

This book, as Juan Cole points out in the foreword, is the first academic book-length study in English devoted to a single work of Baháullah.² As such it represents an important milestone in the history of Bahai exegesis and the author and publisher deserve abundant praise for their courage and fortitude in producing *Symbol and Secret*. Christopher Buck displays an impressive command of the existing body of Bahai scholarship and a minute awareness of scholarly articles in obscure journals treating important points of Islamic and Christian doctrine. This book is primarily aimed at scholars of religious studies or Islamics, and Bahais wishing to approach such an audience may suggest this book without any sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness; at the same time, all but those Bahais who are implacably and prejudicially opposed to the application of critical and scholarly methodologies to the scriptures of their own religion can find much to admire in Buck's approach. In view of what has sometimes been an uncomfortable and unhappy relationship between western scholars and scholarship and the Bahai community, *Symbol and Secret's* attempt to face two such disparate audiences at the same time without flinching is an act of considerable courage and imagination. The effort to find a common ground on which both non-academic Bahais and the scholarly community (secular or religious) can comfortably stand to examine the meaning of Bahai scripture is a great service to both communities.

Buck writes in an academic tone from the point of view and with the terminology of a phenomenologist of religion. However, the diction and theological style of Shoghi Effendi's writings occasionally show their traces, as they often do in the writings of Bahais. Under this influence, Buck's rhetorical style not infrequently sounds a moralising Victorian or Edwardian undertone, and his predilection for stentorian and somewhat antiquated adjectives leaps out at the reader, embedded as they are in an otherwise reserved and value-neutral academic prose. This jostling of two incongruous styles may achieve a quaint effect for some readers, or may impress other readers as a balancing of spiritual and academic values, but this reviewer found it jarring to bounce back and forth between statements like: "Bahá'u'lláh made moral reform a precondition to the

1 The writer has diverged from house style for transliteration for his own reasons which he explains at the end of the piece.

2 There is a short book in English on the *Kitáb al-Aqdas* by Suheil Bushrui, but it is not conceived as an academic study. In Persian 'Abd al-Hamid Eshráq-Khávari's four volume dictionary of the *Ketáb-i Iqán (Qāmus-e Iqán)* provides a wonderful mine of philological information about the book, but is written in the form of a traditional Islamic exegetical work, not as a critical study.

realisation of the eschaton, the anticipated apocalypse” (xxxv), on the one hand, and “Bahá’u’lláh was a *scion* of nobility” (xxiv, [emphasis mine]), on the other. Likewise, we encounter “Scholarship at times is deficient in adopting a methodology that is commensurate with religious self-definition” (xxiii) juxtaposed with “It was in this *pestilential pit*” (xxx), “Bahá’u’lláh *penned*” (xxvi) and “*Oriental hyperbole*” (264). There are also a few infelicitous translations: “This is an explanation and comparison; it is figuration, not [literal] reality” (xl, n33) which might be less awkwardly rendered as: “This is interpretation and parable; it is a metaphor, not the truth.” Buck glosses *mustagháth* as “He Who shall be invoked” (120), which is perhaps more at: “He whose aid is sought.” Some of the English sentences raise a mildly amused brow, as well: “As a Persian and hermeneut, Bahá’u’lláh enriches a spectacular legacy of exegesis by Persians” (81); “Its ever-expanding dissemination was boosted after 1863 by its post-declaration status as revelation” (51); “Without aspersing the sincerity of this eulogy of the Qur’an” (89). There are, too, to be fair, occasional passages of beautiful concise prose, such as paragraph two on page 251. But one does not, in any case, pick up a book such as this for concise and bracing eloquence; those of you who find nothing objectionable about the above sentences may justly conclude that I am nit-picking, while those of you who find the prose of the present review turgid and contorted in its own write will be right to think that I have forfeited the right to opine on such matters. Questions of style aside, though, the reader should be forewarned that this is a ponderous, densely argued book, filled with technical jargon. Nevertheless, it does richly repay the effort to understand it.

The introduction (xviii-xli) seeks to provide a theological and historical context for the Babi movement and Baháullah’s subsequent claims. Buck provides a dense capsule history which is well-informed by the latest journal research on the subject and judiciously considers the sometimes tendentious scholarly literature on Babi history. As a caveat, readers unfamiliar with the discourse of phenomenologists of religion may find this chapter somewhat perplexing; conversely, those not already familiar with Babi and Bahai history and theology may leave this chapter without a clear grasp of the salient events leading up to the composition of the *Ketáb-e Iqân*. Assuming that the book is in part aimed at an audience of religious studies scholars who lack detailed knowledge of the Bahai Faith, a bare-bones outline of the doctrinal and historical development from Shiism to Babism to Bahatism, including perhaps a chronological table of the major events and texts, might be added to future editions for such readers’ convenience.

Buck’s concern with the charismatic aspects of Babi-Bahai history and his admonition to keep the “average” Babi’s experience of the religion in mind introduces an important corrective to the existing body of scholarship on the Babis. With a few notable exceptions (e.g. the works of Smith and Momen), most

scholarship tends to focus over-much on scriptural sources, whereas it does not seem that all the texts in question were available to or understood by the main body of Babi converts, largely won over by personal contact and conversation rather than private reading of the Bab's writings. Buck introduces Browne's pen-portrait in evidence of Bahauallah's charisma; though this is moving testimony, it is also suspect, since Browne subsequently used some similar phrases to describe Sobh-e Azal.

