



## KAŠKUL-E ŠAYK BAHĀ'I

**KAŠKUL-E ŠAYK BAHĀ'I**, the title of a large literary anthology compiled by [Shaikh Bahā'-al-Din Moḥammad 'Āmeli](#), commonly known as Shaikh Bahā'i, the gifted polymath and leading jurist of the Safavid empire during most of the reign of [Shah 'Abbās I](#) (r. 1587-1629).

Shaikh Bahā'i, born in Baalbek in what is now northern Lebanon in 953/ 1547, was brought by his father, Ḥosayn b. 'Abd-al-Šamad, to Iraq and then to Iran in 961/1554, when Bahā'i was seven years old (Stewart, 2006). Ḥosayn was one of a number of scholars of the religious sciences from [Jabal 'Āmel](#), the predominantly Shi'ite area of southern Lebanon, who settled in Iran in the mid-sixteenth century and assumed religious functions such as those of prayer leaders, jurists, and teachers of the religious sciences under the patronage of the Safavid kings, particularly Shah Ṭahmāsb (r. 1524-76). Their native village of Juba', just inland from Sidon, had produced a number of notable scholars, including Ḥosayn's teacher, Zayn-al-Din 'Āmeli, who would become known as "the Second Martyr" (al-Šahid al-Ṭāni) after he was executed as a heretic by the Ottomans in Istanbul in 965/ 1558.

In Iran, Shaikh Bahā'i's family first settled in Isfahan, where they came into contact with another immigrant 'Āmeli jurist, Shaikh 'Ali Menšār, whose daughter Shaikh Bahā'i would eventually marry. They moved to Qazvin about three years later, when Shah Ṭahmāsb appointed Bahā'i's father *šayk-al-eslām*, chief jurist of the newly established Safavid capital. In about 970/ 1563, the family moved to Mashad and then Herat, where Ḥosayn held similar positions. Before 979/ 1571-72, Bahā'i parted with his family in Herat to study and teach



the religious sciences back in the capital, Qazvin, and he remained there when his father left Safavid territory to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca in 983/ 1575 (Stewart, 1991, pp. 567-68). Ḥosayn never returned to Iran. He died in 984/ 1576 while visiting Bahrain the next year, perhaps on a less-traveled route back to Iran or on the way to Hyderabad in the Deccan of India, in search of more lucrative employment with the reigning Qotbshahid dynast, Ebrāhim b. Solṭānqoli (r. 1550-80).

Bahā'ī assumed the position of *šayk̄-al-eslām* of Isfahan when his father-in-law, Shaikh 'Ali Menšār, passed away that same year (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 156; tr., p. 248). While he seems to have remained aloof from the politics of the royal court for the ensuing period, during the turbulent reigns of Shah Esmā'īl II (r. 1576-78) and Shah Moḥammad Ḳodābanda (r. 1578-87), his renown as a jurist kept growing. When his older contemporary, Mir Ḥosayn Mojtahed, died in Qazvin in 1001/ 1591-92, he became the leading religious authority in the empire, a prominent courtier who enjoyed the favor of Shah 'Abbās; he remained such until his death three decades later, in 1030/ 1621 (Stewart, 1998, pp. 186-94).

Though Shaikh Bahā'ī was accomplished in many fields, including mathematics, astronomy, Islamic law, Hadith, and commentary on the Qur'an (*tafsir*), he owes much of his fame, both in Shi'ite and Sunnite circles, to the *Kaškul*, a substantial anthology that has enjoyed wide popularity in the Middle East and India from the late sixteenth century until the present time. In the pedagogical manual *Ta'lim al-mota'allem*, Borhān-al-Din Zarnuji (602/ 1223) suggests that a serious student should always have a book in his sleeve and furthermore that the book should have some blank pages so that he might copy down anything worthwhile he comes across (Zarnuji, p. 24). Bahā'ī seems to have taken such advice to heart in composing the *Kaškul* (ed. Naṣiri, I, p. 2). He collected the work, originally in five volumes, over many years, mainly between 1583 and 1599, and evidently constructed it after the fashion of a scrapbook, adding quotations, poems, and anecdotes gradually, as he saw fit, including more substantial treatises of his own authorship as well as other texts, and leaving blank pages to be filled in later (Bosworth, pp. 21-27).

