



# BAHAISM XII. BAHAI LITERATURE

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## BAHAISM

### xii. Bahai Literature

Bahai literature is a large body of writing in Persian and Arabic produced by leaders and adherents of the Bahai religion in Iran from the 1860s to the present. This article is concerned primarily with poetry and belles lettres rather than apologetic, didactic, historiographical, liturgical, or scriptural materials, except insofar as the last-mentioned exhibit characteristics of literary interest.

The immediate antecedents of Bahai literature are the various scriptural and apologetic writings produced in the 1260s/1840s by the [Bāb](#) (see [bayān](#)) and some of his leading followers. Babism was primarily a literate and elitist movement among a section of the Shi'ite *'ulamā'*, but from its outset conventional learning and scholarly writing were, if not wholly rejected, relegated to a status much inferior to that enjoyed by the products of "innate knowledge" and "inspired" composition or "revelation," in which the speed of writing was regarded as a sign of divine activity. In the later phase of the movement (roughly 1264/1848 to 1283/1866), the ability to write or utter "divinely-inspired" verses became the chief criterion whereby claimants to religious authority might be judged. Several individuals regarded as *ommī* (in



this case unlearned, but not illiterate) began to write in this manner, but apart from works by the Bāb and Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī Šobḥ-e Azal (q.v.), very little of this material has survived. Nevertheless, those writings we do possess, together with letters and fragments by other members of the Babi hierarchy (all of them ‘*olamā*’, like Mollā Moḥammad-‘Alī Bārforūšī Qoddūs, Qorrat-al-‘Ayn Ṭāhera (q.v.), Sayyed Yaḥyā Dārābī, and Sayyed Ḥosayn Yazdī share certain important characteristics (see MacEoin, *Babi Doctrine and History*, chap. 4). There is a tendency toward esotericism, obscurantism, idiosyncrasy in matters of style, grammar, and subject, and the use of extended doxological and invocatory formulae (particularly in elaborate perorations based on the divine names). Free association and stream-of-consciousness-style composition are marked features of some works, e.g., the Bāb’s *Ketāb al-asmā’* and *Ketāb-e panj šā’n* or Šobḥ-e Azal’s *Mer’āt al-bayān*, *Šaḥā’ef al-Azal*, *Laḥazāt*, etc.

These characteristics are retained in the later writings of Šobḥ-e Azal (which include a great deal of poetry), but otherwise the Azalī branch of Babism has been almost bereft of literary productions of any kind, in spite of the existence of Azalī litterateurs such as Mīrzā Āqā Khan Kermānī, Shaikh Aḥmad Rūhī Kermānī (q.v.), and Mīrzā Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī. Mīrzā Ḥosayn-‘Alī Nūrī Bahā’-Allāh (q.v.), whose Bahai version of the original Babi movement rapidly ousted its Azalī rival throughout Iran, first came to prominence as one of the unlearned revealers of inspired verses in Baghdad during the 1850s and then as the de facto head of the faith in the 1860s. His early writings represent a significant departure from most previous Babi writing (except for the poetical works of Qorrat-al-‘Ayn, with whom he was associated) in that they are, for the most part, couched in straightforward prose or verse. Although he was later to take a marked aversion to such matters, Bahā’-Allāh was at this period markedly influenced by Sufi writing and even spent a two-year period (1270-72/1854-56) living as a dervish in Kurdistan (see Cole, “Bahaḍu’llah and the Naqshbandi Sufis”). Sufi influences are particularly at work in a small number of poems composed in Baghdad, Kurdistan, and Istanbul, several of which bear the pen name (*taḳallos*) “Darvīš.” The most important of these are: 1) a Persian *ḡazal* entitled *Rašḥ-e ‘amā*, generally considered his earliest extant work; 2) an Arabic *qaṣīda* of 127 distichs (*bayts*) entitled *al-Qaṣīdaal-warqā’īa*, modeled on ‘Omar ebn al-Fāreż’s famous *Naẓm al-solūk*; 3) a Persian *maṭnawī* of 318 *bayts* entitled *Maṭnawī-e mobārak*, written in Istanbul and probably the last of Bahā’-Allāh’s works in verse. Perhaps the most noticeable feature of these poems, which are written in an elegant yet uncomplicated style and possess considerable freshness, is the complete absence of identifiably Babi



elements.