On the messianic secret

In Chapter One, "Bahá'u'lláh and the Book of Certitude," Buck first broaches the question of "messianic secrecy," which he will take up again at other places in the book (e.g., 188-91, 257ff, etc.). He considers both whether or not Bahauallah, in light of the fact that he did not openly lay claim to be a Manifestation [*mazhar*] of God until 1863, understood the process by which he produced the *Ketáb-e Iqân* to be divine revelation, and whether or not this process objectively qualifies as "revelation," as it is currently defined by phenomenologists of religion (1-7). In addition to the colophon of the text—from which an "ideal" Babi reader might be expected to infer a fairly unambiguous claim to the status of revelation—Buck considers other passages in the *Iqân*. The argument here might have been buttressed by a close reading of other early works of Bahauallah, such as the *Hidden Words*, the prolegomenon and epilogue of which (as well as the original title, *Mushaf Fátimah*), also rather strongly imply that Bahauallah understood himself to be "revealing" scripture. B. Todd Lawson has pointed out the important overtones of certain theologically charged words in the writings of the Bab and shows that, though the explicit claims about his station grew over time, they were already implied from the beginning such that a well-informed reader would have inferred them from his earliest texts;³ Lawson's work gives a theoretical framework for the exegesis of Babi and Bahai texts and demonstrates the importance of a broad philological knowledge of Sufi and other Islamic texts.

Buck, following Browne, rightly raises the possibility that the colophon of the *Iqân* was added later. He calls for a text-critical edition of the *Iqân*, which is also a desideratum for other important works by Bahauallah, as well as works like Abdul-Baha's *Some Answered Questions (Mofâvazât)*, for which there are at least three distinct textual layers. This leads into discussions about the dating of the text (7-12) and the "Circumstances of Revelation" (12-14). The rest of this chapter (14-37) leads the reader through the manuscript, translation and publication history of the *Ketáb-e Iqân*. The author provides concise and informative discussions of these matters, marshalling a great deal of information gleaned and conveniently summarised from scattered sources. This section covers

3 B. Todd Lawson, "The Terms 'Remembrance' (*dhikr*) and 'Gate' (*báb*) in the Báb's Commentary on the Sura of Joseph," in *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*, ed. Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1988) 1-63.

dense ground, and in the course of this discussion many readers may feel themselves in danger of losing sight of the forest for the trees. Readers uninitiated into the arcane science of textual criticism might not fully appreciate or grasp the importance of the manuscript and printing history of the *Iqân*—except insofar as the refutation of Sayyed Najafi’s accusations are concerned. It would not hurt to elaborate and recapitulate the reasons for paying minute attention to such evidence, as well as to explain in outline the important role textual scholarship has played in the establishment of the correct reading of other scriptures. There are, of course, larger theological and interpretive questions about the degree of accuracy with which human beings can transmit the form and original intent of utterances and writings, and the dangers of acontextually apotheosising the “text” in any scriptural tradition. Buck remains reticent on this score, undoubtedly in consideration of the sensibilities of his Bahai audience, but he does conclude with an air of either reproach or chagrin that “there are simply no critical editions of Bahá’í scripture” (34).

On the question of Shoghi Effendi’s translation of “This Bird of Heaven, now dwelling upon the dust” for *hammámiy-i turábí*, which Buck observes had been more literally rendered by Ali Kuli Khan as “Earthly Dove,” Shoghi Effendi quite likely had in mind the Avicennian (and ultimately neo-Platonic) allegory of the soul as a heavenly bird trapped in the mortal world, which extricates itself from its fetters and flies all the way to Mount Qáf to meet its King, then returning to enlighten its fellow birds, still trapped on earth, about the nature of their King (see Avicenna’s *Risâlat al-tayr*⁴ and the “Dove Ode” ascribed to him). Likewise, Baháullah, in this passage asserts his ability to unfold “innumerable mysteries” for his Babi compatriots, insinuating that the bird of his own soul has flown the journey to its divine maker and is thus able to reveal the sacred topography of existence to those souls still mired on the earthly plane. This metaphor would therefore seem to suggest that while Baháullah is a mortal man like everyone else, his spirit has ascended to the realms of the divine—hence his identity as a heavenly bird returned to live on earth. This identification of the bird with prophecy seems fairly certain, for aside from the epiphany of the Holy Spirit to Christ in the form of a dove, the *Iqân* (255 of the English translation) also later describes the prophets as “Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity” (*atyâr-e hoviyyeh va hamâmât-e azaliyyeh*), in what may again be an allusion to the Avicennian bird-as-soul motif. I believe this to be more likely than the explanation given by Buck that “a bird normally flies in the sky or perches in a tree,” such that Baháullah’s earthly dove “signifies a man of God obliged to live in mortality.” He gets closer to the truth, I think, in the discussion of the bird as soul on pages 266-7. In either case, however, Buck is quite correct in recognising this passage as an intimation of Baháullah’s “impending revelation.”

