

Karím Khán Kirmání and the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*

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The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is one of the most important compositions of Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í religion. This work was written in Baghdad approx. 1-2 years (1861-2) before He made something of his theophanological claims known (from 1863 onwards). The text was originally known as *Risálah-i Khál* ("Treatise to the uncle"). It is written in Persian, with a number of Biblical, Qur'anic, and Islamic passages and quotations in Arabic. The text was translated into English as early as 1900, when 'Alí Qulí Khán translated it, apparently at the request of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh.¹ Shoghi Effendi, grandson and successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then translated the text into English in 1931. The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* was written in reply to certain questions posed by Hájji Mírzá Sayyid Muḥammad, one of the maternal uncles of 'Alí Muḥammad Shírází, known as the Báb, founder of the Bábí religion. Hájji Mírzá Sayyid Muḥammad was a Shi'í Muslim, not a Bábí, and unwilling to accept the Báb's claims due to certain expectations that he had regarding the nature of the Qá'im (the Shi'í Muslim Messiah) and the circumstances of His coming. He posed the questions when he passed through Baghdad with his brother, after visiting

the Shi'í holy shrines in Najaf and Karbala. We know what his questions were, because Bahá'u'lláh asked the Báb's uncle to draw up a list. Christopher Buck provides a succinct summary of these questions in his book *Symbol and Secret*:

- (1) *The Day of Resurrection*: will it be corporeal? How will the just be recompensed and wicked dealt with?
- (2) *The Twelfth Imám*: How can traditions attesting his occultation be explained?
- (3) *Quranic Interpretation*: How can literal meaning of scripture be reconciled with the interpretations current among Bábís?
- (4) *Advent of the Qá'im*: How can the apparent non-fulfillment of popular Imámí traditions concerning the Resurrector be explained?²

The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is Bahá'u'lláh's answers to these questions, which He composed within a 48-hour period. Although ostensibly composed for the Báb's uncle, Buck suggests a multiplicity of "audiences" for the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*: (1) the immediate audience of the Báb's uncle, (2) the Bábís of the time, for we see phrases such as "O people of the Bayán," and (3) the whole world, as seen in the phrase "O ye peoples of the world."³

This project began with my attempt to contextualize just one small section of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, by choosing to focus on one individual mentioned in this book. The reference appears immediately before one of the best-loved and most cherished sections of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, sometimes known as “the true seeker” section, or the “tablet of the true seeker.” The section begins as follows:

*But, O my brother, when a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.*⁴

It is here that Bahá’u’lláh introduces an example of what appears to be the antithesis of the true seeker, the *shakhṣ-i mujáhid*, and indeed He seems to juxtapose the ideal “true seeker” station towards which He states all must strive, with an account of a specific historical figure. This would be Karím Khán Kirmání, whom Bahá’u’lláh initially alludes to when He states,

*For instance, a certain man, reputed for his learning and attainments, and accounting himself as one of the pre-eminent leaders of his people, hath in his book denounced and vilified all the exponents of true learning.*⁵

Despite deciding that He needed to address this individual’s writings, as

many people had asked Him about him, Bahá’u’lláh says that He was unable to do so because He did not have access to the author’s writings. However, He tells us that eventually someone was able to locate in Baghdad a copy of the book *Irshád al-‘avám* and brought it to Him.⁶

Karím Khán Kirmání was born in 1810 and died in 1871. He came from the Persian city of Kirman, and was the son of a Qajar prince. Kirmání’s father was Ibráhím Khán Zahír al-Dawlah, and Kirmání had nineteen brothers and twenty-one sisters. This Ibráhím Khán was an admirer of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá’í, founder of the Shaykhi movement, which contributed markedly to the establishment of the Bábí religion. Ibráhím Khán founded a school named after himself, the Ibrahimiyya school. When Karím Khán went to Karbala, soon after his father’s death, he met Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, successor to Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá’í and leader of the Shaykhi movement at the time. Karím Khán Kirmání became a disciple of Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, and eventually went back to Kirman, where he planned apparently to “teach and guide the faithful” there.⁷

