“Bahá’u’lláh as ‘World Reformer’”
A Correction
Christopher Buck


For thematic effect, three excerpts were strung together to form the epigraph (p. 24), and all three excerpts were ascribed to Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet to Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901). One of these excerpts, though in fact a brief commentary on the Tablet to the Queen, properly belongs to the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. This error will be noted and explained. The opening citation, in its entirety, was published as follows:

[1] O Queen in London! …[2] Consider these days in which He Who is the Ancient Beauty hath come in the Most Great Name, that He may quicken the world

1. The Journal of Bahá’í Studies, quarterly periodical of a Canadian-based learned society with an international membership, is a “refereed journal” (relying on the double-blind, peer review process), committed to excellence (“substance, method, and the spirit of true scholarship”) in the field of Bahá’í Studies (vide “Editorial,” The Journal of Bahá’í Studies 1.1 (1988–89): ix). This spirit is evident in the Association’s request that I publish a correction.
3. Bahá’u’lláh, Tablet to Queen Victoria, in Kitáb-i-Mubín or Áthár-i-Qalam-i-Alá (Tehran: Mu’áissi-yi-Millí-yi-Matbú‘át-i-Amri, 120 B.E. [1963–1964]) 1: 61–66. This compendium of selected Arabic tablets of Bahá’u’lláh was lithographed in the handwriting of Mulla Zaynu’l-Ábidin-i-Najafábádí, better known as Jináb-i-Zaynu’l-Muqarrabin (1818–1903). This Tablet to Queen Victoria was also printed in Alváh-i-Názilih Khátab bih Mulk Rú’asáiyh Ard (Tehran: M.M.M.A., 124 B.E. [1967–1968]) 131–41. This volume is a collection of Bahá’u’lláh’s epistles to the crowned sovereigns and leading ecclesiastics of his day.
and unite its peoples…. Were anyone to tell them: “The World Reformer is come,” they would answer and say: “Indeed it is proven that He is a fomenter of discord!”5 [3] … Say: “O people! The Sun of Utterance beameth forth in this day, above the horizon of bounty, and the radiance of the Revelation of Him Who spoke on Sinai flasheth and glisteneth before all religions.”6

—Bahá’u’lláh, Tablet to Queen Victoria, 1868

(bracketed numbers and footnotes added)

This date should have read “circa 1868.” In 1936, Shoghi Effendi, the foremost authority of his time on the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, referred to the Tablet to the Queen as having been “revealed almost seventy years ago to Queen Victoria,” which would make the terminus a quo a post–1866 date.7 This dating is corroborated by internal evidence in the tablet itself, in which reference is made to the Súratu’l-Mulúk (Chapter of the Kings), an earlier work revealed circa 1866 in Adrianople (the original name for this city, otherwise known as Edirne).8 The precise starting point is 31 August 1868, the date of Bahá’u’lláh’s arrival at the prison-fortress of ‘Akká, as indicated by Bahá’u’lláh himself:

Upon Our arrival at this Prison, We purposed to transmit to the kings the messages of their Lord, the Mighty, the All-Praised. Though We have transmitted to them, in several Tablets, that which We were commanded, yet We do it once again, as a token of God’s grace.9

In an earlier letter dated 1931, Shoghi Effendi wrote, “Over sixty years ago, in His Tablet to Queen Victoria,” establishing a pre-1871 date as a terminus ad quem.10 The more precise point of termination would be 4 November 1870, marking the end of Bahá’u’lláh’s confinement in the army barracks at ‘Akká.11

5. Bahá’u’lláh, Tablet to Queen Victoria, Epistle 63.
6. Bahá’u’lláh, gloss on the Tablet to Queen Victoria, Epistle 65.
11. Shahrokh Monjazeb, “Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet” preface. The authoritative biographer of Bahá’u’lláh, H. M. Balyuzi, Bahá’u’lláh The King of Glory (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980) 319, n. 3, notes that Bahá’u’lláh and his family and companions were confined in the barracks for two years, two months and five days. Monjazeb seems to indicate that the Tablet to Queen Victoria was revealed during this period of confinement (reflecting what appears to be a consensus on this question) though no supporting evidence is adduced in his brief introduction.
Based on his study of the primary sources, Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne, speaking of the Tablet to Queen Victoria among Bahá’u’lláh’s other epistles to royalty, concludes: “Most of these letters appear to have been written about the same time, viz. soon after the arrival of Behá at Acre (A.H. 1285–86, A.D. 1868–69)….” In any event, actual delivery of the tablet to the British monarch herself appears to be uncertain. Bahá’u’lláh, in his last major work, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf expresses the wish:

