

Religious Texts in Iranian Languages

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Persian language in the Literature of *Bahā'ī* Worship

Shapour Rasekh

Introduction

Worship is an essential part of all religions, and prayer as a mode of cultic act is one of the most frequent responses to the sacred, to the transcendent power or being.

The *Bābī-Bahā'ī* religions offer a great number of prayers and other worship materials of various types (*ṣalāt*, *do'ā*, *monājāt* and *koṭbe*). These are diverse in content and form, many in Arabic, some in Persian, and still fewer in Turkish. These prayers and other materials enrich considerably the existing Persian literature in the field, but at the same time are influenced in their form and content by the Persian language and its past mystical heritage.

There exist a good number of collections of *Bahā'ī* prayers published in Persian, Arabic, English and other languages; but no compilation containing all of them is so far available.¹

Bahā'ī prayers and worship texts are not written only by the co-founders of the *Bahā'ī* faith, the Bāb and Bahā'u'llāh. Bahā'u'llāh's son and successor 'Abdu'l-Bahā has also produced a large number of prayers in Arabic, Persian and to a lesser extent Turkish. A few prayers in both Persian and Arabic were also written by Shoghi Effendi, the late leader of the *Bahā'ī* faith.

1. Among these collections of prayers we refer only to a few: 1. *Bahā'ī Prayers* (a selection of prayers revealed by Bahā'u'llāh, the Bāb and Abdu'l-Bahā), Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1991; 2. *Ad'īyye-ye Hazrat-e Maḥbūb* (various edition, including Germany's edition, 1987); 3. *Prayers and Meditations by Bahā'u'llāh* (London, Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1957); 4. *Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* published in India (1986) from p. 541 to p. 694; 5. *Ḥazrat-e 'Abdu'l-Bahā Majmū'e-ye Monājāthā*, Bahā'ī Publishing Trust Germany 1992.

Two sources of *Bahā'ī* prayers

Since the *Bābī-Bahā'ī* religions are born in Iran within the Islamic (Shi'ite) world, one can assume that they were influenced, as far as the literature of worship is concerned, not only by the Islamic tradition (starting from the Koran and continuing with the words of the Shi'ite Imams),² and its continuation in the prayers left by the eminent Sufi masters,³ but also by Zoroastrian worship materials.

It should also be noted that *Bahā'ī* prayers by both Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bāhā are deeply rooted in the classical Persian literature. A great number of terms used in especially the Sufi literature are reproduced in the *Bahā'ī* prayers and in the *Bahā'ī* literature in general, sometimes with a slightly different meaning.

Like the rest of the *Bahā'ī* literature, *Bahā'ī* prayers use a good variety of *sanāye*-*e badī*' (rhetoric) for the embellishment of the language. Extensive use is also made of images and metaphors, particularly in 'Abdu'l-Bāhā's Writings. 'Abdu'l-Bāhā's prayers have a particular musicality; they take benefit of rhythm and even rhyme, reminding us sometime of the famous *Kāje*-*Abdollah Anṣārī's monājāts*.

Diversity of *Bahā'ī* prayers

Bahā'ī literature of worship includes the obligatory ritual prayer in Arabic (*ṣalāt*), many *do'ās* (asking a favour from God) mostly in Arabic and several hundreds *monājāts* (dialogue with God) together with a large portion of Persian texts. One should add to this list, a great number of *koṭbes* often to be found at the beginning of a letter or a book, expressing praise of God and thanksgiving without addressing God directly. These are for the most part in Arabic but some are in Persian and written in a highly literary style.

The *monājāts* can be divided into two categories:

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2. See for example: *Ṣahīfe-ye Sajjādīyye*, which contains over 50 prayers by Imam Zeyn ol-'Ābedīn, and *Ad'īyye-ye Serr*, which includes prayers from Imam Ṣādeq and Imam Bāqer. Most of these prayers have been translated into Persian and also commented. See Dr. Z. Safa, *History of Persian literature* Vol. 5/1, Teheran 1362/1983, pp. 252-253.
 3. See Dr. H. Davoudi's *Naḡvā-ye Qalam* "The Pen's Whisper", Teheran 1380/2001, pp. 112-162.

General prayers and

Occasional prayers related to some particular circumstances.

The first category covers all the various purposes assigned to prayer, from expression of love and thanksgiving to penitence (imploring God's forgiveness), to petition for some bounty for oneself or others, asking protection and refuge.⁴ In addition to these "personal themes", Bahā'ī prayers address also collective issues, for example requesting God's assistance for the promotion of peace and unity of mankind, elimination of prejudices, and so on.

