AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY
Commentator: John S. Hatcher

Authorized Translations
I have clearly and emphatically reiterated that I had no intention of questioning the efficacy, the validity, and the supremacy of the translations rendered by Shoghi Effendi. As a matter of fact, those whose mother tongues are Persian or Arabic and who are fully versed in these languages and who also know English appreciate the special value of and need for the English translation of the holy writings rendered by Shoghi Effendi. There are often points of clarification as to the exact or proper meaning of certain terms or phrases in the original Persian or Arabic text that can only be gained by referring to Shoghi Effendi’s translation. Thus, the need for examining both the original text and the translation is shared in common by scholars who use the original texts as well as those who use Shoghi Effendi’s translation. Scholarly studies may be based on translations of the Baha’i writings. However, in so doing we have to bear in mind that a substantial portion of what has been revealed by Baha’u’llah, as well as most of the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, have not yet been translated. Therefore, there is naturally some limitation in making inferences based purely on what is now available in translation.

Furthermore, translations, no matter how masterly or even inspired, are always subject to certain intrinsic limitations. Shoghi Effendi, when writing on the Dispensation of Baha’u’llah, has the following words of caution for us:

Such testimonies bearing on this theme are impregnated with such power and reveal such beauty as only those who are versed in the languages in which they were originally revealed can claim to have sufficiently appreciated. 1

He even, through his secretary, has stated:

The translations will continue to vary as more and better translations are made. Shoghi Effendi does not consider even his own translations as final. 2

He does not believe there is anyone at present capable of translating the passages you referred to in Qayyur’1-Asma into befitting and accurate English. 3

2. Letter to an individual, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and dated 14 August 1930.
The Universal House of Justice, in a letter to an individual, provides us with the following guidance:

Even our beloved Guardian, whose skill in this art [translation] amounted to genius, characterized his translation of the Kitáb-i-Ikán as “one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the Writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation” and he expressed the hope “that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterances.”

Therefore, I agree with John Hatcher that we should be concerned about the extent of the validity of inferences based on the language in the English translations of Bahá’u’lláh’s tablets, because, as Hatcher said, “scholarship which does not resort to the original Persian and Arabic texts might be suspect” (60). The scholar does not necessarily need to be personally versed in those languages; it will be enough to seek the collaboration of those who possess such expertise. This has been the systematic practice of eminent scholars versed in Persian and Arabic, such as the late Hand of the Cause of God George Townshend and Dr. Udo Schaefer.

**Inferences Based on Single Words**

The main point in my humble note was “... when using translations of the holy Writings, it would be helpful where making inferences on the basis of single words, to examine the original Persian or Arabic texts and study the historical usage of such words in Persian and Arabic literature” (4.1: 91, emphasis added). First, I had only said “it would be helpful” not imperative. Second, it is a well-known fact that there are not always words in the two languages concerned to convey exactly the same meaning(s) and connotation(s). The word chosen to be the basis of inference may have various meanings and connotations, only one of which is what the translation intends to convey. Without ascertaining which one of those meanings is chosen to render the meaning of the word in the original text, we may be misled by using a different connotation of that word in English. That is what I tried to point out in my original note.

In a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, it is stated that “when in 1947, one of the friends offered to translate the Seven Valleys directly from the Persian into German, Shoghi Effendi pointed out that the ideas associated with such a ‘mystical work’ required not only a command of these languages [Persian and German] but also ‘a deep familiarity with original literature in the original and oriental usage and thought’.” And elsewhere the Universal House of Justice gives the following elucidation:

---

5. Letter dated 27 May 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual.
When the beloved Guardian was making the translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.  

The guidance given by Shoghi Effendi regarding the procedure to be followed in translations to be made into other European languages and quoted by Hatcher is concerned with an entirely different matter from the point made in my comments. Certainly, Bahá'ís are in no doubt that the translations made by Shoghi Effendi “have a special status” as I also clearly stated in my note. I sincerely hope I will not be continuously and repeatedly accused of something I neither wrote nor implied.