4 A translation is given in H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1980).

Dating the text

As regards the dating of the text, Buck nicely describes the various factors to consider and concludes that the *Iqân* was revealed in 1278 AH, possibly corresponding to 1861, though the official date is 1862 (note that the year 1278 AH began on 9 July 1861 and came to a close on 29 June 1862). With respect to Shoghi Effendi's translation of the passage "twelve hundred and eighty years have passed since the dawn of the Muhammadan Dispensation," Buck speculates that "the Guardian evidently took licence in rounding off the figure for an English-speaking audience unconcerned with precise Islamic dates" (p39n22). Buck does not, however, point out that some (if not most) manuscripts of the *Iqân* read 1280 years (*hezâr o devist o hashtâd*), rather than 1278; indeed, the printed versions of the Persian text which are currently available (the reprint of the edition published by the Central Assembly of the Bahais of Egypt in 1352 Hejri [1933-4] and the Indian edition, reprinted from the Iranian edition of 2 Khordâd 1319 [May 23, 1940]) both give the year 1280. The French translation done by Hippolyte Dreyfus, independent of Shoghi Effendi's translation, also reads 1280.

Because Shoghi Effendi indicated in a letter that the *Iqân* dates to 1278, he apparently had access to a manuscript (or perhaps some other historical source) that did give the reading 1278, but the copy-text he followed in translation apparently contained the reading 1280, although in another passage of the same manuscript, referring to the suffering of the Babis in comparison with the suffering of Husayn, allusion is made to the passage of eighteen years since the Bab's declaration. May I suggest here that the reading 1280 may be an emendation made by Bahauallah, himself, when he revised the manuscript Abdul-Baha (at the age of eighteen) had copied for the Bab's maternal uncle. It was at this time that Bahauallah added certain things in the margins, such as the sentence: "Amidst them all, We stand, life in hand, wholly resigned to His will; that perchance, through God's loving kindness and His grace, this revealed and manifest Letter may lay down His life as a sacrifice in the path of the Primal Point, the most exalted Word" (252 of the English text).⁵ Although 1280 may indicate the date at which Bahauallah added the marginal glosses, it may also represent a general, rather than a specific date—equivalent to something like "it has been one millennium, two centuries and about four score years." Perhaps pursuing this avenue of inquiry would provide further clarification for Buck's statement that "We know that Bahá'u'lláh made additions in the margins of the original, but not subtractions" (31).

Inexplicably, Buck ignores Fâzel-e Mâzandarâni's comments on the manuscripts and dating of the *Iqân* in *Asrâr al-asâr* (266-84, s.v. "Iqân").

⁵ See Ugo Giachery, *Shoghi Effendi* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973) 149 and Fâzel-e Mâzandarâni, *Asrâr al-asâr* (Tehran: Mo'asseseh-ye matbu'ât-e amri, 124 B.E./1967) 1: 267-8, s.v. "Iqân." This copy is still extant in the Bahai World Centre archives in Haifa, Israel.

Mâzandarâni points out the existence of various manuscripts (though he does not, unfortunately, specify which ones) that alternatively read 1280 and those that read 1278, suggesting that the actual date of composition might be 1279. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, it is odd that Buck cites Najafî quoting from Mâzandarâni's *Asrâr al-âsâr*, without ever referring directly to Mâzandarâni's text (though his work is cited in the bibliography). Mâzandarâni was obviously aware of and sensitive to variant readings in the manuscripts, had seen a good many manuscripts, lithographs and printed editions of the text *de visu* and offers the suggestion that the book may actually have been written in 1279, splitting the difference between the two dates. Whether one agrees with Mâzandarâni's conclusions or not, in the detailed and minute discussion that Buck devotes to this question, the reader should have been made aware of Mâzandarâni's views.

Language and meaning

Chapter Two, "Exegesis and Ideology," examines the doctrinal proposition of the *Iqân*—how it interprets potential objections to the claims put forth by the Bab—and whether or not it foretells Bahau'llah's impending revelation. This is framed in terms of the discourse of comparative religion, appealing to the concepts of "eschaton" and "messianic secrecy." The discussion of Shiite traditional expectations about the Qâ'em and the rhetorical strategies employed by Bahau'llah to engage these, as well as the Koranic "Seal of the Prophets" verse is illuminating. I do not see how an objective reader can deny that the *Hidden Words*, the *Iqân* and other writings of Bahau'llah's Baghdad period suggest, sometimes not so subtly, that Bahau'llah viewed himself as possessing special access to the divine and the interior meaning of previous scriptures. One might also have fruitfully compared the "messianic secret" as it is hidden/divulged in the Baghdad texts of Bahau'llah, with the "messianic secret" that is hidden and simultaneously divulged by the Bab in his early writings, as I suggest above. Indeed, in view of the Islamic attitudes toward heresy and the death sentence that it might eventually entail, anyone other than a duly recognised and appointed jurispudent laying claim to special levels of insight into scripture was compelled to speak allusively. Aside from the question of the messianic secret, however, Buck describes the main thrust of the *Book of Certitude* as "essentially an extended rhetorical argument leading to a symbolic interpretation of eschatological images which occur and recur in the Qur'an" (74).