This is also largely true of some of Bahā'-Allāh's earliest prose works, several of which are of real literary merit. Notable among these are: 1) *Haft wādī* and 2) *Čahār wādī*, two Persian mystical treatises along the lines of 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭeq al-ṭayr*; 3) *Kalemāt-e mahnūna*, a collection of Persian and Arabic aphoristic statements, mostly of an ethical nature; 4) the *Ḥorūfāt-e 'ālīn*, a short Arabic disquisition on death, which also exists in a Persian translation by the author; 5) the *Ketāb-e iqān*, one of his very few full-length works, being a book of apologetics and exegesis written in a lucid and original Persian style; 6) the *Jawāher al-asrār*, an Arabic treatise along similar lines written about the same time; and 7) a series of brief Persian and Arabic poems and prose pieces, largely mystical in nature, including "Lawḥ-e mallāḥ al-qods" and "Lawḥ-e nāqūs," all in prose, and the poems "Lawḥ-e ḥūrīya," "Lawḥ-e šakar-šakan," "Lawḥ-e ḡolām al-kold," "Lawḥ-e halhala yā bešārāt," "Sāqī az ḡayb-e baqā'," "Bāz ā wa be-deh jām-ī," and "Az bāḡ-e elāhī."

Although Bahā'-Allāh continued to write extensively in Edirne (1280-85/1863-68) and Palestine (1285-1309/1868-92), his later work is, with only a few exceptions, increasingly turgid, repetitive, and visibly lacking in the linguistic brilliance and poetic energy that characterize his early output. The contents of some of these later writings reveal an acquaintance with European ideas, but the style and format remain Persian. Divorced from its earlier mysticism, Bahā'-Allāh's prose becomes less elegant and even archaic. Perhaps the best products of this period are a series of proclamatory letters to several kings and rulers in Asia and Europe, some of which exhibit a polished epistolary style. His last major work, a book-length Persian letter to the famous *mojtahed* of Isfahan Āqā Najafī, is a rambling patchwork of quotations from earlier works tied together with personal reminiscences and historical allusions. The need to produce "inspired" verses at great speed in response to the stream of letters and petitions arriving from Iran and elsewhere led him to rely more and more on established formulae in order to keep up with the demand.

By contrast, the works of Bahā'-Allāh's eldest son 'Abbās ('Abd-al-Bahā') exhibit the mannered characteristics of an urbane and well-educated litterateur in touch with modern currents of thought and behavior and with some European writing. Whereas his father's Arabic was heavily Persianized, simple, and frequently ungrammatical, that of 'Abd-al-Bahā' is polished, careful, and more Arab than Iranian in its manner. His earliest work, a commentary on the



Hadith “*konto kanzan makfīyan*” written in his late teens in Edirne for ‘Alī Ševket Pasha, shows close familiarity with the ideas and exegetical methods of philosophical Sufism. These and related themes occur in several other works which appear to be from roughly the same period, including *tafsīrs* on the *Sūrat al-fāteḥa* and the words *ḡolebat al-Rūm* (Qur’ān 30:1). Other issues begin to emerge in later works, however, among which social and political questions come increasingly to the fore. The most detailed and interesting of these works is a Persian treatise entitled *al-Resāla al-madanīya* (or *Ketāb asrār al-ḡaybīya le-asbāb al-madanīya* [sic]), written in 1292/1875 and published anonymously in Bombay (1310/1892-93) and Cairo (1329/1911), and later translated twice into English. This work, which makes general proposals for reform in Iran and the Islamic world as a whole, deserves to be more seriously regarded as a contribution to the reformist literature of the period. Much slighter and rather more conservative in tone is the *Resāla-ye sīāsīya* (1893), also published anonymously. Of less interest are his *Maqāla-ye šakṣī sayyāḥ* (A traveler’s narrative), a brief anonymous history of Babism written about 1303/1886 and later published together with a translation by E. G. Browne; and the *Tadkeratal-wafā’*, a collection of meager hagiographies given as table-talks in 1915 and published posthumously in Haifa in 1343/1924. Until his death in 1340/1921, ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ kept up a vast correspondence with Bahais in Iran, Europe, and the United States, and his collected “tablets” (*alwāḥ; tawqī’āt*) contain numerous examples of his mature literary style. Of interest too are his many public addresses delivered in Europe and North America, his table-talks collected under the title *al-Nūr al-abḥā fī mofāwazāt ḥazrat ‘Abd al-Bahā’*, and his numerous Persian prayers (*monājāt*). The latter are often extremely beautiful, with a fine feeling for the rhymes and cadences of the language; some are even written in verse.

