

Bahá'í Hermeneutics:
An Academic and Primary Source Inquiry

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INTRODUCTION

My favorite sort of intellectual endeavor is an exploration of a topic without a strict plan, and with my preconceived notions bracketed in such a way as not to interfere with whatever I may discover on the journey. I am literally finding my way as I go...and I want my reader to have a similar experience, starting off without knowing where s/he will end up. In the course of engaging in this journey, I arrived at a particular destination, and I will share that with the reader. But I have added a few comments here and there, and at the end to encourage the reader to arrive at his or her own conclusions, and to share them with others. Bahá'í hermeneutics will not develop as a field, either in theology or in philosophy, unless it generates dialogue between thinkers. Here you will find the thoughts of Bahá'u'lláh¹, 'Abdu'l-Bahá², Shoghi Effendi³, the Universal House of Justice⁴ – of them acknowledged by Bahá'ís as “authoritative”, that is, as “normative” for Bahá'ís. While no one will deny the importance of becoming familiar with and engaging the ideas of those who have passed on, and those who are in communal leadership positions, it is just as important, if this subject is to be of current interest, that it involve living thinkers and include persons who are not leaders. You will also find the thoughts of several scholars who, at one time or another, have been members of the Bahá'í community. I have been very restrained in offering my own thoughts on this topic, assuming the role of an educator rather than an advocate. My study of this topic has taken many sleepless nights, during periods when I was not fully employed, and often also when I was alone and not particularly happy. This work provided a unique solace, inasmuch as I experienced unique moments as my brain registered levels of understanding which were usually just below the surface or out of range...until they came into focus. Scholarship is always a human endeavor, and, as such, it has much more than the intellectual dimensions which appear in an article or book. It stirs the soul, animates the body, and tickles the fancy, as well as taxing the mind and exercising the intellect. May it provide you with even a fraction of the wealth that I have derived from it.

HERMENEUTICS DEFINED

A number of Bahá'í scholars have written essays on the subject of Bahá'í hermeneutics, including, listed chronologically in order of publication, Robert Parry⁵, Steven Scholl,

Dann May, Michael Sours, Khazeh Fananapazir and Seena Fazel, Jack McLean, Juan Ricardo Cole, Christopher Buck, and Sen McGlenn. Their essays were published over the course of a period of fifteen years, from 1982 to 1997. The recent treatments of the subject have not been featured here and will have to await another author's interest. We will hear first from these writers, as each one seeks to define hermeneutics in the context of studying the Bahá'í Writings.

Steven Scholl⁶ opened the discussion contrasting the "orthodox" scientific historical method, based on a methodologically agnostic search for objective truth championed by Denis MacEoin with the "orthodox" approach taken by "fundamentalist Bahá'ís clinging to the 'authoritative' interpretations of Shoghi Effendi as the final word as to what true Shaykhism or Bábism was and what Bahá'ism is and will be". He contrasts the "scientific method" of MacEoin, who holds that there is an "objective or absolute truth" which is the unattainable goal of scholarship, which must therefore formulate "approximations rather than final statements about the truth"⁷ and that the scholar "must proceed by methods that are rational, critical, open to criticism, universal and as free from subjective bias as it is possible to render them". Scholl contrasts this hermeneutic with the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl, Mircea Eliade, W. Brede Kristensen, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and described by Robert Parry⁸. Scholl comes out very much in favor of the phenomenological approach, while ending his article with "I do not wish to make the gulf between historians and phenomenologists sound unbridgeable. I share the hope of Raffaele Pettazzoni that the two disciplines will complement each other and broaden their respective horizons."

Dann May⁹ began his consideration of hermeneutics with a definition of terminology derived from Richard Palmer¹⁰ and Steven Levy¹¹. He says that hermeneutics "is broadly defined as the science and methodology of interpretation. It is primarily concerned with the overall interpretive process and the various theories and principles of interpretation, especially the principles of proper textual exegesis. While Palmer "discusses the importance of hermeneutics to the fields of theology, philosophy and literary interpretation", Levy "examines the role of interpretive principles in psychoanalytic psychotherapy." May indicates that his paper "attempts to identify and discuss certain interpretive principles found within the Bahá'í writings." Like Scholl, he favors a phenomenological approach. Unlike Scholl, he does not contrast this approach with the "historical" approach or with the "authoritative" approach. Nor does he repeatedly refer to phenomenologist thinkers in the course of his article. Instead he focuses on deriving hermeneutical principles directly from the Bahá'í source texts. While he cites "authoritative interpretation" he does not dwell on the topic, paying much more attention to those principles that will be useful to individuals who seek to decipher meaning for themselves.

Michael Sours¹² affirms in the opening sentence to his article, without offering either references or examples, that "In Bahá'u'lláh's Writings there is no single method of interpretation, such as allegorical, symbolical, typological, or literal, that is used exclusively for the understanding of any major category of Scripture, be it prophecy, historical narratives, or general explanatory texts." He continues, "Bahá'u'lláh freely uses a variety of different forms of interpretation to explain specific passages found in different categories of sacred texts. However, in some instances He rejects interpretations that rely on these same methods. For example, He may reject the literal interpretation of some prophecies while accepting the literal interpretation of other prophecies. Moreover, in many instances He indicates that

more than one method of interpretation is applicable for understanding a single passage." Having made this statement about Bahá'u'lláh's hermeneutics, he then asks, "*How then can an interpreter determine when one or more methods of interpretation are applicable or inapplicable to a specific verse in the Scriptures?*" He answers this question by saying that "*a sound theology is essential to correct interpretation.*" Sours does not refer to any of the methods cited above, and his purpose is to show how Bahá'í theology should guide interpretations of the Bahá'í Writings.

Seena Fazel and **Khazeh Fananapazir**¹³ define hermeneutics as "*the science of interpretation*" and indicate that it "*is an area of Bahá'í studies yet to be systematically explored*". They describe their intention "*to illustrate some distinctive hermeneutic principles in the Bahá'í Writings*" and begin by noting that "*the multiplicity of interpretive methods is a theme that recent authors have suggested is the basis of Bahá'í hermeneutics*", citing the aforementioned articles by Dann May and Michael Sours. Their paper includes a section on "*authoritative interpretation*" entitled "*The Authorized Interpreters*" but for the most part focuses on hermeneutical principles derived from the Bahá'í source texts that are appropriate for use by individual readers.

Well into his "Prolegomena", **Jack McLean**¹⁴ speaks of two kinds of Bahá'í theology. "*Bahá'í **source theology** refers to the authoritative, objective, and normative truths of the Bahá'í sacred writings or those elucidated by its duly appointed interpreters. Authoritative means that the teaching is binding on believers; objective means that the truths of **source theology** are commonly perceived and recognized as true by the community of believers; normative means that the teaching is recognized by believers as the standard of truth.*" In speaking of Bahá'í theology in the broader sense he writes "*the broader definition refers to the commentary of scholars, called here **derivative theology**: Bahá'í **derivative theology** (commentary) is the subjective, relative, and nonbinding elucidation of Bahá'í teachings by competent scholars. Subjective here means that the commentary is particular to the viewpoint of the writer and becomes objective only where a common consensus exists as to its validity.*" McLean is not principally occupied with defining or delineating the parameters of Bahá'í hermeneutics in his paper, as the subject he has chosen is the much broader field of Bahá'í theology. However, his affirmation of "*authoritative interpretation*" mirrors the references to that principle in May and Fazel/Fananapazir.

Juan Cole¹⁵ begins his paper with "*The Bahá'í writings contain a complex and nuanced set of prescriptions for the interpretation of scripture.*" He then launches into a short history of Western hermeneutics, from the Roman Catholic "*strong emphasis on the relevance of Church tradition to understanding scripture*" to the "*the rise of modern interpretive methods*" with Wilhelm Dilthey leading ultimately "*to positivism, the privileging of empirical evidence, logic, and experimental verifiability over metaphysics*", and the reaction to positivism by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Here, once again, we have the phenomenologists. Cole refers to the "*authoritative interpretation*" (tabyin) of "*non-legal texts*", indicating "*only two individuals have held or ever will hold this function in the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh's eldest Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, Shoghi Effendi*" and that there are "*discrepancies*" between the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and those of Shoghi Effendi. He concludes reference to "*authoritative interpretation*" by suggesting "*the need for the development of a hermeneutical approach even to authoritative interpretive comments.*" He also sets forth the parameters that govern the elucidation of the Universal House of Justice

and Bahá'í institutions at the local and national levels. He speaks of there being three different approaches to hermeneutics by Bahá'ís, "*figurative interpretation, formal exegesis, and academic writing on the Bahá'í Faith*", and ends the paper by relating these three approaches to Gadamer, Dilthey, and Wittgenstein. Rather than deriving hermeneutical principles primarily from Bahá'í source texts, Cole derives them principally from classical Islamic literature and then interprets them in light of modern Western hermeneutics.

Christopher Buck¹⁶ does not treat Bahá'í hermeneutics in Chapter III of Symbol and Secret--he discusses Bahá'u'lláh as a "*hermeneut*", and focuses on his "*hermeneutical terminology...in light of its Islamic heritage*", while qualifying this statement by assuring the reader that "*we shall be careful to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism...inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán went far beyond Islam's doctrinal boundaries and, over a period of time, effected the exegetical creation of the Bahá'í Faith.*" Buck makes no statements about the hermeneutics of Bahá'ís, only about the hermeneutics of Bahá'u'lláh, and therefore the concept of "*authoritative interpretation*" does not arise. Buck makes no reference to the scientific, authoritative and phenomenological approaches discussed by Scholl, but he analyses the Kitáb-i-Íqán according to the Islamic hermeneutics noted by Cole, with the exception that Islamic hermeneutics were applied to legal texts whereas Kitáb-i-Íqán is not such a text.

Sen McGlinn¹⁷ does not give an overall commentary on the Fazel/Fananapazir article published five years earlier. He seizes upon an attribution of a particular interpretive prerogative to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian which he identifies as erroneous, and subsequently sets forth "*the broad outlines of the interpretive principles to be applied: first of all in the doctrine of the separation of the two spheres of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, as defined in The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, second by considering whether the subject matter is a question of administration or of doctrine, and third by listening for the distinctive tone of Shoghi Effendi's writing where he is consciously acting as the Expounder of the words of God.*" This commentary is therefore concerned entirely with defining the parameters of "*authoritative interpretation*" and with suggesting the guidelines that scholars might apply in order to distinguish the "*authoritative interpretations*" of the Guardian from his administrative decisions which may be overridden by the Universal House of Justice.

THE SOURCE OF HERMENEUTICS: PART ONE: **THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD**

We will now look at what Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder and principal author of the Bahá'í Faith says about hermeneutics, and in doing so we must pay close attention to his rhetoric. Bahá'u'lláh uses language in ways with which the contemporary reader is not likely to be familiar. This may give the reader the impression that Bahá'u'lláh's language is incomprehensible, or beyond his understanding, but neither notion is either inevitable or ultimately justified by the evidence. He wrote in a style and utilizing a vocabulary that was understood by readers in his own time and in his own environs. It is to be remembered that, in most cases, his readers were men schooled in the religious, the mystical and to some degree the philosophical literature associated with Islam, and in particular with the Persian Imámí Shí'í¹⁸ tradition. Bahá'u'lláh writes to two learned men of his own time, the first in Haft Vadí and the second in Kitáb-i-Íqán (KI), clearly indicating his intention was to be understood:

If any of the utterances of this Servant may not be comprehended, or may lead to perturbation, the same must be inquired of again, that no doubt may linger, and the meaning be clear as the Face of the Beloved One...¹⁹

Twelve hundred and eighty years have passed since the dawn of the Muhammadan Dispensation, and with every break of day, these blind and ignoble people have recited their Qur'án, and yet have failed to grasp one letter of that Book! Again and again they read those verses which clearly testify to the reality of these holy themes, and bear witness to the truth of the Manifestations of eternal Glory, and still apprehend not their purpose. They have even failed to realize, all this time, that, in every age, **the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man.**²⁰

In some Tablets²¹, Bahá'u'lláh calls the Manifestation of God the Essence, the Source, the Object, the Fountainhead, the Mother, the Soul, the Secret, the Essence, the Day-star and the Mine and Wellhead of all knowledge and learning:

We have decreed, O people, that the highest and last end of all learning be the recognition of Him Who is the **Object** of all knowledge; and yet, behold how ye have allowed your learning to shut you out, as by a veil, from Him Who is the Dayspring of this Light, through Whom every hidden thing hath been revealed.²²

Great is the blessedness of that divine that hath not allowed knowledge to become a veil between him and the One Who is the **Object** of all knowledge, and who, when the Self-Subsisting appeared, hath turned with a beaming face towards Him. He, in truth, is numbered with the learned.²³

Consider the multitude of souls who seemed to be intensely eager and athirst, yet when the Ocean of living waters did surge forth in the world of being, they remained deprived thereof, inasmuch as they failed to relinquish idle fancy and to become consciously aware of Him Who is the **Object** of all knowledge. This failure is in recompense for the deeds their hands had formerly wrought.²⁴

In the Tablet he received, the Báb conferred upon him one of His own titles, that of Hujjat, and urged him to proclaim from the pulpit, without the least reservation, the fundamental teachings of His Faith. No sooner was he informed of the wishes of his Master than he declared his resolve to devote himself to the immediate enforcement of whatever injunction that Tablet contained. He immediately dismissed his disciples, bade them close their books, and declared his intention of discontinuing his courses of study. "Of what profit," he said, "are study and research to those who have already found the Truth, and why strive after learning when He Who is the **Object** of all knowledge is made manifest?"²⁵

The Essence of knowledge exclaimeth and saith: Lo! He Who is the **Object** of all knowledge is come and through His advent the sacred Books of God, the Gracious, the Loving, have been embellished. Every revelation of grace, every evidence of goodly gifts emanateth from Him and unto Him doth it return.²⁶

It hath been witnessed in this day how many of the divines, owing to their rejection of the Truth, have fallen into, and abide within, the uttermost depths of ignorance, and whose names have been effaced from the scroll of the glorious and learned. And how many of the ignorant who, by reason of their acceptance of the Faith, have soared aloft and attained the high summit of knowledge, and whose names have been inscribed by the Pen of Power upon the Tablet of divine Knowledge. Thus, "What He pleaseth will God abrogate or confirm; for with Him is the Source of Revelation." [Qur'án 13:41] Therefore, it hath been said: "To seek evidence, when the Proof hath been established is but an unseemly act, and to be busied with the pursuit of knowledge when the **Object** of all learning hath been attained is truly blameworthy." Say O people of the earth! Behold this flamelike Youth that speedeth across the limitless profound of the Spirit, heralding unto you the tidings: "Lo: the Lamp of God is shining," and summoning you to heed His Cause which, though hidden beneath the veils of ancient splendour, shineth in the land of 'Iraq above the day-spring of eternal holiness.²⁷

They clamour for guidance, although the standards of Him Who guideth all things are already hoisted. They cleave to the obscure intricacies of knowledge, when He, Who is the **Object** of all knowledge, shineth as the sun. They see the sun with their own eyes, and yet question that brilliant Orb as to the proof of its light. They behold the vernal showers descending upon them, and yet seek an evidence of that bounty. The proof of the sun is the light thereof, which shineth and envelopeth all things. The evidence of the shower is the bounty thereof, which reneweth and investeth the world with the mantle of life. Yea, the blind can perceive naught from the sun except its heat, and the arid soil hath no share of the showers of mercy. "Marvel not if in the Qur'án the unbeliever perceiveth naught but the trace of letters, for in the sun, the blind findeth naught but heat."²⁸

Arise in the name of Him Who is the **Object** of all knowledge, and, with absolute detachment from the learning of men, lift up your voices and proclaim His Cause. I swear by the Day Star of Divine Revelation! The very moment ye arise, ye will witness how a flood of Divine knowledge will gush out of your hearts, and will behold the wonders of His heavenly wisdom manifested in all their glory before you. Were ye to taste the sweetness of the sayings of the All-Merciful, ye would unhesitatingly forsake your selves, and would lay down your lives for the Well-Beloved.²⁹

Of these truths some can be disclosed only to the extent of the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge, and the recipients of Our hidden grace. We beseech God to strengthen thee with His power, and enable thee to recognize Him Who is the Source of all knowledge, that thou mayest detach thyself from all human learning, for "what would it profit any man to strive after learning when he hath already found and recognized Him Who is the **Object** of all knowledge?"³⁰

We have forbidden men to walk after the imaginations of their hearts, that they may be enabled to recognize Him Who is the sovereign Source and **Object** of all knowledge, and may acknowledge whatsoever He may be pleased to reveal. Witness how they have entangled themselves with their idle fancies and vain imaginations. By My life! They are themselves the victims of what their own hearts have devised, and yet they perceive it not. Vain and profitless is the talk of their lips, and yet they understand not.³¹

Bahá'u'lláh also refers to the Manifestation as the Fountainhead and Fountain of knowledge:

Even as He saith: "None knoweth the meaning thereof except God and them that are well-grounded in knowledge." [Qur'án 3:7] And yet, they have sought the interpretation of the Book from those that are wrapt in veils, and have refused to seek enlightenment from the **fountainhead** of knowledge.³²

Cleave to the Root of knowledge, and to Him Who is the **Fountain** thereof, that thou mayest find thyself independent of all who claim to be well versed in human learning, and whose claim no clear proof, nor the testimony of any enlightening book, can support.³³

Bahá'u'lláh calls the Manifestation the Source of true knowledge:

Whosoever among the divines of every age receiveth, in the Day of Reckoning, the testimony of faith from the **Source** of true knowledge, he verily becometh the recipient of learning, of divine favour, and of the light of true understanding. Otherwise, he is branded as guilty of folly, denial, blasphemy, and oppression.³⁴

It is evident and manifest unto every discerning observer that even as the light of the star fadeth before the effulgent splendour of the sun, so doth the luminary of earthly knowledge, of wisdom, and understanding vanish into nothingness when brought face to face with the resplendent glories of the Sun of Truth, the Day-star of divine enlightenment.³⁵

Consider now, had the people of the Gospel recognized the meaning of the symbolic terms

"sun" and "moon," had they sought, unlike the forward and perverse, enlightenment from Him Who is the Revealer of divine knowledge, they would have surely comprehended the purpose of these terms, and would not have become afflicted and oppressed by the darkness

of their selfish desires. Yea, but since they have failed to acquire true knowledge from its very **Source**, they have perished in the perilous vale of waywardness and misbelief. They still have not awakened to perceive that all the signs foretold have been made manifest, that the promised Sun hath risen above the horizon of divine Revelation, and that the "sun" and "moon" of the teachings, the laws, and learning of a former Dispensation have darkened and set.³⁶

Of these truths some can be disclosed only to the extent of the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge, and the recipients of Our hidden grace. We beseech God to strengthen thee with His power, and enable thee to recognize Him Who is the **Source** of all knowledge, that thou mayest detach thyself from all human learning, for "what would it profit any man to strive after learning when he hath already found and recognized Him Who is the Object of all knowledge?"³⁷

We have forbidden men to walk after the imaginations of their hearts, that they may be enabled to recognize Him Who is the sovereign **Source** and Object of all knowledge, and may acknowledge whatsoever He may be pleased to reveal. Witness how they have entangled themselves with their idle fancies and vain imaginations. By My life! They are themselves the victims of what their own hearts have devised, and yet they perceive it not. Vain and profitless is the talk of their lips, and yet they understand not.³⁸

In like manner, endeavour to grasp the significance of "return," "revelation," and "resurrection," as witnessed in the days of the Manifestations of the divine Essence, that thou mayest behold with thine own eyes the "return" of the holy souls into sanctified and illumined bodies, and mayest wash away the dust of ignorance, and cleanse the darkened self with the waters of mercy flowing from the **Source** of divine Knowledge; that perchance thou mayest, through the power of God and the light of divine guidance, distinguish the Morn of everlasting splendour from the darksome night of error.³⁹

Inasmuch as they have not apprehended the meaning of Knowledge, and have called by that name those images fashioned by their own fancy and which have sprung from the embodiments of ignorance, they therefore have inflicted upon the **Source** of Knowledge that which thou hast heard and witnessed.⁴⁰

The signs of God shine as manifest and resplendent as the sun amidst the works of His creatures. Whatsoever proceedeth from Him is apart, and will always remain distinguished, from the inventions of men. From the **Source** of His knowledge countless Luminaries of learning and wisdom have risen, and out of the Paradise of His Pen the breath of the All-Merciful hath continually been wafted to the hearts and souls of men. Happy are they that have recognized this truth.⁴¹

We have forbidden men to walk after the imaginations of their hearts, that they may be enabled to recognize Him Who is the sovereign **Source** and Object of all knowledge, and may acknowledge whatsoever He may be pleased to reveal. Witness how they have entangled themselves with their idle fancies and vain imaginations. By My life! They are themselves the victims of what their own hearts have devised, and yet they perceive it not. Vain and profitless is the talk of their lips, and yet they understand not.⁴²

The Manifestation is the Day-star of knowledge:

Cast away, O concourse of divines, the things ye have composed with the pens of your idle fancies and vain imaginings. By God! The **Day-Star** of Knowledge hath shone forth above the horizon of certitude.⁴³

The Manifestation is the Root of knowledge:

Cleave to the **Root** of knowledge, and to Him Who is the Fountain thereof, that thou mayest find thyself independent of all who claim to be well versed in human learning, and whose claim no clear proof, nor the testimony of any enlightening book, can support.⁴⁴

The Manifestation is the Mine and Wellhead of knowledge:

For it behooveth no man to interpret the holy words according to his own imperfect understanding, nor, having found them to be contrary to his inclination and desires, to reject and repudiate their truth. For such, today, is the manner of the divines and doctors of the age, who occupy the seats of knowledge and learning, and who have named ignorance knowledge, and called oppression justice. Were these to ask the Light of Truth concerning those images which their idle fancy hath carved, and were they to find His answer inconsistent with their own conceptions and their own understanding of the Book, they would assuredly denounce Him Who is the **Mine** and **Wellhead** of all Knowledge as the very negation of understanding. Such things have happened in every age.⁴⁵

The Manifestation is well-grounded in knowledge, the Mother, the Soul, the Secret, and the Essence of knowledge:

Even as thou dost witness how the people of the Qur'án, like unto the people of old, have allowed the words "Seal of the Prophets" to veil their eyes. And yet, they themselves testify to this verse: "None knoweth the interpretation thereof but God and they that are well-grounded in knowledge." [Qur'án 3:7] And when He Who is **well-grounded** in all knowledge, Who is the **Mother**, the **Soul**, the **Secret**, and the **Essence** thereof, revealeth that which is the least contrary to their desire, they bitterly oppose Him and shamelessly deny Him.⁴⁶

Finally, Bahá'u'lláh affirms that the Manifestations are the Essences of knowledge:

As the wayward of every age have failed to fathom the deeper import of these weighty and pregnant utterances, and imagine the answer of the Prophets of God to be irrelevant to the questions they asked them, they therefore have attributed ignorance and folly to those **Essences** of knowledge and understanding.⁴⁷

In other Tablets and Books, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh call the Manifestation of God the "Point"⁴⁸, including these passages:

Secrets are many, but strangers are myriad. Volumes will not suffice to hold the mystery of the Beloved One, nor can it be exhausted in these pages, although it be no more than a word, no more than a sign. "Knowledge is a single **point** [nuqtih], but the ignorant have multiplied it."⁴⁹

Whatever high proofs and wondrous allusions are recounted herein, concern but a single Letter [bi-huruf váhid], a single **Point** [nuqtih váhidih]. "Such hath been the way of God...and no change canst thou find in the way of God." [Qur'án 33:62; 48:23]⁵⁰

Nay, whatsoever proceedeth from these Mines of divine Wisdom and these Treasuries of eternal knowledge is truth, and naught else but the truth. The saying: "Knowledge is one **point**, which the foolish have multiplied" is a proof of Our argument, and the tradition: "Knowledge is a light which God sheddeth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth" a confirmation of Our statement.⁵¹

THE SOURCE OF HERMENEUTICS: PART TWO: **THE WORD OF GOD**

It is the teachings, the revealed Word of the Manifestation that is the balance in which all things may be weighed in order to discern truth from falsehood. No other standard can be trusted absolutely. This truth is affirmed in other texts, including these:

This is the Day when the loved ones of God should keep their eyes directed towards His Manifestation, and fasten them upon whatsoever that Manifestation may be pleased to reveal. Certain traditions of bygone ages rest on no foundations whatever, while the notions entertained by past generations, and which they have recorded in their books, have, for the most part, been influenced by the desires of a corrupt inclination. Thou dost

witness how most of the commentaries and interpretations of the words of God, now current amongst men, are devoid of truth. Their falsity hath, in some cases, been exposed when the intervening veils were rent asunder. They themselves have acknowledged their failure in apprehending the meaning of any of the words of God.

Our purpose is to show that should the loved ones of God sanctify their hearts and their ears from the vain sayings that were uttered aforetime, and turn with their inmost souls to Him Who is the Day Spring of His Revelation, and to whatsoever things He hath manifested, such behavior would be regarded as highly meritorious in the sight of God.⁵²

Thus it is recorded: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth." He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."⁵³

We perceive none, however, amongst the people of the earth who, sincerely yearning for the Truth, seeketh the guidance of the divine Manifestations concerning the abstruse matters of his Faith. All are dwellers in the land of oblivion, and all are followers of the people of wickedness and rebellion. God will verily do unto them that which they themselves are doing, and will forget them even as they have ignored His Presence in His day. Such is His decree unto those that have denied Him, and such will it be unto them that have rejected His signs.⁵⁴

In "Kitáb-i-Aqdas" (1872) Bahá'u'lláh stated that all must turn to him, the Sun of Reality, during his lifetime, and to his Book when he ascended to the spiritual worlds:

Should differences arise amongst you over any matter, refer it to God while the Sun still shineth above the horizon of this Heaven and, when it hath set, refer ye to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him. This, verily, is sufficient unto the peoples of the world.⁵⁵

In the "Súratu'l-Bayán" Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

Say: I am come to you, O people, from the Throne of glory, and bear you an announcement from God, the Most Powerful, the Most Exalted, the Most Great. In mine hand I carry the testimony of God, your Lord and the Lord of your sires of old. Weigh it with the just Balance that ye possess, the Balance of the testimony of the Prophets and Messengers of God. If ye find it to be established in truth, if ye believe it to be of God, beware, then, lest ye cavil at it, and render your works vain, and be numbered with the infidels. It is indeed sign of God that hath been sent down through the power of truth, through which the validity of His Cause hath been demonstrated unto His creatures, and the ensigns of purity lifted up betwixt earth and heaven.⁵⁶

We see Bahá'u'lláh calling upon the believers who possess "the testimony of the Prophets and Messengers of God" to "weigh" his words in the "just Balance" they possess in that "testimony" and then, if they acknowledge its truth, to adhere to it closely. He does not require anyone to recognize the truth of his words. All are free to accept or reject them. In various Tablets Bahá'u'lláh affirms this freedom of choice:

This is My counsel unto thee and unto the beloved of God. Whosoever wisheth, let him turn thereunto; whosoever wisheth, let him turn away.⁵⁷

Thus doth the Nightingale utter His call unto you from this prison. He hath but to deliver this clear message. Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel, and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord.⁵⁸

This Wronged One calleth aloud for the sake of God. Whosoever wisheth, let him turn thereunto; whosoever wisheth, let him turn away.⁵⁹

Leave them unto themselves, saying: Unto you be that which ye desire and unto us that which we desire.⁶⁰

We exhort, wholly for the sake of God, His servants. Let him who wisheth turn unto Him, and him who wisheth turn aside.⁶¹

In the "Kitáb-i-Íqán" Bahá'u'lláh referred to the Scriptures associated with the Prophets and Messengers of the past as the unfailing standard of truth⁶²:

We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist among the Christians, that it hath ascended unto heaven. How grievously they have erred! How oblivious of the fact that such a statement imputeth the gravest injustice and tyranny to a gracious and loving Providence! How could God, when once the Day-star of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people, and ascended into the fourth heaven, cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? What would be left to that people to cling to from the setting of the day-star of Jesus until the rise of the sun of the Muhammadan Dispensation? What law could be their stay and guide? How could such people be made the victims of the avenging wrath of God, the omnipotent Avenger? How could they be afflicted with the scourge of chastisement by the heavenly King? Above all, how could the flow of the grace of the All-Bountiful be stayed? How could the ocean of His tender mercies be stilled? We take refuge with God, from that which His creatures have fancied about Him! Exalted is He above their comprehension!"⁶³

Having thus conclusively demonstrated that no day is greater than this Day, and no revelation more glorious than this Revelation, and having set forth all these weighty and infallible proofs which no understanding mind can question, and no man of learning overlook, how can man possibly, through the idle contention of the people of doubt and fancy, deprive himself of such a bountiful grace?⁶⁴

They that valiantly labour in quest of God's will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, will be so attached and wedded to that City that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable. They will hearken unto infallible proofs from the Hyacinth of that assembly, and receive the surest testimonies from the beauty of its Rose and the melody of its Nightingale. Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and re-adorned...That city is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad the Messenger of God the Qur'án; in this day the Bayán...⁶⁵

For instance, the Qur'án was an impregnable stronghold unto the people of Muhammad...All the things that people required in connection with the Revelation of Muhammad and His laws were to be found revealed and manifest in that Ridvan of resplendent glory. That Book constitutes an abiding testimony to its people after

Muhammad, inasmuch as its decrees are indisputable, and its promise unfailing. All have been rejoined to follow the precepts of that Book until 'the year sixty'--the year of the advent of God's wondrous Manifestation. That Book is the Book which unfailingly leaeth the seeker unto the Ridvan of the divine Presence, and causeth him that hath forsaken his country and is treading the seeker's path to enter the Tabernacle of everlasting reunion. Its guidance can never err, its testimony no other testimony can excel. All other traditions, all other books and records, are bereft of such distinction, inasmuch as both the traditions and they that have spoken them are confirmed and proven solely by the text of that Book. Moreover, the traditions themselves grievously differ, and their obscurities are manifold...⁶⁶

Although many traditions had been revealed by that Source of Prophethood and Mine of divine Guidance, yet He mentioned only that Book, thereby appointing it as the mightiest instrument and surest Testimony for the seekers; a guide for the people until the Day of Resurrection.⁶⁷

With unswerving vision, with pure heart, and sanctified spirit, consider attentively what God hath established as the testimony of guidance for His people in His Book, which is recognized as authentic by both the high and lowly. To this testimony we both, as well as all the peoples of the world, must cling, that through its light we may know and distinguish between truth and falsehood, guidance and error. Inasmuch as Muhammad hath confined His testimonies to His Book and to His Family, and whereas the latter hath passed away, there remaineth His Book only as His one testimony amongst the people.⁶⁸