In part because of this method of compilation, several recensions of the work exist in manuscripts, and a critical edition has yet to be produced. The work is meant to be at once entertaining and edifying, and Bahā'ī seems to have prized variety over organization. It includes poetry, historical and literary anecdotes, mathematical proofs, prayers, Hadith reports, discussions of grammatical and



exegetical questions, and longer treatises on various technical topics in the Islamic sciences. It also includes what might be described as trivia, such as a document dated 1584 cataloguing the number of mosques, churches, baths, and other types of buildings to be found in Istanbul, a list of the names of the books in the Hebrew Bible, and so on (*Kaškul*, ed. Naşiri, I, pp. 42-43; ed. Kārsān, II, pp. 46-48). Poetry makes up about one-third of the anthology, and Persian material about a fourth. The poets quoted are mainly from the 'Abbasid and later periods.

Because of the circumstances of his background and upbringing, Bahā'i acquired excellent training in a number of fields and was able to combine learned traditions to an extent that was unusual. On the one hand, he was versed in the religious sciences of the Shi'ite tradition, including law and Hadith, along with the ancillary arts of Arabic grammar and rhetoric. On the other hand, he studied the rational sciences, including mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy, which were highly cultivated in Iran and Transoxania during this period, with the best scholars available, while at the same time becoming versed in Persian mystical traditions. Two centuries earlier, *Ebn Kaldun* had already noted the expertise of scholars from Persia and Transoxania in the rational sciences (*Ebn Kaldun*, III, p. 117), and Bahā'i benefited from this tradition. While many scholars from this period had training in several disciplines, few could boast having authored the most highly regarded texts on mathematics and astronomy and, at the same time, standard-setting works on Islamic law and Hadith. Bahā'i's achievement was quite rare, and this varied expertise had a profound effect on the contents of his *Kaškul*.

Internal evidence suggests that Bahā'i began the work in the course of an extensive journey through Ottoman territory in 1583-85, during which he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca and visited Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo. Traveling with merchants, he followed the trade route Tabriz-Van-Amid-Aleppo, passing through an Ottoman checkpoint at Amid. While on the journey, he wrote a work entitled *Sawāneḥ safar al-Ḥejāz fi'l-taraqqi ela'l-ḥaqiqa men al-majāz*. This work consisted of original compositions by Bahā'i himself, both in poetry and prose, primarily, as far as is evident, in Persian. No manuscript of the original work survives, but Bahā'i quotes it many times in the *Kaškul*, and more quotations are found in other manuscripts. It included individual Persian lyrics (*ḡazal*) as well as several longer couplet poems (*matnawi*) written in the style of Jalāl-al-Din Moḥammad Rumi. Bahā'i's



*maṭnawis*, *Nān o panir* (Bread and cheese), *Nān o ḥalwā*, and *Šir o šekar* (published with his other Persian poems by Jawāheri), may all have been included in the *Sawāneh*. They are all didactic poems of mystical inspiration, discussing the traps of infatuation with outer meaning, fame and fortune, and formal learning, while true meaning lies elsewhere. The *Sawāneh* included as well an artistic prose piece, also in Persian, entitled *Muš o gorba*. This text, too, is of mystical inspiration, an allegorical tale of the mystic quest for inner meaning undertaken by various persons of distinct character (Dalāl 'Abbās, pp. 431-98).

Several of the lyrics that appeared in *Sawāneh safar al-Hejāz* were, after a fashion, occasional poems written in response to the events of the journey. In these poems, he adopted the poetic pen name (*takalloṣ*) Bahā'i, by which he would become known. For example, in Amid (modern Diyarbekir in Turkey), Bahā'i mentions that he wrote a poem in Persian while being held up at the border by greedy customs officials. He mentions that he wrote a poem in Shirvan on the 6th of Ramazān 993 (1 September 1585?), perhaps on the return from his trip (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, p. 355).