‘Abd-al-Bahā’’s grandson and successor, Šawqī (Shoghi Effendi, d. 1377/1957), wrote principally in English, all his major works being translated later into Persian; but he also penned large quantities of letters in the latter language, as well as some in Arabic. His baroque and mannered style, with its extended periods, archaisms, and at times contrived vocabulary, had a marked effect on Bahai writing in this century, encouraging it to be florid, hyperbolic, and out of step with general changes in modern Persian letters (a phenomenon paralleled by Bahai writing in English during the same period). At the same time, Šawqī’s elegant and sensitive translations of Bahai scriptural writings (largely works by Bahā’-Allāh) deserve to be mentioned here.



Bahai writing in general has concentrated on apologetics and historiography, and includes very few works of real literary merit or wider interest, with the partial exceptions of the writings of Mīrzā Abu'l-Faẓl Golpāyegānī, some autobiographical works (notably Mīrzā Ḥaydar-'Alī Eṣfahānī's *Behjat al-ṣodūr*, Yunes Khan Afrūḳta's *Ḳāṭerāt-e noh-sāla*, and Dr. Ḥabīb Mo'ayyad's *Ḳāṭerāt-e Ḥabīb*), and a few collections of hagiographical biography in the tradition of Islamic *rejāl* literature (notably Solaymānī's *Maṣābiḥ-e hedāyat* and Bayzā'ī's *Taḍkera-ye šo'arā*).

There is, however, a substantial body of poetry written by Iranian adherents of the faith, some of which is of an exceptionally high standard, although it remains for the most part unknown outside Bahai circles. Bahai poetry is essentially a continuation of classical Persian and Arabic religious verse, although it has its own themes and conventions. Much of it is didactic or apologetic in nature, and most of it makes for dull reading, but this is more than compensated for by the vigor and freshness of the better examples.

A number of early Babis wrote poetry, among them Ḥājj Solaymān Khan Tabrīzī and Karīm Khan Māfi (Behjat Qazvīnī), but little of their work has survived. Of much greater importance is the verse of Qorrat-al-'Ayn Ṭāhera, which has remained popular with Bahais and has even gained a well-deserved reputation with a wider public in Iran and India. Born in Qazvīn 1229/1814 into a family of '*olamā*', she received training as an '*ālema*' and became a leading exponent of the Shaikhi (q.v.) school. An early convert of the Bāb's, she dominated the Iraqi branch of the Babi movement until 1263/1847, when she returned to Iran. Her influence on the formulation of Babi doctrine was considerable, and the numerous apologetics she wrote on behalf of the sect helped provide the impetus for the break with Islam in 1264/1848. Imprisoned for several years in Tehran, she was executed following the attempt on the life of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah in 1268/1852. Her reputation among modern Bahais rests largely on the belief that she was an early champion of women's rights, something which has no foundation in fact. Nevertheless, her legendary stature combined with the genuine beauty of many of the poems she composed has given her work a firm place in Bahai literature. Only a small number of her poems (as well as several falsely attributed to her) have been published, but the present writer has discovered several manuscripts of what appear to be authentic works by her, from which a scholarly edition of her poetry may eventually be prepared.