This subject is then taken up at greater length in Chapter Three, "Beyond Islam: Hermeneutical Terminology in the Book of Certitude," which situates the *Iqân* in the genre of Koranic commentary or *tafsir*. This is certainly true, and Buck makes several good points in this regard. Much more might be said on the subject in future, as an examination of the Islamic exegetical tradition on the verse containing the phrase "Seal of the Prophets" is complex and occasionally

heterodox; the *Iqân* owes more perhaps to the approach of Sufi commentary than to the Sunni or even Shiite exposition of the text, and must be understood specifically within the discourse of the later Iranian philosophical tradition, ecumenical movements within Indo-Iranian Islam that sought to create a synthesis between Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Islam (such as Akbar's House of Worship or Âzar Kayvân's Illuminationist Zoroastrianism), as well as the conflicts of Akhbârî vs. Usûlî Shiism and Shaykhism.

The *Iqân* is written in eloquent but accessible Persian and, notes Buck, this style suggests a paradigm shift by moving the discussion of eschatology, salvation and Koranic interpretation away from the terminology and conceptual categories of specialists—the scholars of *hadîth*, Islamic law and Islamic history—to the vocabulary of the common man, thus reinforcing linguistically the theological doctrine that every man must understand the verities of religion for himself. Of course, this strategy had already been adopted by Iranian men of letters in the early medieval Mirror for Princes literature (of Nezâm al-Molk or al-Ghazzâlî, e.g.), often for philosophical texts (the Persian treatises of Avicenna or Sohrawardi, for example) and, most especially, mystical texts, whether in prose or poetry, like those of 'Attâr and Rumi, and that of Mohammad ebn al-Monavvar, who clothed sophisticated and deep theological and philosophical arguments in an accessible and pleasing Persian—usually, however, in the form of parable and poetry, rather than the form of more traditional theological argumentation. Bahau'llah's return to the style of the texts of the 10th through 13th centuries arguably corresponds with his concern for political reform (as evinced by his admiration for Qâ'em-Maqâm Farâhâni), religious reform (as evinced by his attraction to the Bab), and to literary and linguistic reform—specifically the *bâz gasht* or neo-classical movement in Persian letters. This marks a significant shift within Babi culture, which had produced a great number of arcane texts (by the Bab, Tahereh, Qoddus and others) steeped in the argumentation and minutiae of the Shiite ulama. Bahau'llah's reading of the Koran follows an essentially karaite strategy, stripping away the sediment of doctrine that had built up around the Koranic text, and calling the reader to confront the meaning of the scripture directly, albeit figuratively.

For this reason, the subsequent effort in this chapter of *Symbol and Secret* to develop technical rhetorical definitions for the various terms (*ramz*, *sirr*, *talvih*, *eshâre*, etc.) Bahau'llah uses to signal the inner meaning or proper understanding of various points of doctrine or of scripture, or to see them as part of a hermeneutical lexicon, seems to me rather misplaced. While Persian manuals of rhetoric, poetics and prosody, as well as some of the Sufi manuals, do develop a technical vocabulary of hermeneutical terms—especially in works of the 11th through 13th centuries AD—those technical terms (including the ones Buck cites, with the possible exception of *ta'wil*) often had more mundane, non-technical usages. In addition, the popularisation of mystical thought in later Persian

literature diluted the specificity of such terms, except when a given later author would treat them in a clearly terminological way (e.g., the theory of *vahdat al-vojud* ascribed to Ibn ‘Arabi by later commentators). In a book such as the *Iqân*, written in an epistolary style employing *saj’*, or metrically parallel and rhyming phrases, the choice of words might often be determined on the basis of their sonority and the number of syllables. The example *kalimât-e marmûzih va ishârât-e mulghazih* is given in *Symbol and Secret* (95), translated by Shoghi Effendi as “symbolic terms and abstruse allusions.” These paired phrases observe grammatical parallelism, have the same number of syllables, and while not technically rhyming according to the rules of Persian prosody, create homoteleuton, a kind of slant rhyme between both the first and the second pair of words (-â/â and -zih/zih). It is my impression that most such terms used by Bahauallah in the *Iqân* do not convey a precise technical meaning, but were chosen rather for stylistic/poetic reasons, whereas to call them a “hermeneutical terminology” forces them to bear a burden of meaning that they were not meant to carry. Likewise, the significance which the author attempts to locate in grammatical formulations, such as the *ezâfe-ye este’âri* (123, 254), is almost wholly absent. The *ezâfe* construction is the primary way that modifiers of any type (adjectives, possessives, nouns of specification) are linked to nouns in Persian, and one would have to resort to awkward circumlocutions to express things otherwise. Buck himself seems to realise at one point (217) that the *Iqân*, because of its genre, is an unlikely pond in which to fish for technical rhetorical vocabulary; by this point in the book, however, he has already committed to casting his nets in that endeavour. Focussing on the theological terminology of the *Iqân*, such as Manifestation (*mazhar*), Revelation (*vahy, ezhâr*), Resurrection (*qiâmat*), return (*raj’at*), etc., and how this corresponds and/or differs from the usage of such concepts in Babi, Shaykhi, Shiite and other texts, would probably have allowed him to reel in bigger fish and a more abundant catch.