Consider, how He hath appointed and decreed this self-same Book, the Qur'án, as a guidance unto all that are in heaven and on earth. He, the divine Being, and unknowable Essence, hath, Himself, testified that this Book is, beyond all doubt and uncertainty, the guide of all mankind until the Day of Resurrection. And now, We ask, is it fair for this people to view with doubt and misgiving this most weighty Testimony, the divine origin of which God hath proclaimed, and pronounced it to be the embodiment of truth? Is it fair for them to turn away from the thing which He hath appointed as the supreme Instrument of guidance for attainment unto the loftiest summits of knowledge, and to seek aught else but that Book? How can they allow men's absurd and foolish sayings to sow the seeds of distrust in their minds? How can they any longer idly contend that a certain person hath spoken this or that way, or that a certain thing did not come to pass? Had there been anything conceivable besides the Book of God which could prove a more potent instrument and a surer guide to mankind, would He have failed to reveal it in that verse?⁶⁹

We should acknowledge the holy and wondrous Scriptures, for failing to do this we have failed to acknowledge the truth of this blessed verse. For it is evident that whoso hath failed to acknowledge the truth of the Qur'án hath in reality failed to acknowledge the truth of the preceding Scriptures.⁷⁰

Behold, how lofty is the station, and how consummate the virtue, of these verses which He hath declared to be His surest testimony, His infallible proof, the evidence of His all-subduing power, and a revelation of the potency of His will. He, the divine King, hath proclaimed the undisputed supremacy of the verses of His Book over all things that testify of His truth. For compared with all other proofs and tokens, the divinely-revealed verses shine as the sun, whilst all others are as stars. To the peoples of the world they are the abiding testimony, the incontrovertible proof, the shining light of the ideal King. Their

excellence is unrivalled, their virtue nothing can surpass. They are the treasury of the divine pearls and the despository of the divine mysteries. They constitute the indissoluble Bond, the firm Cord, the 'Urvatu'l-Vuthqa ["strongest handle"], the inextinguishable Light. Through them floweth the river of divine knowledge, and gloweth the fire of His ancient and consummate wisdom. This is the fire which, in one and the same moment, kindleth the flame of love in the breasts of the faithful, and induceth the chill of heedlessness in the heart of the enemy.⁷¹

Likewise He saith: "Such are the verses of God: with truth do We recite them to Thee. But in what revelation will they believe, if they reject God and His verses?" [Quran 45:5] If thou wilt grasp the implication of this verse, thou wilt recognize the truth that no manifestation greater than the Prophets of God hath ever been revealed, and no testimony mightier than the testimony of their revealed verses hath ever appeared upon the earth. Nay, this testimony no other testimony can ever excel, except that which the Lord thy God willeth. In another passage He saith: "Woe to every lying sinner, who heareth the verses of God recited to him, and then, as though he heard them not, persisteth in proud disdain! Apprise him of a painful punishment." [Qur'án 45:6] The implications of this verse, alone, suffice all that is in heaven and on earth, were the people to ponder the verses of their Lord. For thou hearest how in this day the people disdainfully ignore the divinely-revealed verses, as though they were the meanest of all things. And yet, nothing greater than these verses hath ever appeared, nor will ever be made manifest in the world!⁷²

They scoffed at the verses, a single letter of which is greater than the creation of the heavens and earth, and which quickeneth the dead of the valley of self and desire with the spirit of faith; and clamoured saying: "Cause our fathers to speed out of their sepulchres." Such was the perversity and pride of that people. Each one of these verses is unto all the peoples of the world an unfailing testimony and a glorious proof of His truth. Each of them verily sufficeth all mankind, wert thou to meditate upon the verses of God. In the above-mentioned verse itself pearls of mysteries lie hidden. Whatever be the ailment, the remedy it offereth can never fail.⁷³

Consider, hath anything else besides the verses been established in the whole Book, as a standard for the recognition of the Manifestations of His Beauty, that the people might cling to, and reject the Manifestations of God? On the contrary, in every instance, He hath threatened with fire those that repudiate and scoff at the verses, as already shown.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the sign of truth and falsehood is designated and appointed in the Book. By this divinely-appointed touchstone, the claims and pretensions of all men must needs be assayed, so that the truthful may be known and distinguished from the imposter. This touchstone is no other than this verse: "Wish for death, if ye are men of truth." [Qur'án 2:94]⁷⁵

Even as religion and its revelation of truth is progressive in nature⁷⁶, it follows that the Book of each Manifestation abrogates and supersedes the Books of his predecessors⁷⁷. The Báb indicated that his successor, whom he designated as "Him Whom God will make manifest", would be the touchstone, the only standard upon his advent⁷⁸. Bahá'u'lláh likewise affirmed this authority of "Him Whom God will make manifest" and his writings in "Kitáb-i-Iqán" (1861) and in "Epistle to the Son of the Wolf" (1891):

...in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them transcendent and supreme.⁷⁹

And likewise, He saith: "Suffer not yourselves to be shut out as by a veil from God after He hath revealed Himself. For all that hath been exalted in the Bayán is but as a ring upon the hand of Him Whom God shall make manifest—glorified be His mention! He turneth it as He pleaseth, for whatsoever He pleaseth, and through whatsoever He pleaseth. He, verily, is the Help in Peril, the Most High." And likewise, He saith: "Were He to make of every one on earth a Prophet, all would, in very truth, be accounted as Prophets in the sight of God." And likewise, He saith: "In the day of the revelation of Him Whom God shall make manifest all that dwell on earth will be equal in His estimation. Whosoever He ordaineth as a Prophet, he, verily, hath been a Prophet from the beginning that hath no beginning, and will thus remain until the end that hath no end, inasmuch as this is an act of God."⁸⁰

After his declaration to a small group of his followers in 1863, Bahá'u'lláh gradually disclosed to the entire body of the followers of the Báb that he was the promised "Him Whom God will make manifest".

THE SOURCE OF HERMENEUTICS: PART THREE: **THE BOOK OF GOD**

Bahá'u'lláh establishes the testimony of the revealed Word as the enduring source of God's guidance in this world. While the Manifestation of God is physically present in this world only during the duration of his earthly sojourn, the Book lives on after him. Bahá'u'lláh attested this with regard to his own Revelation, in Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and in an untitled Tablet:

Be not dismayed, O peoples of the world, when the day-star of My beauty is set, and the heaven of My tabernacle is concealed from your eyes. Arise to further My Cause, and to exalt My Word amongst men. We are with you at all times, and shall strengthen you through the power of truth.⁸¹

He indicates that once he will have passed on, it is his wish that his followers “exalt My Word”, meaning the Book, so that it will live on after his demise.

Should differences arise amongst you over any matter, refer it to God while the Sun still shineth above the horizon of this Heaven and, when it hath set, refer ye to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him.⁸²

As long as he is alive, all differences are to be referred to him personally, but once he will have passed on, his followers must turn “**to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him**”. This phrase, used in the Qur’án and the writings of the Báb, denominates the revealed Book, which is composed of verses which are described as having descended from God.

If the seeker weighs the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, who claimed to be “Him Whom God shall manifest”, in the "just Balance" of the "testimony of the Prophets and Messengers of

God" and finds his "testimony" to be authentic and divinely-inspired, then his Writings become that "just Balance":

That city is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the

days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad the Messenger of God the Qur'án; in this day the Bayan; and in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book-the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme.⁸³

Say: O leaders of religion! Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.⁸⁴

Give ear unto the verses of God which He Who is the sacred Lote-Tree reciteth unto you. They are assuredly the infallible balance, established by God, the Lord of this world and the next.⁸⁵

Say: This is the infallible Balance which the Hand of God is holding, in which all who are in the heavens and all who are on the earth are weighed, and their fate determined, if ye be of them that believe and recognize this truth. Say: This is the Most Great Testimony, by which the validity of every proof throughout the ages hath been established, would that ye might be assured thereof. Say: Through it the poor have been enriched, the learned enlightened, and the seekers enabled to ascend unto the presence of God. Beware lest ye make it a cause of dissension amongst you. Be ye as firmly settled as the immovable mountain in the Cause of your Lord, the Mighty, the Loving.⁸⁶

This is a Book which hath become the Lamp of the Eternal unto the world, and His straight, undeviating Path amidst the peoples of the earth. Say: This is the Dayspring of Divine knowledge, if ye be of them that understand, and the Dawning-place of God's commandments, if ye be of those who comprehend.⁸⁷

In other Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh affirmed the primacy of his Writings as a standard by which things may be reckoned:

...acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book.⁸⁸

It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them.⁸⁹

Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet.⁹⁰

...acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book."⁹¹

It is incumbent upon everyone to firmly adhere and observe that which hath streamed forth from Our Most Exalted Pen. God, the True One, beareth Me witness, and every atom in existence is moved to testify that such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth have been clearly set forth by Us and are revealed in the Holy Books and Tablets by the Pen of Glory.⁹²

Bahá'u'lláh does not credit oral tradition as a reliable source of divine guidance. In addition to the excerpts from his Writings which touch upon this theme, there is also at least one Tablet written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and several letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to this effect:

That Book is the Book which unfailingly leadeth the seeker unto the Ridvan of the divine Presence, and causeth him that hath forsaken his country and is treading the seeker's path to enter the Tabernacle of everlasting reunion. Its guidance can never err, its testimony no other testimony can excel. All other traditions, all other books and records, are bereft of such distinction, inasmuch as both the traditions and they that have spoken them are confirmed and proven solely by the text of that Book. Moreover, the traditions themselves grievously differ, and their obscurities are manifold.⁹³

Although many traditions had been revealed by that Source of Prophethood and Mine of divine Guidance, yet He mentioned only that Book, thereby appointing it as the mightiest instrument and surest Testimony for the seekers; a guide for the people until the Day of Resurrection.⁹⁴

Thou hast written concerning the pilgrims and pilgrims' notes. Any narrative that is not authenticated by a Text should not be trusted. Narratives, even if true, cause confusion. For the people of Bahá', the Text, and only the Text, is authentic.⁹⁵

Shoghi Effendi has laid down the principle that the Bahá'ís should not attribute much importance to talks, reported to have been given by the Master, if these have not in one form or other obtained His sanction. Bahá'u'lláh has made it clear enough that only those things that have been revealed in the form of Tablets have a binding power over the friends. Hearsays may be matters of interest but can in no way claim authority. This basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh was to preserve the Faith from being corrupted like Islam which attributes binding authority to all the reported sayings of Muhammad. This being a basic principle of the Faith we should not confuse Tablets that were actually revealed and mere talks attributed to the founders of the Cause. The first have absolute binding authority while the latter can in no way claim Our obedience. The highest thing this can achieve is to influence the activities of the one who has heard the saying in person. Those talks of the Master that were later reviewed by Him corrected or in some other form considered authentic by Himself, such as the 'Some Answered Questions'⁹⁶, these could be considered as Tablets and therefore be given the necessary binding power. All the other talks such as are included in Ahmad's Diary or the diary of pilgrims, do not fall under this category and could be Considered only as interesting material to be taken for what they are worth.⁹⁷

According to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh no authority can be attached to a mere hearsay, no matter through whom it may come. The Tablets that bear the seal or

signature of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master are the only parts of the literature that have any authority and that constitute the basis of our belief. All other forms of literature may bear points of interest but they cannot be considered as authentic.⁹⁸

Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani (1844-1914), the highly respected Bahá'í scholar who was personally acquainted with both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has noted that this principle, of the authenticity of the written Word and the untrustworthiness of the spoken word, is one of the distinctive teachings of Bahá'u'lláh:

First, a command which is particularly a feature of the Bahá'í religion and is not found in the other religions is "abstaining from crediting verbal traditions." It is well known to men of learning that it was verbal tradition which divided the Jews into two great sects. Such traditions are the basis of the book of Talmud, and caused the division of that one nation. One of the two schisms called the Rabbinim looks upon the teachings of the Talmud as the law which needs to be followed and considers it the greatest means for the preservation and permanence of the Jewish people. But the other sect, Gharraim [Karaites] looks upon the Talmud as sheer heresy and conducive to perdition. Thus these two sects cannot possibly be harmonized or cease mutual opposition. Similarly in the Christian religion the main cause of schism and division are these verbal traditions which were termed "authoritative." Each one of the Christian Churches, such as the Catholic, the Orthodox, the Jacobite, the Nestorian, and others consider it obligatory to follow these traditions inherited from and handed down by the fathers of their Churches, as the very text of the Holy Book. Thus when in any of the great Councils the question of the unification of the Christian people would be at issue, they would avail themselves of these inherited traditions which were opposed to union and harmony. Likewise in the religion of Islam, claiming these verbal traditions which were related of the Founder of that Religion, subsequent to His death, was the cause of the division and separation into the various principal sects, such as the Sunni, the Shi'i and the Kharajite, or into the secondary schools of Hanofite, Malakite, Shafiite, Haubilite [Hanbali], etc. Each of these hold to a set of traditions considered as authentic by their own sect. But Bahá'u'lláh closed to the people of the world this door which is the greatest means for sedition: for He has clearly announced that "in the religion of God all recorded matters are referable to the Book and all unrecorded matters are dependent upon the decision of the House of Justice." Thus all narrations, relations and verbal traditions have been discredited among the Bahá'í people and the door of dissension, which is the greatest among the doors of hell, has been closed and locked.⁹⁹

Hence, for Bahá'u'lláh and his followers, the Book is authoritative. To what extent does it constitute a divine standard by which all things can be weighed? In a Tablet written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, three letters written on behalf of the Guardian, and a letter written by the Universal House of Justice, the station of the "testimony" of the Prophets and Messengers, and, in particular, the authority of Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, is explained. The first reference is to the authenticity of the historical records found in the Bible and those cited by Bahá'u'lláh in "Lawh-i-Hikmat" (Tablet of Wisdom):

The most important thing is to establish the validity of God's universal Manifestation [mazhar-i-kullí-yi iláhí] ; once His claim proveth true, then whatsoever He may choose to say is right and correct.¹⁰⁰

As to your third question Shoghi Effendi would like you to understand that when one believes in One to be divinely inspired and when one is convinced that he has a great mission to the world in His teachings, he must very naturally be ready to accept all that that world-teacher, that divinely-inspired Man says. It is with this view that he feels that a real Bahá'í would be one who is convinced that Bahá'u'lláh was a world-teacher and a Messenger of God bearing to mankind a great Message and would therefore be ready to accept all that Bahá'u'lláh has said and the same is true of the Master, Whom we believe to have been the great propounder of the Bahá'í teachings and the One through Whom the Covenant of God was firmly established in the world.¹⁰¹

Regarding the question of days referring in some cases to years, and in some cases to centuries in the Tablet to a Zoroastrian follower of the Faith: The only answer we can give people who lack the faith to accept the words of the Master as being divinely inspired interpretations of the truth, is that the language of prophecy has always in the past been veiled in meaning, and that allusions are found in all the Holy Books which cannot be accepted literally, and have not been satisfactorily interpreted until the appearance of this Revelation when, we believe, the books of the past and their mysteries have been at last unsealed. Could anybody find a more logical interpretation of this allusion in the Zoroastrian literature than that given by `Abdu'l-Bahá, or one which fits a coherent interpretation of religious history as well as the Master's words do?¹⁰²

Between the truth which comes from God through His Prophets, and the glimmerings, often misunderstood and misinterpreted, of truth which come from the philosophers and thinkers, there is an immense difference. We must never, under any circumstances, confuse the two...We must use the Writings of the Prophets as our measurement...¹⁰³

The principle of faith is to accept anything the Manifestation of God says, once you have accepted Him as being the Manifestation. That is really the crux of the whole matter. It is a question of confidence.¹⁰⁴

While it may often be the part of wisdom to approach individuals or an audience from a standpoint of current knowledge, it should never be overlooked that the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited.¹⁰⁵

Bahá'u'lláh affirms the tremendous power invested in him, as a Divine Educator, and indicates that only the knowledge and wisdom revealed by him can be of lasting benefit to humanity in this promised Day of God:

The generality of mankind is still immature. Had it acquired sufficient capacity We would have bestowed upon it so great a measure of Our knowledge that all who dwell on earth and in heaven would have found themselves, by virtue of the grace streaming from Our pen, completely independent of all knowledge save the knowledge of God, and would have been securely established upon the throne of abiding tranquillity.¹⁰⁶

In another sense, by these terms is intended the divines of the former Dispensation, who live in the days of the subsequent Revelations, and who hold the reins of religion in their grasp. If these divines be illumined by the light of the latter Revelation they will be acceptable unto God, and will shine with a light everlasting. Otherwise, they will be

declared as darkened, even though to outward seeming they be leaders of men, inasmuch as belief and unbelief, guidance and error, felicity and misery, light and darkness, are all dependent upon the sanction of Him Who is the Day-star of Truth.¹⁰⁷

O ye leaders of religion! Who is the man amongst you that can rival Me in vision or insight? Where is he to be found that dareth to claim to be My equal in utterance or wisdom? No, by My Lord, the All-Merciful! All on the earth shall pass away; and this is the face of your Lord, the Almighty, the Well-Beloved.¹⁰⁸

Could ye but discover the source whence the splendour of this utterance is diffused, ye would cast away the peoples of the world and all that they possess, and would draw nigh unto this most blessed Seat of glory.¹⁰⁹

Shall he who denieth this Cause be able to vindicate the truth of any cause throughout creation? Nay, by Him Who is the Fashioner of the universe! Yet the people are wrapped in a palpable veil. Say: Through this Cause the day-star of testimony hath dawned, and the luminary of proof hath shed its radiance upon all that dwell on earth. Fear God, O men of insight, and be not of those who disbelieve in Me. Take heed lest the word "Prophet" withhold you from this Most Great Announcement, or any reference to "Viceregency" debar you from the sovereignty of Him Who is the Viceregent of God, which overshadoweth all the worlds. Every name hath been created by His Word, and every cause is dependent on His irresistible, His mighty and wondrous Cause. Say: This is the Day of God, the Day on which naught shall be mentioned save His own Self, the omnipotent Protector of all worlds. This is the Cause that hath made all your superstitions and idols to tremble.¹¹⁰

This is the day whereon nothing amongst all things, nor any name amongst all names, can profit you save through this Name which God hath made the Manifestation of His Cause and the Dayspring of His Most Excellent Titles unto all who are in the kingdom of creation. Blessed is that man that hath recognized the fragrance of the All-Merciful and been numbered with the steadfast. Your sciences shall not profit you in this day, nor your arts, nor your treasures, nor your glory. Cast them all behind your backs, and set your faces towards the Most Sublime Word through which the Scriptures and the Books and this lucid Tablet have been distinctly set forth. Cast away, O concourse of divines, the things ye have composed with the pens of your idle fancies and vain imaginings. By God! The Day-Star of Knowledge hath shone forth above the horizon of certitude.¹¹¹

Bahá'u'lláh writes in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* that this principle applies to all of the Manifestations of God:

That city is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad the Messenger of God the *Qur'án*; in this day the *Bayan*; and in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme. In these cities spiritual sustenance is bountifully provided, and incorruptible delights have been ordained. The food they bestow is the bread of heaven, and the Spirit they impart is God's imperishable blessing. Upon detached souls they bestow the gift of Unity, enrich the destitute, and offer the cup of knowledge unto them who wander in the wilderness of ignorance. All the guidance, the

blessings, the learning, the understanding, the faith, and certitude, conferred upon all that is in heaven and on earth, are hidden and treasured within these Cities.

For instance, the Qur'án was an impregnable stronghold unto the people of Muhammad. In His days, whosoever entered therein, was shielded from the devilish assaults, the menacing darts, the soul-devouring doubts, and blasphemous whisperings of the enemy. Upon him was also bestowed a portion of the everlasting and goodly fruits—the fruits of wisdom, from the divine Tree. To him was given to drink the incorruptible waters of the river of knowledge, and to taste the wine of the mysteries of divine Unity. All the things that people required in connection with the Revelation of Muhammad and His laws were to be found revealed and manifest in that Ridvan of resplendent glory. That Book constitutes an abiding testimony to its people after Muhammad, inasmuch as its decrees are indisputable, and its promise unfailling. All have been enjoined to follow the precepts of that Book until “the year sixty”[1260]—the year of the advent of God’s wondrous Manifestation. That Book is the Book which unfaillingly leadeth the seeker unto the Ridvan of the divine Presence, and causeth him that hath forsaken his country and is treading the seeker’s path to enter the Tabernacle of everlasting reunion. Its guidance can never err, its testimony no other testimony can excel. All other traditions, all other books and records, are bereft of such distinction, inasmuch as both the traditions and they that have spoken them are confirmed and proven solely by the text of that Book. Moreover, the traditions themselves grievously differ, and their obscurities are manifold. Muhammad, Himself, as the end of His mission drew nigh, spoke these words: “Verily, I leave amongst you My twin weighty testimonies: The Book of God and My Family.” Although many traditions had been revealed by that Source of Prophethood and Mine of divine Guidance, yet He mentioned only that Book, thereby appointing it as the mightiest instrument and surest testimony for the seekers; a guide for the people until the Day of Resurrection. With unswerving vision, with pure heart, and sanctified spirit, consider attentively what God hath established as the testimony of guidance for His people in His Book, which is recognized as authentic by both the high and lowly. To this testimony we both, as well as all the peoples of the world, must cling, that through its light we may know and distinguish between truth and falsehood, guidance and error. Inasmuch as Muhammad hath confined His testimonies to His Book and to His Family, and whereas the latter hath passed away, there remaineth His Book only as His one testimony amongst the people.¹¹²

In another passage He likewise saith: “And if ye be in doubt as to that which We have sent down to Our Servant, then produce a Surah like it, and summon your witnesses, beside God, if ye are men of truth.”¹¹³ Behold, how lofty is the station, and how consummate the virtue, of these verses which He hath declared to be His surest testimony, His infallible proof, the evidence of His all-subduing power, and a revelation of the potency of His will. He, the divine King, hath proclaimed the undisputed supremacy of the verses of His Book over all things that testify to His truth. For compared with all other proofs and tokens, the divinely-revealed verses shine as the sun, whilst all others are as stars. To the peoples of the world they are the abiding testimony, the incontrovertible proof, the shining light of the ideal King. Their excellence is unrivalled, their virtue nothing can surpass. They are the treasury of the divine pearls and the depository of the divine mysteries. They constitute the indissoluble Bond, the firm Cord, the Urvatu'l-Vuthqa, the inextinguishable Light. Through them floweth the river of divine knowledge, and gloweth the fire of His ancient and consummate wisdom. This is the fire which, in one and the same moment, kindleth the flame of love in the breasts of the faithful, and induceth the chill of heedlessness in the heart of the enemy.¹¹⁴

We see from these passages from his Writings that Bahá'u'lláh does not invest much importance in mere utterances, that is, in the human record of traditions, such as compose the entirety of the Gospels, and the hadith of Muhammad and the twelve Imams. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi extended this restriction of the sources of Revelation, by insisting that only those Writings of Bahá'u'lláh which are authenticated--which have been discovered in his autograph or with his seal or some other mark of his approbation--will be accepted as legitimate.

Any narrative that is not authenticated by a Text should not be trusted. Narratives, even if true, cause confusion. For the people of Bahá, the Text, and only the Text, is authentic.¹¹⁵

Shoghi Effendi has laid down the principle that the Bahá'ís should not attribute much importance to talks reported to have been given by the Master, if these have not in one form or other obtained His sanction. Bahá'u'lláh has made it clear enough that only those things that have been revealed in the form of Tablets have a binding power over the friends. Hearsays may be matters of interest but can in no way claim authority. This basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh was to preserve the Faith from being corrupted like Islam which attributes binding authority to all the reported sayings of Muhammad. This being a basic principle of the Faith, we should not confuse Tablets that were actually revealed and mere talks attributed to the founders of the Cause. The first have absolute binding authority while the latter can in no way claim our obedience. The highest thing this can achieve is to influence the activities of the one who has heard the saying in person. Those talks of the Master that were later reviewed by Him, corrected or in some other form considered authentic by Himself, such as the "Some Answered Questions", these could be considered as Tablets and therefore be given the necessary binding power. All the other talks such as are included in Ahmad's diary or the diary of pilgrims, do not fall under this category and could be considered only as interesting material to be taken for what they are worth. For this reason Shoghi Effendi has not been encouraging the publication of reported sayings that were not authenticated by the Master Himself. And when he said that they may be published if quotation marks are taken away, Shoghi Effendi tried to prevent the friends from considering as actual words of the Master things that were not authenticated

by Him.¹¹⁶

According to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh no authority can be attached to a mere hearsay, no matter through whom it may come. The Tablets that bear the seal or signature of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master are the only parts of the literature that have any authority and that constitute the basis of our belief. All other forms of literature may bear points of interest but they cannot be considered as authentic. This is the view that Shoghi Effendi took towards the talks of Abdu'l-Bahá that Ahmad Sohrab had incorporated in his book, and it is the attitude that he would take towards any other reported saying, naturally unless the Master has appended His signature to that talk and thereby given it the authority of a Tablet such as is the case with 'Some Answered Questions' that was

actually corrected by Him.¹¹⁷

The Book of God as defined in the Bahá'í Faith is not confined to one volume. It comprises hundreds of volumes, including the extant and authenticated Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. As will be demonstrated, according to Bahá'í teaching, the Word of God is extended, through the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, to include the authoritative and authenticated interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

PRINCIPLES GOVERNING REVELATION OF THE WORD OF GOD

Bahá'u'lláh points out certain principles governing the revelation of the Word of God, apart from the question of authentication--he affirms that the Word of God is revealed according to the capacity of humanity to comprehend and apply it and not according to the capacity of the Manifestation of God to reveal it; he points out the limitations of human language; and he defends the spiritual independence and transcendental character of the Manifestation.

First, the Word of God is revealed according to the capacity of humanity to comprehend and apply it and not according to the capacity of the Manifestation to reveal it:

Notwithstanding all that We have mentioned, how innumerable are the pearls which have remained unpierced in the shell of Our heart! How many huris of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom!¹¹⁸

Behold, how many are the mysteries that lie as yet unravelled within the tabernacle of the knowledge of God, and how numerous the gems of His wisdom that are still concealed in His inviolable treasuries! Shouldst thou ponder this in thine heart, thou wouldst realize that His handiwork knoweth neither beginning nor end. The domain of His decree is too vast for the tongue of mortals to describe, or for the bird of the human mind to traverse; and the dispensations of His providence are too mysterious for the mind of man to comprehend. His creation no end hath overtaken, and it hath ever existed from the "Beginning that hath no beginning"; and the Manifestations of His Beauty no beginning hath beheld, and they will continue to the "End that knoweth no end." Ponder this utterance in thine heart, and reflect how it is applicable unto all these holy Souls.¹¹⁹

Immeasurably exalted is the celestial Melody above the strivings of human ear to hear or mind to grasp its mystery! How can the helpless ant step into the court of the All-Glorious? And yet, feeble souls, through lack of understanding, reject these abstruse utterances, and question the truth of such traditions. Nay, none can comprehend them save those that are possessed of an understanding heart.¹²⁰

By God! This Bird of Heaven, now dwelling upon the dust, can, besides these melodies, utter a myriad songs, and is able, apart from these utterances, to unfold innumerable mysteries. Every single note of its unpronounced utterances is immeasurably exalted above all that hath already been revealed, and immensely glorified beyond that which hath streamed from this Pen. Let the future disclose the hour when the Brides of inner meaning, will, as decreed by the Will of God, hasten forth, unveiled, out of their mystic mansions, and manifest themselves in the ancient realm of being.

Nothing whatsoever is possible without His permission; no power can endure save through His power, and there is none other God but He. His is the world of creation, and His the Cause of God. All proclaim His Revelation, and all unfold the mysteries of His Spirit.¹²¹

In like manner, every time the Prophets of God have illumined the world with the resplendent radiance of the Day Star of Divine knowledge, they have invariably summoned its peoples to embrace the light of God through such means as best befitted the exigencies of the age in which they appeared.¹²²

The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed.¹²³

Oh, would that the world could believe Me! Were all the things that lie enshrined within the heart of Bahá, and which the Lord, His God, the Lord of all names, hath taught Him, to be unveiled to mankind, every man on earth would be dumbfounded...

Of these truths some can be disclosed only to the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge, and the recipients of Our hidden grace.¹²⁴

He points out the limitations of human language:

How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain! How vast the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusions can be made! How manifold are the truths which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come! Even as it hath been said: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it."¹²⁵

He defends the spiritual independence and transcendental character of the Manifestation:

Thus doth the Nightingale utter His call unto you from this prison. He hath but to deliver this clear message. Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord.¹²⁶

This is My counsel unto thee and unto the beloved of God. Whosoever wisheth, let him turn thereunto; and whosoever wisheth, let him turn away. God, verily, is independent of him and of that which he may see and witness.¹²⁷

We have shown thee these two ways; walk thou the way thou choosest. This verily is the truth, and after truth there remaineth naught but error.¹²⁸

This Wronged One calleth aloud for the sake of God. Whosoever wisheth, let him turn thereunto; whosoever wisheth, let him turn away. Verily God can well afford to dispense with all things, whether of the past or of the future.¹²⁹

Truly this Wronged One desireth not to demonstrate His own Cause with proofs produced by others. He is the One Who embraceth all things, while all else besides Him is circumscribed. Say, O people, peruse that which is current amongst you and We will peruse what pertaineth unto Us. I swear by God! neither the praise of the peoples of the world, nor the things that the kindreds of the earth possess are worthy of mention before the remembrance of His Name. Unto this beareth witness He Who under all conditions proclaimeth, 'Verily He is God, the sovereign Ruler of the Day of Reckoning and the Lord of the Mighty Throne.'¹³⁰

Leave them unto themselves, saying: Unto you be that which ye desire and unto us that which we desire. Wretched indeed is the plight of the ungodly.¹³¹

We exhort, wholly for the sake of God, His servants. Let Him who wisheth turn unto Him, and him who wisheth turn aside. Our Lord, the Merciful, is verily the All-Sufficing, the All-Praised.¹³²

HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES: TWO KINDS OF VERSES

Bahá'u'lláh indicates that the Book of God, the text comprising the revelations uttered or penned by the Manifestation of God is composed of two kinds of verses. In making this statement, He cites a passage from the Qur'án, so we will begin with this text:

He has sent down [nazala] to thee the Book [al-Kitáb]: in it there are verses [ayatun] that are decisive in meaning [muh.kamatun] --they are the basis of the Book [hunna ummu'l-Kitáb] --and there are others that are allegorical [ukharu mutashabihatun]. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part there of that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. Say: 'We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord;' and none will grasp the message except for men of understanding.¹³³

Bahá'u'lláh refers to this passage in Kitáb-i-Íqán as he explains the two different kinds of language found in the Book of God. For many attestations to the authority of this volume as a source for Bahá'í doctrine, please read the following comments authored by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi:

Peruse thou the Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude) and that which the All-Merciful hath sent down unto the King of Paris (Napoleon III) and to such as are like him, that thou mayest be made aware of the things that have happened in the past, and be persuaded that We have not sought to spread disorder in the land after it had been well-ordered.¹³⁴

Briefly, there hath been revealed in the Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude) concerning the Presence and Revelation of God that which will suffice the fair-minded.¹³⁵

Not long ago it was stated that thou hadst ascribed the authorship of the Kitáb-i-Íqán and of other Tablets unto others. I swear by God! This is a grievous injustice. Others are incapable of apprehending their meaning, how much more of revealing them!¹³⁶

Bahá'u'lláh has explained these verses in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. There is no need of repetition; refer to it, and you will understand these sayings.¹³⁷

It is clear and evident that these signs have symbolic signification, and that they are not literal. They are fully explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Refer to it.¹³⁸

This subject is fully and clearly explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán.¹³⁹

The "return" which is mentioned in the Divine Scriptures is this: it is fully explained by the Supreme Pen in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Refer to it, so that you may be informed of the truth of the divine mysteries.¹⁴⁰

Foremost among the priceless treasures cast forth from the billowing ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ranks the Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude)...this Book, setting forth in outline the Grand Redemptive Scheme of God, occupies a position unequalled by any work in the entire range of Bahá'í literature, except the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book...