Bahā'i's Arabic poetry appears in the *Kaškul* as well. He quotes a lost collection of his Arabic poems entitled *Riāz al-arwāḥ* (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, p. 47). Bahā'i's own Arabic poetry falls in the main into two formal categories, odes of the classical form and quatrains or *do-bayti*. Also during his trip, in 992/ 1584, he composed a panegyric for Sayyed Moḥammad Bakri, a leading sayyed, Shafī'ite jurist, and Sufi master in Cairo. Bahā'i has many poems such as the riddle poem he wrote for Ebn Abi'l-Loṭf Maqdesi, the Hanafite *mofti* of Jerusalem, which served as a medium of entertaining scholarly social intercourse (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, pp. 63-65). Indeed, both Bahā'i and his father appear to have been skilled composers of this type of poem, termed *loḡaz*, *mo'ammā*, or *čistān*, which provide cryptic hints at an unknown word, such as "If you remove its middle [i.e., the middle letter of the word], it is a tree." The poem in question has as the answer the word *al-Qods* (Jerusalem). Ebn Abi'l-Loṭf responded in kind, with another riddle poem having the same answer (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, pp. 65-66). One of Bahā'i's more famous odes found in the *Kaškul* is *Wasilat al-fawz wa'l-amān* (The means of attaining success and being saved), a poem in praise of the Twelfth Imam. The seventeenth-century Damascene scholar Aḥmad b. 'Ali Manini (d. 1172/ 1759) later wrote an extensive commentary on this poem and dedicated it to a prominent Syrian sayyed (*Kaškul*, Bulaq, 1872, pp. 394-435). Other poems are in a more blatantly humorous vein, such as that



about a Kord who ends up killing his sexually overactive mother, in which Bahā'i indulges in extensive punning drawing on the technical terminology of Arabic grammar. Bahā'i also quotes his own poetry from lost works entitled *Riāz al-arwāḥ* and *al-Ḥadiqa al-sanā'iya*, perhaps one section of his larger anthological work *Ḥadā'eq al-ṣāleḥin* (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, pp. 47, 80).

Bahā'i's quatrains are perhaps his most original poetic contribution, and he seems to have felt a strong affinity for the form. Like the following Arabic example, the quatrains are overwhelmingly devoted to the theme of love (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, p. 183):

I love a moon that has led me to disaster,  
 Yet my tortured heart holds no complaint of him.  
 How many times have I come to complain, but when he looked upon me,  
 From the ecstasy of his nearness, I forgot the complaint.

Neither contrived nor excessively ornate or hyperbolic, the quatrains attest to his ability to use this terse form to convey emotion and tension in a deceptively simple manner.

At the same time, Bahā'i displays his expertise in Qur'anic exegesis, writing commentaries on the famous Sunni *tafsir* works of Abu'l-Qāsem Maḥmud Zamakṣari (d. 538/ 1144) and Nāṣer-al-Din Abu'l-Ḳayr Bayzāwi (d. 685/ 1286) and other short treatises on the *tafsir* of particular verses. He was profoundly engaged with this field of study by the time he left to perform the pilgrimage, and includes in his anthology *Kaškul* many discussions of questions of exegesis, in addition to several more substantial treatises of Qur'anic commentary that may have been written during this period. Of particularly interest is an untitled treatise on the interpretation of the verse 2:23 that attempts to resolve a difficulty in Zamakṣari's *Kaššāf* that, in his view, the various super-commentaries had failed to explain adequately (*Kaškul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, pp. 481-88; Stewart, 1996, pp. 38-40). This treatise work was probably dedicated to Ottoman Sultan Morād III (r. 1574-95) as a precaution in case he were stopped by Ottoman authorities and accused of spying for the Safavids, but the name of the Ottoman sultan has been removed from the text, perhaps by Bahā'i himself. In the treatise, he claims to have been inspired with the



correct interpretation of this particular verse in Mecca, in the vicinity of the Ka'ba itself (*Kaškul*, ed. Naširi, I, p. 488).