Indeed, Buck moves in this direction in Chapter Four, “Exegetical Techniques in the Book of Certitude,” the longest and most central chapter of the book. As Buck observes, it is “the New Testament apocalyptic,” rather than the Shiite traditions about the Qâ’em which occupies centre stage in Bahauallah’s response to the questions raised about the Bab’s claim to be the Qâ’em. Buck convincingly argues the importance of Bahauallah’s detailed treatment of a passage from the Gospel of Matthew, underlining Bahauallah’s strategy of explaining verses of the Koran by analogy to it and drawing out the significance of this strategy of “interscriptural exegesis” (126). By focusing on a Christian interpretive controversy about the Day of Resurrection or Return, Bahauallah can talk analogically, without threatening any deeply-held Shiite beliefs about millennial prophecies, and gradually lead the reader to accept the necessity of looking at scriptural passages and prophetic traditions allegorically, rather than literally. This paradigm shift is accomplished not by appealing to the authority

of earlier exegetical literature, but “by an appeal to absurdity” (125); the stars cannot literally fall from the skies onto the earth, and therefore this passage must have an allegorical intent (as Buck carefully points out [214], however, Baháullah does not deny that some verses have a literal interpretation—just that not all verses can be literally interpreted). Having established the validity of this allegorical methodology, Baháullah can remove Shiite prophecies about the Qâ'em from the realm of the specific and parochial to a universal and symbolic realm (much as Jung would later find archetypal truths suggested by apparently dissimilar religious symbols, or as Eliade would come to see an ur-myth of eternal return in the various millennial myths of various traditions), but also project the Islamic belief about the appearance of past prophets to various peoples at various historical times into the future, explaining these multiple continuous prophecies as a progressive revelation of God's truth.

The *Iqân* as *tafsir*

Buck next compares the *Iqân* to the Shiite exegetical tradition (127ff), attempting to contextualise Baháullah's arguments and suggest their antecedents. He argues that the *Iqân* shares exegetical principles with Akhbari *tafsir*, noting that in Akhbari exegesis, traditions of the Imams are “not so much used to explain the Qur'án...as the Qur'an [*sic*] is used to legitimate a Shi'ite agenda...the Qur'an effectively becomes a Shi'í text” (130). The parallel implication is that the Koran becomes a Babi or Bahai text in Baháullah's exegesis. It does not follow, however, that Baháullah's reverence for the Koran has somehow diminished as a result of his acceptance of the Bab's claim, as Buck wonders (141); there is ample reason to believe Baháullah's expression of fervent devotional attachment to the Koran and Muhammad. Buck locates a further similarity between Akhbari Koran interpretation and Baháullah's interpretation in the *Iqân* in the emphasis on symbolic and esoteric significance (131). This much is certainly true, but is it not also true that any heterodox interpretation or exegesis of scripture, whether Shiite, Calvinist or Kabbalist, will interpret its authoritative scripture as validating its understanding and doctrines, just as the New Testament reinterprets the Old to validate the claim for Jesus as the Messiah? Ultimately, it is the major **difference** between the *Iqân* and Akhbari exegetical techniques that is more significant than any similarities: the *Iqân* accepts that the Qâ'em has appeared and the millennium is upon us, and the Koran, the Shiite traditions, the Old Testament and the Gospel, all are read and interpreted in support of this claim.

At this point, Buck applies the typology of Islamic exegetical literature devised by John Wansbrough. I began reading this section with some trepidation, as Wansbrough's writings have a not undeserved reputation for difficulty among Islamicists, though those who do claim to understand praise them as brilliant. Buck's summary of Wansbrough's typology as consisting of “five *tafsir* types [Narrative, Legal, Textual, rhetorical and Symbolic/Allegorical] and twelve

procedural devices” (135), is clear and painless, and he contends, on the authority of the Islamic scholar Andrew Rippin, that this typology is “scientific..., functional, unified, and revealing.” Buck proposes to break down the *Iqân* according to these categories, as “the number and distribution of each of these techniques within a given text should tell us more precisely what the exegete is doing with his material...” (135). The typology, as Buck presents it, includes the categories “Loci Probantes,” “Lexical Explanation,” “Grammatical Explanation,” “Rhetorical Explanation,” “Periphrasis,” “Analogy,” “Abrogation,” “Circumstances of Revelation,” “Identification of the Vague and Ambiguous,” “Prophetic Tradition,” and “Anecdote.”

These categories, however, derive from classical Arabic models of *tafsir*, and Baháullah’s *Iqân*, if we choose to see it as a Koranic exegesis, is written neither in the classical form, nor in the Arabic language. A modified typology, based upon the rhetorical techniques and form of later Sufi and Shiite exegesis, especially as written in Persian, would allow us to perform a more applicable Wansbroughian analysis to this text, and avoid the “conceptual modifications...necessary to fit the text to the methodology intended to elucidate it” (141, an ominous warning). If Baháullah does employ certain classical rhetorical devices in the course of his argument, this is unconscious, or rather, stems from normal conversational styles of argumentation (or styles of argumentation shared in the discourses of politics, philosophy, history, and other disciplines, besides *tafsir*), and not from a knowledge or scholarly concern about the techniques of argumentation and rhetoric (*‘ilm al-bayân* and *‘ilm al-balâgha*) or the classical strategies of Koranic exegesis, per se. A seminarian or a literary scholar might concern himself with such questions, but Baháullah, as he himself declares, was never schooled in such matters. There seems to be a belated acknowledgement of this fact, in the final chapter of *Symbol and Secret*, as Buck discusses Mirza Abu al-Fazl, who as a scholar was concerned with such things, and did invoke a technical knowledge of rhetoric in defending the *Iqân*. Abu al-Fazl seems to suggest, according to Buck, “why the categories of rhetoric are absent in the Book of Certitude” (252). Yet, despite this expression of doubt, Buck concludes that, by following Wansbrough’s methodology, “we were able to show how Bahá’u’lláh’s tools of exegesis were drawn from the dozen or so kinds of procedural devices which the great Muslim scholars had at their disposal within the classical *tafsir* tradition” (254). What is significant about Baháullah’s exegetical approach is the allegorical, anti-literal interpretations he proposes (and Buck is particularly good at analysing these, 248-52), not the grammatical constructions or technical rhetorical forms (metaphor, simile, metonymy, etc.) by which he makes them. Likewise, it seems to me something of a tautology to argue that “Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretive procedures involve what Fishbane refers to as ‘those hermeneutical strategies whereby meaning is produced for a given text’” (126). Is this not exactly what all readers and interpretive procedures—indeed all

