Dr. Iraj Ayman raises an objection to Dr. Craig Loehle’s idea that “even the prophets are somewhat subject to chance events.” Loehle had supported his speculation using Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that the prophets have been subjected to the “chances of this world” (Kitáb-i-Íqán 73). In the course of his commentary, Ayman raises two thorny issues: (1) the question of divine determinism versus chance, and (2) the problem of relying on Shoghi Effendi’s translations without referring to an original-language edition of the text.

On the surface, Ayman’s argument that the prophets are not subject to chance seems reasonable enough. His method of eliminating Loehle’s supporting evidence in favor of his own view might also seem acceptable from the perspective of scholarly procedure. That is, Ayman points out that the original Persian of the Kitáb-i-Íqán can be understood as “worldly events or happenings” instead of “chances.” But upon closer examination it may be that these two issues are not resolved so simply.

With regard to what is ordained by God—a decreed fate or divine determinism—it is reasonable to assume that it is “preordained” that a prophet will have to sacrifice and suffer in order to overturn the existing and corrupt patterns of society. Vehement resistance to radical change by those who have a vested interest in a system is arguably a social phenomenon inherent in human nature, and as such, opposition to and persecution of a prophet can be seen as “preordained” because of the very nature of the reform mission the prophet accepts and seeks to carry out. But it does not necessarily follow that the type and extent of such suffering is preordained or that a prophet does not have the freedom to use his inspiration creatively to respond to situations that might arise by chance (i.e., for example, the free-will decisions of those with whom he interacts) during his ministry.

Even though a prophet may say a certain event is “ordained by the will of God,” such a statement, like anthropomorphic symbolism, need not be taken literally. It may be understood as an inspired way of seeing events and not as an attempt to portray God as the operator of a mechanical cosmic order. As events occur, the prophet “interprets” them in order to impart guidance and uplift souls. Such interpretation is according to the inspiration given to the prophet, that is, the divine inspiration that imparts the prophet’s ethical and spiritual perspective. An uninspired person could see the same events and utterly fail to grasp any spiritual or existential significance for themselves or others. The ancient belief that “nothing happens by chance” may therefore be a matter of moral and spiritual vision, a way of seeing life and sanctifying it by contemplating it in relation to the divine aim of life.
The issue of “chance” also involves a difficult question of definition. What is “chance”? If God created and ordained the natural order—even from the deist perspective of Nicolaus of Oresmes’ Clockmaker—could not chance be a part of that order, and as such even chance itself ordained by God? If chance exists in our lives, then it could—just as do poverty, afflictions, and illnesses—exist in the lives of the prophets. There is simply no way for us to know with certainty the nature of God’s direct or indirect role in the created order—although some will, of course, believe with certainty. A literal reading of the Báb’s writings can yield as rigid a determinism as that of the Calvinists.

If the concept of decreed fate or determinism is carried so far that all events, no matter how trivial or tragic, are seen as literally ordained by God—be they in the lives of the prophets or our own—no room will be left for our free will, human creativity, or the humanity of the prophets. And surely, without free will, the “ransom” made in the ministries of the Manifestations of God would be reduced to a mechanical activity carried out by biological robots.

In Bahá’í scholarship, the question of referring to the original languages (Persian and Arabic) is equally problematic. It goes without saying that knowledge of the original languages is essential to the study of Bahá’í scripture. However, the problem is complicated by the role of Shoghi Effendi as the divinely appointed interpreter of Bahá’í sacred writings. Since he translated a number of important works including the Kitáb-i-Íqán—and no translation can be undertaken without some degree of interpretation—it follows that Shoghi Effendi’s authoritative interpretations are integral to his translations. This fact leaves us with the problem of deciding in which instances we should emphasize our own understanding of the original language in favor of the meaning suggested by Shoghi Effendi’s translation. Which provides the clearer and more accurate meaning?

Because of the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, Shoghi Effendi’s translations are a unique phenomenon in religious history—more significant to the Bahá’í Faith than perhaps St. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible was to the early Christian Church. Even if English disappears as a living language, the unique role of Shoghi Effendi’s translations in the interpretive process will demand that Bahá’í scholars continue to study his English translations and other writings to understand the original Persian and Arabic texts.

Ayman’s comments suggest that Loehle made a theological mistake because he relied solely on Shoghi Effendi’s English translation, a translation that could have been clarified by referring to the original Persian. In this instance, the opposite can, however, be argued: that is, the original Persian was, in fact, clarified by Shoghi Effendi’s English translation. From this perspective, Loehle’s argument has the added benefit of Shoghi Effendi’s translation, which enabled Loehle to make an observation that might have otherwise been missed.

I have noticed a number of cases where the translations of Shoghi Effendi
seem somewhat baffling until one studies the sacred writings further. He, for example, frequently translates torat as Pentateuch, instead of Torah. The term Torah (or torat) is ambiguous—it could mean anything from a few Mosaic laws to the whole Hebrew Bible, rabbinic commentaries, and way of life—but Pentateuch means only one thing: five books, i.e., the first five books of the Bible. Students of Wellhausen's hypothesis concerning the composition of the Pentateuch—the politically correct view for most academics—will immediately see the difficulties this choice poses, but based on a broad view of how torat is used in the Bahá'í writings and the Qur'Án, as well as its equivalent in the New Testament, it strikes me as an interpretation meant to be taken seriously and one which should not be dismissed by referring back to and isolating the more ambiguous Persian word torat.

In some cases, elements are lost in the English translations, for example, what is commonly translated as “hoopie” (a species of bird) becomes “messenger” in the Hidden Words (Persian, no. 1). Nevertheless, the hoopie was Solomon’s messenger. Other examples seem more significant, such as the abbreviated way Shoghi Effendi translates the stations of ‘ayn (vision/insight/knowledge), haqq (truth/justice), and nür (light/illumination) into the English phrase “stations of absolute certitude” (cf. Kitáb-i-Áqán [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974] 196 and Kitáb-i-Áqán [Egypt: 1934. Persian edition. Reprinted Bahá'í Verlag, 1980]). Such varying examples suggest that we have to give attention to the problem of what is lost in translation versus what is actually clarified.

There are no simple procedures for determining where the emphasis should be placed. In the case of the passage about “chances” in the Kitáb-i-Áqán, there are several points worth considering. Shoghi Effendi, in many instances, translates passages in the Kitáb-i-Áqán in a way much like that of Ali Kuli Khan’s earlier and much more literal translation. However, when translating “havades-i-emkaniyih,” Shoghi Effendi renders it “chances of this world,” whereas Ali Kuli Khan renders it “incidental happenings.” Ayman’s choice, “worldly events or happenings,” is much closer to Ali Kuli Khan’s than to Shoghi Effendi’s later and vastly superior translation. Moreover, Steingass’s Persian-English Dictionary indicates that “chances” is an equally possible option. Perhaps Shoghi Effendi chose “chances of this world” to dissuade us from projecting a rigid determinism onto the message of Bahá’u’lláh and so that the full impact of Bahá’u’lláh’s point about divine tests could be made more evident.

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