Occasional prayers relate to different circumstances of life such as birth, marriage, death, various feasts such as New Year (Now-rūz), intercalary days and times of difficulty or challenge.

The Bahā'ī literature of worship encompasses prayers for various kinds of people. There are particular prayers for children, women, teachers and promoters of the faith, for the citizen of certain cities or for certain Bahā'ī institutions such as the Local Spiritual Assemblies, and even for some minorities (such as Zoroastrians).

There are many beautiful prayers, and even *koṭbes*, by Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bāhā written in pure Persian and mostly addressed to the "Parsis" or new believers from the Zoroastrian background.⁵

4. According to Imam Saḥḥād (Zeyn ol-'Ābedīn) people use prayers and *monājāts* for fifteen different purposes. These are: 1. confession of sins and repentance; 2. Soliciting the help of God to overcome the temptation of his/her ego; 3. prayer inspired by the fear of God, the fear of becoming deprived from God's contentment; 4. asking God's favour; 5. asking God to forget the believers shortcomings and continue his mercy; 6. thanksgiving; 7. asking God's assistance for total obedience to God's will; 8. expressing devotion to the Cause of God; 9. expressing love; 10. requesting the gift of meeting with God in the kingdom of paradise; 11. expressing needs and shortcomings to receive divine grace and bounty to satisfy those needs and remove those shortcomings; 12. praising God and confessing his/her ability to know God's essence, using therefore a mystical approach; 13. admitting the inadequacy of whatever mention is made of God and at the same time asking the remembrance of God continue forever; 14. asking protection and refuge and finally 15. prayer of piety (*Zohd*) and rejection of the material world, seeking nearness to God (see *Naḥvā-ye Qalam*, *ibid.*, pp. 25-30).

5. See for example the following books: *Yārān-e Pārsī* (Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, Germany, 1998) and *Darāye-ye Dāneš* (Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, India, 1985).

Different styles

Bahā'u'llāh was a prolific writer in a number of genres or writings designed for worship ('*ebādat*). The fine literary style of much of his work has been commended by critics such as Edward G. Browne and a good number of literary men.⁶

In his prayers and *koṭbes*, he addresses mostly the transcendent aspect of God, *tanzīhī* attributes of God (emphasising the fact that God is pure and sanctified), while his son Abdu'l-Baha refers more to the immanent aspect of divinity, underlining the *tašbīhī* attributes (or likening God to human beings).

Here are few examples of Baha'ullah's style in his *monājāts* (only the beginning of the prayers are given quoted from the *Prayers and Meditations*⁷):

“Praised be Thou, O Lord, my God. Every time I attempt to make mention of Thee, I am hindered by the sublimity of Thy station and overpowering greatness of Thy might...”

“Glorified art thou, O Lord, my God. Every man of might confesseth Thy sovereignty and Thy dominion, and every discerning eye perceiveth the greatness of Thy majesty and the compelling power of Thy might...”

“All praise, O my God, be to thee who are the source of all glory and majesty, of greatness and honour, of sovereignty and dominion, of loftiness and grace, of awe and power...”

The difference in 'Abdu'l-Bahā's style can be seen in the following examples:

“O God, my God. Thou art my hope and my beloved, my highest aim and desire. With great humbleness and entire devotion, I pray to thee to make me a minaret of thy love in thy land, a lamp of thy knowledge among thy creatures, and a banner of divine bounty in Thy dominion...” (*Baha'i Prayers*, p. 57)

6. See my Persian article “Baha'u'llah's literary style”, in *Kūše-hā'ī az qarman-e adab va honar*, vol. 4, 1993, pp. 27-60. See also Browne's *A History of Persian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1924, Vol. IV, *Modern Times*, p. 423.

7. *Prayers and Meditations of Baha'ullah*, Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, London, 1957.

“O Thou forgiving God. These servants are turning to Thy Kingdom and seeking Thy grace and bounty. O God, make their hearts good and pure in order that they may become worthy of thy love...Purify and sanctify the eyes that they may perceive Thy light. Purify and sanctify the ears in order that they may hear the call of Thy Kingdom...” (*Baha'i Prayers*, p. 113)

“O God, my God. These are servants attracted in thy days by the fragrances of thy holiness, enkindled with the flame burning in thy holy tree, responding to thy voice, uttering thy praise, awakened by Thy breeze...” (*Baha'i Prayers*, p. 156)

'Abdu'l-Bahā to a great extent adapts the tone of his prayers to the group concerned. His prayers for children, for example, are usually shorter, using a rather simple language, but are at the same time embellished with poetic images such as: brilliant star, shining lamp, refreshing breeze, attractive flowers, and flourishing plants. Here are examples of two of his prayers for children:

“He is God! O God, my God, bestow upon me a pure heart like unto a pearl.”