The existence of poetry by Qorrat-al-'Ayn and Bahā'-Allāh gave the writing of



verse an acceptable place in the Bahai movement, even when the marked anti-Sufism of Bahā'-Allāh and 'Abd-al-Bahā' (see, e.g. Bahā'-Allāh, *Alwāh-e mobāraka*, pp. 184-88; 'Abd-al-Bahā', *Makātīb* I, p. 346) rendered many of the classical models unacceptable and blocked the possibility of a spontaneous development of mystical verse within the religion. Although 'Abd-al-Bahā' spoke disparagingly of the poets of the past (*Makātīb* I, p. 451), he did express approval of poetry written on Bahai religious themes and included versified passages in some of his letters (e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 414, 421, 439; II, pp. 54-55). Since both singing and instrumental music were permitted in *al-Ketāb al-aqdas* (see [aqdas](#)), poetry became a natural extension of liturgical recitation and a useful vehicle for the expression of numinous feelings and didactic intentions.

The earliest Bahai poet of merit was Mollā Yār-Moḥammad Zarandī Nabīl (1247-1310/1831-92), better known as the author of the history translated into English by Shoghi Effendi as *The Dawn-Breakers* or *Nabil's Narrative*. Converted to Babism at an early age, Zarandī was among the Babis who took up residence in Baghdad in the 1850s. Having failed to attract a following for theophanic claims advanced by himself, he became one of the earliest proponents of belief in Bahā'-Allāh as the Babi messiah. After journeys which took him to Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt, he finally settled in Palestine, where the Bahai exile community was located from 1285/1868. His history was begun in 1305/1886 and completed shortly before his suicide in 1310/1892, following the death of Bahā'-Allāh.

Very little of Nabīl's poetry has been published. A lengthy poem in couplet form (*maṭnawī*) providing details of Babi and Bahai history was printed in Cairo in 1342/1923-24, but copies of it are extremely rare and it has not been reissued since then; another historical *maṭnawī*, entitled *Hejr o weṣāl* (Separation and union) has not so far found its way into print. Several examples of the shorter poems, including two fine *qaṣīdas*, each with the refrain *Bahā', Bahā'*, have been published by Browne (*JRAS* 24, 1892, pp. 323-25; *Materials*, pp. 351-57) and Bayzā'ī (*Taḍkera* III, pp. 421-35). Nabīl does appear, however, to have been a prolific writer: Bayzā'ī states that he has seen a collection of his poems amounting to 10,000 *bayts*, the bulk being made up of *maṭnawīs* (*Taḍkera* III, p. 418). Apart from the vigor of style in his non-historical poems, the chief characteristic of Nabīl's work is its use of hyperbole in reference to the claims and person of Bahā'-Allāh.

Of great literary merit is the work of Zarandī's younger contemporary, Āqā Mīrzā 'Alī-Aṣraf Lāhījānī, known as 'Andalīb (ca. 1270/1853-54—1335/1917),



whose *dīvān* runs to over 750 pages. Originally a Shaikhi, ‘Andalīb was converted to Bahaism in his twenties, after which he became widely known in Lāhijān for his convictions. In 1300/1883, he was arrested along with several others in the vicinity of Rašt and imprisoned there for almost two years; it was during this period that he completed his *dīvān* of *ġazals*, amounting to over 300 poems. He later took up residence in Shiraz, where he remained, apart from several journeys (including two to Palestine), until his death.

‘Andalīb’s *ġazals*, written in the classical style, are notable for the absence of overt references to Bahai beliefs or figures, and have undeservedly been neglected by non-Bahai anthologists. His other poetry is unqualifiedly Bahai in inspiration, consisting largely of poems in praise of Bahā’-Allāh and ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ or on various Bahai festivals, particularly that of Rezwān (see ‘īd-e rezwān). He also wrote a lengthy *maṭnawī* on the martyrdoms of two Bahai brothers in Isfahan in 1296/1879 (*Dīvān*, pp. 433-70) and another in reply to criticisms of Bahai belief. Apart from his fame as a poet, ‘Andalīb enjoyed a reputation as one of the leading controversialists of the Bahai movement in his day. A lively account of his technique is given by E. G. Browne in *A Year Amongst the Persians* (pp. 401-02, 433-35, 436-38, 438-40, 442-43). At least one prose work in defense of Bahaism (an *estedlālīya* in reply to Shaikh Bahā’ī Lāhijānī) is extant but unpublished.