users of language—do; understand a text or utterance according to certain rules and techniques that endow said text with meaning?

Despite my misgivings, the section in *Symbol and Secret* on Wansbrough's typology of exegetical and rhetorical strategy (136-213) affords Buck an opportunity to present close readings and philological studies of several passages of the *Iqân*, which are very informative and of enduring interest in their own right. Of particular interest are the divergences in the case of two Koranic verses (25:25, discussed by Buck on pages 146ff; and 55:5, discussed on 173ff) between the received reading and Baháullah's reading in the *Iqân*. There are, it should be noted, fourteen separate and equally canonical traditional "readings" of the Koran, which differ from one another on minor points of vowelings and grammatical analysis of the Koranic text; I suspect Baháullah's reading of these verses may find precedence in one or the other of these fourteen traditional recitations.

Symbol and Secret mines the technical aspects of rhetoric and the stylistics of exegesis for all they are worth. This is an important step along the way to discovering the mother lode, which, however, in the case of the *Iqân*, I believe lies elsewhere. While hoping that "the unity of argument" in the *Iqân* will be more clearly revealed by Wansbrough's model, Buck himself recognises that analysis along Wansbrough's typology "might strike the reader as somewhat disjointed" (136). This reader found the analysis not so much disjointed, as wide of the mark. Future efforts to dig deeper into the significance of the *Iqân* and more precisely locate what is unique in it, should look not to the rhetoric, form and grammar of the arguments made, but to the content of the arguments—the actual differences of doctrine between Baháullah and the Shaykhis, Akhbaris, Usulis, Sunnis, etc.

Buck is at his strongest when he does exactly that as, for example, when he shows how Baháullah deals with the doctrine of *tahrif*—the deliberate alteration (or even excision) of passages of scripture by the clergy (113-14, 126, 139-41, 209, 241). The argument that scripture and prophetic traditions need to be read allegorically allows Baháullah to argue that the actual text of the Torah and Gospel have not been altered, but rather, the clergy have distorted their meaning (*tahrif*) by teaching a false (and usually literal) interpretation. Similarly, Buck's discussion of the Koranic promise of *leqâ*, the meeting with God (191-200), in the *Iqân* vis-a-vis the interpretation of *leqâ* in the writings of the Shaykhis and of the Bab is very illuminating. Buck's analysis of Baháullah's appeal to Koran 33:44 promising attainment to the divine Presence on the Day of Resurrection (itself allegorically interpreted by Baháullah as the advent day of a new prophet), as a counter-argument to the nearby verse (33:40) about the "Seal of the Prophets" is simply brilliant. Likewise, the discussion of Shiite traditions alluded to by Baháullah (200-210) greatly assists the reader not steeped in Shiism to understand how the popular piety and traditional liturgical texts of Baháullah's

own background resonate in the *Iqân*.

History and philology

Building on Buck's work, one might now begin a historical and philological investigation into the deeper doctrinal and theological context of the *Iqân* with a detailed synopsis of the various Islamic and specifically Shiite beliefs about the Day of Resurrection and the appearance of the Mahdi/Qâ'em. A comparison might then be made to Bahau'llah's explanations of the meaning of the Day of Resurrection and the finality of prophecy, as well as to the explanations of other millenarian movements within Islam, such as the Ahmadiyyas or the followers of the Mahdi in the Sudan. Only by considering what had been previously taught and believed and how other roughly contemporaneous movements explained the advent of their candidate for Mahdi-hood in terms of previous tradition and scripture, will one come to understand the full significance of various arguments about and interpretations of the Koran, the prophetic and Imami traditions (*hadith*). Likewise, comparison to the way Sufis and the more esoteric groups (Horufis, the Druze, etc.) had explained such eschatological and prophetic passages, staked claims of prophetic or millennial authority for various figures, as well as to their methods of scriptural exegesis generally, might prove illuminating. For example, twentieth-century Imami Shiism has tackled the central question of temporal authority with Khomeini's doctrine of *velâyat-e faqih*, the rule of the clergy in the absence of the Hidden Imam; this is one doctrinal development that addresses certain problems of eschatology, traditional Shiite quietism and the demands of contemporary political activism. As Buck argues, following Amanat, "the Bâbî movement represented one reformist solution to the pressures and perils facing Persia in the mid-nineteenth century" (238). To what, then, is Bahau'llah's ecumenical, universalist blue-print for a new world order to be built collectively by the followers of various creeds (Buck notes [240] the *Ketâb-e Iqân* addresses itself to "the peoples of the world") a response or a solution?