The *Kaškul* shows some interest in history, particularly the history of Iran, for it includes a list of the [Il-khanid](#) dynasts, who ruled in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries from Tabriz and may have been a significant model for the Safavids. There is also a discussion of [Ḥasan Šabbāḥ](#), a prominent Isma'ili *dā'i*, and the Nezāri Isma'ilis of [Alamut](#), whose fortresses were reduced by [Hulāgu Khan](#) in the mid-thirteenth century after inspiring fear in Sunnite rulers for over a century and a half. He also presents the text of Našir-al-Din Ṭusi's letter to the ruler of Aleppo after Hulāgu's conquest of Baghdad in 1258 (*Kaškul*, ed. Ḳārsān, II, pp. 500, 507-8). Bahā'ī's attention to these matters may reflect some recognition of the Il-khanid period's formative influence on subsequent Iranian history, including the rise of the Safavid dynasty itself.

Bahā'ī studied some philosophy, but no philosophical work by him is extant. The *Kaškul* mentions that he wrote a philosophical treatise on the concept of the essence (*al-Jawhar al-fard*), but this has apparently been lost. Other philosophical topics appearing in the *Kaškul* include a text (ed. Naširi, I, pp. 230-33; II, p. 30) criticizing the philosophers' terminology regarding physics, as well as a discussion of the distinction between instinctive and acquired reason. Probably drawing on the works of [Abu Ḥāmed Ġazāli](#), Bahā'ī describes the controversy between theologians and philosophers over the creation of the world, as well as their debate over theodicy. Bahā'ī distances himself from the Islamic philosophers, as well as from the Mo'tazelites, when he quotes them, and he cites a passage arguing that Avicenna is destined for Hell, apparently with approval (*Kaškul*, ed. Naširi, II, p. 174).

Astronomy and mathematics are major topics of interest in the *Kaškul*. The work includes many mathematical proofs and constructions in geometry and algebra, a method for finding the center of a circle, another for finding the meridian, and another for constructing a triangle on the surface of a sphere. More substantial is a treatise on the controversy over the light of the planets besides the moon, discussing whether it is primary/original (*dātiya*) or secondary/derived (*mostafāda*; *Kaškul*, ed. Naširi, I, pp. 71-76).

The *Kaškul* cites some explicitly Shi'ite material, including statements and Hadith reports attributed to the Imams, and indulges in some typical Shi'ite-Sunni polemics, but these are not presented in a heavy-handed manner, mainly in the mode of clever answers to pointed questions. For example, he



includes an anecdote about the tenth Imam, al-Hādi, answering questions in the audience of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Motawakkel (r. 847-61). Another passage, quoting the *Moḥāzarāt* of Abu'l-Qāsem Rāḡeb Eṣfahāni (d. 502/ 1108), describes the inhabitants of Qazvin, in this case Shi'ites, beating a man named 'Omrān (not generally subject to opprobrium by Shi'ites) on the grounds that his name is formed by joining 'Omar with half of 'Oṭmān (*Kaṣkul*, ed. Naṣiri, I, p. 363). These do not differ in kind from other humorous anecdotes, such as Ebn al-Jawzi's (598/ 1200) clever improvisations in his sermon sessions, and this aspect of the *Kaṣkul* led Ignaz Goldziher (1874, pp. 457-67) to view Bahā'i as a moderate Shi'ite who was not particularly inimical to Sunnis.

The history of the *Kaṣkul*'s publication is complex. It was published several times already in the nineteenth century in Iran and Egypt. The early Egyptian editions of the work, which circulated widely in the Arab world and attracted the attention of Goldziher during his stay in Egypt in the 1870s, are decidedly inferior as witnesses to Bahā'i's original conception, since they omitted the Persian material altogether. The best editions to date are those of Moḥammad-Mahdi Ḳarsān (1973) and Moḥammad-Ṣādeq Naṣiri (1958-61), which include the Persian material and are otherwise more complete and accurate.