Next to this unique repository of inestimable treasures must rank that marvelous collection of gem-like utterances, the "Hidden Words" with which Bahá'u'lláh was inspired, as He paced, wrapped in His meditations, the banks of the Tigris... To these two outstanding contributions to the world's religious literature, occupying respectively, positions of unsurpassed preeminence among the doctrinal and ethical writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Dispensation...¹⁴¹

Bahá'u'lláh, towards the conclusion of Kitáb-i-Íqán, that Book "of unsurpassed preeminence among the doctrinal...writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Dispensation", writes:

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language [z.áhir], is devoid of allusions [bi ramz], is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions [ruyát makshufih] and the evident verses [ayát vad.h.ih] already mentioned. The other language is veiled [h.ijáb] and concealed [satir], so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed. Thus hath Sadiq, son of Muhammad, spoken: "God verily will test them and sift them." This is the divine standard [mízán iláhi], this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him. In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth." He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."¹⁴²

THE OUTWARD LANGUAGE [muh.kamatun]

We will go through this commentary line by line, to make certain that we understand its import. The Scriptures have two kinds of language. One of these, "the outward language [z.áhir], is devoid of allusions [bi ramz], is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions [ruyát makshufih] and the evident verses [ayát vad.h.ih] already mentioned." The "outward language" must then be comprehensible to everyone, requiring no special skills or intelligence or knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh refers to this "outward language" earlier in Kitáb-i-Íqán:

Heed not the idle contention of those who maintain that the Book and verses thereof can never be a testimony unto the common people, inasmuch as they neither grasp their meaning nor appreciate their value. And yet, the unfailing testimony of God to both the

East and the West is none other than the Qur'án. Were it beyond the comprehension of men, how could it have been declared as a universal testimony unto all people? If their contention be true, none would therefore be required, nor would it be necessary for them to know God, inasmuch as the knowledge of the divine Being transcendeth the knowledge of His Book, and the common people would not possess the capacity to comprehend it. Such contention is utterly fallacious and inadmissible. It is actuated solely by arrogance and pride. Its motive is to lead the people astray from the Ridvan of divine good-pleasure and to tighten the reins of their authority over the people. And yet, in the sight of God, these common people are infinitely superior and exalted above their religious leaders who have turned away from the one true God. The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding. Well is it with the sincere in heart for their share of the light of a mighty Day!¹⁴³

In *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, his Book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh writes of this language of Scripture that is meant to be understood literally, in its outward sense:

Whoso layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God, ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying impostor. We pray God that He may graciously assist him to retract and repudiate such claim. Should he repent, God will, no doubt, forgive him. If, however, he persisteth in his error, God will, assuredly, send down one who will deal mercilessly with him. Terrible, indeed, is God in punishing! Whosoever interpreteth this verse otherwise than its obvious meaning is deprived of the Spirit of God and of His mercy which encompasseth all created things. Fear God, and follow not your idle fancies. (K37)

In *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Bahá'u'lláh warns against those who would alter the evident meaning of the divine language:

Whoso interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the Sublime Word of God, and is of the most ones in the *Lucid Book*.¹⁴⁴

In a long passage in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*¹⁴⁵, Bahá'u'lláh explains the meaning of perverting the Word of God as the alteration of its meaning based on self interest. Immediately following the passage last cited, Bahá'u'lláh writes in *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

It hath been enjoined upon you to pare your nails, to bathe yourselves each week in water that covereth your bodies, and to clean yourselves with whatsoever ye have formerly employed. Take heed lest through negligence ye fail to observe that which hath been prescribed unto you by Him Who is the Incomparable, the Gracious. Immerse yourselves in clean water; it is not permissible to bathe yourselves in water that hath already been used. See that ye approach not the public pools of Persian baths; whoso maketh his way toward such baths will smell their fetid odour ere he entereth therein. Shun them, O people, and be not of those who ignominiously accept such vileness. In truth, they are as sinks of foulness and contamination, if ye be of them that apprehend. Avoid ye likewise the malodorous pools in the courtyards of Persian homes, and be ye of the pure and

sanctified. Truly, We desire to behold you as manifestations of paradise on earth, that there may be diffused from you such fragrance as shall rejoice the hearts of the favoured of God. If the bather, instead of entering the water, wash himself by pouring it upon his body, it shall be better for him and shall absolve him of the need for bodily immersion. The Lord, verily, hath willed, as a bounty from His presence, to make life easier for you that ye may be of those who are truly thankful.¹⁴⁶

In *Lawh-i-Ta'vil* Bahá'u'lláh insists that his commandments not be interpreted figuratively, and in so doing, we find him referring to exactly the same theme as the verse cited above:

The purpose of figurative interpretation (*ta'vil*) is not that one be deprived of the outward sense of the verse, nor that its intent be veiled. For instance, let us say that from the heaven of the divine will the command is revealed, "Wash your faces." Do not interpret it figuratively, saying that the intent is that one should wash the countenance of one's inner self, cleansing it with the water of mystical insight, and so forth. For in this manner a person might, by reason of such a figurative interpretation, continue to have a malodorous face soiled with dirt, yet be convinced in his own mind that he had carried out the very essence of God's decree. For in this station it is clear and obvious that the intent is that the face be washed with physical water.¹⁴⁷

In *Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams* Bahá'u'lláh advises against explaining away and missing out on the meaning of the literal verses:

...whoso concentrateth on the metaphorical sense to the exclusion of the prosaic meaning is heedless.¹⁴⁸

Most of the verses which are meant to be understood literally pertain to the ethical counsels and commandments. This is indicated by many verses, including the following:

Thou seest, O God of Mercy, Thou Whose power pervadeth all created things, these servants of Thine, Thy thralls, who, according to the good-pleasure of Thy Will, observe in the daytime the fast prescribed by Thee, who arise, at the earliest dawn of day, to make mention of Thy Name, and to celebrate Thy praise, in the hope of obtaining their share of the goodly things that are treasured up within the treasuries of Thy grace and bounty.¹⁴⁹

In the *Prayer of Fasting*¹⁵⁰ We have revealed: "Should Thy Will decree that out of Thy mouth these words proceed and be addressed unto them, 'Observe, for My Beauty's sake, the fast¹⁵¹, O people, and set no limit to its duration,' I swear by the majesty of Thy glory, that every one of them will faithfully observe it, will abstain from whatsoever will violate Thy law, and will continue to do so until they yield up their souls unto Thee." In this consisteth the complete surrender of one's will to the Will of God. Meditate on this, that thou mayest drink in the waters of everlasting life which flow through the words of the Lord of all mankind, and mayest testify that the one true God hath ever been immeasurably exalted above His creatures. He, verily, is the Incomparable, the Ever-Abiding, the Omniscient, the All-Wise. The station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth, and will ever remain exalted above, every other station. It behoveth thee to consecrate thyself to the Will of God. Whatsoever hath been revealed in His Tablets is

but a reflection of His Will. So complete must be thy consecration, that every trace of worldly desire will be washed from thine heart. This is the meaning of true unity.¹⁵²

If Bahá'u'lláh regarded it as permissible to interpret his ordinances allegorically, symbolically, rather than literally, he would not have said that every one of his followers would follow his command to set no limit to the fast until he died. Nor would he have indicated that this literal interpretation and this strict observance of his laws constitutes "complete surrender of one's will to the Will of God", nor that this "station of absolute self-surrender transcendeth, and will ever remain exalted above, every other station" if his laws could be interpreted in such a manner as not to require enactment and realization in the physical world. He writes, in the same vein, in the opening of *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration. They whom God hath endued with insight will readily recognize that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples. He that turneth away from them is accounted among the abject and foolish. We, verily, have commanded you to refuse the dictates of your evil passions and corrupt desires, and not to transgress the bounds which the Pen of the Most High hath fixed, for these are the breath of life unto all created things. The seas of Divine wisdom and Divine utterance have risen under the breath of the breeze of the All-Merciful. Hasten to drink your fill, O men of understanding! They that have violated the Covenant of God by breaking His commandments, and have turned back on their heels, these have erred grievously in the sight of God, the All-Possessing, the Most High.¹⁵³

It is impossible to misread Bahá'u'lláh's intentions here. And his intentions would be completely foiled were it permissible to interpret the language of His laws and ethical counsels in an allegorical fashion. In a Tablet revealed subsequent to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, he writes:

While in prison We have revealed a Book which We have entitled 'The Most Holy Book'. We have enacted laws therein and adorned it with the commandments of thy Lord, Who exerciseth authority over all that are in the heavens and on the earth. Say: Take hold of it, O people, and observe that which hath been sent down in it of the wondrous precepts of your Lord, the Forgiving, the Bountiful. It will truly prosper you both in this world and in the next and will purge you of whatsoever ill beseemeth you. He is indeed the Ordainer, the Expounder, the Giver, the Generous, the Gracious, the All-Praised.¹⁵⁴

In one of his earliest treatises, a letter to Shaykh Muhyi'd-Dín-i-Kháníqí, known as the *Haft Vadi*, Bahá'u'lláh insists that the spiritual path must include the faithful observance of laws, and as we have seen, the faithful observance of laws is impossible unless we interpret the verses pertaining to those laws in a literal, straightforward fashion:

In all these journeys the traveler must stray not the breadth of a hair from the "Law," [shari'a] for this is indeed the secret of the "Path" [t.ariqa] and the fruit of the Tree of "Truth" [h.aqiqa]; and in all these stages he must cling to the robe of obedience to the

:commandments, and hold fast to the cord of shunning all forbidden things, that he may be nourished from the cup of the Law and informed of the mysteries of Truth.¹⁵⁵

There are two exceptions to the general accessibility of the divine commandments which are not related to the interpretation of the language in which they are composed, but rather to questions of timeliness and appropriateness in light of factors of an entirely different nature. Bahá'u'lláh indicated that his laws would be gradually established among his followers, by his own practice during his ministry and through his Writings. Speaking of the gradual and progressive revelation of the teachings of the new Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Indeed, the laws of God are like unto the ocean and the children of men as fish, did they but know it. However, in observing them one must exercise tact and wisdom... Since most people are feeble and far-removed from the purpose of God, therefore one must observe tact and prudence under all conditions, so that nothing might happen that could cause disturbance and dissension or raise clamor among the heedless. Verily, His bounty hath surpassed the whole universe and His bestowals encompassed all that dwell on earth. One must guide mankind to the ocean of true understanding in a spirit of love and tolerance. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself beareth eloquent testimony to the loving providence of God.¹⁵⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá took the same approach to the establishment of Bahá'í laws, insisting upon strict observance of most of the laws that pertain to personal behavior by the Iranian Bahá'ís who were familiar with the full text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, but more gradually instituting those laws in other parts of the world, among Bahá'ís who did not have access to that text. Shoghi Effendi continued in the same vein, but inasmuch as his ministry is regarded as another step forward in the maturation of the Bahá'í community, his remarks are more definite, his expectations are higher:

The laws revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Aqdas are, whenever practicable and not in direct conflict with the Civil Law of the land, absolutely binding on every believer or Bahá'í institution whether in the East or in the West. Certain laws should be regarded by all believers as universally and vitally applicable at the present time. Others have been formulated in anticipation of a state of society destined to emerge from the chaotic conditions that prevail today...What has not been formulated in the Aqdas, in addition to matters of detail and of secondary importance arising out of the application of the laws already formulated by Bahá'u'lláh, will have to be enacted by the Universal House of Justice. This body can supplement but never invalidate or modify in the least degree what has already been formulated by Bahá'u'lláh. Nor has the Guardian any right whatsoever to lessen the binding effect much less to abrogate the provisions of so fundamental and sacred a Book.¹⁵⁷

The Universal House of Justice has reiterated this principle by citing the words of Bahá'u'lláh and Shoghi Effendi in its Introduction to "The Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas" in 1974 and its Preface to "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas" in 1992. In 1974 the Universal House of Justice addressed a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iceland, listing the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that were not at that time binding upon Bahá'ís in the West. Its letter to the Bahá'ís of the world in Ridvan 1992 made the law of Huququ'llah binding upon all believers. In 9 May 1993 the Universal House of

Justice sent a copy of the 1974 letter addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iceland to every National Spiritual Assembly, also noting that in Ridvan 1992 the law of Huququ'llah had become binding universally. On 28 December 1999, the Universal House of Justice made universally binding all laws pertaining to fasting and prayer. On 8 February 2001, the Universal House of Justice directed its Secretariat to update all National Spiritual Assemblies on the status of these communications, and this letter is reproduced in full in the endnotes.¹⁵⁸

RESPONSE TO OUTWARD LANGUAGE

We have introduced the first kind of divine language, the outward language, meant to be understood literally, meant to be comprehended by everyone, meant to be put into practice. This is the most important dimension of religion, which is why it is accessible to everyone. Not everyone can understand everything, but everyone can understand the counsels and commandments, and in so doing, they attain to the "highest station", which is "the surrender of one's will to the Will of God." While Bahá'u'lláh values insight and intelligence, eloquence and skill, creativity and inventiveness, above all he values enacting the divine counsels and commandments.

Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.¹⁵⁹

Strive that your deeds may be cleansed from the dust of self and hypocrisy and find favor at the court of glory; for ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored One, accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity.¹⁶⁰

Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds. Every one must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds. In this wise We counsel you in this holy and resplendent tablet.¹⁶¹

Should your words, O people, be at variance with your deeds, what then shall distinguish you from those who profess their faith in the Lord, their God, and yet, when He came down to them overshadowed with clouds, rejected Him and waxed proud before God, the Incomparable, the Omniscient?¹⁶²

How, We fain would ask, is it possible to impugn this people whose deeds are in conformity with their words, and to give credence instead to those who have refused to relinquish one jot of their worldly authority in the path of Him Who is the Unconstrained?¹⁶³

Live ye one with another, O people, in radiance and joy. By My life! All that are on earth shall pass away, while good deeds alone shall endure; to the truth of My words God doth Himself bear witness.¹⁶⁴

Say: Beware, O people of Bahá, lest ye walk in the ways of them whose words differ from their deeds. Strive that ye may be enabled to manifest to the peoples of the earth the signs of God, and to mirror forth His commandments. Let your acts be a guide unto all

mankind, for the professions of most men, be they high or low, differ from their conduct. It is through your deeds that ye can distinguish yourselves from others. Through them the brightness of your light can be shed upon the whole earth. Happy is the man that heedeth My counsel, and keepeth the precepts prescribed by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.¹⁶⁵

It behooveth the people of Bahá to render the Lord victorious through the power of their utterance and to admonish the people by their goodly deeds and character, inasmuch as deeds exert greater influence than words.¹⁶⁶

The essence of faith is fewness of words and abundance of deeds; he whose words exceed his deeds, know verily his death is better than his life.¹⁶⁷

Centre your attention unceasingly upon that which will cause the Word of God to be exalted. In this Most Great Revelation goodly deeds and a praiseworthy character are regarded as the hosts of God, likewise is His blessed and holy Word. These hosts are the lodestone of the hearts of men and the effective means for unlocking doors. Of all the weapons in the world this is the keenest.¹⁶⁸

THE VEILED AND CONCEALED LANGUAGE [mutashabihatun]

According to Bahá'u'lláh, the second kind of divine language employed by the Manifestations of God is "veiled and concealed":

The other language is veiled [h.ijáb] and concealed [satir],¹⁶⁹ so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed. Thus hath Sadiq, son of Muhammad, spoken: "God verily will test them and sift them." This is the divine standard [mízán iláhí], this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him. In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth." He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."¹⁷⁰

Bahá'u'lláh specifically identifies many passages of the divine verses that employ this symbolic language and for which a literal interpretation is either inadequate or inaccurate:

This is the purpose underlying the **symbolic words** of the Manifestations of God...Hence, it is clear and manifest that by the words "the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven" is intended the waywardness of the divines, and the annulment of laws firmly established by divine Revelation, all of which, in **symbolic language**, have been fore-shadowed by the Manifestations of God. None except the righteous shall partake of this cup, none but the godly shall share therein. "The righteous shall drink of a cup tempered at the camphor fountain." [Qur'án 76:5]¹⁷¹

Consider now, had the people of the Gospel recognized the meaning of the **symbolic terms** “sun” and “moon,” had they sought, unlike the froward and perverse, enlightenment from Him Who is the Revealer of divine knowledge, they would have surely comprehended the purpose of these terms, and would not have become afflicted and oppressed by the darkness of their selfish desires. Yea, but since they have failed to acquire true knowledge from its very Source, they have perished in the perilous vale of waywardness and misbelief.¹⁷²

And as the commentators of the Qur’án have failed to grasp the **symbolic meaning** of these “Suns,” they therefore were at pains to interpret the above-quoted verse.¹⁷³

The **symbolic term** “smoke” denotes grave dissensions, the abrogation and demolition of recognized standards, and the utter destruction of their narrow-minded exponents.¹⁷⁴

Notwithstanding the warning which, in marvelously **symbolic language and subtle allusions**, hath been uttered in days past, and which was intended to awaken the peoples of the world and to prevent them from being deprived of their share of the billowing ocean of God's grace, yet such things as have already been witnessed have come to pass!¹⁷⁵

Little perception is required to enable them to gather from the **symbolic language** of these two verses all that We have purposed to propound, and thus to attain, through the grace of the All-Merciful, the resplendent morn of certitude.¹⁷⁶

Reflect, how this **symbolic language**, more eloquent than any speech, however direct, testifieth to the non-existence of a true believer.¹⁷⁷

‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms this principle in a number of statements:

This is the outward meaning of these verses of the Revelation of St. John; but they have another explanation and a **symbolic sense**, which is as follows: the Law of God is divided into two parts.¹⁷⁸

The iron rod is a **symbol** of power and might—it is not a sword—and means that with divine power and might He will shepherd all the nations of the earth. This son is the Báb.¹⁷⁹

It is clear and evident that these signs have **symbolic** signification, and that they are not literal. They are fully explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Refer to it.¹⁸⁰

Therefore, this story of Adam and Eve who ate from the tree, and their expulsion from Paradise, must be thought of simply as a **symbol**. It contains divine mysteries and universal meanings, and it is capable of marvelous explanations. Only those who are initiated into mysteries, and those who are near the Court of the All-Powerful, are aware of these secrets. Hence these verses of the Bible have numerous meanings.¹⁸¹

For according to the terminology of the Holy Books, this reference is to the Law, the woman being its symbol here. And the two luminaries, the sun and the moon, are the two thrones, the Turkish and the Persian, these two being under the rule of the Law of God. The sun is the symbol of the Persian Empire, and the moon, that is, the crescent, of the Turkish.¹⁸²

Chapter 16 of "Some Answered Questions" is devoted to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks about the symbolic verses of Scripture¹⁸³. In his talks in North America and Europe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made many references to the symbolic nature of the sacred text, and some of these are also cited in an endnote¹⁸⁴.

Now to return to Bahá'u'lláh, in his discussion of the second kind of divine language, he indicates that it serves as a test whereby "whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed". This aligns perfectly with the Qur'anic verse: "But those in whose hearts is perversity pursue such thereof as are susceptible of different interpretations, seeking discord and seeking wrong interpretation of it."¹⁸⁵ Bahá'u'lláh reiterates this point throughout Kitáb-i-Íqán:

Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time immemorial such hath been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books.¹⁸⁶

Yea, such things as throw consternation into the hearts of all men come to pass only that each soul may be tested by the touchstone of God, that the true may be known and distinguished from the false....

But inasmuch as the divine Purpose hath decreed that the true should be known from the false, and the sun from the shadow, He hath, therefore, in every season sent down upon mankind the showers of tests from His realm of glory.¹⁸⁷

The All-Glorious hath decreed these very things, that are contrary to the desires of wicked men, to be the touchstone and standard whereby He proveth His servants, that the just may be known from the wicked, and the faithful distinguished from the infidel.¹⁸⁸

And yet they bear witness to this well-known tradition: "Verily Our Word is abstruse, bewilderingly abstruse." In another instance, it is said: "Our Cause is sorely trying, highly perplexing; none can bear it except a favorite of heaven, or an inspired Prophet, or he whose faith God hath tested." These leaders of religion admit that none of these three specified conditions is applicable to them. The first two conditions are manifestly beyond their reach; as to the third, it is evident that at no time have they been proof against those tests that have been sent by God, and that when the divine Touchstone appeared, they have shown themselves to be naught but dross.¹⁸⁹

Furthermore, the sign of truth and falsehood is designated and appointed in the Book. By this divinely-appointed touchstone, the claims and pretensions of all men must needs be assayed, so that the truthful may be known and distinguished from the imposter.¹⁹⁰

This is the divine standard, the Touchstone. We find Bahá'u'lláh speaking of this divine standard in other verses, and warning against measuring this standard by any scale besides itself:

Say: I am come to you, O people, from the Throne of glory, and bear you an announcement from God, the Most Powerful, the Most Exalted, the Most Great. In mine hand I carry the testimony of God, your Lord and the Lord of your sires of old. Weigh it with the just Ba-

lance that ye possess, the Balance of the testimony of the Prophets and Messengers of God. If ye find it to be established in truth, if ye believe it to be of God, beware, then, lest ye cavil at it, and render your works vain, and be numbered with the infidels. It is indeed the sign of

God that hath been sent down through the power of truth, through which the validity of His Cause hath been demonstrated unto His creatures, and the ensigns of purity lifted up betwixt earth and heaven.¹⁹¹

Say: O leaders of religion! Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.¹⁹²

The divine standard, the Touchstone then is the Word of God, and particularly the "abstruse" Word, and through it the spiritually ignorant and blind may be distinguished from the spiritually knowledgeable and perceptive. How does Bahá'u'lláh describe those who comprehend the "abstruse" Word?

None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him.¹⁹³

This echoes the Qur'anic verse: "And none knows its right interpretation except God and those whose are firmly grounded in knowledge."¹⁹⁴ There are several meanings of this verse according to Bahá'u'lláh. The superlative connotation of this expression--firmly grounded in knowledge--is the Manifestation of God:

With fixed and steady gaze, born of the unerring eye of God, scan for a while the horizon of divine knowledge, and contemplate those words of perfection which the Eternal hath revealed, that haply the mysteries of divine wisdom, hidden ere now beneath the veil of glory and treasured within the tabernacle of His grace, may be made manifest unto you... **It is obvious and manifest that the true meaning of the utterances of the Birds of Eternity is revealed to none except those that manifest the Eternal Being, and the melodies of the Nightingale of Holiness can reach no ear save that of the denizens of the everlasting realm...** Even as He saith: *'None knoweth the meaning thereof except God and them that are well grounded in knowledge.'* And yet, they have sought the interpretation of the Book from those that are wrapt in veils, and have refused to seek enlightenment from the fountainhead of knowledge.¹⁹⁵

In God We put our trust, and to Him We cry for help, **that haply there may flow from this pen that which shall quicken the souls of men**, that they may all arise from their beds of heedlessness and **hearken unto the rustling of the leaves of Paradise, from the tree which the hand of divine power hath, by the permission of God, planted in the Ridvan of the All-Glorious.**¹⁹⁶

Make haste, O my brother, that while there is yet time our lips may taste of the immortal draught, for the breeze of life, now blowing from the city of the Well-Beloved, cannot last, and the streaming river of holy utterance must needs be stilled, and the portals of the Ridvan cannot for ever remain open. The day will surely come when the Nightingale of

Paradise will have winged its flight away from its earthly abode unto its heavenly nest. Then will its melody be heard no more, and the beauty of the rose cease to shine. Seize the time, therefore, ere the glory of the divine springtime hath spent itself, and the Bird of Eternity ceased to warble its melody, that thy inner hearing may not be deprived of hearkening unto its call. This is My counsel unto thee and unto the beloved of God.¹⁹⁷

Had they sought with a humble mind **from the Manifestations of God in every Dispensation the true meaning of these words revealed in the sacred books--**words the misapprehension of which hath caused men to be deprived of the recognition of the Sadratu'l-Muntaha, the ultimate Purpose--they surely would have been guided to the light of the Sun of Truth, and would have discovered the mysteries of divine knowledge and wisdom.¹⁹⁸

Thus **We instruct thee** in the interpretation of the traditions, **and reveal unto thee** the mysteries of divine wisdom, that haply thou mayest comprehend the meaning thereof, and be of them that have quaffed the cup of divine knowledge and understanding.¹⁹⁹

If these divines be illumined **by the light of the latter Revelation** they will be acceptable unto God, and will shine with a light everlasting. Otherwise, they will be declared as darkened, even though to outward seeming they be leaders of men, inasmuch as belief and unbelief, guidance and error, felicity and misery, light and darkness, are all **dependent upon the sanction of Him Who is the Day-star of Truth.** Whosoever among the divines of every age receiveth, in the Day of Reckoning, the testimony of faith from the Source of true knowledge, he verily becometh the recipient of learning, of divine favour, and of the light of true understanding. Otherwise, he is branded as guilty of folly, denial, blasphemy, and oppression.