Kirmání was an extremely learned and highly prolific individual who wrote a great deal on a wide variety of subjects. He was perhaps best known for his elaborations on the “fourth pillar,” or the “*rukṇ al-rábi’*.” Shaykh Aḥmad had already condensed the traditional “five pillars” of Shi‘i Islam – (1) divine unity, (2) prophethood, (3) resurrection, (4) divine justice, and (5) the imamate—into three pillars: (1) knowledge of God, (2)

prophethood, (3) the imamate. The early Shaykhi leaders added a fourth pillar: (4) the Shi'i community or someone within that community who would offer guidance. (Sayyid Kázim saw this as an individual figure, and it was understood messianically by the Báb). Kirmání seems to have modified that fourth pillar to refer to (4) "knowledge of friends and enemies of the Imams."⁸ Kirmání wrote a number of passages and tracts elaborating on his understandings of this fourth pillar. Other subjects he wrote on included optics, alchemy, *ḥadith*, color mysticism, prophetology, and many others.

As time passed, because of the sorts of ideas he was teaching to his students, he ran into conflicts with various individuals and groups in Kirman. Among those individuals were his brother-in-law, Sayyid Áqá Javád Shírází (he was a son-in-law of Ibrahím Khán Zahír al-Dawla and therefore Karím Khán's brother-in-law). These two quarreled over control of the Ibrahimiyya school, with Karím Khán trying to have Shaykhism taught there. When Sayyid Kázim Rashtí died in 1844, Karím Khán proclaimed himself the new leader of the Shaykhí school, and from what I can gather, continued to spread the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kázim and expanded Shaykhí thought in various ways.

In addition to clashes with the religious orthodoxy, and other Shaykhis, Karím Khán also denounced the Báb, and in fact viciously attacked Him and His claims in a number of essays and books (at least eight). His earliest work against the Báb was entitled the *Izhaq al-batil*.⁹ Karím

Khán Kirmání spent his last years in privacy on his estate in Langar, outside of Kirman city. Mangol Bayat states that "his ideas remained unrealized, his ambition unfulfilled," and the radical transformation of Shaykhi ideas into a concrete program of action was instead undertaken by someone else — i.e. the Báb.¹⁰

The Mi'raj

As a considerable portion of Bahá'u'lláh's comments on Kirmání relate to the *mi'raj*, a brief discussion of this phenomenon in Islamic studies would be useful. The *mi'raj* is associated with Qur'anic verses, in particular the following: "Glory be to Him who transported His servant by night from the Masjid al-Ḥaram to the Masjid al-Aqṣá which We have surrounded with blessing, in order to show him one of our signs."¹¹ The significance of the *mi'raj* in Islamic history has been noted as follows:

The belief that Muhammad ascended to heaven in the course of his life and beheld the secrets of the otherworld as no other person had ever beheld them is shared by all factions of Islam. In Muslim religious literature, the idea of the Mi'raj, Muhammad's ascension to heaven, is closely associated with that of the Isra', his nocturnal journey. Neither term appears as such in the Qur'an, yet both developed in close connection with crucial, though ambiguous, Quranic passages.¹²

The Qur'anic passage related to the *m'iraj* has received a great deal of atten-

tion on the part of commentators, analysts, poets, artists, and others throughout history. Legends quickly developed in the first two centuries after the establishment of Islam and found their way into a number of different genres of writing. The *mi'ráj* appears in numerous versions, with different explanations and important variations reflecting the historical period in which the story was retold, etc. The story found its way into a number of genres of literature and Islamic writing, including "stories of the prophets" literature (*qiṣas al-anbiyá'*), general histories, Muḥammad's biography, and *ḥadīth* literature. There has been lively and robust debate surrounding a number of elements of the story, including whether or not the ascension was a spiritual event or a physical one. We find *mi'ráj* literature in east and west Africa, we find it in Indonesian literature, and we find it in Islamic art, with some magnificent productions of *mi'rájnamahs*, manuscripts of the *mi'ráj* being beautifully illuminated. The story has been interpreted by theologians, by neoplatonic Islamic philosophers, by Sufis, and by poets.¹³

Bahá'u'lláh says that while the *Irshád al-a'vám* was in his possession, He had the opportunity to glance at it a couple of times, and the second time He examined it, He "accidentally came upon the story of the 'Mi'ráj' of Muḥammad." He also states that He noticed that the author had listed

some twenty or more sciences, the knowledge of which he considered to be essential for the comprehen-