Bahā'i actually composed two literary anthologies, the earlier of which bore the title *Meḳlāh* and is mentioned in the introduction to the *Kaṣkul*. However, the work that has been published as *al-Meḳlāh*, reprinted many times and even translated into Persian, is a false attribution to Bahā'i perpetrated originally by an Egyptian publisher. The authorship of this pseudo-*Meḳlāh* has not been determined, but internal evidence suggests that it was composed in Egypt by a Sunni literary scholar and adherent of the Ḥanafī legal school in the mid-fifteenth century, over a century before Bahā'i wrote his works (Stewart, 1990, pp. 280-81). Little is known of the real *Meḳlāh* besides Bahā'i's characterization of it in the introduction to *Kaṣkul*. He explains that he wrote the work in the prime of his youth, that it was well organized, arranged in a clever manner, and that it included poetry, anecdotes, Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith reports, and problems. Āḡā Bozorg Ṭehrāni reports that an acquaintance, Sayyed Āqā Tostari, had a copy of Bahā'i's real *Meḳlāh* in his private library, that it was quite different from the published editions, and that it included a commentary on a prayer by the Companion 'Abd-Allāh b. Estenṭāl (Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, XX, pp. 232-33). In the *Kaṣkul* (ed. Naṣiri, I, p. 502; II, p. 280), Bahā'i refers the reader to two specific texts he had included in the *Meḳlāh*, one the story behind the aphorism "Dance for the evil monkey in



his time,” and the other a passage where he cited poems describing the gazelle by the poets Borhān-al-Din Qirāṭi (d. 781/ 1379) and Ebn al-Ḳarrāṭ (d. 839/ 1436). Āqā Bozorg’s report of the existence of an authentic manuscript of *Meklāh* has not been confirmed by other sources, and the work has not yet been published.

The merits of *Kaškul* are several. It provides valuable information about Bahā’i’s life and works that is not recorded elsewhere. It also records a large proportion of his extant poetry. In addition, it provides insight into the scholar of the period as a whole person, albeit an academic person, something that is often possible to miss when one reads works written within narrow, generic confines. Bahā’i cites a great deal of both Arabic and Persian poetry by other authors, and even a few samples of Turkish poetry. C. E. Bosworth has examined the Arabic poetry in particular, finding that the majority of the poets are postclassical, including favorites of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries such as Ebn Nobāta, Qirāṭi, and Ebn al-Ḳarrāṭ. The work is thus an important witness to reading habits and literary taste during this period throughout the central Islamic lands, supplementing other anthologies of Arabic poetry such as Šehāb-al-Din Ḳafāji’s (d. 1069/ 1695) *Rayḥānat al-alebbā*, Moḥammad Moḥebbi’s (d. 1082/ 1671) *Nafḥat al-rayḥāna*, and Ebn Ma’šum’s (d. 1120/ 1708) *Solāfat al-ašr*. It thus challenges modern views (e.g., Nicholson, pp. 442-70; Cachia, pp. 103-22; Bauer; Kilpatrick; Lowry and Stewart) that Arabic poetry went to seed after the tenth century and that Arabic literature entered a prolonged period of decadence, only to emerge from its stupor in the nineteenth century with the influx of new forms and ideas from Europe.

As a book of entertainment literature, *Kaškul* was a great success. This is attested by the large numbers of manuscripts throughout the Middle East, the early editions of the work, and the many later anthologies that adopted *Kaškul* as a title. One might argue that the work established a particular sub-genre of the anthology in the Islamic world. Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni (XVIII, pp. 70-83) lists over thirty works by this title in his catalogue of Shi’ite works; perhaps the most famous of these is the *Kaškul* of Yusof b. Aḥmad Baḥrāni (d. 1186/ 1772; Āqā Bozorg, XVIII, p. 81), which, however, never attained the fame of its model. Many of these works range less widely in topics than Bahā’i’s *Kaškul* and are more decidedly Shi’ite in flavor. Yet another tribute to the fame of Bahā’i’s work is the fact that an early twentieth-century Egyptian humor magazine adopted *al-Kaškul* as its title.



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