“O God! Guide me, protect me, make of me a shining lamp and a brilliant star. Thou art the Mighty and the Powerful”⁸

Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahā sometimes paints an elaborate picture based on a particular metaphor to express a spiritual theme, as in the following prayer:

“O God! Educate these children. These children are the plants of Thine orchard, the flowers of Thy meadow, the roses of Thy Garden. Let Thy rain fall upon them; let the Sun of Reality shine upon them with Thy Love. Let Thy breeze refresh them in order that they may be trained, grow and develop, and appear in the utmost beauty. Thou art the Giver, Thou art the Compassionate.”⁹

8. *Baha'i Prayers*, Willmette 1991, p. 37.

9. *ibid.*, pp. 35-36

We have already referred to the ornamental character of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s writings. We find an abundance of analogies and metaphors in ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s prayers and also, to a lesser degree, in Bahā’u’llāh’s prayers. Some examples taken from various books of worship are: “the ocean of your generosity”, “the lamp of your faith”, “the pearls of your love”, “the brilliant star of your munificence”, “the clouds of delusive imagination”, “the sea of knowledge”, “the shadow of your tree of justice”, “the fountain of eternal life”, etc.

Why so many prayers?

The central aim of the *Bahā’ī* faith is to bring about a radical transformation of the world and the civilization. Therefore it is justified to ask why there is such proliferation of prayers in the new religion? One answer may be that a new faith underscores the importance of spirituality. According to the *Bahā’īs*, the essence of man is his soul and the ultimate reason for his being in this material world, is to develop his spiritual and moral qualities to fit for an eternal life blessed by the nearness of God. While the *Bahā’īs* endeavour to change the world to a place of peace, unity and justice they also believe that without a spiritual regeneration, no real improvement can be brought to this world. Connection and communication with God through prayer is therefore a great necessity for that regeneration, provided that the prayer leads to the right meditation and the meditation to the right action.

Below I quote a few examples from the *Bahā’ī* literature¹⁰ concerning the importance of prayer and of praying.

- the state of prayer is the best of conditions, for man is then associating with God (‘Abdu’l-Bahā)
- the obligatory prayers are binding in as much as they are conducive to humility and submissiveness, to setting one’s face towards God and expressing devotion to him. Through such prayer, man holdeth communion with God, seeketh to draw near unto him, converseth with the true Beloved of one’s heart, and attaineth spiritual stations (‘Abdu’l-Bahā)

10. *Compilation on the importance of prayer, meditation and the devotional attitude*, Bahā’i Publishing Trust, 1980.

- chant the words of God and pondering over their meaning transform them into actions ('Abdu'l-Bahā)
- all should gather together and harmoniously attuned one to another engage in prayer; with the result that out of this coming together, unity and affection shall grow and flourish in human heart ('Abdu'l-Bahā)
- the true worshipper, while praying, should endeavour not so much to ask God to fulfil his wishes and desires, but rather to adjust these and make them conform to the divine Will. Only through such an attitude, can one derive that feeling of inner peace and contentment which the power of prayer alone can confer (Shoghi Effendi)
- prayer and meditation are very important factors in deepening the spiritual life of the individual, but with them must go also action and example, as these are the tangible results of the former. Both are essential. (Shoghi Effendi)

Persian as the language of worship

The use of Persian as a language of worship goes back a long way, and this tradition has continued through both poetry and prose until recent time. In the Bahā'ī religion, the Persian has been highly valued. As Bahā'u'llāh has said in one of his writings Persian language fits whatever praise one make because, "the sun of knowledge has shone from the heaven of Iran" (*Daryā-ye Dāneš*, p. 4). Bahā'u'llāh considers Arabic the language of eloquence (*Loġat-e Foṣṣḥā*) and Persian as the luminous language (*Loġat-e Nūrā*).¹¹ He admits however, that both Persian and Arabic are commendable because what is expected from a language is its ability to convey a message which is understandable for the receiver.¹² In addition to this, we know that Bahā'u'llāh from around 1870 had recommended the adoption of an international auxiliary language and scripture.

Through the Persian writings of Bahā'u'llāh, Iranians have access to religious texts revealed in their own language. Through translations into other languages, the style of the Bahā'ī writings has become known to other cultures where the Bahā'ī literature has been translated.

11. *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh revealed after Kitāb-e Aqdas*, Wilmette, 1988, p.122.

12. *Daryā-ye Dāneš*, Op. cit. p. 4 (see note 5).

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