A consideration of the possible alternative approaches that Bahau'llah might have pursued but did not to answer the questions posed by the Bab's uncle would also highlight the significance and originality of the approach Bahau'llah does take. For example, Bahau'llah does not appeal to the concept of *badâ*—the Shiite doctrine that a change in the divine will may occur such that a soteriological event transpires differently than the prophesies of the past foretell—even though the Bab did appeal to this doctrine in explanation of some of the very questions that his uncle posed to Bahau'llah. Meanwhile, Bahau'llah condemns his Shaykhi contemporary, Karim Khân, for his conceit and shallow understanding of the meaning of the *Me'râj*. How would Bahau'llah's interpretation differ? Why did Bahau'llah not argue the case that the Koran did foretell the Bab (by name in verse 5:23), or that other messengers (7:37-39), "a witness" (*shahid*, 11:18), or

two further protectors (57:28) would come after Muhammad? Of course, such verses are not normally interpreted in this way by Muslims, but then Bahauallah's allegorical interpretations of some other Koranic verses are also non-traditional. What reasons might Bahauallah have chosen not to follow this tack and instead to advance the arguments he did offer?

The final chapter, "Conclusion: The Other Side of the Bridge," though ostensibly a summary and conclusion, introduces much new material and restates some of the ideas developed earlier in a more succinct and accessible form; readers less familiar with the subject matter of this book may actually wish to begin with this chapter before going on to the introduction. Christians, Comparativists and those with an eye to Christian-Islamic interfaith dialogue will find the discussion of Jesus in Bahauallah's writings (240-41) and Bahauallah's "doctrine of the spiritual fraternity of God's prophets" of keen interest. Buck also addresses the issue of how the Bahai Faith emerges from Babism shortly after the composition of the *Iqân* (242ff). This discussion is illuminating and helps a modern reader who approaches the book through the subsequent lens of Bahauallah's ministry and later writings understand something of what the book must have meant for its original Babi audience. Buck takes up at length and carefully evaluates the debate between Cole and MacEoin over the thesis of Messianic Secrecy. Arguing once again the danger of a purely textual approach, Buck offers as evidence the testimony of individuals who knew Bahauallah during this period, before he announced his claim, and indicated that they recognised him as the promised Manifestation foretold by the Bab (257-61). The following sections marshal convincing and overwhelming evidence that Bahauallah was, indeed, aware of his "messianic secret" in writing the *Iqân*. *Symbol and Secret* closes with a discussion of how the *Iqân* was received by the Babis, the reforms Bahauallah introduced to Babism once he became the acknowledged leader of the movement, and how his doctrines developed in his subsequent writings, expanding upon the ecumenical and anti-literal interpretations of religious scripture he had offered in the *Iqân*, and revealing a new set of laws, to the point where his "symbolic universe" becomes "an eschatologically realised promised land of universalisms" (291). This section (278-91) is one of the best, most original contributions of what was already a very meaty book, and will provide a basis for further discussion of such questions for some time into the future.

Few books appear completely free of typographical and related problems. Given the complex transliteration system (a computer font was specifically designed for this book), the pervasive occurrence of Arabic and Persian words, the quotation from other sources using different transliteration standards, typographical errors are remarkably few. I mention the following not by way of criticism, but merely so that they can be corrected in future editions: "Shahrokh Monjazez" occurs on 38n20, but earlier appears as "Shahroakh" on xvii; read

“pervasive” instead of “persuasive” in the middle of page xxviii; “Gods” on page 62 should read “God’s;” on page 71 “ilmihī” would appear to require initial ‘ (‘*ayn*); on page 97 there is a font/formatting problem with the word “Riḡḡv n” in a different type face than the plain or italic of the rest of the text—this should appear as “Riḡvân” (with under-dot below the d); on page 100 “opaque” should read “opaque” and on page 132 “Allesandro” should read “Alessandro;” an accent is missing over the “a” in Qur’an in the quotation of Shoghi Effendi’s translation on page 141; on page 173 the entire paragraph beginning “Rodwell’s translation...” is accidentally indented, and the “u” in *qamaru* in the transliterated Arabic quotation in the middle of the same page should be superscript—*qamar^u*. On page 206, it appears that “Its” and not “It” should be the subject of the sentence. The table of Koran citations in Appendix I is useful; so would an index be, if a second edition is planned.