It is evident and manifest unto every discerning observer that even as the light of the star fadeth before the effulgent splendour of the sun, **so doth the luminary of earthly knowledge, of wisdom, and understanding vanish into nothingness when brought face to face with the resplendent glories of the Sun of Truth, the Day-star of divine enlightenment.**²⁰⁰

Consider now, had the people of the Gospel recognized the meaning of the symbolic terms 'sun' and 'moon,' **had they sought, unlike the forward and perverse, enlightenment from Him Who is the Revealer of divine knowledge, they would surely have comprehended the purpose of these terms,** and would not have become afflicted and oppressed by the darkness of their selfish desires. Yea, but **since they have failed to acquire true knowledge from its very Source,** they have perished in the perilous vale of waywardness and misbelief. They still have not awakened to perceive that all the signs foretold have been made manifest, that the promised Sun hath risen above the horizon of divine Revelation, and that the 'sun' and 'moon' of the teachings, the laws, and learning of a former Dispensation have darkened and set.²⁰¹

Little perception is required to enable them to gather from the symbolic language of these two verses all that We have purposed to propound, and thus to attain, through the grace of the All-Merciful, the resplendent morn of certitude. **Such are the strains of celestial melody which the immortal Bird of Heaven, warbling upon the Sadrih of Bahá, poureth out upon thee,** that, by the permission of God, thou mayest tread the path of divine knowledge and wisdom.²⁰²

And yet they bear witness to this well-known tradition: "Verily Our Word is abstruse, bewilderingly abstruse." In another instance, it is said: "Our Cause is sorely trying, highly perplexing; **none can bear it except a favorite of heaven, or an inspired Prophet**, or he whose faith God hath tested." These leaders of religion admit that none of these three specified conditions is applicable to them. The first two conditions are manifestly beyond their reach; as to the third, it is evident that at no time have they been proof against those tests that have been sent by God, **and that when the divine Touchstone appeared, they have shown themselves to be naught but dross.**²⁰³

Yea, inasmuch as the peoples of the world have failed to seek **from the luminous and crystal Springs of divine knowledge** the inner meaning of God's holy words, they therefore have languished, stricken and sore athirst, in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness.²⁰⁴

Inasmuch as these undiscerning and wretched souls have failed to apprehend the true meaning of "Resurrection" and of the "attainment unto the divine Presence," they therefore have remained utterly deprived of the grace thereof. Although the sole and fundamental purpose of all learning, and the toil and labour thereof, is attainment unto, and the recognition of, this station, yet they are all immersed in the pursuit of their material studies. **They deny themselves every moment of leisure, and utterly ignore Him, Who is the Essence of all learning**, and the one Object of their quest. Methinks, their lips have never touched the cup of divine Knowledge, nor do they seem to have attained even a dewdrop of the showers of heavenly grace.²⁰⁵

Were We to expound its inner meanings and unfold its hidden mysteries, eternity would never suffice to exhaust their import, nor would the universe be capable of hearing them! God verily testifieth to the truth of Our saying!²⁰⁶

Those words uttered by the **Luminaries of Truth** must needs be pondered, and should their significance be not grasped, enlightenment should be sought from the Trustees of the depositories of Knowledge, that these may expound their meaning, and unravel their mystery. For it behooveth no man to interpret the holy words according to his own imperfect understanding, nor, having found them to be contrary to his inclination and desires, to reject and repudiate the truth. For such, today, is the manner of the divines and doctors of the age, who occupy the seats of knowledge and learning, and who have named ignorance knowledge, and called oppression justice. **Were these to ask the Light of Truth concerning those images which their idle fancy hath carved, and were they to find His answer inconsistent with their own conceptions and their own understanding of the Book, they would assuredly denounce Him Who is the Mine and Wellhead of all Knowledge as the very negation of understanding.** Such things have happened in every age.²⁰⁷

Even as thou dost witness how the people of the Qur'án, like unto the people of old, have allowed the words "Seal of the Prophets" to veil their eyes. And yet, they themselves testify to this verse: "*None knoweth the interpretation thereof but God and they that are well-grounded in knowledge.*" **And when He Who is well-grounded in all knowledge, He Who is the Mother, the Soul, the Secret, and the Essence thereof, revealeth that which is the least contrary to their desire, they bitterly oppose Him and shamelessly deny Him.** These thou hast already heard and witnessed. Such deeds

and words have been solely instigated by leaders of religion, they that worship no God but their own desire, who bear allegiance to naught but gold, who are wrapt in the densest veils of learning, and who, enmeshed by its obscurities, are lost in the wilds of error. Even as the Lord of being hath explicitly declared: "What thinkest thou? He who hath made a God of his passions, and whom God causeth to err through a knowledge, and whose ears and whose heart He hath sealed up, and over whose sight He hath cast a veil—who, after his rejection by God, shall guide such a one? Will ye not then be warned?" [Qur'án 45:22]²⁰⁸

For whatsoever hath come to pass, hath been prophesied by them who are the Mines of divine knowledge, and Recipients of God's eternal law.²⁰⁹

We entreat the learned men of the Bayan not to follow in such ways, not to inflict, at the time of Mustaghath, upon Him Who is the divine Essence, the heavenly Light, the Absolute Eternity, the Beginning and the End of the Manifestations of the Invisible, that which hath been inflicted in this day. We beg them not to depend upon their intellect, their comprehension and learning, nor to contend with the Revealer of celestial and infinite knowledge.²¹⁰

We perceive none, however, amongst the people of the earth who, sincerely yearning for the Truth, seeketh the guidance of the divine Manifestations concerning the abstruse matters of his Faith. All are dwellers in the land of oblivion, and all are followers of the people of wickedness and rebellion. God will verily do unto them that which they themselves are doing, and will forget them even as they have ignored His Presence in His day. Such is His decree unto those that have denied Him, and such will it be unto them that have rejected His signs.²¹¹

In other Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh systematically establishes the same principle, that it is the Manifestation of God who is the fountainhead and source of all divine knowledge, and that we are to turn to him at all times and under all circumstances:

Should differences arise amongst you over any matter, **refer It to God while the Sun still shineth** above the horizon of this Heaven and, when it hath set, refer ye to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him. This, verily, is sufficient unto the peoples of the world.²¹²

Whatsoever ye understand not in the Bayan, **ask it of God**, Your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers. Should He so desire, **He will expound for you that which is revealed therein**, and disclose to you the pearls of Divine knowledge and wisdom that lie concealed within the ocean of its words. He, verily, is supreme over all names; no God is there but Him, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.²¹³

The second meaning of "those firmly grounded in knowledge" is that it refers to the "chosen ones" of the Manifestation of God, those whom he chooses to interpret his teachings subsequent to the completion of his ministry. He affirms that in the Dispensation of Muhammad these were the twelve Imams:

From the sayings of those **Masters of holy utterance, Who have expounded the meaning of true knowledge**, the odour of these dark teachings, which have obscured the world, can in no wise be detected.²¹⁴

As they understood not the significance of these noble sayings, nor sought enlightenment from the **recognized expounders of the Faith**, that these might confer a sprinkling of the Kawthar of divine knowledge upon them, therefore such fires of mischief were kindled amongst men.²¹⁵

Bahá'u'lláh also refers to these "chosen ones" in more general terms, encompassing all of the divine Dispensations:

Those words uttered by the Luminaries of Truth must needs be pondered, and should their significance be not grasped, **enlightenment should be sought from the Trustees of the depositories of Knowledge**, that these may expound their meaning, and unravel their mystery. For it behooveth no man to interpret the holy words according to his own imperfect understanding, nor, having found them to be contrary to his inclination and desires, to reject and repudiate the truth. For such, today, is the manner of the divines and doctors of the age, who occupy the seats of knowledge and learning, and who have named ignorance knowledge, and called oppression justice. Were these to ask the Light of Truth concerning those images which their idle fancy hath carved, and were they to find His answer inconsistent with their own conceptions and their own understanding of the Book, they would assuredly denounce Him Who is the Mine and Wellhead of all Knowledge as the very negation of understanding. Such things have happened in every age.²¹⁶

These things We mention only that the people may not be dismayed because of certain traditions and utterances, which have not yet been literally fulfilled, that they may rather attribute their perplexity to their own lack of understanding, and not to the non-fulfillment of the promises in the traditions, inasmuch as the meaning intended by the Imams of the Faith is not known by this people, as evidenced by the traditions themselves. The people, therefore, must not allow such utterances to deprive them of the divine bounties, **but should rather seek enlightenment from them who are the recognized Expounders thereof**, so that the hidden mysteries may be unravelled, and be made manifest unto them.²¹⁷

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth forever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom.²¹⁸

The standard beliefs amongst the Bahá'ís is that the "chosen ones" in their Faith are 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and that this is indicated by Bahá'u'lláh in Kitáb-i-Aqdas and Kitáb-i-'Ahdi and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament:

When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched²¹⁹ from this Ancient Root.²²⁰

O people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched²²¹ from this mighty Stock.²²²

The Will of the divine Testator is this: It is incumbent upon the Aghsan, the Afnan and My Kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch.²²³ Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book: ‘When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.’ The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch. Thus have We graciously revealed unto you Our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful.²²⁴

‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirmed his authority as Expounder²²⁵ and Interpreter²²⁶ of the Bahá'í teachings and Writings in a number of Tablets and talks, and indicated that the appointment of a Centre of the Covenant by Bahá'u'lláh was one of the distinctive teachings of the Bahá'í Dispensation:

As to the most great characteristic of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, a specific teaching not given by any of the Prophets of the past: It is the ordination and appointment of the Center of the Covenant. By this appointment and provision He has safeguarded and protected the religion of God against differences and schisms, making it impossible for anyone to create a new sect or faction of belief.²²⁷

Shoghi Effendi calls ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the Expounder²²⁸ and Interpreter²²⁹ of the Faith in a number of his letters and in his history of the Bahá'í Faith. In his Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed Shoghi Effendi as the Interpreter of the Faith after his demise:

O my loving friends! After the passing away of this wronged one, it is incumbent upon the Aghsan (Branches), the Afnan (Twigs) of the Sacred Lote-Tree, the Hands (pillars) of the Cause of God and the loved ones of the Abha Beauty to turn unto Shoghi Effendi—the youthful branch branched from the two hallowed and sacred Lote-Trees and the fruit grown from the union of the two offshoots of the Tree of Holiness,—as he is the sign of God, the chosen branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, he unto whom all the Aghsan, the Afnan, the Hands of the Cause of God and His loved ones must turn. He is the Interpreter of the Word of God...²³⁰

Shoghi Effendi also reiterated ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s authority as Interpreter, as well as his own in a number of letters written on his behalf²³¹. Here are excerpts from a couple of those letters:

The Beloved Guardian has noted your letter of February 15th, addressed to the National Teaching Committee, other committees and Local Assemblies giving advice concerning Teaching methods in Canada. The Beloved Guardian noted that in paragraph three you mention that no teachers have the authority to interpret more accurately than others: that every teacher is bound to interpret to some degree but the more he appreciates the Faith, the less will he be inclined to be dogmatic, etc. The Guardian feels that this paragraph will cause great confusion amongst the friends. The Will and Testament of Bahá'u'lláh and the Will and Testament of the Master clearly and explicitly indicate that the **Interpreter** of the Word was the Centre of the Covenant and now is the Guardian.

There are no other **Interpreters** whatsoever and no individual may interpret. This is strictly forbidden. No doubt the intent of this paragraph was to indicate that the Bahá'í teachers in making explanation of Divine Truths must give their understanding of the Divine Truths: explanations that have been clarified for them in study classes, summer schools, etc. Divine Truth is relative and that is why we are enjoined to constantly refer the seeker to the Word itself--and why any explanations we make to ease the journey of the soul of any individual must be based on the Word and the Word alone. If there is a wide divergence in the understandings of the Friends of the Teachings then the National Assembly should arrange for study classes on such points--and particularly the Summer Schools. The Guardian feels the letter of February 15th should be withdrawn.²³²

He feels that there must have been some misapprehension on your part of his statements concerning future Guardians: they cannot 'abrogate' the interpretations of former Guardians, as this would imply not only lack of guidance but mistakes in making them; however they can elaborate and elucidate former interpretations, and can certainly abrogate some former ruling laid down as a temporary necessity by a former Guardian.²³³

Now that we have completed our exegesis of the second kind of language used by the Manifestations of God, we come to a principle related to the hermeneutics of the symbolic verses -- Bahá'u'lláh indicates that the symbolic verses do not have a literal meaning that is well known to the people:

In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended.²³⁴

Bahá'u'lláh warns that many people have misunderstood the divine verses because they invented literal interpretations for verses that were meant to be understood symbolically. However, his purpose was not to encourage all symbolic interpretations, but rather to point out that some verses have symbolic interpretations, and that these symbolic meanings can be discerned, if we follow the guidance of the Manifestations. As we have seen, it is the Manifestation and His "chosen ones" who reveal the true meanings of these symbolic verses, and only under the guidance of these infallibly-guided ones is it remotely possible for certain believers to discover the authentic meaning of symbolic verses without deriving them directly from the holy utterances and holy writ. We will discuss this spiritual gift under individual interpretation, in connection with the third meaning of "those who are sound in knowledge". Some of the verses which Bahá'u'lláh indicates as being mistakenly interpreted in a literal fashion when their true meaning was symbolic are mentioned here:

For when the latter saw the aforementioned passages in their Scriptures and heard the **literal interpretations** of their divines, they refused to recognize God in those who are the Manifestations of His unity, the Exponents of His singleness, and the Embodiments of His sanctity, and failed to believe in them and submit to their authority.²³⁵

To interpret this city according to the **literal meaning** of the tradition would indeed prove impossible, nor can such a city ever be found. Wert thou to search the uttermost corners of

the earth, nay probe its length and breadth for as long as God's eternity hath lasted and His sovereignty will endure, thou wouldst never find a city such as they have described, for the entirety of the earth could neither contain nor encompass it.²³⁶

Meditate then upon the utterance of one of the Prophets as He intimated to the souls of men, through veiled allusions and hidden symbols, the glad-tidings of the One Who was to come after Him, that thou mayest know of a certainty that their words are inscrutable to all save those who are endued with an understanding heart. He saith: "His eyes were as a flame of fire", and "brass-like were His feet", and "out of His mouth goeth a two-edged sword".⁵⁰ How could these words be **literally interpreted**?²³⁷

Inasmuch as the Christian divines have failed to apprehend the meaning of these words, and did not recognize their object and purpose, and have clung to the **literal interpretation** of the words of Jesus, they therefore became deprived of the streaming grace of the Muhammadan Revelation and its showering bounties.²³⁸

Judge fairly: Were the prophecies recorded in the Gospel to be **literally fulfilled**; were Jesus, Son of Mary, accompanied by angels, to descend from the visible heaven upon the clouds; who would dare to disbelieve, who would dare to reject the truth, and wax disdainful?²³⁹

As they have **literally interpreted** the Word of God, and the sayings and traditions of the Letters of Unity, and expounded them according to their own deficient understanding, they have therefore deprived themselves and all their people of the bountiful showers of the grace and mercies of God.²⁴⁰

Were they to be questioned concerning those signs that must needs herald the revelation and rise of the sun of the Muhammadan Dispensation, to which We have already referred, none of which have been **literally fulfilled**, and were it to be said to them: "Wherefore have ye rejected the claims advanced by Christians and the peoples of other faiths and regard them as infidels," knowing not what answer to give, they will reply: "These Books have been corrupted and are not, and never have been, of God."²⁴¹

Were the verse "And verily Our host shall conquer" to be **literally interpreted**, it is evident that it would in no wise be applicable to the chosen Ones of God and His hosts, inasmuch as Husayn, whose heroism was manifest as the sun, crushed and subjugated, quaffed at last the cup of martyrdom in Karbila, the land of Taff. Similarly, the sacred verse "Fain would they put out God's light with their mouths: But God hath willed to perfect His light, albeit the infidels abhor it." Were it to be **literally interpreted** it would never correspond with the truth. For in every age the light of God hath, to outward seeming, been quenched by the peoples of the earth, and the Lamps of God extinguished by them. How then could the ascendancy of the sovereignty of these Lamps be explained?²⁴²

Could they seek to justify themselves by saying: "We have clung to a certain tradition, and not having beheld the **literal fulfilment** thereof, we have therefore raised such cavils against the Embodiments of divine Revelation, and kept remote from the law of God?"²⁴³

These things We mention only that the people may not be dismayed because of certain traditions and utterances, which have not yet been **literally fulfilled**, that they may

rather attribute their perplexity to their own lack of understanding, and not to the non-fulfillment of the promises in the traditions, inasmuch as the meaning intended by the Imams of the Faith is not known by this people, as evidenced by the traditions themselves.²⁴⁴

We come finally to another principle regarding the interpretation of the symbolic verses of Scripture -- its polyvalence, its multiplicity of meanings, and to the knowledge of that multiplicity of meanings:

Thus it is recorded: "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth." He also saith: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain."²⁴⁵

These two ahadith express a principle that is also found in this hadith from the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, interpreting a verse from the Qur'án:

God here informs thee that the Word of God has no end, no termination, and It shall never cease at all.²⁴⁶

Bahá'u'lláh reiterates this principle in virtually identical wording:

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth forever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted.²⁴⁷

Hence, the meaning of "seventy" and "seventy-one" is not that the symbolic significances of the Word of God are limited to these numbers, but that, on the contrary, these numbers represent the unlimited meanings the Word of God contains. The first of these hadith indicated that only one of the infinite meanings of the symbolic language "is known amongst the people", while the Qa'im will reveal them all when he appears. The Qa'im was the Báb, and, following Bahá'u'lláh's principle of the unity of the Manifestations, he represents every Manifestation. The Manifestation is able to explain all the symbolic significances of the divine worlds. The second hadith indicates that the divine word has infinite meanings, and that each one of these meanings can be explained...by the revealer of that word. Likewise, the third hadith mentioned, which is reiterated by Bahá'u'lláh, is followed by the following qualification: "They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom."²⁴⁸

HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES: THE CHOSEN MUBAYYIN

Bahá'u'lláh insists that this prophecy related to his prophetic successor be interpreted literally, according to its obvious meaning. If we have any doubt whatsoever of this interpretation of his explanation, we find it confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá²⁴⁹ and Shoghi Effendi²⁵⁰ in the most literal of terms. Two other passages of Kitáb-i-Aqdas that Bahá'u'lláh meant to be interpreted literally is the following:

When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.²⁵¹

O people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.²⁵²

In his own *Kitáb-i-'Ahd*, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that this verse is to be understood according to its literal meaning, an interpretation confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá²⁵³ and Shoghi Effendi²⁵⁴:

The Will of the divine Testator is this: It is incumbent upon the Aghsan, the Afnan and My Kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch. Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book: 'When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.' The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch [Abdu'l-Bahá]. Thus have We graciously revealed unto you Our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful. Verily God hath ordained the station of the Greater Branch [Muhammad Ali] to be beneath that of the Most Great Branch [Abdu'l-Bahá]. He is in truth the Ordainer, the All-Wise. We have chosen 'the Greater' after 'the Most Great', as decreed by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.²⁵⁵

There are instances in which the literal meaning of the words written by Bahá'u'lláh has been superseded by the interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (K63), Bahá'u'lláh warns a man "that ye take not unto yourselves more wives than two." The import of this verse seems to have been that a man may take up to two wives at the same time, but it would be preferable that he take only one wife. According to Bahá'í historian Susan Maneck²⁵⁶, "In an untranslated letter²⁵⁷, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave a believer permission to take a second wife. He also indicated that the law concerning taking no more than two wives cannot be abrogated." Having permitted bigamy, Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "Whoso contenteth himself with a single partner from among the maidservants of God, both he and she shall live in tranquility...Such is the ordinance which, in truth and justice, hath been recorded by the Pen of Revelation." Maneck also points out, "He also noted that this law was conditional upon justice which was a condition virtually impossible to fulfill, but that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not prevent believers from marrying a second wife if they were certain they would act with justice."²⁵⁸ So far we have a strictly literal interpretation of the law of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. However, subsequent to writing this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in several letters²⁵⁹ that Bahá'u'lláh enjoined monogamy in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, including the following very firm statement:

Know thou that polygamy is not permitted under the law of God, for contentment with one wife hath been clearly stipulated. Taking a second wife is made dependent upon equity and justice being upheld between the two wives, under all conditions. However, observance of justice and equity towards two wives is utterly impossible. The fact that bigamy has been made dependent upon an impossible condition is clear proof of its absolute prohibition. Therefore it is not permissible for a man to have more than one wife.²⁶⁰

While the first interpretation of this verse by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá might appear to be the more literal of the two, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh indicated his preference that his followers practice monogamy, in saying "whoso contenteth himself with a single partner...both he and she shall live in tranquility", and as he indicated that this "ordinance...hath been recorded by the Pen of Revelation...in truth and justice", the second interpretation, which establishes monogamy and in the name of justice is in actuality the more narrow interpretation of the text. The first interpretation would allow both for bigamy and monogamy, while the second would allow only for monogamy, which was clearly Bahá'u'lláh's preference. Shoghi Effendi adopted the latter interpretation, prescribing monogamy, in all references to the law of marriage.²⁶¹

A second example of the gradual implementation of a law, involving a first interpretation and then a subsequent one pertains to the membership of women on the House of Justice. The Board of Counsel elected by the Bahá'ís of Chicago, was initially composed (March 1900) of ten men, and subsequently expanded (June 1900) to nineteen members, some of whom were women. In May 1900, at the insistence of Mirza Asadu'llah Isfahani²⁶², a House of Justice was elected, with nine members, all of whom were men. Mrs. Corinne True was not satisfied with this state of affairs, and she wrote to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asking for his guidance. In Jun 1902, she received his response, which included the following:

Know thou, O handmaid, that in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men²⁶³, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness²⁶⁴. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them. Whosoever draweth nearer to God, that one is the most favoured, whether man or woman. How many a handmaid, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Bahá, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth. The House of Justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men²⁶⁵; this is for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon²⁶⁶.

As to you, O ye other handmaids who are enamored of the heavenly fragrances, arrange ye holy gatherings, and found ye Spiritual Assemblies, for these are the basis for spreading the sweet savours of God, exalting His Word, uplifting the lamp of His grace, promulgating His religion and promoting His Teachings, and what bounty is there greater than this?²⁶⁷

The wording of this Tablet was apparently confirmed by a second Tablet, addressed to a Bahá'í woman, and dated 28 August 1913. This Tablet was translated and appended to a collection of addresses given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1911 and 1913, currently entitled "Paris Talks":²⁶⁸

O Thou my beloved daughter!

Thine eloquent and fluent letter was perused in a garden, under the cool shade of a tree, while the gentle breeze was wafting. The means of physical enjoyment was spread before the eyes and thy letter became the cause of spiritual enjoyment. Truly, I say, it was not a letter but a rose-garden adorned with hyacinths and flowers.

It contained the sweet fragrance of paradise and the zephyr of Divine Love blew from its roseate words.

As I have not ample time at my disposal, I will give herein a brief, conclusive and comprehensive answer. It is as follows:

In this Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the women go neck and neck with the men. In no movement will they be left behind. Their rights with men are equal in degree. They will enter all the administrative branches of politics. They will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs. Rest ye assured. Do ye not look upon the present conditions; in the not far distant future the world of women will become all-refulgent and all-glorious, For His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh Hath Willed It so! At the time of elections the right to vote is the inalienable right of women, and the entrance of women into all human departments is an irrefutable and incontrovertible

question. No soul can retard or prevent it.

But there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women. For example, at the time when the community is taking up vigorous defensive measures against the attack of foes, the women are exempt from military engagements. It may so happen that at a given time warlike and savage tribes may furiously attack the body politic with the intention of carrying on a wholesale slaughter of its members; under such a circumstance defence is necessary, but it is the duty of men to organize and execute such defensive measures and not the women—because their hearts are tender and they cannot endure the sight of the horror of carnage, even if it is for the sake of defence. From such and similar undertakings the women are exempt.

As regards the constitution of the House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the men. He says: 'O ye men of the House of Justice!'

But when its members are to be elected, the right which belongs to women, so far as their voting and their voice is concerned, is indisputable. When the women attain to the ultimate degree of progress, then, according to the exigency of the time and place and their great capacity, they shall obtain extraordinary privileges. Be ye confident on these accounts. His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh has greatly strengthened the cause of women, and the rights and privileges of women is one of the greatest principles of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Rest ye assured! Ere long the days shall come when the men addressing the women, shall say: 'Blessed are ye! Blessed are ye! Verily ye are worthy of every gift. Verily ye deserve to adorn your heads with the crown of everlasting glory, because in sciences and arts, in virtues and perfections ye shall become equal to man, and as regards tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior'.

There was resistance from some American Bahá'í women to the establishment of an exclusively male Bahá'í administrative body, and this resulted in further correspondence. Mrs. True wrote a letter to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, asking for his guidance in resolving the difference of opinion among the Bahá'ís in this matter:²⁶⁹

There has existed a difference of opinion in our Assembly [that is, the Chicago Bahá'í community] as to how it should be governed. Every believer desires to carry out the Commands of the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'u'lláh] but we want to know from our Lord himself [that is, 'Abdu'l-Bahá] what these Commands are, as they are written in Arabic and we do not know Arabic. Will Our Lord write me direct from Acca and not have it go through any Interpreter [sic] in America and thus grant me the Authority to say the Master says thus & so, for he has written it to me . . . Many in our Assembly feel that the Governing Board in Chicago should be a mixed Board of both men & women. Woman in America stands so conspicuously for all that is highest & best in every department and for that reason it is contended the affairs should be in the hands of both sexes...

Mrs. True received a letter from 'Abdu'l-Bahá dated 29 July 1909, initially translated by Dr. Farid²⁷⁰, and here retranslated by a committee appointed by the Universal House of Justice:

According to the ordinances of the Faith of God, women are the equals of men in all rights save only that of membership on the Universal House of Justice [bayt al-'adl 'umumi], for, as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of Justice are men. However, in all other bodies, such as the Temple Construction Committee, the Teaching Committee, the Spiritual Assembly, and in charitable and scientific associations, women share equally in all rights with men.²⁷¹

In a subsequent letter to Louise Waite, dated 20 April 1910, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

The Spiritual Assemblies which are organized for the sake of teaching the Truth, whether assemblies for men, assemblies for women or mixed assemblies, are all accepted and are conducive to the spreading of the Fragrances of God. This is essential.²⁷²

'Abdu'l-Bahá went on to state that the time had not yet arrived for establishment of the House of Justice, and he exhorted the men and women to conduct their affairs in harmony with one another. In another Tablet addressed to the Bahá'ís of Cincinnati, Ohio, he wrote:

It is impossible to organize the House of Justice in these days; it will be formed after the establishment of the Cause of God. Now the Spiritual Assemblies are organized in most of the cities, you must also organize a Spiritual Assembly in Cincinnati. It is permissible to elect the members of the Spiritual Assembly from among the men and women; nay, rather, it is better so that perfect union may result.²⁷³

However, he did not approve of dissolving any of the already functioning all-male administrative bodies. Rather than doing this, on 4 March 1911 he encouraged the American Bahá'ís to establish a separate all-female administrative institution:

Now Spiritual Assemblies must be organized and that is for teaching the Cause of God. In that city you have a spiritual Assembly of men and you can establish a spiritual Assembly for women. Both Assemblies must be engaged in diffusing the fragrances of God and be occupied with the service of the Kingdom. The above is the best solution for this problem...²⁷⁴

The American Bahá'ís continued to have three kinds of administrative bodies--some all-male, some all-female, and some of mixed gender. There were polarized sentiments among them as to whether women should serve on the governing bodies of the Bahá'ís. At this time, women had not yet been accorded the Constitutional right to vote--it had to wait until 1921. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of the law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas pertaining to the membership of the House of Justice had originally been literal, then became ambiguous (inasmuch as the administrative institutions were given new names and the Bahá'ís were told that it was premature to form the House of Justice). In the case of the Bahá'ís though, universal suffrage was to be established much earlier. In 1912, during his visit to North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made it understood that Houses of Justice would

ultimately be established in every municipality where Bahá'ís resided in sufficient numbers to merit governance; that it was premature for Houses of Justice to be formed, and that, in their place, Spiritual Assemblies should be founded, in order to administer the affairs of the Faith; that the membership of these Spiritual Assemblies was open to women and men alike; that only the Universal House of Justice (as indicated in His letter of 1909 to Mrs. True) was to have an exclusively male membership. As reported in "Star of the West",

On Sunday evening, the 11th [of August 1912], the Chicago Assembly [meaning here, the whole Bahá'í community] selected a "Spiritual Meeting" of nine, composed of men and women, whose service--according to the wish of 'Abdu'l-Bahá--is, first, to promulgate the teachings of the Revelation, and, second, to attend to other matters necessary to the welfare of the assembly.²⁷⁵

To recapitulate, the first interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which was according to the literal wording of Kitáb-i-Aqdas, excluded women from membership on the House of Justice. The second interpretation, issued only seven years after the first, explicitly indicated that the Universal House of Justice was to have an all-male membership. However, in several letters as well as oral instructions given to the North American Bahá'ís while in visiting their continent in 1912, he clearly indicated that women were to be eligible for membership on all Bahá'í administrative bodies with the sole exception of the Universal House of Justice. This bears comparison with the second interpretation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas verse on bigamous marriage, which was reiterated by Shoghi Effendi. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi correlated these two occasions in which a second interpretation of a verse of Bahá'u'lláh by 'Abdu'l-Bahá superseded the first interpretation in three letters written on his behalf:

As regards your question concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice; there is a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which he definitely states that the membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed and appreciated in the future. In the local, as well as the National Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership. It is, therefore, only to the International House of Justice that they cannot be elected...²⁷⁶

As regards your question concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice, there is a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which He definitely states that the membership of the Universal House is confined to men and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed in the future. In the local, as well as the National Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership. It is therefore, only to the International House that they cannot be elected. The Bahá'ís should accept this statement of the Master in a spirit of deep faith, confident that there is a divine guidance and wisdom behind it, which will be gradually unfolded to the eyes of the world. Regarding your question, the Master said the wisdom of having no women on the International House of Justice, would become manifest in the future. We have no other indication than this. At present there are women on the International Council, and this will continue as long as it exists, but when the International House of Justice is elected, there will only be men on it, as this is the law of the Aqdas.²⁷⁷

The membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men. Fixing the number of the members, the procedures for election and the term of membership will be known later, as these are not explicitly revealed in the Holy Text.²⁷⁸

As regards the membership of the International House of Justice, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in a Tablet that it is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be revealed as manifest as the sun in the future. In any case the believers should know that, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explicitly stated that sexes are equal except in some cases, the exclusion of women from the International House of Justice, should not be surprising. From the fact that there is no equality of functions between the sexes one should not, however, infer that either sex is inherently superior or inferior to the other, or that they are unequal in their rights.²⁷⁹

While Shoghi Effendi cited a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Scriptural basis for stating that only men were eligible to serve on the Universal House of Justice, we can see that 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote more than one opinion on the subject, and, barring the discovery of more precise language or a reconciliation of the general and specific interpretations, it seems that Shoghi Effendi chose which written source to privilege, and it was he who confirmed that the binding interpretation of this provision of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas would mandate the masculine gender of all members of Universal House of Women, at least until the advent of the next Manifestation of God.

It is significant that Bahá'u'lláh does not promise his followers that they will be able to discover infinite meanings in each of the symbolic verses revealed from his Pen. He prays that they will be enabled to do so, and he invites all of humanity to discover these meanings, but does not assure anyone that he or she will attain to these truths. Attainment to these meanings is conditional upon fulfilling certain criteria, and, beyond that, it is dependent upon the Will of God and His grace and mercy. His promise is that he, and by extension, his "chosen ones" can explain the symbolism of the divine verses. This, then, is the core principle of Bahá'í hermeneutics--to turn to the Manifestation of God and his "chosen ones" for the interpretation of the symbolic verses.

As Bahá'u'lláh has indicated in the references cited above, the infallible and divinely-guided Interpreter and Expounder of the Word of God is the Manifestation of God, he who reveals the Word of God. After him, the "chosen ones" he appoints for the explaining of his utterances and writings after "...the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation"²⁸⁰ will assume this role. No individual believer and no institution can provide authoritative interpretation. Bahá'í hermeneutics distinguishes between the authoritative and the individual, the infallible and the fallible, that guided by the Holy Spirit and that which is the fruit of human faculties, that which is protected by the Covenant and that which is unprotected thereby. In all of these distinctions, the former pertains to authoritative interpretation, whilst the latter pertains to individual or institutional interpretation.

The position of the Universal House of Justice is neither that of an authoritative Interpreter of the Bahá'í source texts and their contents the Bahá'í teachings; nor that of an individual believer or group of believers. Bahá'u'lláh writes of this Institution, setting forth its powers and prerogatives:

The men of God's House of Justice have been charged with the affairs of the people...Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the Ministers of the House of Justice that they may act according to the needs and requirements of the time. They that, for the sake of God, arise to serve His Cause, are the recipients of divine inspiration from the unseen Kingdom. It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them.²⁸¹

It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He, verily, is the Provider, the Omniscient.²⁸²

It is incumbent upon the men of God's House of Justice to fix their gaze by day and by night upon that which hath shone forth from the Pen of Glory for the training of peoples, the upbuilding of nations, the protection of man and the safeguarding of his honour.²⁸³

Religion bestoweth upon man the most precious of all gifts, offereth the cup of prosperity, imparteth eternal life, and showereth imperishable benefits upon mankind. It behoveth the chiefs and rulers of the world, and in particular the Trustees of God's House of Justice, to endeavour to the utmost of their power to safeguard its position, promote its interests and exalt its station in the eyes of the world. In like manner it is incumbent upon them to enquire into the conditions of their subjects and to acquaint themselves with the affairs and activities of the divers communities in their dominions. We call upon the manifestations of the power of God—the sovereigns and rulers on earth—to bestir themselves and do all in their power that haply they may banish discord from this world and illumine it with the light of concord.²⁸⁴

The members of the House of Justice are charged to "fix their gaze by day and by night upon that which hath shone forth from the Pen of Glory for the training of peoples", "to endeavour to the utmost of their power to safeguard its [religion's] position, promote its interests and exalt its station in the eyes of the world the upbuilding of nations, the protection of man and the safe-guarding of his honour" and "do all in their power that haply they may banish discord from this world and illumine it with the light of concord". This gives the House of Justice very broad powers. 'Abdu'l-Bahá interprets these verses literally, applying them specifically to the Universal House of Justice. In his Will and Testament he writes:

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice, and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant. By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England.