*sion of the mystery of the 'Mi'ráj'. We gathered from his statements that unless a man be deeply versed in them all, he can never attain to a proper understanding of this transcendent and exalted theme. Among the specified sciences were the science of metaphysical abstractions, of alchemy, and natural magic. Such vain and discarded learnings, this man hath regarded as the pre-requisites of the understanding of the sacred and abiding mysteries of divine Knowledge.*¹⁴

Bahá'u'lláh expresses concern that "Not one understanding heart or mind, not one among the wise and learned, hath taken notice of these preposterous statements," that is, those made by the author in this work.¹⁵ He asks,

*How can the knowledge of these sciences, which are so contemptible in the eyes of the truly learned, be regarded as essential to the apprehension of the mysteries of the 'Mi'raj,' whilst the Lord of the 'Mi'raj' Himself was never burdened with a single letter of these limited and obscure learnings, and never defiled His radiant heart with any of these fanciful illusions?*¹⁶

Bahá'u'lláh presents an alternative route to understanding the *mi'ráj*, stating:

By the righteousness of God! Whoso desireth to fathom the mystery of this 'Mi'raj,' and craveth a drop from this ocean, if the mirror of his heart be already obscured by the dust of these learnings, he must needs cleanse and purify it ere the light of this

*mystery can be reflected therein.*¹⁷

Bahá'u'lláh continues to criticize Karím Khán's arrogance and ignorance, and expresses astonishment over the fact that people were actually listening to Karím Khán, and following him.

The *Irshád al-a'vám*

Kirmání wrote the *Irshád al-'avám* 1267/1850-51, and it was published in Tabriz, Iran in 1271/1854-55, some six years before Bahá'u'lláh composed the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* in 1861. It was also published in Bombay in 1851, approximately ten years before Bahá'u'lláh wrote the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. This book exists in three volumes, and the section in the *Irshád al-'avám* about the *mi'ráj* appears to be exactly that portion of the book that Bahá'u'lláh read and refers to. I have translated the relevant passage which includes the list of "sciences" Kirmání says are necessary to understand the *mi'ráj*. They consist of the following:

- 1) geometry
- 2) astronomy
- 3) Ptolemaic studies
- 4) geography
- 5) mirrors and imaging
- 6) natural sciences
- 7) divine knowledge/divinity
- 8) philosophy of nature
- 9) medicine
- 10) impressions
- 11) talismanic magic
- 12) magic squares
- 13) grammatical studies
- 14) signs/esoteric significances
- 15) rubrics

- 16) addition and subtraction
- 17) approximation and interdistance
- 18) planetary conjunctions and genealogy
- 19) astrology
- 20) embryology (? *rukhá'im*)
- 21) transubstantiation
- 22) reverberations
- 23) pharmaceuticals and planets / solar systems
- 24) mechanics
- 25) resemblances (? *mushákilah*)¹⁸

Kirmání certainly does see himself as being the only one sufficiently knowledgeable in these sciences to be able to explain the realities of the *mi'ráj*, and boasts that he has been able to provide these explanations using a colloquial and common language that villagers would be able to understand, and anticipates receiving criticism about this.

What I find particularly interesting is that it is immediately after Bahá'u'lláh's commentary on Karím Khán Kirmání and his writings that we find the famous "true seeker" section of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. It is also interesting to note that the requirements of the true seeker as expounded in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* number approximately the same as Kirmání's list. For purposes of comparison, Bahá'u'lláh's list is as follows:

- (1) [*The true seeker must*] *cleanse and purify his heart from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.*
- (2) *purge his breast, which is the*

- sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments.*
- (3) *He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.*
- (4) *That seeker must at all times put his trust in God,*
- (5) *must renounce the peoples of the earth,*
- (6) *detach himself from the world of dust,*
- (6) *cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords.*
- (7) *He must never seek to exalt himself above any one,*
- (8) *must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory,*
- (9) *must cling unto patience and resignation,*
- (10) *observe silence and refrain from idle talk.*
- (11) *regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.*
- (12) *He should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire*
- (13) *treasure the companionship of those that have renounced the world,*
- (14) *regard avoidance of boastful and worldly people a precious benefit.*
- (15) *At the dawn of every day he should commune with God,*
- (16) *with all his soul persevere in the quest of his Beloved.*
- (17) *He should consume every wayward thought with the flame of His loving mention,*
- (18) *with the swiftness of lightning, pass by all else save Him.*
- (19) *He should succour the dispossessed,*
- (20) *and never withhold his favour from the destitute.*
- (21) *He should show kindness to animals, how much more unto his fellow-man, to him who is endowed with the power of utterance.*
- (22) *He should not hesitate to offer up his life for his Beloved,*
- (23) *nor allow the censure of the people to turn him away from the Truth.*
- (24) *He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself,*

- (25) *nor promise that which he doth not fulfil.*
- (26) *With all his heart should the seeker avoid fellowship with evil doers, and pray for the remission of their sins.*
- (27) *He should forgive the sinful, and never despise his low estate, for none knoweth what his own end shall be.*
- (28) *he should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness.*¹⁹

In one sense, Bahá'u'lláh could be juxtaposing Karím Khán's list of 25 "sciences" necessary to understand the mysteries of the *mi'raj* with His own list of approximately the same number of qualities necessary for understanding the divine mysteries. For those readers who were familiar with the *Irshád al-a'vám* and Kirmání's list of 25 sciences, Bahá'u'lláh's list certainly would have provided an extremely powerful contrast between the two.

Karím Khán extends or exaggerates the argument in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* beyond, perhaps, what Bahá'u'lláh intended. Bahá'u'lláh, it seems to me, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, stresses the point that sciences such as those listed by Karím Khán Kirmání are **not** useful in understanding the *mi'raj*, which Bahá'u'lláh understands spiritually, as did Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kázim. It is important to note that Bahá'u'lláh does NOT present a

blanket condemnation of science or learning, for Karím Khán's list contains a number of highly respected sciences, some of which Bahá'u'lláh elsewhere extensively praises.²⁰

Conclusion

This study has shown the benefits of what we can generally call "contextualization" of Bahá'í sacred writings. In many cases, it is not only appropriate, but beneficial and advantageous to be more familiar with the historical background and circumstances relating to the production of a particular text. In this instance, it is not just reading Bahá'u'lláh, but reading what Bahá'u'lláh read, that results in a much greater appreciation of the "Tablet of the true seeker."

Notes

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1. Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret: Qur'án Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1995), 36.
2. Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, 13-14.
3. Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, 14.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, translated by Shoghi Effendi as *The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), 192.
5. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 184.
6. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 184.

7. Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 86. Information on Kirmání’s biography can also be found in “shaykhiyya,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (EI2), by Denis MacEoin.
8. EI2, “shaykhiyya” and Stephen N. Lambden, “Some Aspects of Isrá’iliyyát and the Emergence of the Bábi-Bahá’í Interpretation of the Bible,” PhD dissertation, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2000.
9. Will McCants, a graduate student at Princeton University, has written a paper on this work which was presented at the Irfan Colloquium at Louhelen Conference Center in October, 2003. Kirmání composed the *Izháq al-bátíl* approximately a year or so after the Báb made His claims to Mullá Husayn, and in it he not only divined the fact that the Báb was making a great claim, but thought fit to reject it and condemn it through a close analysis of the *Qayyum al-asmá*. He also considered the *Bayán* blasphemous, attacked the notion of a “new prophet,” and vowed that he would destroy the Báb.
10. Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*, 86.
11. Qur’án, 17: 1.
12. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), “mi‘ráj” vol. 9, 552.
13. EI2, “Mi‘rádj.”
14. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 186.
15. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 186
16. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 187
17. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, 187
18. Kirmání, Hájj Muḥammad Karím Khán, *Irshád al-a‘vám* (Kirman: Chápkhánah-i Sa‘ádat, n.d.), 396-397.
19. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, slightly modified and paraphrased, 192-195.
20. One obvious example is the science of medicine (*tibb*), which Bahá’u’lláh praises using a very exalted language *Lawḥ-i-tibb*,

“Say, the science of healing is the most noble of all sciences.” (trans. Stephen N. Lambden, www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/BAHA'-ALLAH/L-TIBB.htm)