

FROM: THE LETTERS OF OTTOMAN SULTAN SELIM I AND SAFAVID SHAH ISMAIL I

[In Muslim opinion, the Ottomans' right to rule rested on their success in war against the Christians and on their implementing the Holy Law in their lands. But this did not entitle them to dominate other Sunni Muslim states and when Ottoman arms first attempted to overthrow rival Muslim rulers throughout Asia Minor, religious resistance developed. In 1502 the threat increased when the head of the Safavid family, Ismail, proclaimed himself shah and quickly built an empire directly to the east of the Ottoman frontier. Ismail's success depended on his followers' belief that his descent (probably fictitious) from Muhammad's son-in-law `Ali made him the true and only legitimate successor to the Prophet. Such a claim implied that all other Muslim rulers were usurpers, including the Ottoman sultans. This doctrine was especially explosive because large numbers of people in Asia Minor were predisposed to accept such an idea. For generations a semi-secret Shi`ite propoganda had taught that the rulers of Islam were all illegitimate, and that the true head of the Muslim community, the Imam, would appear someday to overthrow the mighty and set all things right. Ismail's meteoric career seemed to match such expectations, and the many views which had developed about how and when the Imam would manifest himself tended to coalesce around his person. Sultan Selim I responded to this challenge by resorting to terror against those in his domains suspected of sympathizing with Shah Ismail. He massacred many thousands in eastern Asia Minor and then marched on Tabriz, Ismail's new capital. Selim's Ottoman forces defeated Ismail and his army at Chaldiran (1514) and occupied Tabriz, but could not hold it because the town was too far from Constantinople. The result was a stand-off, each ruler remaining supreme within his own frontiers. Before the battle of Chaldiran, Selim and Ismail exchanged a number of letters. The two of these letters translated below are not dated, but were probably written sometime in 1514. Ismail's letter, apparently the only one he wrote, came in reply to three Selim had written, one of which is translated below. The letters were, in fact, a form of propoganda. Selim set out to defend his right to rule by quoting from the Quran and alluding to examples from history which buttressed his claims. Ismail, who based his claims on heredity, had no need of such learning; rather he quotes from seemingly contemporary Persian poetry and appears almost casual, if not insolent, in addressing his rival.]

1. LETTER FROM SELIM TO ISMAIL (UNDATED, AROUND 1514)

"It is from Solomon and it is: 'In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Rise not up against me, but come to me in surrender.'" [Quran 27:30-31] God's blessings upon the best of his creatures, Muhammad, his family, and his companions all. "This is a Scripture We have sent down, blessed; so follow it, and be godfearing; haply so you will find mercy." [Quran 6:156]

This missive which is stamped with the seal of victory and which is, like inspiration descending from the heavens, witness to the verse "We never chastise until We send forth a Messenger" [Quran XVII: i5] has been graciously issued by our most

glorious majesty--we who are the Caliph of God Most High in this world, far and wide; the proof of the verse "And what profits men abides in the earth" [Quran XIII: 17] the Solomon of Splendor, the Alexander of eminence; haloed in victory, Faridun [an ancient and celebrated king of Persia, who began to reign about 750 BCE] triumphant; slayer of the wicked and the infidel, guardian of the noble and the pious; the warrior in the Path, the defender of the Faith; the champion, the conqueror; the lion, son and grandson of the lion; standard-bearer of justice and righteousness, Sultan Selim Shah, son of Sultan Bayezid, son of Sultan Muhammad Khan--and is addressed to the ruler of the kingdom of the Persians, the possessor of the land of tyranny and perversion, the captain of the vicious, the chief of the malicious, the usurping Darius [Probably Darius III (r. 336-330 BCE), who was defeated three times by Alexander the Great before his assassination by the satrap of Bactria. Selim is alluding to current Ottoman-Safavid relations.] of the time, the malevolent Zahhak [a mythological king of Iran notorious for blood-thirstiness] of the age, the peer of Cain, Prince Ismail.

As the Pen of Destiny has drawn up the decree "Thou givest the kingdom to whom Thou wilt" [Quran 3:26] in our sublime name and has signed it with the verse "Whatsoever mercy God opens to men, none can withhold" [Quran 35:2], it is manifest in the Court of Glory and the Presence of Deity that we, the instrument of Divine Will, shall hold in force upon the earth both the commandments and prohibitions of Divine Law as well as the provisions of royal proclamations. "That is the bounty of God; he gives it unto whomsoever He will." [Quran 57:21]

It has been heard repeatedly that you have subjected the upright community of Muhammad (Prayers and salutations upon its founder!) to your devious will, that you have undermined the firm foundation of the Faith, that you have unfurled the banner of oppression in the cause of aggression, that you no longer uphold the commandments and prohibitions of the Divine Law, that you have incited your abominable Shi'i faction to unsanctified sexual union and to the shedding of innocent blood [reference to uncanonical practices, such as temporary marriage. The shedding of blood could be a reference to Shi'i massacres of Sunnis at Tabriz and elsewhere] that like they "Who listen to falsehood and consume the unlawful" [Quran 5:42] you have given ear to idle deceitful words and have eaten that which is forbidden [a further reference to illegitimate (from Sunni perspective) practices condoned by Shi'ites]:

He has laid waste to mosques, as it is said, Constructing idol temples in their stead, that you have torn the noble fiber of Islam with the hand of tyranny, and that you have called the Glorious Quran the myths of the Ancients. The rumor of these abominations has caused your name to become like that of Harith deceived by Satan.