It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and **deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions +that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.** Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. Inasmuch as the

House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same.²⁸⁵

‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicates that the Universal House of Justice is to "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book." Shoghi Effendi interpreted Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's descriptions of the powers and prerogatives of the Universal House of Justice in a literal fashion as well. Two of his re-articulations of these very broad powers are cited below:

Touching the point raised in the Secretary's letter regarding the nature and scope of the Universal Court of Arbitration, this and other similar matters will have to be **explained** and **elucidated** by the Universal House of Justice, to which, according to the Master's explicit instructions, all important and fundamental questions must be referred. At present the exact implication and full significance of the provisions of the Master's Will are as yet imperfectly understood, and time will serve to reveal the wisdom and the far-reaching effects of His words.²⁸⁶

From these statements it is made indubitably clear and evident that the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings. The interpretation of the Guardian, functioning within his own sphere, is as authoritative and binding as the enactments of the International House of Justice, whose exclusive right and prerogative is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá'u'lláh has not expressly revealed. Neither can, nor will ever, infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other. Neither will seek to curtail the specific and undoubted authority with which both have been divinely invested.²⁸⁷

Such is the immutability of His revealed Word. Such is the elasticity which characterizes the functions of His appointed ministers. The first preserves the identity of His Faith, and guards the integrity of His law. The second enables it, even as a living organism, to expand and adapt itself to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society.²⁸⁸

In 1957, the Guardian died without appointing a successor, and it appeared that the design of the New World Order set forth in the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which called for a succession of Guardians, with Guardian serving as Head of the Universal House of Justice, was not to be fulfilled. Once the Universal House of Justice was elected, in April 1963, this Institution exercised its constitutional authority, derived from the documents cited above, responding to Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation that "each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution" and that "such affairs should be referred to the Ministers of the House of Justice that they may act according to the needs and requirements of the time"; to consult "regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them"; "to endeavour to the utmost of their power to safeguard" the Faith, "its position, promote its interests and exalt its station in the eyes of the world"; and to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's command that "all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice" and his assurance that whatever "this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God

Himself", as well as his guidance that they will "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book" and his promise that "whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself"; and Shoghi Effendi's elucidation that the "exclusive right and prerogative" of the Universal House of Justice "is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá'u'lláh has not expressly revealed"--based on this mandate, the Universal House of Justice described its own role in elucidating the Bahá'í teachings:

There is a profound difference between the interpretations of the Guardian and the elucidations of the House of Justice in exercise of its function to "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book." The Guardian reveals what the Scripture means; his interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied. Upon the Universal House of Justice, in the words of the Guardian, "has been conferred the exclusive right of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the Bahá'í Writings." Its pronouncements, which are susceptible of amendment or abrogation by the House of Justice itself, serve to supplement and apply the Law of God. Although not invested with the function of interpretation, the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth. Unity of doctrine is maintained by the existence of the authentic texts of Scripture and the voluminous interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, together with the absolute prohibition against anyone propounding "authoritative" or "inspired" interpretations or usurping the function of Guardian. Unity of administration is assured by the authority of the Universal House of Justice.²⁸⁹

The elucidations of the Universal House of Justice stem from its legislative function, while the interpretations of the Guardian represent the true intent inherent in the Sacred Texts. The major distinction between the two functions is that legislation with its resultant outcome of elucidation is susceptible of amendment by the House of Justice itself, whereas the Guardian's interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied.²⁹⁰

To ensure the preservation of the Sacred Texts and to safeguard their inviolability; to analyze, classify, and coordinate the Writings...To advance the interests of the Faith of God; to proclaim, propagate and teach its Message...to deliberate and decide upon all problems which have caused difference; to elucidate questions that are obscure...²⁹¹

As is apparent from reading all of the above, it is entirely within the powers and prerogatives of the Universal House of Justice to take whatever actions it deems necessary to protect not only the Bahá'í source texts, but also to safeguard the purity and integrity of the Bahá'í teachings by deciding "upon all problems which have caused difference" and by elucidating "questions that are obscure". The elucidations of the Universal House of Justice and, to a lesser extent, of the Institutions that operate under its aegis--the International Teaching Centre and Bahá'í International Community, are "susceptible of amendment by the House of Justice itself". While they are authoritative and normative, they do not represent statements "of truth which cannot be varied". No individual Bahá'í, and no other Bahá'í institution--no local, regional or national council, and no member of the institution of the learned (Counselor, Auxiliary Board Member, or assistant ABM)--is endowed with the authority and permission to elucidate the meaning of the Bahá'í writings and teachings for the entire community and in a formal manner

representing the Bahá'í Faith as a whole. The publications of the Bahá'í International Community and the International Bahá'í Council and Universal House of Justice are regarded by Bahá'ís as secondary texts of their Faith and are generally based in a systematic fashion upon the Bahá'í source texts. All individual interpretations are considered in the next section.

Any attempt to divorce Bahá'í hermeneutics from the source texts is doomed from the start. In the Bahá'í Revelation, the source texts include the authenticated Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, the authenticated Writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the authenticated writings by and on behalf of Shoghi Effendi. The interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi cannot be separated from and disposed of their links with the authenticated sources associated with the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh...and vice versa. We find Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice emphasizing this principle:

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. **They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom. Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming we may walk and converse with his neighbors, and share with them their food and their drink.**²⁹²

Ye have guarded and defended the Cause of God; **ye have not been a cause of dividing up His Word**; ye have not brought His Faith low, but have striven to glorify His Holy Name; ye have not allowed the Blessed Cause to be exposed to the derision of the people. Ye have not permitted the Designated Station to be humbled, nor been willing to see the Centre of Authority discredited or exposed to mockery and persecution. **Ye have striven to keep the Word whole and one.**²⁹³

Whatever the Master has said is based on the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. He was the perfect Interpreter, had lived with Him all His life; therefore what He says has the same standing, even if a text of Bahá'u'lláh is not available...**We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two.** That is what makes our Faith so flexible and well balanced. for instance there are calamities for testing and for punishment -- there are also accidents, plain cause and effect!²⁹⁴

These various statements must be taken in conjunction with all the Bahá'í teachings; we cannot get a correct picture by concentrating on just one phrase.²⁹⁵

We must not take many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements as dogmatic finalities, for there are other points which when added to them round out the picture. For instance, when

He calls Aristotle and Plato Philosophers of the East, He is obviously placing them in that category because He believes they belong more correctly to Eastern culture than to Central European and the New World cultures of the West. When He calls the philosophers of the West materialistic this does not for a moment mean He includes all Western philosophers for, as you truly point out, many of them have been very spiritual in their concepts...The Guardian hopes this will better enable you to understand our wonderful Faith--for a living religion it is, and not merely a philosophy!²⁹⁶

He feels that many of the perplexities that arise in your mind could be dissipated if you always conceived of the teachings as one great whole with many facets. Truth may, in covering different subjects, appear to be contradictory, and yet it is all one if you carry the thought through to the end. For instance the statement on life after death and the condition of believers and non-believers, you might say that a wonderful believer is alike a diamond blazing in the sun, an unawakened soul like one in a dark room. But we must couple this concept with the other part of the teachings, that God's Mercy exceeds His Justice, and that soul can progress in the world beyond; the unilluminated soul can become brilliant.²⁹⁷

Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply. **One might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them...**²⁹⁸

We must never take one sentence in the Teachings and isolate it from the rest...²⁹⁹

In attempting to understand the Writings, therefore, one must first realise that there is and can be no real contradiction in them, and in light of this we can confidently seek the unity of meaning which they contain.³⁰⁰

When these issues are approached with an understanding of the unity underlying all the Teachings, clarification results. Should the seeker, however, be influenced by a spirit of mistrust and conflict, then unending problems appear.³⁰¹

In considering the second passage we must once more hold fast to the principle that the teachings do not contradict themselves.³⁰²

The scope of authoritative interpretation, combined with that of authoritative elucidation comprises a body of such rich detail and depth that the task of the individual reader is both tremendously complicated and challenging on the one hand, and greatly facilitated on the other. It is complicated and challenging because it calls for the synthesis and correlation of hundreds, sometimes thousands of source texts, in a variety of languages (Arabic, Persian and English); it is greatly facilitated because the individual is not left to his own devices, which would be conducive to error, dissension, division and ultimately the fragmentation of the Bahá'í community and loss of the purity and integrity of the Bahá'í teachings.

We now turn to discussions of authoritative interpretation by Bahá'í scholars. Most of the writers introduced at the beginning of this study have referred to this theme:

Dann May³⁰³ stated that "*authoritative interpretations made by the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith--the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi--comprise an important and integral part*

of the Bahá'í canon. Their interpretations can be grouped into two broad types: those which explain, clarify, or provide an overall summary or distillation of the Bahá'í writings; and those which explain and interpret past religious traditions and sacred writings. Bahá'í doctrine holds that both types of interpretation are infallible and divinely inspired."

Michael Sours³⁰⁴ addresses the question of authoritative interpretation from the perspective of how a text may be perceived by its author and those who are inspired by his teachings on the one hand, and non-believers on the other hand: "From a historical and literary point of view, it appears that Scripture, Biblical, Qur'anic, and Bahá'í, contains a variety of stories, myths and ideas derived from a number of sources that are of doubtful historical truth and authenticity in the objective sense. From a theological point of view, however, it seems reasonable to argue that the modern emphasis on the literary and historical analysis and interpretation of sacred Scripture has not always given appropriate consideration to the true nature of Scripture and its real means of composition. The stories Bahá'u'lláh refers to, such as Noah and the flood, while not real in the objective historical sense, refer to what is real in the spiritual sense, and this spiritual reality is the most appropriate measure of its truth. Bahá'u'lláh appears to anticipate the critics of our secular age with this warning: "Weigh not the Book of God with the standards and sciences as are current amongst you . . . the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard" (Synopsis 22). The divine inspiration of a story or any written or oral tradition pertains to the spiritual meaning and purpose that is "breathed" into what, in many instances, were originally fragments of collected information. Because the substance of such stories is spiritual their "truth" and spiritual "authenticity" can only be evaluated and correctly ascertained by spiritual criteria. This provides a type of definition of what real truth is in a religious context. And, in this context it is separate and independent of objective historicity."

Khazeh Fananapazir and **Seena Fazel**³⁰⁵ cite statements made by the Universal House of Justice which point out that only 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi "can state what the Book means"³⁰⁶. They affirm that "the interpretative writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian do not have a temporary or transient nature"³⁰⁷. They also cite comments about the authoritative interpretations of Shoghi Effendi by Ruhíyyih Khanum³⁰⁸ and Glenford E. Mitchell³⁰⁹, with the former relating that Shoghi Effendi "considered he had said all he had to say, in many ways, in the Dispensation"³¹⁰, and the latter remarking that "Shoghi Effendi seems completely to avoid gratuitous random interpretations of the Sacred Texts; the questions and needs of the community outline the course and output of his exegesis."³¹¹

Jack McLean³¹² writes: "Based on these considerations, one can offer two heuristic definitions of Bahá'í theology. The first points to revelation as the source of theology; the second points to theology as commentary on revelation. The narrow refers to the Bahá'í revelation itself, what I call here source theology or revelation theology, which is the substance of Bahá'í sacred scripture. Bahá'í source theology refers to the authoritative, objective, and normative truths of the Bahá'í sacred writings or those elucidated by its duly appointed interpreters. Authoritative means that the teaching is binding on believers; objective means that the truths of source theology are commonly perceived and recognized as true by the community of believers; normative means that the teaching is recognized by believers as the standard of truth."

Juan Cole³¹³ writes: "Another, very different sort of interpretation [apart from "figurative interpretation, formal exegesis and academic writing"] with regard to non-legal texts is authoritative interpretation (*tabyín*). Bahá'u'lláh instituted this function in *The Most Holy Book* . . .", and he points to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as the "only two individuals" who "have held or will ever

hold this function in the Bahá'í community". However, Cole does not believe that the authoritative interpretations stand on their own merits. In his opinion, "when 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi both commented on an issue, they did not always give the same interpretation. Such discrepancies point to the need for further scholarly study, and suggest the need for the development of a hermeneutical approach even to authoritative interpretative comments. All in all, the corpus of official interpretation helps Bahá'ís understand important aspects of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, but leaves wide scope for continuing investigation of the holy writ by individuals."

All of the papers examined on the question of Bahá'í hermeneutics either focus exclusively upon individual non-authoritative interpretation, or refer to this core of Bahá'í hermeneutics in passing or in part. The focus of these papers has been on articulating the approaches that Bahá'í scholars are taking to hermeneutics, as well as distilling principles from the Bahá'í source texts which might appropriately guide those individual hermeneutists. We will address this question subsequently, but first we have sought to set forth the foundations of authoritative interpretation, inasmuch as it is generally recognized that all normative and authoritative Bahá'í hermeneutics is derived entirely from the source texts of the Faith.

HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES: INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATION

The third meaning of "those firmly grounded in knowledge" in the verse "And none knows its right interpretation except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge" refers to true believers in the Manifestations and their "chosen ones". Bahá'u'lláh depicts some of the distinguishing characteristics of those "whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him":

Wert thou to **cleans**e the mirror of thy heart from the dust of malice, thou wouldst apprehend the meaning of the symbolic terms revealed by the all-embracing Word of God made manifest in every Dispensation, and wouldst discover the mysteries of divine knowledge. Not, however, until thou **consumest with the flame of utter detachment those veils of idle learning, that are current amongst men**, canst thou behold the resplendent morn of true knowledge.³¹⁴

O my brother! A divine Mine only can yield the gems of divine knowledge, and the fragrance of the mystic Flower can be inhaled only in the ideal Garden, and the lilies of ancient wisdom can blossom nowhere except in the city of a stainless heart. "In a rich soil, its plants spring forth abundantly by permission of its Lord, and in that soil which is bad, they spring forth but scantily." [Qur'án 7:57] Inasmuch as it hath been clearly shown that **only those who are initiated into the divine mysteries can comprehend the melodies uttered by the Bird of Heaven**, it is therefore incumbent upon everyone to seek enlightenment from the illumined in heart and from the Treasuries of divine mysteries regarding the intricacies of God's Faith and the abstruse allusions in the utterances of the Daysprings of Holiness. **Thus will these mysteries be unravelled, not by the aid of acquired learning, but solely through the assistance of God and the outpourings of His grace.** "Ask ye, therefore, of them that have the custody of the Scriptures, if ye know it not." [Qur'án 16:43]³¹⁵

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They **depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.**³¹⁶

He knoweth the inner secrets of the hearts and the meaning hidden in a mocker's wink. **How many an embodiment of heedlessness who came unto Us with purity of heart have We established upon the seat of Our acceptance;** and how many an exponent of wisdom have We in all justice consigned to the fire.³¹⁷

How then does the believer who is "pure of heart" and "chaste of soul" arrive at the understanding of the "abstruse" Word of God? He must turn to the Manifestation of God and the chosen ones and the holy Book to find the truth:

The people, therefore, must not allow such utterances to deprive them of the divine bounties, but should rather seek enlightenment from them who are the recognized Expounders thereof, so that the hidden mysteries may be unraveled, and be made manifest unto them. We perceive none, however, amongst the people of the earth who, sincerely yearning for the Truth, seeketh the guidance of the divine Manifestations concerning the abstruse matters of his Faith.³¹⁸

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth forever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom.³¹⁹

Should differences arise amongst you over any matter, refer it to God while the Sun still shineth above the horizon of this Heaven and, when it hath set, refer ye to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him. This, verily, is sufficient unto the peoples of the world.³²⁰

O people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever he understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.³²¹

Let not the things they have perpetrated grieve thee. Truly they are even as dead, and not living. Leave them unto the dead, then turn thy face towards Him Who is the Life-Giver of the world.³²²

Great is the blessedness of him who hath in this Day cast away the things current amongst men and hath clung unto that which is ordained by God, the Lord of Names and the Fashioner of all created things, He Who is come from the heaven of eternity through the power of the Most Great Name, invested with so invincible an authority that all the powers of the earth are unable to withstand Him.³²³

Abandon the things current amongst you and adopt that which the faithful Counselor biddeth you.³²⁴

Cast away the things current amongst men and take fast hold on that whereunto ye are bidden by virtue of the Will of the Ordainer, the Ancient of Days.³²⁵

Your sciences shall not profit you in this day, nor your arts, nor your treasures, nor your glory. Cast them all behind your backs, and set your faces towards the Most Sublime

Word through which the Scriptures and the Books and this lucid Tablet have been distinctly set forth.³²⁶

In every Dispensation, the believers have questioned whether they were expected to understand the Word of God, inasmuch as it often seemed to them to be impenetrable or uncertain in meaning. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, repeatedly and emphatically, that the Word of God is meant to be understood:

They have failed to realize, all this time, that, in every age, the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man.³²⁷

Heed not the idle contention of those who maintain that the Book and verses thereof can never be a testimony unto the common people, inasmuch as they neither grasp their meaning nor appreciate their value. And yet, the unfailing testimony of God to both the East and the West is none other than the Qur'án. Were it beyond the comprehension of men, how could it have been declared as a universal testimony unto all people? If their contention be true, none would therefore be required, nor would it be necessary for them to know God, inasmuch as the knowledge of the divine Being transcendeth the knowledge of His Book, and the common people would not possess the capacity to comprehend it. Such contention is utterly fallacious and inadmissible. It is actuated solely by arrogance and pride. Its motive is to lead the people astray from the Ridvan of divine good-pleasure and to tighten the reins of their authority over the people. And yet, in the sight of God, these common people are infinitely superior and exalted above their religious leaders who have turned away from the one true God.³²⁸

In fact, all the Scriptures and the mysteries thereof are condensed into this brief account. So much so, that were a person to ponder it a while in his heart, he would discover from all that hath been said the mysteries of the Words of God, and would apprehend the meaning of whatever hath been manifested by that ideal King. As the people differ in their understanding and station, We will accordingly make mention of a few traditions, that these may impart constancy to the wavering soul, and tranquillity to the troubled mind. Thereby, will the testimony of God unto the people, both high and low, be complete and perfect.³²⁹

If any of the utterances of this Servant may not be comprehended, or may lead to perturbation, the same must be inquired of again, that no doubt may linger, and the meaning be clear as the Face of the Beloved One [mahbúb] shining from the "Glorious Station."³³⁰

Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.³³¹

What is the nature of this knowledge that the true believer receives from the Manifestation of God, from his chosen ones, and from his Book? It is unlike human knowledge, for it is not acquired but received as a gift. While anyone may memorize and recite verses, understanding verses entails the receipt of the gift of understanding. And this gift is not endowed to all human beings, to all souls, only to those whom God blesses with His grace:

This station conferreth the true standard of knowledge, and freeth man from tests. In this realm, to search after knowledge is irrelevant, for He hath said concerning the guidance of travelers on this plane, "Fear God, and God will instruct thee." [Qur'án 2:282] And again: "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth."³³²

Were the earth of their hearts to remain unchanged, how could such souls who have not been taught one letter, have seen no teacher, and entered no school, utter such words and display such knowledge as none can apprehend? Methinks they have been moulded from the clay of infinite knowledge, and kneaded from the water of divine wisdom. Therefore, hath it been said: "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth." It is this kind of knowledge which is and hath ever been praiseworthy, and not the limited knowledge that hath sprung forth from veiled and obscured minds. This limited knowledge they even stealthily borrow one from the other, and vainly pride themselves therein!³³³

The spiritually learned are lamps of guidance among the nations, and stars of good fortune shining from the horizons of humankind. They are fountains of life for such as lie in the death of ignorance and unawareness, and clear springs of perfections for those who thirst and wander in the wasteland of their defects and errors. They are the dawning places of the emblems of Divine Unity and initiates in the mysteries of the glorious Qur'án. They are skilled physicians for the ailing body of the world, they are the sure antidote to the poison that has corrupted human society. It is they who are the strong citadel guarding humanity, and the impregnable sanctuary for the sorely distressed, the anxious and tormented, victims of ignorance. "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth."³³⁴

This station conferreth the true standard of knowledge, and freeth man from tests. In this realm, to search after knowledge is irrelevant, for He hath said concerning the guidance of travelers on this plane, 'Fear God, and God will instruct thee.' And again: 'Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.' Wherefore, a man should make ready his heart that it be worthy of the descent of heavenly grace, and that the bounteous Cup-Bearer may give him to drink of the wine of bestowal from the merciful vessel.³³⁵

The discovery of spiritual truth is not dependent upon research and study, for Bahá'u'lláh explicitly denies that human learning is necessary to attain to the understanding of the divine verses. However, it is not incompatible with research and study, for Bahá'u'lláh points to the high station of those learned ones who recognize the new Manifestation and who are filled with the divine knowledge of his Revelation. In Kitáb-i-Iqán we find a list of prominent disciples of the Báb who were learned scholars and erudite professors. This spiritual discovery is essentially receptive in its spiritual configuration. Just as the Manifestation of God receives Revelation, so also the true believer receives spiritual insight. We will now review the guidance given by Bahá'u'lláh to the true believer, that he might attain to this divine knowledge:

Both these sayings have but one meaning, **were you to ponder** upon the Manifestations of the Unity of God **with divine insight**.³³⁶

If they be in the likeness of the Sun of Truth, they will surely be accounted as the most exalted of all luminaries; otherwise, they are to be recognized as the focal centres of hellish fire.³³⁷

Were the eye of the heart to open, it would surely perceive that the words revealed from the heaven of the will of God are at one with, and the same as, the deeds that have emanated from the Kingdom of divine power.³³⁸

If the eye of justice be opened, it will readily recognize, in the light of that which hath been mentioned, that He, Who is the Cause and ultimate Purpose of all these things, is made manifest in this day.³³⁹

Know verily that Knowledge is of two kinds: Divine and Satanic. **The one welletth out from the fountain of divine inspiration;** the other is but a reflection of vain and obscure thoughts. **The source of the former is God Himself;** the motive-force of the latter the whisperings of selfish desire.³⁴⁰

Our hope is that, God willing, the breeze of mercy may blow, and the divine Springtime clothe the tree of being with the robe of new life; **so that we may discover the mysteries of divine Wisdom, and, through His providence, be made independent of the knowledge of all things. We have, as yet, descried none but a handful of souls, destitute of all renown, who have attained unto this station.** Let the future disclose what the Judgment of God will ordain, and the Tabernacle of His decree reveal. In such wise We recount unto thee the wonders of the Cause of God, and **pour out into thine ears the strains of heavenly melody, that haply thou mayest attain unto the station of true knowledge, and partake of the fruit thereof.**³⁴¹

And how many of the ignorant who, by reason of their acceptance of the Faith, have soared aloft and attained the high summit of knowledge, and whose names have been inscribed by the Pen of Power upon the Tablet of divine knowledge.³⁴²

Notwithstanding the obviousness of this theme, in the eyes of those that have quaffed the wine of knowledge and certitude, yet how many are those who, through failure to understand its meaning, have allowed the term "Seal of the Prophets" to obscure their understanding, and deprive them of the grace of all His manifold bounties!³⁴³

We have consumed this densest of all veils, with the fire of the love of the Beloved--the veil referred to in the saying: "The most grievous of all veils is the veil of knowledge." Upon its ashes, We have reared the tabernacle of divine knowledge. We have, praise be to God, burned the "veils of glory" with the fire of the beauty of the Best-Beloved. **We have driven from the human heart all else but Him Who is the Desire of the world, and glory therein. We cleave to no knowledge but His Knowledge, and set our hearts on naught save the effulgent glories of His light.**³⁴⁴

Upon detached souls they bestow the gift of Unity, enrich the destitute, **and offer the cup of knowledge unto them who wander in the wilderness of ignorance. All the guidance, the blessings, the learning, the understanding, the faith, the**

certitude, conferred upon all that is in heaven and on earth, are hidden and treasured within these Cities.³⁴⁵

‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms this guidance, and speaks of the true believer receiving a ray of the light projected from the Sun of Reality, the Manifestation of God. The true believer is receiving that light, and it is bestowed upon him by the grace of God, rather than being a fruit of his exertions:

For in the realm of conscience naught but the ray of God’s light can command, and on the throne of the heart none but the pervading power of the King of Kings should rule. Thus

it is that one can arrest and suspend [the action of] every faculty except thought and reflection; for a man cannot even by his own volition withhold himself from reflection or thought, nor keep back his musings and imaginings.³⁴⁶

But acquired infallibility is not a natural necessity; on the contrary, it is a ray of the bounty of infallibility which shines from the Sun of Reality upon hearts, and grants a share and portion of itself to souls.³⁴⁷

But the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities. It is like a mirror which, although clear, polished and brilliant, is still in need of light. Until a ray of the sun reflects upon it, it cannot discover the heavenly secrets.³⁴⁸

This divine intellectual power is the special attribute of the Holy Manifestations and the Dawning-places of prophethood; a ray of this light falls upon the mirrors of the hearts of the righteous, and a portion and a share of this power comes to them through the Holy Manifestations.³⁴⁹

The splendors of the perfections, bounties and attributes of God shine forth and radiate from the reality of the Perfect Man—that is to say, the Unique One, the supreme Manifestation of God. Other beings receive only one ray, but the supreme Manifestation is the mirror for this Sun, which appears and becomes manifest in it, with all its perfections, attributes, signs and wonders.³⁵⁰

The believer is promised that God may grant him the gift of spiritual understanding. But how is the believer to discern the difference between spiritual understanding and vain imaginings? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reiterates the centrality of the revealed Book of God as the standard whereby we may discriminate between truth and falsehood:

As to the difference between inspiration and imagination: Inspiration is in conformity with the Divine Texts, but imaginations do not conform therewith. A real, spiritual connection between the True One and the servant is a lumious bounty which causeth an ecstatic (or divine) flame, passion and attraction. When this connection is secured (or realized) such an ecstasy and happiness become manifest in the heart that man doth fly away (with joy) and uttereth melody and song. Just as the soul bringeth the body in motion, so that spiritual bounty and real connection likewise moveth (or cheereth) the human soul.³⁵¹

I have been asked a question: "How can we know when our actions meet with the approval of God?" Sometimes passion incites us to action; the laws of nature attract us, we obey our senses; the other incentive is the comprehension of the direction of God. We must find out if our actions are divinely inspired and if they do not conform, then it is our sensations which speak. Let us ever weigh our deeds in the scales of the divine teaching.³⁵²

Inasmuch as the Book of God is the standard by which the believer's thinking and behavior is to be regulated, it is imperative that he neither alter nor pervert the text of that Book. This is in effect a principle guiding all interpretation, for if the text is changed from its authentic character, whether mechanically through alteration of the actual words and their sequencing or through the falsifying of the meaning intended by the author:

Take heed lest ye alter or pervert the text of the Word of God.³⁵³

Bahá'u'lláh gives examples of right and wrong interpretation of his Writings...in effect, he teaches the reader how to interpret the Scriptures, including his own Words. Firstly, he states that **whoever uses Scripture to reject the Manifestation of God is erroneous** in his interpretation of the text:

Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbors, and share with them their food and their drink.³⁵⁴

Take heed lest ye be prevented by aught that hath been recorded in the Book from hearkening unto this, the Living Book, Who proclaimeth the truth...³⁵⁵

We, verily, see amongst you him who taketh hold of the Book of God and citeth from it proofs and arguments wherewith to repudiate his Lord, even as the followers of every other Faith sought reasons in their Holy Books for refuting Him Who is the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.³⁵⁶

A **second kind of wrong interpretation** is when one would depend upon any previous Scripture, in other words, anything but the verses revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the most recent and most complete Revealer of the Will of God:

...in the dispensation of Him Whom God shall make manifest His own Book--the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme.³⁵⁷

Let none, in this Day, hold fast to aught save that which hath been manifested in this Revelation. Such is the decree of God, aforesaid and hereafter--a decree wherewith the Scriptures of the Messengers of old have been adorned...To read but one of the verses of My Revelation is better than to peruse the Scriptures of both the former and latter generations.³⁵⁸

Say: God, the True One, is My witness that neither the Scriptures of the world, nor all the books and writings in existence, shall, in this Day, avail you aught without this, the Living Book...³⁵⁹

Yet a **third kind of wrong interpretation** is one which alters the evident or outward meaning of the Word of God. This does not mean that every one of the divine words is meant to be understood literally, but that the altering of the literal meaning of the Word which is meant to be understood literally is erroneous:

Whoso interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book.³⁶⁰

The purpose of interpretation is this: that none become deprived of that which is evident, and be veiled from that which is intended. If, for example, from the heaven of the Will of God it were revealed: "wash ye your faces", do not interpret this to mean, by washing, [that] the intent is the cleansing of the inner face that should be washed and purified by the water of divine knowledge, and the like! Many a time, with [because of] such interpretations, a person's face may remain utterly filthy and pungent, whilst, in his own idle fancy, he hath performed the essence of God's command! Yet, in this instance, it is clear and evident that the washing of the face with material water is intended.³⁶¹

Bahá'u'lláh refers to another kind of "perversion" of the Word of God, in this case **the literal interpretation of figurative verses**. In one case he cites the statement in the Qur'án, "They pervert the text of the Word of God."³⁶² He explains:

Verily by "perverting" the text is not meant that which these foolish and abject souls have fancied, even as some maintain that Jewish and Christian divines have effaced from the Book such verses as extol and magnify the countenance of Muhammad, and instead thereof have inserted the contrary. How utterly vain and false are these words! Can a man who believeth in a book, and deemeth it to be inspired by God, mutilate it? Moreover, the Pentateuch had been spread over the surface of the earth, and was not confined to Mecca and Medina, so that they could privily corrupt and pervert its text. Nay, rather, by corruption of the text is meant that in which all Muslim divines are engaged today, that is the interpretation of God's holy Book in accordance with their idle imaginings and vain desires. And as the Jews, in the time of Muhammad, interpreted those verses of the Pentateuch, that referred to His Manifestation, after their own fancy, and refused to be satisfied with His holy utterance, the charge of "perverting" the text was therefore pronounced against them. Likewise, it is clear, how in this day, the people of the Qur'án have perverted the text of God's holy Book, concerning the signs of the expected Manifestation, and interpreted it according to their inclination and desires. In yet another instance, He saith: "A part of them heard the Word of God, and then, after they had understood it, distorted it, and knew that they did so."³⁶³ This verse, too, doth indicate that the meaning of the Word of God hath been perverted, not that the actual words have been effaced. To the truth of this testify they that are sound of mind. Again in another instance, He saith: "Woe unto those who, with their own hands, transcribe the Book corruptly, and then say: 'This is from God,' that they may sell it for some mean price."³⁶⁴ This verse was revealed with reference to the divines and leaders of the Jewish Faith. These divines, in order to please the rich, acquire worldly emoluments, and give vent to their envy and misbelief, wrote a number of treatises, refuting the claims of Muhammad, supporting their arguments with such evidences as it would be improper to mention, and claimed that these arguments were derived from the text of the Pentateuch. The same may be witnessed today. Consider how abundant are the denunciations written by the foolish

divines of this age against this most wondrous Cause! How vain their imaginings that these calumnies are in conformity with the verses of God's sacred Book, and in consonance with the utterances of men of discernment!³⁶⁵

A broad category of erroneous interpretation, which includes all of the above and others besides, is that which is **guided not by divine inspiration but by selfish desires and vain imaginings**. While the believer is enjoined to be detached from his selfish desires and to rid his heart of vain imaginings, he may not have been successful in effecting a perfect self-purification, and hence he is vulnerable to the error which arises from ego:

But having weighed the testimony of God by the standard of their own knowledge, gleaned from the teachings of the leaders of their faith, and found it at variance with their limited understanding, they arose to perpetrate such unseemly acts.³⁶⁶

The denials and protestations of these leaders of religion have, in the main, been due to their lack of knowledge and understanding. Those words uttered by the Revealers of the beauty of the one true God, setting forth the signs that should herald the advent of the Manifestation to come, they never understood nor fathomed.³⁶⁷ And yet, they have sought the interpretation of the Book from those that are wrapt in veils, and have refused to seek enlightenment from the fountainhead of knowledge.³⁶⁸

From time immemorial even unto this day, all the kindreds and peoples of the earth have clung to such fanciful and unseemly thoughts, and thus have deprived themselves of the clear waters streaming from the springs of purity and holiness.³⁶⁹

...when the reins of mankind will have fallen into the grasp of the foolish and ignorant, when the portals of divine unity and understanding--the essential and highest purpose in creation--will have been closed, when certain knowledge will have given way to idle fancy, and corruption will have usurped the station of righteousness. Such a condition as this is witnessed in this day when the reins of every community have fallen into the grasp of foolish leaders, who lead after their own whims and desire. On their tongue the mention of God hath become an empty name; in their midst His holy Word a dead letter. Such is the sway of their desires, that the lamp of conscience and reason hath been quenched in their hearts...³⁷⁰

Their hearts seem not to be inclined to knowledge and the door thereof, neither think they of its manifestations, inasmuch as in idle fancy they have found the door that leadeth unto earthly riches, whereas in the manifestation of the Revealer of knowledge they find naught but the call to self-sacrifice. They therefore naturally hold fast unto the former, and flee from the latter.³⁷¹

That these divine Luminaries seem to be confined at times to specific designations and attributes, as you have observed and are now observing, is due solely to the imperfect and limited comprehension of certain minds. Otherwise, they have been at all times, and will through eternity continue to be, exalted above every praising name, and sanctified from every descriptive attribute. The quintessence of every name can hope for no access unto their court of holiness, and the highest and purest of all attributes can never approach their kingdom of glory. Immeasurably high are the Prophets of God exalted above the comprehension of men, who can never know them except by their own Selves. Far be it

from His glory that His chosen Ones should be magnified by any other than their own persons. Glorified are they above the praise of men; exalted are they above human understanding!³⁷²

Thereupon We realized that that poor man had not been favoured with a single drop of the ocean of true understanding, and had strayed far from the burning Bush of divine wisdom.³⁷³

And as the commentators of the Qur'án have failed to grasp the symbolic meaning of these "Suns," they therefore were at pains to interpret the above-quoted verse. Some of them maintained that owing to the fact that the sun each day rises from a different point, the terms "east" and "west" have been mentioned in the plural. Others have written that by this verse the four seasons of the year are intended, inasmuch as the dawning and setting points of the sun vary with the change of the seasons. Such is the depth of their understanding! None the less, they persist in imputing error and folly to those Gems of knowledge, those irreproachable and purest Symbols of wisdom.³⁷⁴

The tree of such teachings can yield no result except iniquity and rebellion, and beareth no fruit but hatred and envy. Its fruit is deadly poison; its shadow a consuming fire.³⁷⁵

As most of the divines have failed to apprehend the meaning of these verses, and have not grasped the significance of the Day of Resurrection, they therefore have foolishly interpreted these verses according to their idle and faulty conception.³⁷⁶

Such ills befell them only because they have clung to the ways of the divines of the age in which they lived, and blindly imitated them in accepting or denying these Essences of Detachment, these holy and divine Beings. These leaders, owing to their immersion in selfish desires, and their pursuit of transitory and sordid things, have regarded these divine Luminaries as being opposed to the standards of their knowledge and understanding, and the opponents of their ways and judgments. As they have literally interpreted the Word of God, and the sayings and traditions of the Letters of Unity, and expounded them according to their own deficient understanding, they have therefore deprived themselves and all their people of the bountiful showers of the grace and mercies of God.³⁷⁷

Nay, rather, by corruption of the text is meant that in which all Muslim divines are engaged today, that is the interpretation of God's holy Book in accordance with their idle imaginings and vain desires. And as the Jews, in the time of Muhammad, interpreted those verses of the Pentateuch, that referred to His Manifestation, after their own fancy, and refused to be satisfied with His holy utterance, the charge of 'perverting' the text was therefore pronounced against them. Likewise, it is clear, how in this day, the people of the Qur'án have perverted the text of God's holy Book, concerning the signs of the expected Manifestation, and interpreted it according to their own inclination and desire.³⁷⁸

In yet another instance, He saith: 'A part of them heard the Word of God, and then, after they had understood it, distorted it, and knew that they did so.' [Qur'án 2:75] This verse, Too, doth indicate that the meaning of the Word of God hath been perverted, not that the actual words have been effaced. To the truth of this testify they that are sound of mind. In yet another instance, He saith: "A part of them heard the Word of God, and then, after they had understood it, distorted it, and knew that they did so." [Qur'án 2:75] This verse, too, doth indicate that the meaning of the Word of God hath been perverted,

not the actual words have been effaced. To the truth of this testify they that are sound of mind. Again in another instance, He saith: "Woe unto those who, with their own hands, transcribe the Book corruptly, and then say: 'This is from God,' that they may sell it for some mean price." [Qur'án 2:79] This verse was revealed with reference to the divines and leaders of the Jewish Faith. These divines, in order to please the rich, acquire worldly emoluments, and give vent to their envy and misbelief, wrote a number of treatises, refuting the claims of Muhammad, supporting their arguments with such evidences as it would be improper to mention, and claimed that these arguments are derived from the text of the Pentateuch. The same may be witnessed today. Consider how abundant are the denunciations written by the foolish divines of this age against this most wondrous Cause! How vain their imaginings that these calumnies are in conformity with the verses of God's sacred Book, and in consonance with the utterances of men of discernment!³⁷⁹

Yea, inasmuch as the peoples of the world have failed to seek from the luminous and crystal Springs of divine knowledge the inner meaning of God's holy words, they therefore have languished, stricken and sore athirst, in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness. They have strayed far from the fresh and thirst-subduing waters, and gathered round the salt that burneth bitterly. Concerning them, the Dove of Eternity hath spoken: "And if they see the path of righteousness, they will not take it for their path; but if they see the path of error, for their path will they take it. This, because they treated Our signs as lies, and were heedless of them." [Qur'án 7:145]³⁸⁰

How well hath He spoken concerning them: "Hearts have they, with which they understand not, and eyes have they with which they see not!" [Qur'án 7:178]³⁸¹

As the commentators of the Qur'án and they that follow the letter thereof misapprehended the inner meaning of the words of God and failed to grasp their essential purpose, they sought to demonstrate that, according to the rules of grammar, whenever the term "idha" (meaning "if" or "when") precedeth the past tense, it invariably hath reference to the future. Later, they were sore perplexed in attempting to explain those verses of the Book wherein that term did not actually occur....How vain their sophistry! How grievous their blindness! They refuse to recognize the trumpet-blast which so explicitly in this text was sounded through the revelation of Muhammad.³⁸²

Even as it hath been previously recorded: "Hearts have they with which they understand not." [Qur'án 7:178]³⁸³

...all the people, whether high or low, have clung to the ways of those abject manifestations of the Prince of Darkness. They continually appeal to them for aid in unraveling the intricacies of their Faith, and, owing to lack of knowledge, they make such replies as can in no wise damage their fame and fortune. It is evident that these souls, vile and miserable as the beetle itself, have no portion of the musk-laden breeze of eternity, and have never entered the Ridvan of heavenly delight. How, therefore, can they impart unto others the imperishable fragrance of holiness? Such is their way, and such will it remain forever.³⁸⁴

Furthermore, it is already evident and known unto thee that those things to which the Jews and the Christians have clung, and the cavilings which they heaped upon the Beauty of Muhammad, the same have in this day been upheld by the people of the Qur'án, and

been witnessed in their denunciations of the "Point of the Bayan" --may the souls of all that dwell within the kingdom of divine Revelation be a sacrifice unto Him! Behold their folly: they utter the self-same words, uttered by the Jews of old, and know it not! How well and true are His words concerning them: "Leave them to entertain themselves with their cavilings!" [Qur'án 6:91] "As Thou livest, O Muhammad! They are seized by the frenzy of their vain fancies." [Qur'án 15:72]³⁸⁵

Consider, how can he that faileth in the day of God's Revelation to attain unto the grace of the "Divine Presence" and to recognize His Manifestation, be justly called learned, though he may have spent aeons in the pursuit of knowledge, and acquired all the limited and material learning of men? It is surely evident that he can in no wise be regarded as possessed of true knowledge. Whereas, the most unlettered of all men, if he be honoured with this supreme distinction, he verily is accounted as one of those divinely-learned men whose knowledge is of God; for such a man hath attained the acme of knowledge, and hath reached the furthest summit of learning.³⁸⁶

As the wayward of every age have failed to fathom the deeper import of these weighty and pregnant utterances, and imagine the answer of the Prophets of God to be irrelevant to the questions they asked them, they therefore have attributed ignorance and folly to those Essences of knowledge and understanding.³⁸⁷

Among these "veils of glory" are the divines and doctors living in the days of the Manifestations of God, who, because of their want of discernment and their love and eagerness for leadership, have failed to submit to the Cause of God, nay, have even refused to incline their ears unto the divine Melody. "They have thrust their fingers into their ears." [Qur'án 2:19] And the people who, utterly ignoring God and taking them for their masters, have placed themselves unreservedly under the authority of these pompous and hypocritical leaders, for they have no sight, no hearing, no heart, of their own to distinguish truth from falsehood. Notwithstanding the divinely-inspired admonitions of all the Prophets, the Saints, and Chosen ones of God, enjoining the people to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears, they have disdainfully rejected their counsels and have blindly followed, and will continue to follow, the leaders of their Faith. Should a poor and obscure person, destitute of the attire of the men of learning, address them saying: "Follow ye, O people! the Messengers of God," [Qur'án 36:20] they would, greatly surprised at such a statement, reply: "What! meanest thou that all these divines, all these exponents of learning, with all their authority, their pomp and pageantry, have erred, and failed to distinguish truth from falsehood? Dost thou, and people like thyself, pretend to have comprehended that which they have not understood?" If numbers and excellence of apparel be regarded as the criterions of learning and truth, the peoples of a bygone age, whom those of today have never surpassed in numbers, magnificence and power, should certainly be accounted a superior and worthier people. It is clear and evident that whenever the Manifestations of Holiness were revealed, the divines of their day have hindered the people from attaining unto the way of truth. To this testify the records of all the scriptures and heavenly books. Not one Prophet of God was made manifest Who did not fall a victim to the relentless hate, to the denunciation, denial, and execration of the clerics of His day! Woe unto them for the iniquities their hands have formerly wrought! Woe unto them for that which they are now doing! What veils of glory more grievous than these embodiments of error! By the righteousness of God! to pierce such veils is the mightiest of all acts, and to rend them asunder the most meritorious of all deeds! May God assist us and assist you, O concourse of the Spirit! that perchance ye may in the time of His Manifestation [Him Whom God shall make

manifest] be graciously aided to perform such deeds, and may in His days attain unto the Presence of God.³⁸⁸

Immeasurably exalted is the celestial Melody above the strivings of human ear to hear or mind to grasp its mystery! How can the helpless ant step into the court of the All-Glorious? And yet, feeble souls, through lack of understanding, reject these abstruse utterances, and question the truth of such traditions. Nay, none can comprehend them save those that are possessed of an understanding heart.³⁸⁹

These people with one hand cling to those verses of the Qur'án and those traditions of the people of certitude which they have found to accord with their inclinations and interests, and with the other reject those which are contrary to their selfish desires. 'Believe ye then part of the Book, and deny part?' [Qur'án 2:85] How could ye judge that which ye understand not? Even as the Lord of being hath in His unerring Book, after speaking of the 'Seal' in His exalted utterance: 'Muhammad is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets,' [Qur'án 33:40] hath revealed unto all people the promise of 'attainment unto the divine Presence.' [Qur'án 33:47: min allah faDlan kabíran]³⁹⁰

So great is the folly and perversity of the people, that they have turned their face toward their own thoughts and desires, and have turned their back upon the knowledge and will of God--hallowed and glorified be His name!"³⁹¹

For it behooveth no man to interpret the holy words according to his own imperfect understanding, nor, having found them to be contrary to his inclination and desires, to reject and repudiate their truth. For such, today, is the manner of the divines and doctors of the age, who occupy the seats of knowledge and learning, and who have named ignorance knowledge, and called oppression justice. Were these to ask the Light of Truth concerning those images which their idle fancy hath carved, and were they to find His answer inconsistent with their own conceptions and their own understanding of the Book, they would assuredly denounce Him Who is the Mine and Wellhead of all Knowledge as the very negation of understanding. Such things have happened in every age.³⁹²

And now behold the divines of the age who, because of their being honoured by His name, and finding that their fathers have acknowledged His Revelation, have blindly submitted to His truth. Observe, were this people today to receive such answers in reply to such questionings, they would unhesitatingly reject and denounce them--nay, they would again utter the self-same cavils, even as they have uttered them in this day. All this, notwithstanding the fact that these Essences of being are immensely exalted above such fanciful images, and are immeasurably glorified beyond all these vain sayings and above the comprehension of every understanding heart. Their so-called learning, when compared with that Knowledge, is utter falsehood, and all their understanding naught but blatant error. Nay, whatsoever proceedeth from these Mines of divine Wisdom and these Treasuries of eternal knowledge is truth, and naught else but the truth. The saying: 'Knowledge is one point, which the foolish have multiplied' is a proof of Our argument, and the tradition: 'Knowledge is a light which God sheddeth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth' a confirmation of Our statement. Inasmuch as they have not apprehended the meaning of Knowledge, and have called by that name those images fashioned by their own fancy and which have sprung from the embodiments of ignorance, they therefore have inflicted upon the Source of Knowledge that which thou hast heard and witnessed.³⁹³

For instance, a certain man, reputed for his learning and attainments, and accounting himself as one of the pre-eminent leaders of his people, hath in his book denounced and vilified all the exponents of true learning. This is made abundantly clear by his explicit statements as well as by his allusions throughout his book.³⁹⁴

From this title [Irshadu'l-'Avam, Guidance unto the Ignorant] We perceived the odour of conceit and vainglory, inasmuch as he hath imagined himself a learned man and regarded the rest of the people ignorant. His worth was in fact made known by the very title he had chosen for his book. It became evident that its author was following the path of self and desire, and was lost in the wilderness of ignorance and folly.³⁹⁵

We noticed that he had enumerated some twenty or more sciences, the knowledge of which he considered to be essential for the comprehension of the mystery of the "Mi'raj". We gathered from his statements that unless a man be deeply versed in them all, he can never attain to a proper understanding of this transcendent and exalted theme. Among the specified sciences were the science of metaphysical abstractions, of alchemy, and natural magic. Such vain and discarded learnings, this man hath regarded as the prerequisites of the understanding of the sacred and abiding mysteries of divine Knowledge. Gracious God! Such is the measure of his understanding. And yet, behold what cavils and calumnies he hath heaped upon those Embodiments of God's infinite knowledge! How well and true is the saying: "Flingest thou thy calumnies unto the face of Them Whom the one true God hath made the Trustees of the treasures of His seventh sphere?" Not one understanding heart or mind, not one among the wise and learned, hath taken notice of these preposterous statements. And yet, how clear and evident it is to every discerning heart that this so-called learning is and hath ever been, rejected by Him Who is the one true God. How can the knowledge of these sciences, which are so contemptible in the eyes of the truly learned, be regarded as essential to the apprehension of the mysteries of the "Mi'raj," whilst the Lord of the "Mi'raj" Himself was never burdened with a single letter of these limited and obscure learnings, and never defiled His radiant heart with any of these fanciful illusions? How truly hath he said: "All human attainment moveth upon a lame ass, whilst Truth, riding upon the wind, darteth across space."³⁹⁶ In this day, they that are submerged beneath the ocean of divine Knowledge, and dwell within the ark of divine wisdom, forbid the people such idle pursuits. Their shining breasts are, praise be to God, sanctified from every trace of such learning, and are exalted above such grievous veils. We have consumed this densest of all veils, with the fire of the love of the Beloved--the veil referred to in the saying: "The most grievous of all veils is the veil of knowledge." Upon its ashes, We have reared the tabernacle of divine knowledge.³⁹⁷

We were surprized exceedingly when We observed that his one purpose was to make the people realize that all these learnings were possessed by him. And yet, I swear by God that not one breath, blowing from the meads of divine knowledge, hath ever been wafted upon his soul, nor hath he ever unravelled a single mystery of ancient wisdom. Nay, were the meaning of Knowledge ever to be expounded unto him, dismay would fill his heart, and his whole being would shake to its foundation. Notwithstanding his base and senseless statements, behold to what heights of extravagance his claims have reached!³⁹⁸

Even as the people of Israel, in the time of Moses, bartered away the bread of heaven for the sordid things of the earth, these people, likewise, sought to exchange the divinely-revealed verses for their foul, their vile, and idle desires. In like manner, thou beholdest in this day that although spiritual sustenance hath descended from the heaven of divine

mercy, and been showered from the clouds of His loving kindness, and although the seas of life, at the behest of the Lord of all being, are surging within the Ridvan of the heart, yet these people, ravenous as the dogs, have gathered around carrion, and contented themselves with the stagnant waters of a briny lake. Gracious God! how strange the way of this people! They clamour for guidance, although the standards of Him Who guideth all things are already hoisted. They cleave to the obscure intricacies of knowledge, when He, Who is the Object of all knowledge, shineth as the sun. They see the sun with their own eyes, and yet question that brilliant Orb as to the proof of its light. They behold the vernal showers descending upon them, and yet seek an evidence of that bounty. The proof of the sun is the light thereof, which shineth and envelopeth all things. The evidence of the shower is the bounty thereof, which reneweth and investeth the world with the mantle of life. Yea, the blind can perceive naught from the sun except its heat, and the arid soil hath no share of the showers of mercy. "Marvel not if in the Qur'án the unbeliever perceiveth naught but the trace of letters, for in the sun, the blind findeth naught but heat."³⁹⁹

Therefore, understand from this verse and know of a certainty that the people in every age, clinging to a verse of the Book, have uttered such vain and absurd sayings, contending that no Prophet should again be made manifest to the world. Even as the Christian divines who, holding fast to the verse of the Gospel to which We have already referred [Matthew 24:35], have sought to explain that the law of the Gospel shall at no time be annulled, and that no independent Prophet shall again be made manifest, unless He confirmeth the law of the Gospel. Most of the people have become afflicted with the same spiritual disease.⁴⁰⁰

Even as thou dost witness how the people of the Qur'án, like unto the people of old, have allowed the words "Seal of the Prophets" to veil their eyes. And yet, they themselves testify to this verse: "None knoweth the interpretation thereof but God and they that are well-grounded in knowledge." [Qur'án 3:7] And when He Who is well-grounded in all knowledge, Who is the Mother, the Soul, the Secret, and the Essence thereof, revealeth that which is the least contrary to their desire, they bitterly oppose Him and shamelessly deny Him. These thou hast already heard and witnessed. Such deeds and words have been sorely instigated by leaders of religion, they that worship no God but their own desire, who bear allegiance to naught but gold, who are wrapt in the densest veils of learning, and who, enmeshed by its obscurities, are lost in the wilds of error. Even as the Lord of being hath explicitly declared: "What thinkest thou? He who hath made a God of his passions, and whom God causeth to err through a knowledge, and whose ears and whose heart He hath sealed up, and over whose sight He hath cast a veil--who, after his rejection by God, shall guide such a one? Will ye not then be warned?" [Qur'án 45:22]⁴⁰¹

Although the outward meaning of "Whom God causeth to err through a knowledge" is what hath been revealed, yet to Us it signifieth those divines of the age who have turned away from the Beauty of God, and who, clinging unto their own learning, as fashioned by their own fancies and desires, have denounced God's divine Message and Revelation. "Say: it is a weighty Message, from which ye turn aside!" [Qur'án 38:67] Likewise, He saith: "And when Our clear verses are recited to them, they say, 'This is merely a man who would fain pervert you from your father's worship.' And they say, 'This is none other than a forged falsehood.'" [Qur'án 34:43]⁴⁰²

Be fair: Is the testimony of those acceptable and worthy of attention whose deeds agree with their words, whose outward behaviour conforms with their inner life? The mind is bewildered at their deeds, and the soul marvelleth at their fortitude and bodily endurance. Or is the testimony of these faithless souls who breathe naught but the breath of selfish desire, and who lie imprisoned in the cage of their idle fancies, acceptable? Like the bats of darkness, they lift not their heads from their couch except to pursue the transient things of the world, and find no rest by night except as they labour to advance the aims of their sordid life. Immersed in their selfish schemes, they are oblivious of the divine Decree. In the day-time they strive with all their soul after worldly benefits, and in the night-season their sole occupation is to gratify their carnal desires. By what law or standard could men be justified in cleaving to the denials of such petty-minded souls, and in ignoring the faith of them that have renounced, for the sake of the good-pleasure of God, their life, and substance, their fame and renown, their reputation and honour?⁴⁰³

A Revelation, of which the Prophets of God, His saints and chosen ones, have either not been informed, or which, in pursuance of God's inscrutable Decree, they have not disclosed,—such a Revelation these mean and depraved people have sought to measure with their own deficient minds, their own deficient learning and understanding. Should it fail to conform to their standards, they straightway reject it. "Thinkest thou that the greater part of them hear or understand? They are even like unto the brutes! Yea, they stray even further from the path!" [Qur'án 25:44]⁴⁰⁴

We beg them not to depend upon their intellect, their comprehension and learning, nor to contend with the Revelator of celestial and infinite knowledge.⁴⁰⁵

Secrets are many, but strangers are myriad. Volumes will not suffice to hold the mystery of the Beloved One, nor can it be exhausted in these pages, although it be no more than a sign. 'Knowledge is a single point [al-'ilm nuqtih], but the ignorant have multiplied it.'⁴⁰⁶

This station conferreth the true standard of knowledge, and freeth man from tests. In this realm, to search after knowledge is irrelevant, for He hath said concerning the guidance of travelers on this plane, 'Fear God, and God will instruct thee.' [Qur'án 2:282] And again: 'Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth.'⁴⁰⁷

Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbors, and share with them their food and their drink.⁴⁰⁸

We beseech God to strengthen thee with His power, and enable thee to recognize Him Who is the Source of all knowledge, that thou mayest detach thyself from all human learning, for, 'what would it profit any man to strive after learning when he hath already found and recognized Him Who is the Object of all knowledge?' Cleave to the Root of Knowledge, and to Him Who is the Fountain thereof, that thou mayest find thyself independent of all who claim to be well versed in human learning, and whose claim no clear proof, nor the testimony of any enlightening book, can support.⁴⁰⁹

Whoso interpreteth this verse otherwise than its obvious meaning is deprived of the Spirit of God and of His mercy which encompasseth all created things. Fear God, and follow not your idle fancies. Nay, rather, follow the bidding of your Lord, the Almighty, the All-Wise. Erelong shall clamorous voices be raised in most lands. Shun them, O My people,

and follow not the iniquitous and evil-hearted. This is that of which We gave you forewarning when We were dwelling in 'Iraq, then later while in the Land of Mystery, and now from this Resplendent Spot.⁴¹⁰

Whoso interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book.⁴¹¹

O concourse of divines! When My verses were sent down, and My clear tokens were revealed, We found you behind the veils...Beware lest ye shut out the people by yet another veil. Pluck asunder the chains of vain imaginings, in the name of the Lord of all men, and be not of the deceitful. Should ye turn unto God and embrace His Cause, spread not disorder within it, and measure not the Book of God with your selfish desires. This, verily, is the counsel of God aforetime and hereafter, and to this God's witnesses and chosen ones, yea, each and every one of Us, do solemnly attest.⁴¹²

We, verily, see amongst you him who taketh hold of the Book of God and citeth from it proofs and arguments wherewith to repudiate his Lord, even as the followers of every other Faith sought reasons in their Holy Books for refuting Him Who is the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Say: God, the True One, is My witness that neither the Scriptures of the world, nor all the books and writings in existence, shall, in this Day, avail you aught without this, the Living Book, Who proclaimeth in the midmost heart of creation: "Verily, there is none other God but Me, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise."⁴¹³

Take heed that ye dispute not idly concerning the Almighty and His Cause, for lo! He hath appeared amongst you invested with a Revelation so great as to encompass all things, whether of the past or of the future.⁴¹⁴

It behoveth thee to look with divine insight upon the things We have revealed and sent unto thee and not towards the people and that which is current amongst them. They are in this day like unto a blind man who, while moving in the sunshine, demandeth: Where is the sun? Is it shining? He would deny and dispute the truth, and would not be of them that perceive. Never shall he be able to discern the sun or to understand that which hath intervened between him and it. He would object within himself, voice protests, and would be among the rebellious. Such is the state of this people. Leave them unto themselves, saying: Unto you be that which ye desire and unto us that which we desire. Wretched indeed is the plight of the ungodly.⁴¹⁵

O concourse of divines! This is the day whereon nothing amongst all things, nor any name amongst all names, can profit you save through this Name which God hath made the Manifestation of His Cause and the Dayspring of His Most Excellent Titles unto all who are in the kingdom of creation. Blessed is that man that hath recognized the fragrance of the All-Merciful and been numbered with the steadfast. Your sciences shall not profit you in this day, nor your arts, nor your treasures, nor your glory. Cast them all behind your backs, and set your faces towards the Most Sublime Word through which the Scriptures and the Books and this lucid Tablet have been distinctly set forth. Cast away, O concourse of divines, the things ye have composed with the pens of your idle fancies and vain imaginings. By God! The Day-Star of Knowledge hath shone forth above the horizon of certitude.⁴¹⁶

How strange! These people with one hand cling to those verses of the Qur'án and those traditions of the people of certitude which they have found to accord with their own inclinations and interests, and with the other reject those which are contrary to their selfish desires. 'Believe ye then part of the Book, and deny part?'⁴¹⁷ How could ye judge that which ye understand not? Even as the Lord of being hath in His unerring Book, after speaking of the "Seal" in His exalted utterance: "Muhammad is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets,"⁴¹⁸ hath revealed unto all people the promise of "attainment unto the divine Presence."⁴¹⁹ To this attainment to the presence of the immortal King testify the verses of the Book, some of which We have already mentioned.⁴²⁰

Should ye turn unto God and embrace His Cause, spread not disorder within it, and measure not the Book of God with your selfish desires. This, verily, is the Counsel of God aforetime and hereafter, and to this God's witnesses and chosen ones, yea, each and every one of Us, do solemnly attest.⁴²¹

People for the most part delight in superstitions. They regard a single drop of the sea of delusion as preferable to an ocean of certitude. By holding fast unto names they deprive themselves of the inner reality and by clinging to vain imaginings they are kept back from the dayspring of heavenly signs. God grant [that] you may be graciously aided under all conditions to shatter the idols of superstition and to tear away the veils of the imaginations of men. Authority lieth in the grasp of God, the Fountainhead of revelation and inspiration and the Lord of the Day of Resurrection.⁴²²

Whether a seeker after truth or a believer immersing himself in the Word of God, either one must first and foremost purify his heart in preparation for receipt of divinely inspired understanding of the words and teachings revealed by the Manifestation of God:

Unto every discerning observer it is evident and manifest that had these people in the days of each of the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth sanctified their eyes, their ears, and their hearts from whatever they had seen, heard, and felt, they surely would not have been deprived of beholding the beauty of God, nor strayed far from the habitations of glory.⁴²³

This is the food that conferreth everlasting life upon the pure in heart and the illumined in spirit.⁴²⁴

O my brother! Take thou the step of the spirit, so that, swift as the twinkling of an eye, thou mayest flash through the wilds of remoteness and bereavement, attain the Ridvan of everlasting reunion, and in one breath commune with the heavenly Spirits. For with human feet thou canst never hope to traverse these immeasurable distances, nor attain thy goal. Peace be upon him whom The light of truth guideth unto all truth, and who, in the name of God, standeth in the path of His Cause, upon the shore of true understanding.⁴²⁵

Would that the hearts of men could be cleansed from these man-made limitations and obscure thoughts imposed upon them! haply they may be illumined by the light of the Sun of true knowledge, and comprehend the mysteries of divine wisdom.⁴²⁶

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.⁴²⁷

It is incumbent upon thee, by the permission of God, to cleanse the eye of thine heart from the things of the world, that thou mayest realize the infinitude of divine knowledge, and mayest behold Truth so clearly that thou wilt need no proof to demonstrate His reality, nor any evidence to bear witness unto His testimony.⁴²⁸

Shouldst thou ponder these words in thine heart, thou wilt of a certainty find the doors of divine wisdom and infinite knowledge flung open before thy face.⁴²⁹

Wert thou to attain to but a dewdrop of the crystal waters of divine knowledge, thou wouldst readily realize that true life is not the life of the flesh but the life of the spirit. For the life of the flesh is common to both men and animals, whereas the life of the spirit is possessed only by the pure in heart who have quaffed from the ocean of faith and partaken of the fruit of certitude. This life knoweth no death, and this existence is crowned by immortality.⁴³⁰

Only those will attain to the knowledge of the Word of God that have turned unto Him, and repudiated the manifestations of Satan.⁴³¹

Strive, therefore, O my brother, to grasp the meaning of "Resurrection," and cleanse thine ears from the idle sayings of these rejected people. Shouldst thou step into the realm of complete detachment, thou wilt readily testify that no day is mightier than this Day, and that no resurrection more awful than this Resurrection can ever be conceived.⁴³²

It hath been witnessed in this day how many of the divines, owing to their rejection of the Truth, have fallen into, and abide within, the uttermost depths of ignorance, and whose names have been effaced from the scroll of the glorious and learned.⁴³³

O my friend, were the bird of thy mind to explore the heavens of the Revelation of the Qur'án, were it to contemplate the realm of divine knowledge unfolded therein, thou wouldst assuredly find unnumbered doors of knowledge set open before thee.⁴³⁴

Ponder this in thine heart, that the sweet gales of divine knowledge, blowing from the meads of mercy, may waft upon thee the fragrance of the Beloved's utterance, and cause thy soul to attain the Ridvan of understanding.⁴³⁵

...cleanse the darkened self with the waters of mercy flowing from the Source of divine knowledge; that perchance thou mayest, through the power of God and the light of divine guidance, distinguish the Morn of everlasting splendour from the darksome night of error.⁴³⁶