Likewise, We mention some verses from the Tablet of Her Majesty, the Queen (Queen Victoria)—may God, exalted and glorified be He, assist her. Our purpose is that haply the breezes of Revelation may envelop thee, and cause thee to arise, wholly for the sake of God, and serve His Cause, and that thou mayest transmit any of the Tablets of the kings which might have remained undelivered. This mission is a great mission, and this service a great service.  

It is perhaps to this very passage (or at least to the idea it conveys) that Count Cottrell had alluded to when he wrote: “The princes [Bahá’u’lláh’s sons] are very anxious to carry out the wish of their late father [Bahá’u’lláh], and to have copies of the works presented to Her Majesty the Queen; and also to obtain, unofficially, the countenance of the British Foreign Office to enable them to reach the other sovereigns with a similar object. They have furnished me with summaries of the principal works in Arabic and Persian, with the object of having them translated and published in Britain and in the United States of America.”

Evidently, the Count was one of very few Europeans who had actually met Bahá’u’lláh. Even fewer Europeans may have actually received tablets from Bahá’u’lláh. In 1891, French diplomat M. de Balloy speculates that Queen Victoria had evinced sympathy towards the Bahá’ís: “The Queen of England has, it appears, recommended to the Sháh clemency and moderation in his own interest and in that of Persia.” This speculation cannot be relied upon as evidence that the Queen had actually received Bahá’u’lláh’s epistle and was favorably disposed thereby, Bahá’í speculation notwithstanding. Further research on this question would be welcome.

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17. Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980) 65: “Queen Victoria, it is said, upon reading the Tablet revealed for her, remarked: ‘If this is of God, it will endure; if not, it can do no harm.’” (Emphasis added.)
Returning to the problem of my own miscitation, excerpt [3] supra is not from Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet to Queen Victoria per se, but properly belongs to Bahá’u’lláh’s brief commentary on it. This sentence belongs to Bahá’u’lláh’s gloss on his express role as “World Reformer” (muslih al-‘álam).18

This charge of fomenting discord is the same as that imputed aforetime by the Pharaohs of Egypt to Him Who conversed with God (Moses). … Men have, at all times, considered every World Reformer a fomenter of discord. … Say: “O people! The Sun of Utterance beameth forth in this day, above the horizon of bounty, and the radiance of the Revelation of Him Who spoke on Sinai (núr-i zuhúr-i mukallam-i túr) [Bahá’u’lláh] flasheth and glisteneth before all religions.19

The Arabic term muslih may be variously translated as “peacemaker, conciliator; reformer, reformist; salt.”20 As the tide indicates, Bahá’u’lláh’s professed role as a reformer was one of the dominant ideas of my article. The presence of the term in a passage immediately following Bahá’u’lláh’s citation of the Tablet to Queen Victoria in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf seems to have controlled not only my article but also my perceptions of a text at the time. I had simply failed to discern a citation from a contiguous gloss on the concept of “World Reformer.”

Not having had access to the Arabic original at the time and proceeding on a vague recollection of the tablet in its entirety, I had unfortunately confused this comment with the actual gloss in the Tablet to Queen Victoria in which Bahá’u’lláh castigates his persecutors who, metaphorically, are said to have severed their own arms from their bodies (figuratively: heedlessness), having not the acumen of judgment to discern what was in their own best interests, much less having been able to distinguish between the “World Reformer” and a “fomenter of discord.”

My thanks to Bahá’í scholar Shahrokh Monjazeb of Waterloo, Ontario, who pointed out my error to the editors of the Journal and kindly provided me with copies of the Arabic original along with his working translation of this important tablet.

18. Or, alternatively transliterated, muslihu’l-‘álam. Vide Bahá’u’lláh, Lawh-i-Malikih (Tablet to Queen Victoria), in Kitáb-i-Mubín, p. 63, line 16.
