

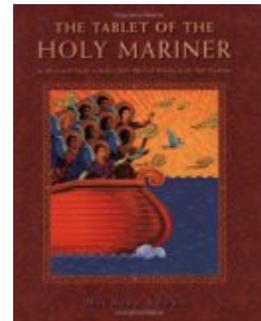
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Sours. *The Tablet of the Holy Mariner: An Illustrated Guide to Baha'u'llah's Mystical Writing in the Sufi Tradition*. Los Angeles: Kalimot Press, 2002. 101 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-890688-19-6.

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Composed at Mazra al-Washshash outside Baghdad in March 1863, during the spring festival of Nawruz, the Lawh Mallah al-Quds or Tablet of the Holy Mariner is an important work from the earliest period of Bahau'llah's ministry. The tablet, which includes an Arabic and a Persian section, and which was composed shortly before Bahau'llah's banishment to Istanbul, is generally considered by Bahais to allude to tribulations which were to befall Bahau'llah later in his life.

Published studies of core Bahai texts (especially in European languages) are still relatively few and far between, so any addition to this secondary literature is welcome. Of course, Michael Sours is not a professional scholar, and his book is not intended for an academic audience. Subtitled "An Illustrated Guide to Baha'u'llah's Mystical Writing in the Sufi Tradition," his book appears to try to bridge the gap between an academic readership and the general reader, although Sours's frequent use of terms such as "seeker" and "believer" would alienate non-Bahai readers and those not already familiar with the conventions of much secondary Bahai literature. Kalimat deserves praise for publishing such a book, although I feel that Sours falls short of his ambitious goal in several ways.

Sours's fundamental failing is his inability to engage with the original Arabic (or the Persian) text of the tablet. Throughout this book, the reader senses a tangible distance from the Arabic original. The original Arabic term for a word or phrase is rarely given, if at all; inevitably the reader must conclude that Sours is unable to read the texts in the original and this is why he does not refer to them. Furthermore, he fails to compare the Arabic sec-

tion of the tablet to the Persian section (on at least one occasion [p.27] he even refers to these two sections as different "versions" of the tablet). The Persian section, though clearly not the focus of this study, appears to have been ignored altogether (apart from some very general comments on p.27). Although certainly not merely a Persian translation of the Arabic section of the tablet, the Persian section is clearly closely related to the Arabic. A comparative analysis of the two, however brief, would have been illuminating.[1] For example, it is interesting to note that the Persian differs from the Arabic in that it has no repeated verse, is composed largely in rhyming prose (saj=) and that stylistically it is very similar to sections of Bahau'llah's Kalimat-i Maknuna or Hidden Words (c.1858). This similarity is evident in the following section:[2]

pas ay sakinan-i basat-i hubb-i ilahi va ay shariban-i khamr-i rahmat-i samadani, qurb-i jamal-i dust ra ba-du jahan tabdil nanama'id va az laqa-yi u ba laqa-yi saqi narpardazid. . . .

Then, o dwellers on the plain of divine love and o quaffers of the wine of eternal mercy, do not exchange nearness to the Beauty of the Friend for both worlds, and do not seek reunion with the cupbearer over reunion with Him . . .

Sours, by basing his analysis of the Arabic original on an English translation, often draws less than convincing conclusions. In my view, it is not possible to write about a Bahai primary text in an informed way for any readership without adequate working knowledge of the original language(s).

Without himself having consulted the original Arabic, Sours accepts Shoghi Effendi's translation on face value. For example, he does not discuss Shoghi Effendi's decision to render *al-fata al-'iraqi* as "Arabian youth" rather than the more literal "Iraqi youth" (p. 61). If Sours had consulted the Persian text of the tablet he would know that, interestingly, it opens with the phrase "huwwa al-'ajami al-farisi al-'iraqi," literally, "He is the non-Arab, the Persian, the Iraqi." [3]

Sours does note (p. 27) that Shoghi Effendi first published an English translation of the Arabic tablet in May 1922 in the *Star of the West* under the title "Song of the Holy Mariner." This title, which was subsequently changed, hints that Shoghi Effendi may have thought the tablet similar to a "song" because he viewed the repeated phrase "fa-subhana rabbi al-abha" (Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious) as a sort of chorus to the main body of the tablet. Sours suggests (pp. 30-32) a link between this format and Sufi chanting or dhikr. This is an interesting point, although dhikr normally involves the repetition of a single word or short phrase (to the exclusion of any other text) to the accompaniment of hypnotic rhythmical music. Although there may be hints of dhikr in this tablet (as there may also be in prayers such as the Long Healing Prayer and the Fire Tablet), I think it unlikely that Bahauallah ever intended this text to be chanted as dhikr.