And yet, feeble souls, through lack of understanding, reject these abstruse utterances, and question the truth of such traditions. Nay, none can comprehend them save those that are possessed of an understanding heart. Say, He is that End for Whom no end is all the universe can be imagined, and for Whom no beginning in the world of creation can be conceived. Behold, O concourse of the earth, the splendours of the End, revealed in the Manifestations of the Beginning!⁴³⁷

Whoso desireth to fathom the mystery of this "Mi'raj," and craveth a drop from this ocean, if the mirror of his heart be already obscured by the dust of these learnings, he must needs cleanse and purify it ere the light of this mystery can be reflected therein.⁴³⁸

We have driven from the human heart all else but Him Who is the Desire of the world, and glory therein.⁴³⁹

O my brother! A divine Mine only can yield the gems of divine knowledge, and the fragrance of the mystic Flower can be inhaled only in the ideal Garden, and the lilies of ancient wisdom can blossom nowhere except in the city of a stainless heart. "In a rich soil, its plants spring forth abundantly by permission of its Lord, and in that soil which is bad, they spring forth but scantily."⁴⁴⁰

But, O my brother, when the true seeker determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth. Even as thou dost witness in this day how most of the people, because of such love and hate, are bereft of the immortal Face, have strayed far from the Embodiments of the divine mysteries, and, shepherdless, are roaming through the wilderness of oblivion and error.⁴⁴¹

Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being.⁴⁴²

With unswerving vision, with pure heart, and sanctified spirit, consider attentively what God hath established as the testimony of guidance for His people in His Book, which is recognized as authentic by both the high and lowly.⁴⁴³

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding. Well is it with the sincere in heart for their share of the light of a mighty Day!⁴⁴⁴

In fact, all the Scriptures and the mysteries thereof are condensed into this brief account. So much so, that were a person to ponder it a while in his heart, he would discover from all that hath been said the mysteries of the Words of God, and would apprehend the meaning of whatever hath been manifested by that ideal King.⁴⁴⁵

None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favour with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him.⁴⁴⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá likewise indicated that it is only with a pure heart that the believer can understand the symbolic meanings of the figurative Word of God:

It is easy to read the Holy Scriptures, but it is only with a clean heart and a pure mind that one may understand their true meaning. Let us ask God's help to enable us to understand the Holy Books. Let us pray for eyes to see and ears to hear, and for hearts that long for peace.⁴⁴⁷

I have been informed that the purpose of your class meeting is to study the significances and mysteries of the Holy Scriptures and understand the meaning of the divine Testaments. It is a cause of great happiness to me that you are turning unto the Kingdom of God, that you desire to approach the presence of God and to become informed of the realities and precepts of God. It is my hope that you may put forward your most earnest endeavor to accomplish this end, that you may investigate and study the Holy Scriptures word by word so that you may attain knowledge of the mysteries hidden therein. Be not satisfied with words, but seek to understand the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the words...The divine Words are not to be taken according to their outer sense. They are symbolical and contain realities of spiritual meaning...All the texts and teachings of the holy Testaments have intrinsic spiritual meanings. They are not to be taken literally. I, therefore, pray in your behalf that you may be given the power of understanding these inner real meanings of the Holy Scriptures and may become informed of the mysteries deposited in the words of the Bible so that you may attain eternal life and your hearts may be attracted to the Kingdom of God. May your souls be illumined by the light of the Words of God, and may you become repositories of the mysteries of God, for no comfort is greater and no happiness is sweeter than spiritual comprehension of the divine teachings.⁴⁴⁸

The believer is exhorted to purify his heart, so that he may receive prophetically inspired understanding, but he is not promised that he will be able to understand the same as anyone else or as much as the wisest and most perceptive of believers. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that the capacity of each individual is...unique and personal, and that he should be concerned with maximizing his own potential not with comparing his gifts with the endowments of others:

Thereupon, We imparted unto him, according to the measure of his capacity and understanding, certain truths of Science and ancient Wisdom.⁴⁴⁹

We have variously and repeatedly set forth the meaning of every theme, that perchance every soul, whether high or low, may obtain, according to his measure and capacity, his share and portion thereof. Should he be unable to comprehend a certain argument, he may, thus, by referring unto another, attain his purpose. "That all sorts of men may know where to quench their thirst."⁴⁵⁰

In fact, all the Scriptures and the mysteries thereof are condensed into this brief account. So much so, that were a person to ponder it a while in his heart, he would discover from all that hath been said the mysteries of the Words of God, and would apprehend the meaning of whatever hath been manifested by that ideal King. As the people differ in their understanding and station, We will accordingly make mention of a few traditions, that these may impart constancy to the wavering soul, and tranquillity to the troubled mind. Thereby, will the testimony of God unto the people, both high and low, be complete and perfect.⁴⁵¹

As the individual believer is not assured of infallible protection from error, no individual is given the authority to interpret the Word of God for himself and by himself. He is counseled to turn to the Manifestation of God, to His chosen ones, and to the principles He revealed which altogether constitute the most reliable way for him to ascertain the Will of God. Consequently, the individual believer has no authority. Nevertheless, he must be encouraged to read the Word, to study the Word, and to seek understanding of the Word. For example, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Cast away, in My name that transcendeth all other names, the things ye possess, and immerse yourselves in this Ocean in whose depths lay hidden the pearls of wisdom and of utterance, an ocean that surgeth in My name, the All-Merciful.⁴⁵²

Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.⁴⁵³

They that immerse themselves in the ocean of His utterances should at all times have the utmost regard for the divinely-revealed ordinances and prohibitions.⁴⁵⁴

He advises his readers to "reflect" (33 times in Kitáb-i-Iqan; 29 times in Gleanings; 8 times in Kitáb-i-Aqdas), to "ponder" (24 times in Kitáb-i-Iqan; 24 times in Gleanings; 5 times in Kitáb-i-Aqdas), and to "consider" (35 times in Kitáb-i-Iqan; 54 times in Gleanings; 13 times in Kitáb-i-Aqdas), all of which indicate cognitive activity. Quoting a hadith, he shows himself to be solidly in favor of deep thought, writing, "The wine of renunciation must needs be quaffed, the lofty heights of detachment must needs be attained, and the meditation referred to in the words "One hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship" must needs be observed, so that the secret of the wretched behaviour of the people might be discovered, those people who, despite the love and yearning for truth which they profess, curse the followers of Truth when once He hath been made manifest."⁴⁵⁵

Considering the clear and sacred principles set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, what is the current practice of Bahá'ís? Bahá'ís are using various interpretive tools, models and approaches, including the following:

1. Some isolate a particular teaching or a particular text, and analyze that particular; it is very common for such studies not to examine the context of that teaching or text, in the entire corpus of the Author, and in light of the entire Bahá'í canon;
2. Some compare Bahá'í teachings or texts to Western ideas and language; often it is assumed that science is the determiner of truth, and hence these particulars are weighed in the balance of science as it is understood by an individual;
3. Some compare Bahá'í teachings or texts to Islamic ideas and language; it is generally the case that Bahá'í particulars are assumed to be Islamic in origin, and the specifics of that origination are reconstructed;
4. Some compare Bahá'í teachings or texts to non-Western, non-Islamic ideas and languages; in this case there is usually a fair amount of speculative comparison, inasmuch as there was very little contact between Bahá'í particulars and such non-Western and non-Islamic cultures during the lifetimes of the Founder and his son

These approaches are widely regarded as normative in the Bahá'í community, and many Bahá'ís associate them with liberal, modern, secular, scientific, global, non-partisan social mores, and find them to be in harmony with their understanding of the social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, as expounded in North America and Europe by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1911-1913. Many have associated those who adhere closely to the authoritative interpretations of the teachings and writings by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi with conservatism, traditionalism...some even with fundamentalism. They cite what they take to be Shoghi Effendi's broad affirmations of the individual's right to possess personal interpretations and the "undoubted right of the individual to self-expression":

I feel that regarding such interpretations (of verses from the Scriptures) no one has the right to impose his view or opinion and require his listeners to believe in his particular interpretation of the sacred and prophetic writings. I have no objection to your interpretations and inferences so long as they are represented as your own personal observations and reflections. It would be unnecessary and confusing to state authoritatively and officially a dogmatic Bahá'í interpretation to be universally accepted and taught by believers. Such matters I feel should be left to the personal judgment and insight of individual teachers.⁴⁵⁶

It is clear from this statement that Shoghi Effendi did not regard the espousal of authoritative interpretations coupled with insistence that they be adopted by all Bahá'ís to be either necessary or efficacious...he writes that "it would be unnecessary and confusing to state authoritatively and officially a dogmatic Bahá'í interpretation to be universally accepted and taught by believers". Shoghi Effendi did not clarify the meaning of every teaching and word revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. Indeed, he often declined to give his interpretations of matters that were not already explained by Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For example, when asked about certain details of a passage in Epistle to the Son of the Wolf--

In the treasuries of the knowledge of God there lieth concealed a knowledge which, when applied, will largely, though not wholly, eliminate fear. This knowledge, however, should be taught from childhood, as it will greatly aid in its elimination. Whatever decreaseth fear increaseth courage. Should the Will of God assist Us, there would flow out from the Pen of the Divine Expounder a lengthy exposition of that which hath been mentioned, and there would be revealed, in the field of arts and sciences, what would renew the world and the nations. A word hath, likewise, been written down and recorded by the Pen of the Most High in the Crimson Book which is capable of fully disclosing that force which is hid in men, nay of redoubling its potency. We implore God—exalted and glorified be He—to graciously assist His servants to do that which is pleasing and acceptable unto Him.⁴⁵⁷

--the Guardian makes the following comments:

Unfortunately it would seem that the knowledge 'which could largely eliminate fear' has not been disclosed or identified by Bahá'u'lláh, so we do not know what it is. However, what Bahá'u'lláh did not elaborate but what He meant by the 'world' recorded in the Crimson Book was the power of the Covenant. The 'Crimson Book' refers to the Book of

His Covenant, and the reference above means the power for unity which the Covenant possesses and radiates.⁴⁵⁸

In the above-cited passage, it appears that the Guardian did not wish an individual Bahá'í to press for the adoption of an authoritative interpretation of Scriptural verses that were not specifically explained by Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Another statement that has been understood by many as according broad liberties of self-understanding and self-expression to believers is the following:

Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views.⁴⁵⁹

The context of this passage is easily traced. On 23 February 1924, Shoghi Effendi wrote a letter to the American Bahá'ís, which is included in its entirety in Bahá'í Administration. A portion of this letter, showing the position of the statement in question, and the allied articulations of principle that undoubtedly relate to that statement, is here cited in full:

The various Assemblies, local and national, constitute today the bedrock upon the strength of which the Universal House is in future to be firmly established and raised. Not until these function vigorously and harmoniously can the hope for the termination of this period of transition be realized. It devolves upon us whose dearest wish is to see the Cause enter upon that promised era of universal recognition and world achievements, to do all in our power to consolidate the foundations of these Assemblies, promoting at the same time a fuller understanding of their purpose and more harmonious cooperation for their maintenance and success. **Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views.** If certain instructions⁴⁶⁰ of the Master are today particularly emphasized and scrupulously adhered to, let us be sure that they are but provisional measures designed to guard and protect the Cause in its present state of infancy and growth until the day when this tender and precious plant shall have sufficiently grown to be able to withstand the unwisdom of its friends and the attacks of its enemies.

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other.

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to

the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can insure the protection and advancement of the Cause.⁴⁶¹

The overall context of this remark indicates that it points to the right of the individual believer to express his views in the context of the administration of his community, such as during the consultation of the nineteen day feast, in correspondence and meetings with the spiritual assembly, and in annual convention which elects the spiritual assembly at the local and national level. It does not refer to the uninhibited right of the individual to self-expression at all times and under all circumstances. Notwithstanding the Guardian's encouragement of individual self-expression, he was adamant that Bahá'ís adhere closely to the Bahá'í teachings in their purity:

There are two main principles which the Guardian wishes the friends to always bear in mind and to conscientiously and faithfully follow. First is the principle of unqualified and whole-hearted loyalty to the revealed Word. The believers should be careful not to deviate, even a hair-breadth, from the Teachings. Their supreme consideration should be to safeguard the purity of the principles, tenets and laws of the Faith. It is only by this means that they can hope to maintain the organic unity of the Cause. There can and should be no liberals or conservatives, no moderates or extremes in the Cause. For they are all subject to the one and the same law which is the Law of God. This law transcends all differences, all personal or local tendencies, moods and aspirations. Next is the principle of complete, and immediate obedience to the Assemblies, both local and national. It is the responsibility of these Bahá'í administrative bodies to enable the community to acquire, and increasingly deepen in the knowledge and understanding of the Cause. Doctrinal unity and administrative unity, these are the two chief pillars that sustain the edifice of the Cause, and protect it from the storms of opposition which so severely rage against it.⁴⁶²

I urge them to study profoundly the revealed utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and the discourses of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and not to rely unduly on the representation and interpretation of the Teachings given by the Bahá'í speakers and teachers.⁴⁶³

To deepen in the Cause means to read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master so thoroughly as to be able to give it to others in its pure form. There are many who have some superficial idea of what the Cause stands for. They, therefore, present it together with all sorts of ideas that are their own. As the Cause is still in its early days we must be most careful lest we fall under this error and injure the Movement we so much adore. There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the Writings the more

truths we can find in them and the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous.⁴⁶⁴

While Shoghi Effendi issued many letters with his authoritative and divinely guided interpretations of the teachings and writings of the Faith, he also encouraged the Bahá'ís to read, study, think for themselves, and teach the Faith in their own way, rather than trying to imitate anyone else. The Universal House of Justice reiterated this fundamental human right and responsibility in a series of publications:

A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings... So, although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís.⁴⁶⁵

The existence of authoritative interpretations does not preclude the individual from engaging in the study of the Teachings and thereby arriving at a personal interpretation or understanding. A clear distinction is, however, drawn in the Bahá'í Writings between authoritative interpretation and the understanding that each individual arrives at from a study of its Teachings. Individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the Teachings constitute the fruit of man's rational power and may well contribute to a greater comprehension of the Faith. Such views, nevertheless, lack authority. In presenting their personal ideas, individuals are cautioned not to discard the authority of the revealed words, not to deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation, and not to engage in controversy; rather they should offer their thoughts as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that their views are merely their own.⁴⁶⁶

Individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the teachings constitute the fruit of man's rational power and may well contribute to a more complete understanding of the Faith. Such views, however, lack authority. The believers are, therefore, free to accept or disregard them. Further, the manner in which an individual presents his interpretation is important. For example, he must at no time deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation, but rather offer his idea as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that his views are merely his own.⁴⁶⁷

These matters are elucidated by the Universal House of Justice, particularly in its 29 December 1988 letter to the American Bahá'ís on "Individual Rights and Freedoms"⁴⁶⁸:

¶1. We have noticed with concern evidences of a confusion of attitudes among some of the friends when they encounter difficulties in applying Bahá'í principles to questions of the day. On the one hand, they acknowledge their belief in Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings; on the other, they invoke Western liberal democratic practices when actions of Bahá'í institutions or of some of their fellow Bahá'ís do not accord with their expectations. At the

heart of this confusion are misconceptions of such fundamental issues as individual rights and freedom of expression in the Bahá'í community. The source of the potential difficulties of the situation appears to us to be an inadequacy of Bahá'í perspective on the part of both individual believers and their institutions...

¶11. It is this perspective that helps us to understand the question of freedom and its place in Bahá'í thought and action. The idea and the fact of freedom pervade all human concerns in an infinitude of notions and modes. Freedom is indeed essential to all expressions of human life.

¶12. Freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of action are among the freedoms which have received the ardent attention of social thinkers across the centuries. The resulting outflow of such profound thought has exerted a tremendous liberating influence in the shaping of modern society. Generations of the oppressed have fought and died in the name of freedom. Certainly the want of freedom from oppression has been a dominant factor in the turmoil of the times: witness the plethora of movements which have resulted in the rapid emergence of new nations in the latter part of the twentieth century. A true reading of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh leaves no doubt as to the high importance of these freedoms to constructive social processes. Consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers. Can it not be deduced from this alone that attainment of freedom is a significant purpose of His Revelation? His denunciations of tyranny and His urgent appeals on behalf of the oppressed provide unmistakable proof. But does not the freedom foreshadowed by His Revelation imply nobler, ampler manifestations of human achievement? Does it not indicate an organic relationship between the internal and external realities of man such as has not yet been attained?

¶13. In his summary of significant Bahá'í teachings, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'u'lláh "inculcates the principle of 'moderation in all things'; declares that whatsoever, be it 'liberty, civilization and the like', 'passeth beyond the limits of moderation' must 'exercise a pernicious influence upon men'; observes that western civilization has gravely perturbed and alarmed the peoples of the world; and predicts that the day is approaching when the 'flame' of a civilization 'carried to excess' 'will devour the cities'."

¶14. Expounding the theme of liberty, Bahá'u'lláh asserted that "the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal"; that "liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station"; that "true liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments". "We approve of liberty in certain circumstances," He declared, "and refuse to sanction it in others." But He gave the assurance that, "Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty." And again He said: "Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty."

¶15. Bahá'u'lláh's assertions clearly call for an examination of current assumptions. Should liberty be as free as is supposed in contemporary Western thought? Where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive? What are the limits to the expansion of freedom? For so fluid and elastic are its qualities of application and expression that the concept of freedom in any given situation is likely to assume a different latitude from one mind to another; these qualities are, alas, susceptible to the employment alike of good and evil. Is it any wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to submission to the will of God?

¶16. Since any constructive view of freedom implies limits, further questions are inevitable: what are the latitudes of freedom in the Bahá'í community? How are these to be determined? Because human beings have been created to "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization", the exercise of freedom, it may be deduced, is intended to enable all to fulfill this purpose in their individual lives and in their collective functioning as a

society. Hence whatever in principle is required to realize this purpose gauges the latitudes or limits of freedom.

¶17. Contemplating Bahá'u'lláh's warning that "whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence", we come to appreciate that the Administrative Order He has conceived embodies the operating principles which are necessary to the maintenance of that moderation which will ensure the "true liberty" of humankind. All things considered, does the Administrative Order not appear to be the structure of freedom for our Age? 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers us comfort in this thought, for He has said that "the moderate freedom which guarantees the welfare of the world of mankind and maintains and preserves the universal relationships, is found in its fullest power and extension in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh"...

¶24. As to freedom of expression, a fundamental principle of the Cause, the Administrative Order provides unique methods and channels for its exercise and maintenance; these have been amply described in the writings of the Faith, but they are not yet clearly understood by the friends. For Bahá'u'lláh has extended the scope and deepened the meaning of self-expression. In His elevation of art and of work performed in the service of humanity to acts of worship can be discerned enormous prospects for a new birth of expression in the civilization anticipated by His World Order. The significance of this principle, now so greatly amplified by the Lord of the Age, cannot be doubted; but it is in its ramifications in speech that keen understanding is urgently needed. From a Bahá'í point of view, the exercise of freedom of speech must necessarily be disciplined by a profound appreciation of both the positive and negative dimensions of freedom, on the one hand, and of speech, on the other.

¶25. Bahá'u'lláh warns us that "the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison." "Material fire consumeth the body," He says in elaborating the point, "whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century." In tracing the framework of free speech, He again advises "moderation". "Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation", He states, adding: "As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets."

¶26. Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that, "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it."

¶27. Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgement, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences. Thus there exist in the system of Bahá'u'lláh checks and balances necessary to the beneficial uses of this freedom in the onward development of society. A careful examination of the principles of Bahá'í consultation and the formal and informal arrangements for employing them offer new insights into the dynamics of freedom of expression...

¶37. We return to the phenomenal characteristics of speech. Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously. Their efforts at such discipline will give birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race. Just as this discipline

applies to the spoken word, it applies equally to the written word; and it profoundly affects the operation of the press.

¶38. The significance and role of the press in a new world system are conspicuous in the emphasis which the Order of Bahá'u'lláh places on accessibility to information at all levels of society. Shoghi Effendi tells us that Bahá'u'lláh makes "specific reference to 'the swiftly appearing newspapers', describes them as 'the mirror of the world' and as 'an amazing and potent phenomenon', and prescribes to all who are responsible for their production the duty to be sanctified from malice, passion and prejudice, to be just and fair-minded, to be painstaking in their inquiries, and ascertain all the facts in every situation".

¶39. In His social treatise, "The Secret of Divine Civilization", 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers insight as to the indispensability of the press in future society. He says it is "urgent that beneficial articles and books be written, clearly and definitely establishing what the present-day requirements of the people are, and what will conduce to the happiness and advancement of society". Further, He writes of the "publication of high thoughts" as the "dynamic power in the arteries of life", "the very soul of the world". Moreover, He states that, "Public opinion must be directed toward whatever is worthy of this day, and this is impossible except through the use of adequate arguments and the adducing of clear, comprehensive and conclusive proofs."

¶40. As to manner and style, Bahá'u'lláh has exhorted "authors among the friends" to "write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people". And He issues a reminder: "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."

¶41. In the light of all this, the code of conduct of the press must embrace the principles and objectives of consultation as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. Only in this way will the press be able to make its full contribution to the preservation of the rights of the people and become a powerful instrument in the consultative processes of society, and hence for the unity of the human race.

This statement, from which selections have been cited, is deserving of a careful and systematic examination in its own stead. Suffice it to say that the guidance of the Universal House of Justice on this matter of the rights of the individual Bahá'í in the context of the Bahá'í community and in relation to wider society has many features that make it distinctive and dissimilar to that prevailing in Western secular society. But the fact of the matter is that all of the Bahá'í scholars cited in this study make their lives in Western secular society, and hence their awareness of their rights and responsibilities is conditioned largely by that society. Their participation in the Bahá'í community is only a part of their lives, and, for most Bahá'ís it is a sideshow and not the main attraction. That place is taken by family and work, social entertainments and obligations. And in the heart and mind of most Western Bahá'ís, the main attraction consists of those characteristics of personal identity that have been acquired over a lifetime, whilst Bahá'í identity is composed, in most cases, of ideas assimilated in early adulthood and elaborated over the course of subsequent decades. It is the fruits of that experience that have resulted in the views set forth here.

The right of the individual, to arrive at his own interpretations of the Word of God, and his own understanding of the teachings, together with the right of the individual to express his views, are fundamental underpinnings of the process of individual interpretation. Without a statement guaranteeing these two rights, to quote **Dann May**,

"it might be argued that the very existence of infallible interpretation within the Bahá'í Faith precludes or, at the very least, severely limits the sphere of individual interpretation."⁴⁶⁹ Shoghi Effendi has indicated that the individual must demonstrate "unqualified and whole-hearted loyalty to the revealed Word...be careful not to deviate, even a hair-breadth, from the Teachings...safeguard the purity of the principles, tenets and laws of the Faith"⁴⁷⁰; while the Universal House of Justice has affirmed that the individual must not "discard the authority of the revealed words" and "must at no time deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation". The Guardian indicated that no individual believer "has the right to impose his view or opinion and require his listeners to believe in his particular interpretation of the sacred and prophetic writings" and he felt that such interpretation "should be left to the personal judgment and insight of individual teachers."⁴⁷¹ Likewise, the Universal House of Justice indicated that "individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the Teachings...lack authority" and it advises that "in presenting their personal ideas, individuals are cautioned not...to engage in controversy; rather they should offer their thoughts as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that their views are merely their own."⁴⁷² To summarize the guidance from the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, individual interpretation and individual self-expression are not only permitted, but encouraged. That permission and that encouragement is not absolute, it is relative, and it is conditional upon the responsible exercise of these freedoms by the individual. If the individual violates the contract between himself and the Manifestation of God by misrepresenting or distorting the Bahá'í teachings, disobeying the Bahá'í institutions, flagrantly disregarding the moral and ethical strictures of the Faith, then he will be advised of the consequences of his actions. His freedoms will not be inhibited, but if he persists in violating that contract and misrepresenting himself as a Bahá'í and the Bahá'í Faith as a community and a body of teachings, his association with the Bahá'í community will be limited, and ultimately it may be severed. This is both for his protection, for his violation of this contract is extremely detrimental to his spiritual health, and for the protection of the Bahá'í community, institutions, and the Cause of God. For nothing can injure the Cause of God except the hypocritical behavior of those who claim to be its followers but whose actions do not agree with their words. Bahá'u'lláh affirmed this truth in *Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyih*, and reiterated it in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*:

My imprisonment doeth Me no harm, neither the tribulations I suffer, nor the things that have befallen Me at the hands of My oppressors. That which harmeth Me is the conduct of those who, though they bear My name, yet commit that which maketh My heart and My pen to lament.⁴⁷³

There is a widespread assumption in institutions of higher learning, located throughout the planet and based on the Western academic model, that religious texts can best be studied according to "scientific" criteria called "higher criticism", employing the so-called "historical-critical method". Higher criticism was originated in Germany by a group of Biblical scholars including "Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), who began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to analyze the historical records of the Middle East from Christian and Old Testament times, in search of independent confirmation of events related in the Bible. These ideas were taken to England by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and, in particular, by George Eliot's translations of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846) and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1854). *La Vie de Jésus* (1863), by a Frenchman, Ernest Renan (1823–1892), continued the same tradition. But three years earlier before

the appearance of *La Vie de Jésus*, liberal Anglican theologians had begun the process of incorporating this historical criticism into Christian doctrine in *Essays and Reviews* (1860). In Catholicism, *L'Evangile et l'Eglise* (1902), by Alfred Loisy, against the *Essence of Christianity* of Adolf von Harnack and less inspired than Renan, gave birth to the modernist crisis (1902–1961). Some scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann, have used higher criticism of the Bible to demythologize it."⁴⁷⁴

Higher criticism was already well established in many academic institutions and liberal Protestant seminaries by the early 20th century, when the Bahá'í Faith arrived from the Middle East. Since then higher criticism has become entrenched and virtually unassailable. The dissenters from the approach taken by higher criticism are generally considered to include fundamentalist Christians, Orthodox Jews and anti-Western Muslims. 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not refer to higher criticism in his Writings, but in at least two of his conversations with Westerners, the topic came up. Here is the record of the first of these conversations:

Question: How shall we determine the truth or error of certain biblical interpretation, as, for instance, the higher criticism and other present-day Christian teachings?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: Your question is an abstruse and important one. Complete answer to it would require a long time. I will reply to it briefly. The only true Explainer of the Book of God is the Holy Spirit, for no two minds are alike, no two can comprehend alike, no two can speak alike. That is to say, from the mere human standpoint of interpretation there could be neither truth nor agreement.⁴⁷⁵

Here we find 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterating a principle which has been discussed in detail in the first part of this essay. He clearly regarded higher criticism as a "*mere human standpoint of interpretation*". It is ironic that now that so many liberal Protestants, Catholics and Jews, and academic students of the Bible have embraced higher criticism, it has in large part taken the place of the "*Explainer of the Book of God*", and consequently those who adhere to this interpretive principle, of the binding judgment of "*the true Explainer*" are now perceived to be **causing** disagreements because they do not accept the consensus achieved through higher criticism. He continues, in the same talk:

Question: Do you approve of the new thought in which the control of mind over matter is the central principle?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: Philosophy develops the mind. Christ and the Word of God are revealed through the Spirit. Plato says, "The mental conclusions are so and so." Christ says, "Be led of the Spirit."⁴⁷⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates the authority of the Holy Spirit as arbiter of truth, and praises philosophy as effective for developing the "mind" but identifies the higher truth which results when we are "led of the Spirit." And he concludes with these words:

Question: Should children be allowed to read the higher criticism?

'Abdu'l-Bahá: They should first be taught the reality of religion as a foundation. For instance, in the Catholic Church the child is taught that through some act of the priest the bread and wine of the sacrament become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. The mind cannot accept this. The child must be taught that this transformation is symbolical of the truth that Christ is the food from heaven, the eating of which produces eternal life. The Jews had memorized the Bible but failed to grasp its meanings. If they had

understood the spiritual significances of the scriptures, they would have been the first believers in Christ. You are among the first believers in this country. You are the children of the Kingdom. Bahá'u'lláh has taught you the reality of religion. There are many of the Bahá'í friends in Persia whom we do not know, but we know you here in America. Turn your faces to the Sun of Reality. That Sun has always risen in the East. Find the answer to your questions in your heart. Be as little children. Until the soil is prepared, it cannot receive the benefit of planting.⁴⁷⁷

The implication of this response is that the answers are to be found in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and the expositions of those teachings by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and others who have "understood the spiritual significances of the scriptures", who have found answers to their questions in their hearts, by turning towards the source of knowledge--here, in their midst. This position is reiterated with particular clarity in the second conversation:

A. B. "Whom dost thou think Christ was?"

H. S. [Hans Springer] "I believe he was a great philosopher."

A. B. "Oh no! He was much greater than a philosopher. He was the Word of God, the Spirit of God."

H. S. "Whew! There are many scholars in Europe who do not believe that there was ever such a person as Christ. On the other hand there is an increasing host of people whose faith in Christianity is shaken because the ministers of the Gospel do not live in accord with the behests of their Master. They have become worldlings wrapped up in traditions and dogmas. When I was in Jerusalem, I observed that the Christians have divided the Church of the Resurrection into many sections, like a bazaar, and they are always engaged in acrimonious controversies and factional fights, while they claim Christ brought peace and salvation. Where can one find peace, and how can one be saved? Through their religious hatred for each other they have shut the door of salvation."

A. B. "What thou sagest is true. But we are not looking at the present conditions. Let us look at the glorious life of Christ and those sanctified souls who came after him. Did they not embody in their deeds the ideals of their words? There have appeared many philosophers in the world, but they are all forgotten. But because Christ was the Spirit and the Word of God, he and his disciples through him, became the fountains of the water of life. Now I hope that like unto them thou wilt be the means of the illumination of the world of humanity and serve God."⁴⁷⁸

In this conversation as well, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that the views of philosophers, like the philosophers themselves, do not last, whereas the teachings of the Manifestations are the truth and through these teachings souls become "*the means of the illumination of the world of humanity*". While not specifically addressing the higher criticism, he indicates through his comments that he does not regard this as a sufficient approach for becoming informed of the spiritual truths latent in the Word of God.

We return now to the commentaries by Bahá'í scholars on hermeneutics...