In making inferences based on single words, we do need to investigate the background and the history, the usage, meanings, and connotations of that word in both the original language as well as in the translation and to examine in what context it has been used and what meaning is intended for it to render. This of course includes the special usage of certain words in Bahá'í terminology. I do not think that such routine practice in scholarly studies should be disregarded by Bahá'í scholars because of their “belief in the influence in society and in history of unseen or spiritual forces,” as argued by Hatcher (62). Hatcher’s discussion of the Bahá'í approach to scholarly studies is valid; however, it goes beyond the simple point that I wanted to be taken into consideration.

It is obvious that the language and words used by the Manifestation of God and authorized interpreters are the languages and words used and understood by people. Otherwise, how could the people being addressed understand the message conveyed to them? In the Bahá'í writings there are new meanings bestowed to certain words generating more profound and precise terminology. However, each word has a history and a life of its own that cannot be ignored when the word is used for communication with the people using the language. Is it really practical to maintain that there is no relation between “how the word was commonly employed by others at the time” and “the special sense it has in the context of a particular tablet”? Original usage and context are so interrelated that by divesting the words of their “original usage” we shall not be able, as cautioned by the Guardian, to understand the message properly.

**Role of “Chance” in the Life of the Manifestations**

In Bahá'í terminology, the “Manifestation of God” refers to one who manifests all the attributes of God. My question was how the Manifestations of God could be subject to random events God does not intend for them. Such a statement embodies a clear contradiction. We have ample evidence in the

---


life histories of the Manifestations, particularly the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, that 
as Manifestations of God, whatever happened to them was divinely ordained 
and that they in their divine station had foreknowledge of such events. As a 
matter of fact, most of what happened to them was even foretold in the 
scriptures of previous dispensations.

However, I fully agree with Hatcher on the role of the free will of the 
individual. In this connection I would like to recall the famous statement of 
Shoghi Effendi printed in Citadel of Faith where he gives a vivid picture of the 
vital role of individual believers and says:

Without his [individual] support, at once whole-hearted, continuous and generous, 
every measure adopted, and every plan formulated, by the body which acts as the 
national representative of the community to which he belongs, is foordoomed to 
failure. The World Center of the Faith itself is paralyzed if such a support on the part 
of the rank and file of the community is denied it. The Author of the Divine Plan 
Himself is impeded in His purpose if the proper instruments for the execution of His 
design are lacking. The sustaining strength of Bahá’u’lláh Himself, the Founder of 
the Faith, will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run 
to arise and play his part.9

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like us to be reminded that what we study and write 
about is directed to a purpose. Therefore, before embarking on a piece of 
scholarly work we have to examine whether it would have any useful purpose. 
We, I am sure, do not intend to spend our time in pursuits which “begin with 
words and end with words” and cannot “profit the peoples of the earth.”10

When we write on the Bahá’í Faith, we should always remember these 
words of Bahá’u’lláh:

Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause 
dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the one true

---

8. For example, in the Tablet to Násiri’d-dín Sháh, Bahá’u’lláh has revealed: “This 
[Bahá’u’lláh] is but a leaf which the winds of the will of thy Lord, the Almighty, the 
All-Praised, have stirred” (The Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh [Haifa: Bahá’í World 
Centre, 1972] 57). In Láh-i-Salman, Bahá’u’lláh has revealed a categorical statement 
that whatever we notice in this world even if it appear to be contrary to the outward 
will of the Manifestations of God, in reality all are and will be by the will of God 
(Fadil-i-Mazandarani, A. Amr va Khálp, vol. 1 [Hofheim-Langenhain, Germany: 
Bahá’í Verlag, 1985] 93).

9. Emphasis added. Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 

10. Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 
1978) 52.
God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world. It hath been revealed in the Lawh-i-Hikmat: “The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting” (Baha'u'llah, Tablets 141). Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people.\(^{11}\)

May the pages of *The Journal of Baha'i Studies* always be a mirror reflecting the best manifestations of these guiding words of Baha'u'llah.

IRAJ AYMAN