Transliteration

There are, however, numerous inconsistencies in transliteration. Occasionally, in place of word-final *-ih* (e.g., *názilih*, 308), as the Bahai system of transliteration renders the final silent letter “h” (pronounced by Iranians as a short vowel “e”), we encounter the more contemporary usage of Arabic transliteration, “a” (e.g., *qá’imiyya*, 54). This leads, in transliterating the *ezâfe* construction, to *mubâarakay-i* (308), in place of the normal Bahai convention of *mubâarakiy-i*. This hybrid system results in a final “ay,” which would typically be read as the diphthong of short “a” plus long “ī,” thus giving the sound of the vowel in the English word “high.” So, for example, we find *Sidrah-y-i ‘ishq* on line 3 of page 264 (which should presumably read *sidray-i*), though this might be mistaken for the pronunciation *sedray’ii*. Elsewhere we encounter, less ambiguously, *sidriy-i* (38n20). The constant fluctuation between transliterating the Arabic consonant *wâw* as Persian “v” or Arabic “w” does not seem to follow any logic (i.e., adopting one for Persian titles, and the other for Arabic titles). The rules for capitalization of Arabic and Persian titles in transliteration follow at times the Bahai transliteration system (the first letter of all words of a title are capitalised), and at times the contemporary scholarly conventions (see the *Chicago Manual of Style*), which capitalise only the first letter of the first word in a transliterated Arabic title, unless subsequent words are proper names. There are also inconsistencies in the use of Islamic terms rendered in English. For example, we encounter quranic and ulama, without diacriticals, but Qur’an and Qur’ân (once in the same sentence on 130). We find Shiism, but Sunnī Islam (59); Shí’í (60), but Shiism (237). The diacriticals on Qájár are probably unnecessary. The occurrence of “Babism” with no diacriticals near the word “Bábí” (242, lines 2-3) should assure us that removing the diacriticals from the latter will not cause consternation for the reader.

The many inconsistencies and errors of transliteration in the bibliography

and text of this book are not caused by carelessness or ignorance, though, and to carp at them here would beg the larger issue, which is this: the need for Bahai publishers and authors to conform to the official Bahai standards for transliteration results in a difficult, rather cluttered, and foreign-looking textual terrain. In addition to making the job of proof-readers more difficult and the likelihood of errors greater, the fastidious apostrophising, accenting, under-lining and -dotting of words of Persian and Arabic origin that the Bahai institutions continue to mandate mars the visual appeal of the page and may, at least in English-speaking countries, where diacritical marks are not in everyday use, have created something of a hindrance to public receptivity to the Bahai message. It could give the graphical impression of an arcane and imported sect, not to mention causing confusion in its very name—Bahá'í—with B'nai Brith. I therefore have opted, in this review, to use such marks as little as possible, or at least less frequently than usual; while I feel certain this will annoy some readers, particularly Bahais used to seeing the old system, I am equally certain that it will please others and subtly make discussion of the Bahai religion seem less foreign and more natural to native readers of English.

When Shoghi Effendi implemented a uniform convention of transliteration for Bahai publications, he followed a system adopted by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1896. In a letter written on his behalf in 1931, it was explained that this system of transliteration was “now adhered to by the most eminent scholars.”⁶ The fact that the Bahai system for transliteration was generally accepted by academics in 1931, whereas academics themselves have constantly been developing and refining transliteration systems, inadvertently gives Bahai works the look of old-fashioned (and now politically suspect) orientalist scholarship of the early twentieth century. Modern academic conventions use the macron or circumflex to represent the long vowels, rather than the acute accent still used in Bahai publications. Most modern systems also drop the underline under th, dh, sh and gh. Furthermore, there are now systems constructed or modified especially for Persian, whereas the older systems are based upon Arabic pronunciations, and do not do a decent job of conveying the sounds to non-speakers of Persian.

There is certainly an advantage for the Bahai community in maintaining uniform spelling with Bahai texts published in the 1930s through the 1990s; it may undoubtedly prove disconcerting for Bahais who have written “Bahá'u'lláh” for over fifty years to now read and write Bahā' Allāh, Bahā'ullāh, or simply Bahauallah (as in this review) or, following the Persian pronunciation, Bahāollāh. Nevertheless, since Shoghi Effendi seems to have intended that Bahai transliteration correspond to the accepted academic norms, we will now need to learn the current conventions of transliteration, rather than clinging to ones that

6 See Moojan Momen, “The System of Transliteration,” *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 5:1-2 (January 1991): 13-69.

today are outmoded. Here is one case where adherence to the letter of the instructions of the Guardian may actually conflict with the spirit of his intent. The Bahai conventions of transliteration are no longer accepted by academics and, as a pronunciation guide for Persian words, the system fails miserably, and has generally been replaced among scholars by the conventions followed in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Even so, would it not be sufficient to provide a glossary, with diacriticals, of Perso-Arabic terms at the back of a book such as this and dispense with academic transliteration in the body of the work, thus allowing the text to flow unencumbered by flying accents, stippled dots and flailing apostrophes? Bahai doctrine will certainly not suffer if publishers are given leeway to omit apostrophes and acute accents from the words Bahauallah and Bahai, which occur perhaps one thousand times throughout the 325-page text of *Symbol and Secret*? Is there any possibility that these words could be confused with something else? Is the general reader expected to mentally convert every occurrence of every proper name, title and technical word into the Arabic script, or even to care? I think the present book would have looked graphically better, contained fewer mistakes, appealed more to those who do not know Persian or Arabic (and perhaps even to those who do), and would not inadvertently have suggested by its visual appearance that it was written about either an arcane and occult sect, or some hopelessly obscure topic only scholars of philology might have an interest in.

Despite these scattered comments, corrections and curmudgeonly remarks, *Symbol and Secret* is a ground-breaking study, setting a standard for and describing the agenda of the exegesis of Bahai texts for some time to come. It is this fact above all that I should like the reader of this review to remember.