The writing of apologetics was a particular concern of another Bahai poet of the same period, Mīrzā Moḥammad Sedehī, known as Na‘īm (1272-1334/1856-1916), whose most popular work, *Aḥsan al-taqwīm* or *Jannat al-na‘īm*, is an extended poetical apology for Bahaism. Of peasant stock, Na‘īm had a limited education but wrote poetry from an early age and formed part of a small literary circle in the village complex of Sedeh. This small group, which included the poets Āqā Sayyed Moḥammad Nayyer and Āqā Sayyed Esmā‘īl Sīnā, was converted to Bahaism in 1298/1881. Arrested and expelled from the Isfahan area, Na‘īm settled in Tehran, where he taught Persian at the British embassy and established a class for young Bahai missionaries, which he ran until his death.

Apart from the *Aḥsan al-taqwīm*, which has been published in several editions, including an annotated recension by ‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd Ešrāq Kāvārī, Na‘īm is well known in Bahai circles for his *Qaṣīda-ye nūnīya* (published in full but without title, with a translation by E. G. Browne in his *Literary History of Persia IV*, pp. 198-220), a *Bahārīya* (or *Sayfīya*) modeled on that of Mīrzā Ḥabīb Qā‘ānī, and a *morabba‘* entitled *Manzūma-ye bīst o noh ḥorūf*. Na‘īm also wrote several prose



works, some of which have been published; these include two Bahai apologies (*estedlālīya*), a refutation of the Persian introduction to the *Ketāb-e noqṭat al-kāf*, and a collection of passages from the Persian *Bayān*. The apologetic and didactic character of so much of Naʿīm's verse makes it rather forced and often turgid, although one cannot deny the ingenuity with which he incorporates textual references and quotations into the first part of his *Aḥsan al-taqwīm*. Where his poetry is freed from these restraints, however, it does reveal considerable charm.

In contrast to the overtly sectarian character of the above writers, the work of Abu'l-Ḥasan Mīrzā Shaikh al-Ra'īs (1264-1336/1848-1918) is for the most part concerned with broader issues. A son of Moḥammad-Taqī Mīrzā Ḥesām-al-Salṭana, Abu'l-Ḥasan trained as an *'ālem* and acquired a reputation as a preacher and a constitutionalist. He appears to have been converted to Bahatism at an early age, either by his mother or by Mīrzā 'Alī-Rezā Sabzavārī Mostašār-al-Molk. Although Shaikh al-Ra'īs never openly proclaimed his Bahai allegiance, his connection with the faith did become known and proved a spur for controversy on more than one occasion. Under the sobriquet of Ḥayrat, Shaikh al-Ra'īs wrote a small amount of poetry, most of which has been collected in the compilation entitled *Montakab-e nafīs*. There are also several poems by him on Bahai themes, some of which have been published by Bayzā'ī (*Tadkera* I, pp. 282-90). His prose works include the *Resāla-ye etteḥād-e Eslām*, written for Sultan 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd, and the *Resālat al-abrār*, an Arabic diatribe against Ḡolām Aḥmad Qādiānī.

Mīrzā Moḥammad Ardestānī, known as Nāṭeq (1298-1355/1880-1936), also started life as an *'ālem*, but abandoned his clerical calling following his conversion in 1325/1907. He was for eleven years Director of the Bahai Waḥdat-e Bašar school in Kāšān and later taught at the Ta'yīd school in Hamadān before becoming a full-time Bahai missionary. His *dīvān* of almost 400 pages was published posthumously by the Bahais in Tehran. Although they show little originality, Nāṭeq's poems at least take a somewhat broader view than those of most Bahai poets. Several prose works by him remain unpublished.

There are numerous other Bahai poets, most of whom have been made known thanks to the assiduous researches of Ne'mat-Allāh Ḍokā'ī Bayzā'ī, whose 4-volume *Tadkera-ye šo'arā-ye qarn-e awwal-e bahā'ī* contains biographies and samples of the work of no fewer than 134 individuals. Not very many of these are of much literary merit, of course, since Bayzā'ī's criterion for inclusion



appears to have been that someone be a Bahai and write poetry. Nevertheless, his collection does serve to draw attention to the work of several individuals previously unknown and possibly worth further notice. It is worth observing that a reasonable number of female poets appear in this collection, several of whom were active in the Babi and early Bahai periods.

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