Indeed, as both the fatwas of distinguished *`ulama* who base their opinion on reason and tradition alike and the consensus of the Sunni community agree that

the ancient obligation of extirpation, extermination, and expulsion of evil innovation must be the aim of our exalted aspiration, for "Religious zeal is a victory for the Faith of God the Beneficent"; then, in accordance with the words of the Prophet (Peace upon him!) "Whosoever introduces evil innovation into our order must be expelled" and "Whosoever does aught against our order must be expelled," action has become necessary and exigent. Thus, when the Divine Decree of Eternal Destiny commended the eradication of the infamously wicked infidels into our capable hands, we set out for their lands like ineluctable fate itself to enforce the order "Leave not upon the earth of the Unbelievers even one." [Quran 71:26] If God almighty wills, the lightning of our conquering sword shall uproot the untamed bramble grown to great heights in the path of the refulgent Divine Law and shall cast them down upon the dust of abjectness to be trampled under the hooves of our legions, for "They make the mightiest of its inhabitants abased. Even so they too will do" [Quran XXVII: 341; the thunder of our avenging mace shall dash out the muddled brains of the enemies of the Faith as rations for the lionhearted *ghazis* . "And those who do wrong shall surely know by what overthrowing they will be overthrown." [Quran 26: 227]

But "Religion is Counsel," and should you turn the countenance of submission to the *qibla* of bliss and the Ka'ba of hope--our angelic threshold, the refuge of the noble--moreover, should you lift up the hand of oppression from the heads of your subjects ruined by tyranny and sedition, should you take up a course of repentance, become like one blameless and return to the sublime straight path of the Sunna of Muhammad (Prayers and salutations upon him and God's satisfaction upon his immaculate family and his rightly-guided companions all!) . . . and should you consider your lands and their people part of the well-protected Ottoman state, then shall you be granted our royal favor and our imperial patronage.

He whose face touches the dust of my threshold in submission will be enveloped in the shadow of my favor and my justice. How great the happiness of him who complies with this!

On the other hand, if your evil, seditious habits have become a part of your nature, that which has become essential can never again be accidental. What avail sermons to the black-hearted?

Then, with the support and assistance of God, I will crown the head of every gallows tree with the head of a crown-wearing Sufi and clear that faction from the face of the earth-"The party of God, they are the victors" [Quran 5:56]; I will break the oppressors' grip with the power of the miraculous white hand of Moses, for "God's hand is over their hands." [Quran 48:10] Let them remove the cotton of negligence from the ears of their intelligence and, with their shrouds on their shoulders, prepare themselves for "Surely that which you are promised will come to pass." [Quran 6:134] The triumphant troops "As though they were a building well-compacted" [Quran 61:41] crying out like fate evoked "When their term

comes they shall not put it back a single hour nor put it forward" [Quran 7:34] and maneuvering in accordance with "Slay them wherever you find them" [Quran 4:89], will wreak ruin upon you and drive you from that land. "To God belongs the command before and after, and on that day the believers shall rejoice." [Quran 30:4] "So the last roots of the people who did evil were cut off, Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds." [Quran 6:45]

2. ISMAIL TO SELIM (UNDATED, AROUND 1514)

May his godly majesty, the refuge of Islam, the might of the kingdom, he upon whom God looks with favor, the champion of the sultanate and of the state, the hero of the faith and of the earth, Sultan Selim Shah (God grant him immortal state and eternal happiness!) accept this affectionate greeting and this friendly letter, considering it a token of our good will.

Now to begin: Your honored letters have arrived one after another, for "No sooner has a thing doubled than it has tripled." Their contents, although indicative of hostility, are stated with boldness and vigor. The latter gives us much enjoyment and pleasure, but we are ignorant of the reason for the former. In the time of your late blessed father (May God enlighten his proof!) when our royal troops passed through the lands of Rum [Anatolia] to chastise the impudence of Ala al-Dawla Dhu'l-Qadr, complete concord and friendship was shown on both sides. Moreover, when your majesty was governor at Trebizond [i.e., before his accession] there existed perfect mutual understanding. Thus, now, the cause of your resentment and displeasure yet remains unknown. If political necessity has compelled you on this course, then may your problems soon be solved.

Dispute may fire words to such a heat

That ancient houses be consumed in flames.

The intention of our inaction in this regard is twofold:

(1) Most of the inhabitants of the land of Rum are followers of our forefathers (May God the All-Forgiving King have mercy upon them!).

(2) We have always loved the ghazi-titled Ottoman house and we do not wish the outbreak of sedition and turmoil once again as in the time of Timur.

Why should we then take umbrage at these provocations? We shall not.

The mutual hostility of kings is verily an ancient rite.

Should one hold the bride of worldly rule too close,

His lips those of the radiant sword will kiss.

Nevertheless, there is no cause for improper words: indeed, those vain, heretical amputations are the mere fabrications of the opium-clouded minds of certain secretaries and scribes. We therefore think that our delayed reply was not completely without cause for we have now dispatched our honored personal companion and servant Shah Quli Aga (May he be sustained!) with a golden casket stamped with the royal seal and filled with a special preparation for their use should they deem it necessary. May he soon arrive so that with assistance from above the mysteries concealed behind the veil of fate might be disclosed. But one should always exercise free judgment not bound solely by the words of others and always keep in view that in the end regrets avail him naught.

At this writing we were engaged upon the hunt near Isfahan; we now prepare provisions and our troops for the coming campaign. In all friendship we say do what you will.

Bitter experience has taught that in this world of trial
He who falls upon the house of `Ali always falls.
Kindly give our ambassador leave to travel unmolested.
"No soul laden bears the load of another." [Quran 6:164; 53:38] When war becomes inevitable, hesitation and delay must be set aside, and one must think on that which is to come. Farewell.

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