Sours also wishes to establish a link between Lawh Mallah al-Quds and nineteenth-century Shii passion plays (or ta=ziya) which commemorate the sufferings of the imams, in particular the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. This is another interesting suggestion, one that should be further examined by someone who is able to compare Bahai tablets and ta=ziya texts in the original.

There are many other problems with this book. On a purely technical level, others have pointed out that the transliteration system employed by Sours is outdated and not currently in usage by academics in Middle East Studies. [4] He also gives many quotes in italics in the body of the text, which are rather tiring on the eye. Some of Sours's statements are either factually incorrect or too vague to be of use, even to the general reader. For example, he refers to the Haft Vadi as Bahauallah's "version of the Seven Valleys" (p. 34) and he talks about a "type" of literature, where presumably he means a particular "genre" (p. 36). He also makes several broad generalisations, including one about something he calls "Near-Eastern literature" (p. 43). It is not clear if by this term he intends all of Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Akkadian, Syriac,

and Turkish literature, both modern and classical. His discussion of Islamic exegesis (tafsir) (pp. 33-34) is half-hearted and rather weak; it is unclear what the point of this section is. His verse-by-verse analysis (pp. 65-80) of the tablet is repetitive and rather unfocused.

Sours does raise some provocative (if rather strange) points in his discussion of the text, one being his reading of Bahauallah's references to various seas (pp. 67-68). He even provides the reader with a basic map of the region on which Iran appears as Persia, Istanbul is qualified by a bracketed "Constantinople," and Edirne appears to have fully entered the modern era and lost its Greek name, Adrianople. The table of "Main Symbols and Scriptural Antecedents" (p. 45) is rich in quranic and biblical references and would be useful to those interested in comparative religious traditions.

Another area where Sours encounters problems is that of tone. Unfortunately, he employs a rather didactic tone throughout the book, at once talking about the need to understand the "deeper message" of the tablet (p. 33), whilst avoiding "unwarranted conjecture" (p. 35). In the introduction (p. ix), Sours describes the great Czech orientalist, Jan Rypka, as one who "fails to appreciate the spiritual depth of Bahauallah's writings," yet recognises their "great literary quality." Sours is at times also rather presumptuous, claiming, for example, to know that most of Bahauallah's companions would have appreciated the main significance of what he had written (p. 43).

Sours's bibliography is missing some key entries. Although he talks about early Babi history (pp. 23-26) he makes no reference to Abbas Amanat's *Resurrection and Renewal* (Cornell University Press, 1989), easily the most significant academic work on the subject. He also appears to have failed to consult Adib Taherzadeh's four-volume *Revelation of Baha'u'llah* (George Ronald, 1974-1987).

The "narrative illustrations" executed by the author himself are both highly decorative and, for my taste, overly Western in their iconography. An uninformed reader would not immediately recognise this as a guide to a text originally composed in Arabic. Including the cover, there are eleven illustrations, all of which have a decidedly Christian flavor. We are presented with striking representations of Noah's Ark (p. 3); the Burning Bush (p. 5); multi-ethnic, mixed-sex groups of angels (e.g., p. 7); a swooning angel framed by Gothic-like church architecture (p. 17); and panoramas of a city that closely resembles the walled city of Jerusalem (pp. 15, 19, and 21). Such illustrations are more appropriate for a children's

or teenagers' publication than one aimed at adults.

This volume is a combination of reverential translation, devotional illustration, and quasi-academic musings. Despite all shortcomings, Kalimat Press deserves credit for its courage in publishing a book of this format. I hope that this attempt will open the way for other illustrated guides to the rich cornucopia of Bahai primary texts.

Notes

[1]. For the Arabic and Persian text of the tablet, see *Ma'ida-yi Asmani*, vol. 4, ed. A. Ishraq-Khavari (Tehran, 1973) pp. 335-341.

[2]. *Ma'ida-yi Asmani*, vol. 4, p. 340.

[3]. *Ma'ida-yi Asmani*, vol. 4, p. 340.

[4]. See, for example, Frank Lewis, "Review of Christopher Buck's *Symbol and Secret*," in *Baha'i Studies Review* 6 (1996), http://www.bahai-library.org/bsr/bsr06/65_reviews2.htm.

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