Dann May looks at individual interpretation, and seeks to discern "*principles of interpretation*" that might guide Bahá'í hermeneutics. He points out "*four common pitfalls*"-- "*the first is a tendency to overconceptualize or overanalyze a text or religious tradition*"; "*the second pitfall...on the one hand, a tendency to ignore the obvious meaning of the words, or on the other hand, to make unwarranted and extremely allegorical interpretations*"; "*the third pitfall is either to neglect or*

overemphasize the social and historical context of a particular tradition"; "the final pitfall is the tendency to interpret passages, especially obscure ones, out of context of in isolation from the larger body of canonical writings." (p. 43) He does not cite Bahá'í sources for these four pitfalls, and it is not at all obvious that such sources exist. May proceeds directly to a consideration of the principles of interpretation he derives from the Bahá'í Writings (pp. 42-51): (1)"religious texts contain multiple meanings"; (2)"the symbolic and mythological character of religious language"; (3)"the role of science and reason in the interpretive process"; (4)"the progressive and relative nature of religious truth"; (5) "the twofold nature of religion"; (6)"the problem of personal biases and presuppositions"; (7)"the independent investigation of reality"; (8)"interpretive moderation". May then demonstrates a Bahá'í exegesis, finding "three steps...in the Bahá'í interpretation" of a passage from the Book of Isaiah. "The first step involves the use of reason and scientific knowledge to question the literal meaning...The second step involves a symbolic interpretation...The third and final step entails a 'Bahá'í-centric' interpretation" (pp. 51-52). May concludes with affirming that the eight principles "certainly constitute some of the most important ones"; that "individual interpretation is repeatedly encouraged within the Bahá'í writings"; that "we must interpret not only religious texts and sacred writings but also beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and ceremonies"; "the eight principles of interpretation...function interdependently and in concert with each other...we should develop and integrated and balanced approach...avoiding the extreme or excessive use of one principle over the others"; "we should consider all interpretations warranted by the text"; "religious language primarily communicates a vision or interpretation of life...often clothed in symbolic language and embedded in mythological narratives that must be reinterpreted in every age." (p. 53)

Michael Sours does not discuss a variety of interpretive principles, nor enumerate pitfalls. He introduces one interpretive principle--"sound theology is essential to correct interpretation"--and "suggests that there may be numerous ways to interpret a Scriptural passage or verse, all of which can legitimately be considered correct, but the strength of any given interpretation would depend on whether or not it consciously or unconsciously yielded meanings that reflect the true reality of God's nature." He proceeds then to argue that all of Bahá'u'lláh's interpretations of Scripture are symbolic and multivalent. "The laws of Bahá'u'lláh are the only category that fall within a single interpretive approach; that being literal. However, even here one person's literal interpretation may differ from another person." Sours seems to agree with May's first principle of interpretation, namely, "religious texts contain multiple meanings" and his second principle, "the symbolic and mythological character of religious language". His exegesis however, is markedly different in approach to that employed by May.

Seena Fazel and **Khazeh Fananapazir** specifically address the literal and symbolic interpretations of Scripture employed by Bahá'u'lláh. They point out that "even when the evident meaning is sought, the implication is not necessarily the literal." No examples are cited, and in the absence of such, it seems that the authors did not have enough confidence in the idea to demonstrate its reasonableness, let alone its Scriptural justification. They define *ta'wil* as "an esoteric interpretation allowing for many flights of individual fancy" and indicate that Bahá'u'lláh did not approve of this method, but that he was in support of *tafsir*, which they define as "a formal, legitimate interpretation of Scripture". The only parallel to this point in the previously considered papers is in May's indication that individual interpretations should follow the principle of moderation. Insofar as *ta'wil* is known for its immoderacy, there is a parallel. F&F speak of authoritative versus individual interpretation, affirm that there are no real contradictions within the Bahá'í canon, and that the Bahá'í canon must

be studied and interpreted in light of reading "in the context of the whole of the Revelation". They conclude in calling for "balance between literal and metaphorical approaches"; refer to the "vital role of the authorized interpretations"; "suggest that the stylistic use of exaggerated emphasis may contribute to a fuller understanding of Bahá'í Scripture..."

Jack McLean speaks of "derivative theology" and defines it as "the subjective, relative, and nonbinding elucidation of Bahá'í teachings by competent scholars. Subjective here means that the commentary is particular to the viewpoint of the writer and becomes objective only where a common consensus exists as to its validity." He writes that "all Bahá'í theology, whether source or derivative can be subdivided into three categories: the doctrinal, the ethical, and mystical (God Passes By 140). The bulk of theological writing to date, however, falls almost entirely into the doctrinal category. Very little commentary exists on the ethical dimension (moral theology)...Moreover, little has been written by Bahá'í scholars on mysticism. Theology is also concerned with the processes of history and with God's revelation and final purpose (eschatology) within history." Unlike May, Sours, Fazel and Fananapazir, McLean defines the practitioners of individual interpretation as "competent scholars", and also unlike them, he indicates that the viewpoint of the individual become "objective only where a common consensus exists as to its validity." He is guardedly approving of the "relativity pole of the discussion among practitioners of interreligious dialogue", stating that "religious relativity acts then as a bulwark against the one-way interpretation of dogmatism; implies that religious truth although fundamentally one, is progressive, dynamic, infinite, and ever-changing; and allows us to accept various interpretations of metaphysical and theological questions, which would on the surface appear to be incompatible. It is thus an ally of a more inclusive view of reality, one that allows for diversity of approaches. The relativity of religious truth also has strong implications for establishing some measure of unity between science and religion or philosophy, one of the most meaningful and potentially fruitful questions in our time." This appreciation for and seeming adoption of religious relativism by McLean is found also in Dann May's "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity and the Challenge of Radical Pluralism"⁴⁷⁹, and in Moojan Momen's "Relativism: A Basis For Bahá'í Metaphysics"⁴⁸⁰, and in various other publications. It should be pointed out that while May does not espouse either the election of the "competent scholar" nor a full-blown relativism in his article on Bahá'í hermeneutics, in his Master's Thesis he seems to favor both. Sours, Fazel and Fananapazir have not published papers that would enable us to specify their views on these two topics.

Juan Cole's "Commentary" on "Interpretation in the Bahá'í Faith" is focused largely on the varieties of individual interpretation, which he describes as "figurative interpretation, formal exegesis, and academic writing". Cole writes that "individual interpretation is not supposed to contradict the clear text of the Bahá'í scriptures. Still, not all texts are clear. And the authorization of diverse individual interpretations seems to be a recognition that religious truth is difficult to standardize. This leeway for individual interpretation seems to me to accord better with postmodern conceptions of knowledge as fragmented, discontinuous and local than with Enlightenment conceptions of a single rationalist master narrative...All in all, the corpus of official interpretation helps Bahá'ís understand important aspects of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, but leaves wide scope for continuing investigation of the holy writ by individuals." As for the previous writers, Cole sees a wide range of interpretive possibilities of the Bahá'í hermeneut, and he is very much in favor of what McLean called "religious relativism". While he does not indicate that figurative interpretation (*ta'wil*) requires specialized training and knowledge, Cole writes

that "another approach to understanding scripture is formal scripture commentary or exegesis (*tafsir*), which strives to be less subjective and which is best accomplished with a knowledge of the original languages in which scripture was written, their grammar, technical terms, and cultural background...Exegesis requires technical linguistic and philological skills, and its Bahá'í practitioners fall into the category of learned in Bahá', who were so praised by Bahá'u'lláh."

The "learned in Bahá'" are praised by Bahá'u'lláh in Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Lawh-i-Hikmat and Kitáb-i-'Ahd:

Happy are ye, O ye the learned ones in Bahá. By the Lord! Ye are the billows of the Most Mighty Ocean, the stars of the firmament of Glory, the standards of triumph waving betwixt earth and heaven. Ye are the manifestations of steadfastness amidst men and the daysprings of Divine Utterance to all that dwell on earth. Well is it with him that turneth unto you, and woe betide the froward. This day, it behoveth whoso hath quaffed the Mystic Wine of everlasting life from the Hands of the loving-kindness of the Lord his God, the Merciful, to pulsate even as the throbbing artery in the body of mankind, that through him may be quickened the world and every crumbling bone.⁴⁸¹

Abase not the station of the learned in Bahá and belittle not the rank of such rulers as administer justice amidst you.⁴⁸²

Blessed are the rulers and the learned among the people of Bahá. They are My trustees among My servants and the manifestations of My commandments amidst My people. Upon them rest My glory, My blessings and My grace which have pervaded the world of being. In this connection the utterances revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are such that from the horizon of their words the light of divine grace shineth luminous and resplendent.⁴⁸³

The "learned in Bahá'" have an exalted station, and hence Cole's statement that the Bahá'í practitioners of exegesis "*fall into the category of learned in Bahá'*" is an affirmation of great import. In a letter in Persian dated 4 November 1931 and cited in a letter written by the Universal House of Justice, Shoghi Effendi defines the "learned in Bahá'" in referring to the passage cited from Kitáb-i-'Ahd:

In this holy cycle the "learned" are, on the one hand, the Hands of the Cause of God, and, on the other, the teachers and diffusers of His teachings who do not rank as Hands, but who have attained an eminent position in the teaching work. As to the "rulers" they refer to the members of the Local, National and International Houses of Justice. The duties of each of these souls will be determined in the future.⁴⁸⁴

There is no indication, on the other hand, in the authoritative literature of the Faith, that the "learned in Bahá'" are academic or amateur scholars. In fact, the Hands of the Cause, and the Counselors and Auxiliary Board Members who have been appointed in their stead by the Universal House of Justice, are not selected because of their "*technical linguistic and philological skills*" or for other specialized learning. On the contrary, in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice it is stated:

Collateral with His summons to the pursuit of knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh has abolished entirely that feature of all past religions by which a special caste of persons such as the

Christian priesthood or the Islamic `ulama came to exercise authority over the religious understanding and practice of their fellow believers. In a letter written in Persian on his behalf to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the Guardian is at some pains to underline the importance of this marked departure from past religious history: "But praise be to God that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men, and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies."⁴⁸⁵

‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated this principle in Lawh-i-Bayt-ul-‘Adl-‘Azam va ‘Úsúl-i-Qadá’í:

Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.⁴⁸⁶

Cole describes Bahá'í exegetes as having "*technical and philological skills*" and then indicates that "*although I have included some recent works by Bahá'í academics in Western universities under the rubric of formal scripture commentary, the academic approach is in fact a new and distinct set of methodologies...Contemporary academic scholarship takes advantage of all the advances in historical linguistics, in sociology and anthropology, and in modern historiographical technique, which pays special attention to weighting sources, to forms of textual analysis, to the hermeneutic circle, to contextualization, and to change over time.*" It is very clear to the reader that Cole regards academic approaches to the study of the Bahá'í Writings as the most modern, the best suited to the present and future, and the most deserving of readers. Cole's view is neither in harmony with the authoritative position of the Guardian nor with the elucidation and legislative expansion of the institution of the learned by the Universal House of Justice. In one of its letters on the subject of scholarship, the Universal House of Justice authorized the following statement:

Finally, it is no doubt helpful to keep in mind that Bahá'ís who are trained in various academic disciplines do not constitute a discrete body within the community. While the Bahá'í institutions benefit on an ongoing basis from the advice of believers in many fields of specialization, there is obviously no group of academics who can claim to speak on behalf of Bahá'í scholars generally. Scholarly qualifications enable individuals to make greatly valued contributions to the work of the Cause, but do not set those possessing them apart from the general body of the believers.⁴⁸⁷

McLean stated that the commentary of an individual Bahá'í writer "*becomes objective only where a common consensus exists as to its validity.*"⁴⁸⁸ If by this McLean means that the interpretation of an individual scholar only becomes "*objective*" when it is generally accepted, then he seems to be in agreement with Cole, who writes "*Bahá'í scriptural commentary by individuals can gain popularity only by convincing its audience, not by being imposed from*

above." In both cases, the authors assume that the popularity of the views of an individual are a determining factor for them becoming objectified. 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicated that a diversification of views among learned individuals "*would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion...the oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.*"⁴⁸⁹ It would not be appropriate, therefore, for an individual scholar to seek to convince his fellow believers of his point of view, nor would the consensus regarding a particular view among scholars or among believers constitute a formal endorsement of that view. The scholar is advised, as was demonstrated earlier, to share his views with others, but without seeking to convince them, for "*the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority*"⁴⁹⁰ and he may likewise submit his "*deductions and conclusions*" to the Universal House of Justice, for if they "*have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice*", then, if they are endorsed by the House of Justice, they have authority. The seat of authority is not located in the scholar, but rather in the House of Justice.

Cole comments on another matter that is not addressed by the other writers on Bahá'í hermeneutics. He states that "*when 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi both commented on an issue, they did not always give the same interpretation.*" He then elaborates in a footnote his opinion that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave one interpretation of a Biblical and Qur'anic story, which he alleges was contradicted by the Shoghi Effendi's secretary. This supposed conflict can be very easily harmonized, by the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá allowed for both the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic version of the story, whereas the Guardian indicated that the Islamic version was normative for Bahá'ís. These represent foci on an arc of interpretation, which ultimately demonstrate two points--the one that the more recent divine Revelation gives a more accurate depiction of events in sacred history, and that the meaning behind this story in both versions is one and the same (which represents the progressive revelation of the meaning of the Biblical and Qur'anic narratives).

Fazel and Fananapazir discuss apparent contradictions in the Bahá'í canon, and cite Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice on the topic. In the following passages, the Guardian addresses the reconciliation of these apparent contradictions:

We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two. That is what makes our Faith so flexible and well balanced. For instance there are calamities for testing and for punishment—there are also accidents, plain cause and effect!⁴⁹¹

These various statements must be taken in conjunction with all the Bahá'í teachings; we cannot get a correct picture by concentrating on just one phrase.⁴⁹²

He feels that many of the perplexities that arise in your mind could be dissipated if you always conceived of the teachings as one great whole with many facets. Truth may, in covering different subjects, appear to be contradictory, and yet it is all one if you carry the thought through to the end. For instance the statement on life after death and the condition of believers and non-believers, you might say that a wonderful believer is alike a diamond blazing in the sun, an unawakened soul like one in a dark room. But we must couple this concept with the other part of the teachings, that God's Mercy exceeds His

Justice, and that soul can progress in the world beyond; the unilluminated soul can become brilliant.⁴⁹³

Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply. One might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them...⁴⁹⁴

We must never take one sentence in the Teachings and isolate it from the rest: it does not mean we must not love, but we must reach a spiritual plane where God comes first and great human passions are unable to turn us away from Him. All the time we see people who either through the force of hate or the passionate attachment they have to another person, sacrifice principle or bar themselves from the Path of God.

We know absence of light is darkness, but no one would assert darkness was not a fact. It exists even though it is only the absence of something else. So evil exists too, and we cannot close our eyes to it, even though it is a negative existence. We must seek to supplant it by good, and if we see an evil person is not influenceable by us, then we should shun his company for it is unhealthy.⁴⁹⁵

The Universal House of Justice has affirmed the same principle:

In attempting to understand the Writings, therefore, one must first realise that there is and can be no real contradiction in them, and in light of this we can confidently seek the unity of meaning which they contain.⁴⁹⁶

When these issues are approached with an understanding of the unity underlying all the Teachings, clarification results. Should the seeker, however, be influenced by a spirit of mistrust and conflict, then unending problems appear.⁴⁹⁷

In considering the second passage we must once more hold fast to the principle that the teachings do not contradict themselves.⁴⁹⁸

In view of this principle, which Bahá'í scholarship has not yet developed in any direction, it would appear that Cole's opposition of a statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a statement made on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, and his comment that "*such discrepancies...suggest the need for the development of a hermeneutical approach even to authoritative interpretive comments*"⁴⁹⁹.

It is in response to Cole's vociferous expression of his views, in communication with other scholars with similar training, that the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice wrote, on 7 April 1999:

As a number of the friends are aware, a campaign of internal opposition to the Teachings is currently being carried on through the use of the Internet, a communications system that now reaches virtually every part of the world. Differing from attacks familiar in the past, it seeks to recast the entire Faith into a socio-political ideology alien to Bahá'u'lláh's intent. In the place of the institutional authority established by His Covenant, it **promotes a kind of interpretive authority which those behind it attribute to the views of persons technically trained in Middle East studies.**

Early in 1996, the deliberate nature of the plan was revealed in an accidental posting to an Internet list which Bahá'í subscribers had believed was dedicated to scholarly

exploration of the Cause. Some of the people responsible resigned from the Faith when Counsellors pointed out to them the direction their activities were taking. A small number of others continue to promote the campaign within the Bahá'í community.

In the past, in situations of a somewhat similar nature, the patience and compassion shown by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian helped various believers who had been misled by ill-intentioned persons to eventually free themselves from such entanglements. In this same spirit of forbearance the Universal House of Justice has intervened in the current situation only to the extent that has been unavoidable, trusting to the good sense and the goodwill of the believers involved to awaken to the spiritual dangers to which they are exposing themselves. Nevertheless, certain Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies are monitoring the problem closely, and the friends can be confident that whatever further steps are needed to protect the integrity of the Cause will be taken.

As passages in the enclosed reprint make clear, this campaign of internal opposition-while purporting to accept the legitimacy of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice as twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and the Centre of His Covenant-attempts to cast doubt on the nature and scope of the authority conferred on them in the Writings. When other Bahá'ís have pointed out that such arguments contradict explicit statements of the Master, persons behind the scheme have responded by calling into question the soundness of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own judgement and perspective. Gradually, these arguments have exposed the view of those involved that **Bahá'u'lláh Himself was not the voice of God to our age but merely a particularly enlightened moral philosopher, one whose primary concern was to reform existing society.**

By itself, such opposition would likely stand little chance of influencing reasonably informed Bahá'ís. As one of the letters in the enclosed reprint (20 July 1997) points out, the scheme relies for effect, therefore, on exploiting the confusion created in modern thought by the reigning doctrines of materialism. Although the reality of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history are the very essence of the teachings of the Founders of the revealed religions, dogmatic materialism today insists that even the nature of religion itself can be adequately understood only through the use of an academic methodology designed to ignore the truths that make religion what it is. In general, the strategy being pursued has been to avoid direct attacks on the Faith's Central Figures. The effort, rather, has been to sow the seeds of doubt among believers about the Faith's teachings and institutions by appealing to unexamined prejudices that Bahá'ís may have unconsciously absorbed from non-Bahá'í society. In defiance of the clear interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, for example, Bahá'u'lláh's limiting of membership on the Universal House of Justice to men is misrepresented as merely a [1]"temporary measure" subject to eventual revision if sufficient pressure is brought to bear. Similarly, Shoghi Effendi's explanation of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the future Bahá'í World Commonwealth that will unite spiritual and civil authority is dismissed in favour of the assertion that the modern political concept of [2]"separation of church and state" is somehow one that Bahá'u'lláh intended as a basic principle of the World Order He has founded. Particularly subtle is an attempt to suggest that the [3]Mashriqu'l-Adhkar should evolve into a seat of quasi-doctrinal authority, parallel to and essentially independent of the Local House of Justice, which would permit various interests to insinuate themselves into the direction of the life processes of the Cause.

Typically, when misrepresentations of the kind described are challenged, the reaction of those behind the campaign has been to claim that their civil rights are being threatened, an assertion that is of course meaningless in the light of the purely voluntary nature of Bahá'í membership. Much emphasis is placed by them also on academic freedom, their view of which proves, on examination, to be merely freedom on their part to pervert scholarly discourse to the promotion of their own ideological agenda, while seeking to exclude from discussion features of the Bahá'í Faith that are central to the Writings of its Founders.

The effect of continued exposure to such insincerity about matters vital to humanity's well-being is spiritually corrosive. When we encounter minds that are closed and hearts that are darkened by evident malice, Bahá'u'lláh urges that we leave such persons to God and turn our attention to the opportunities which multiply daily for the promotion of the truths which He teaches. In words written at the direction of the Guardian, regarding a situation similar to, though much less serious than, the present one, "...the friends should be advised to just leave these people alone, for their influence can be nothing but negative and destructive...."

The enclosed material is being sent to your Assembly less out of concern over the immediate situation, which is being systematically addressed, than because of longer-term considerations to which it lends perspective. What we are currently seeing, in a relatively primitive form, is the emergence of a new kind of internal opposition to Bahá'u'lláh's Mission. While it will no doubt assume other features as time passes, it is a kind of opposition that takes aim directly at Bahá'u'lláh's assertion of the spiritual nature of reality and of humanity's dependence on the interventions of Divine Revelation.

Developments of the kind described will come as no surprise to friends who are familiar with the Guardian's description of the successive waves of "crisis" and "victory" that have marked the history of the Faith ever since its inception. It is precisely this cyclical process, Shoghi Effendi says, that has propelled the steady unfoldment of Bahá'u'lláh's intent, testing our commitment to His Teachings, purifying His community, and releasing a greater measure of the capacities latent in His Revelation. That resistance to Bahá'u'lláh should now be emerging in yet a new guise is itself a tribute to the gathering strength of the Cause, offering the friends everywhere new opportunities for the deepening of their faith and the energizing of their work.⁵⁰⁰

CONCLUSIONS

As was stated at the onset of this paper, all of the scholars who have written about Bahá'í hermeneutics, including those cited above, were at one time or another, enrolled members of the Bahá'í community. Several of these scholars, including Dann May, Sen McGlinn, Steven Scholl and Juan Ricardo Cole were no longer enrolled as Bahá'ís as of 2009, and all but one of these (Sen McGlinn) are no longer active in the field of Bábí and Bahá'í Studies to which they contributed in the past. Others, including Khazeh Fananapazir, Seena Fazel, Jack McLean, Robert Parry and Michael Sours are still enrolled in the community but are also no longer currently active in the field of Bábí and Bahá'í Studies. In fact, only one of those listed here is still very active in the field, Dr. Christopher Buck. This is a very significant development, inasmuch as there were so few writing about Bahá'í hermeneutics two decades ago, and the trail has gone cold.

Perhaps the next generation of Bahá'í scholars will adhere more closely to the authoritative interpretations depicted above. The academy has become much more tolerant and even encouraging of those scholars who choose to write from a faith-based perspective, to eschew or to adapt the higher criticism that predominated in the academic study of religion the 20th century so as to make it more compatible with traditional religious convictions. At the same time, the academy is also championing multiculturalism and interdisciplinary studies, and both of these trends bode well for reducing and even eliminating the cognitive dissonance that characterized the work of many academics in Bábí and Bahá'í Studies during the time period featured in this study. This speaks to the challenges of Bahá'ís who engage in theological and philosophical inquiries and particularly those related to historical studies. On the other hand, in the coming decades there may well be a proliferation of academic scholars who will, independent of any Bahá'í affiliation, enter into a profound study of the Bahá'í teachings, texts and history. If this occurs, these scholars will employ methodologies not anticipated by the Author and subsequent leaders of the Bahá'í Faith. They will not be compelled, out of loyalty to their community of faith, to adapt such methodologies to the understanding of their co-religionists and to avoid conflicts with the directives of their religious leaders. What new understandings will emerge is not yet known. What is known is that if these methodologies take students of this young religion beyond the unsustainable and alienating dichotomies depicted here, they will no doubt be welcomed by believers and non-believers alike. In the end, culture wars yield more fire than light...and regardless of where we find ourselves, all of us are seeking light.

THE END

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¹ Bahá'u'lláh, the formal designation for Mírzá Husayn-‘Alí Núrí (1817-1892), founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the formal designation for ‘Abbas Effendi, appointed by Bahá'u'lláh in Kitáb-i-‘Ahd to serve as leader of the Bahá'í community after his death.

³ Shoghi Effendi, formally designated as “the Guardian”, was appointed by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in his Will and Testament to serve as the leader of the Bahá'í community after his passing, and, in his stead, to appoint the subsequent “Guardian”. A series of male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh was envisioned to serve as supreme leaders of the Bahá'ís for the foreseeable future.

⁴ Universal House of Justice (baytu'l-‘adl umumi) is the “supreme court” of the Bahá'ís, whose nine male members were elected for the first time in April 1963, five and a half years after the decease of Shoghi Effendi. While a council of Hands of the Cause governed the Bahá'í community between the two events, they were not authorized to legislate or elucidate but only to administer. Hence, it is the communications of the Universal House of Justice which have continued the function of authoritative interpretation in the context of the Bahá'í community. This is only valid in that context. Those who are not members of that community are not likely to regard such elucidations as normative for understanding the intentions of Bahá'u'lláh, or of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi.

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¹⁶ "Symbol and Secret, Qur'án Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán," Chapter III, 'Beyond Islam: Hermeneutical Terminology in the Kitáb-i-Íqán,' Kalimat Press, 1995 [<http://bahai-library.com/books/symbol.secret/3.html>]

¹⁷ "Commentary on Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir's 'Some interpretive principles in the Bahá'í Writings,'" Bahá'í Studies Review, 7, 1997 [http://bahai-library.com/mcglinn_interpretive_principles.html]

¹⁸ Imámí Shí'í refers to the Ithná 'Asharí Shí'í tradition of Islam, which recognizes twelve [ithná 'asharí in Arabic] Imáms descended from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, as having the spiritual authority conferred upon them by Muhammad to interpret the Qur'án, the hadith, and to provide divine guidance to Muslims after the passing of the Messenger of God. This tradition of Islam is predominant in Iran, and parts of 'Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan.

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys (SV)*, p. 39

²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 172

²¹ *Tablets* is the English translation of the Arabic term [lawh in singular, alwah is plural] used to identify many of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

²² Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas (K)*, paragraph 102 (K102); *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf (ESW)*, p. 129

²³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, Súriy-i-Haykal, #88*

²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (TB)*, p. 235

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers (DB)*, p. 533

²⁶ *TB*, p. 245

²⁷ *KI*, pp. 146-147

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209

²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (GL)*, #XXXV:84-85

³⁰ *GL:LXXXIX:176-177*

³¹ *GL:C:204-205*

³² *KI:17*

³³ *GL:LXXXIX:177*

³⁴ *KI:#34*

³⁵ *KI:#35*

³⁶ *KI:#42*

³⁷ *GL:LXXXIX:176-177*

³⁸ *GL:C:204-205*

³⁹ *KI:151-152*

⁴⁰ *KI:184*

⁴¹ *GL:LXXV:144*

⁴² *GL:C:204-205*

⁴³ *TB:211*

⁴⁴ *GL:LXXXIX:177*

⁴⁵ *KI:182*

⁴⁶ *KI:213*

⁴⁷ *KI:149*

⁴⁸ References to the Manifestation of God as the Point are found in the following Writings: *BF:I:15; II:11,12,13,15,16; III:1,7,8,10,12,13; IV:1,12; V:3; VIII:2,5*
References to Muhammad as the Point of the Qur'án are found in the following Writings:

BF:I:15;IV:18;VIII:2;KI:152-153; GL:51

References to the Bab as the Point, the Primal Point, the Point of the Bayan and the Point of Knowledge are found in the following Writings:

BF:I:15;II:4,7,9,12,15,17;III:13,17;IV:12,18;V:16;VI:1VIII:2,4,17;IX:2,3;KA:65,70,109,116,117, 136; TB:51,65,75,77,101,102,103,124,161,182,184,185; KI:135,160,161,252;

PM:84,299-300; ESW:88,142,151,154,159,162,165,166-167,167,168,175,176,177

References to Bahá'u'lláh as the Point are found in the following Writings:

PB:29,93; GL:113; ESW:157 (in reference to BF:IV:5;VI:3;VII:10)

⁴⁹ Athar-i-Qala-i-A'la (AQA):III:117; SV:24-25

⁵⁰ AQA:III:155; SV:63

⁵¹ KI:184

⁵² GL:LXXXVIII:171-172

⁵³ KI:255

⁵⁴ KI:256-257

⁵⁵ K53

⁵⁶ GL:CXXIX:281)

⁵⁷ KI:24

⁵⁸ Lawh-i-Ahmad, Bahá'í Prayers: 210-211

⁵⁹ TB:41

⁶⁰ TB:186

⁶¹ TB:211

⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterated this principle in one of his talks: "God sent His Prophets into the world to teach and enlighten man, to explain to him the mystery of the Power of the Holy Spirit, to enable him to reflect the Light, and so in his turn, to be the source of guidance to others. The Heavenly Books, the Bible, the Qur'án, and the other Holy Writings have been given by God as guides into the paths of Divine virtue, love, justice and peace. Therefore I say unto you that ye should strive to follow the counsels of these Blessed Books, and so order your lives that ye may, following the examples set before you, become yourselves the saints of the Most High!" (Paris Talks, pp. 61-62)

⁶³ KI:88-90

⁶⁴ KI:143-144

⁶⁵ KI:198-199

⁶⁶ KI:200-201

⁶⁷ KI:201-202

⁶⁸ KI:202

⁶⁹ KI:203-204

⁷⁰ KI:204

⁷¹ KI:205

⁷² KI:206-207

⁷³ KI:209-210

⁷⁴ KI:219-220

⁷⁵ KI:227

⁷⁶ Source texts for this Bahá'í doctrine: “Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of **successive Revelations** that hath linked the Manifestation of Adam with that of the Báb. I testify before God that each one of these Manifestations hath been sent down through the operation of the Divine Will and Purpose, that each hath been the bearer of a specific Message, that each hath been entrusted with a divinely-revealed Book and been commissioned to unravel the mysteries of a mighty Tablet. The measure of the Revelation with which every one of them hath been identified had been definitely fore-ordained. This, verily, is a token of Our favor unto them, if ye be of those that comprehend this truth....And when this process of **progressive Revelation** culminated in the stage at which His peerless, His most sacred, and exalted Countenance was to be unveiled to men's eyes, He chose to hide His own Self behind a thousand veils, lest profane and mortal eyes discover His glory.” (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, XXXI (74-75) “Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that **Divine Revelation is progressive**, not final.” (Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 58) “The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh should indeed be regarded, if we wish to be faithful to the tremendous implications of its message, as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in **a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations.**” (Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 102) “...the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that **Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive** and not spasmodic or final.” (Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 115) “Just as the organic evolution of mankind has been slow and gradual, and involved successively the unification of the family, the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, so has the light vouchsafed by the Revelation of God, at various stages in the evolution of religion, and reflected in **the successive Dispensations of the past, been slow and progressive.** Indeed the measure of Divine Revelation, in every age, has been adapted to, and commensurate with, the degree of social progress achieved in that age by a constantly evolving humanity.” (Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come, p. 118) “The first part of this process was the slow and steady growth of this tree of divine revelation, successively putting forth its branches, shoots and offshoots, and revealing its leaves, buds and blossoms, as a direct consequence of the light and warmth imparted to it by **a series of progressive dispensations** associated with Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and other Prophets, and of the vernal showers of blood shed by countless martyrs in their path.” (Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Bahá'í World - 1950-1957, p. 153)

⁷⁷Sources for this Bahá'í doctrine: "And now regarding His words, that the Son of man shall "come in the clouds of heaven." By the term "clouds" is meant those things that are contrary to the ways and desires of men. Even as He hath revealed in the verse already quoted: "As oft as an Apostle cometh unto you with that which your souls desire not, ye swell with pride, accusing some of being impostors and slaying others." [Qur'án 2:87] These "clouds" signify, in one sense, the annulment of laws, the abrogation of former Dispensations, the repeal of rituals and customs current amongst men, the exalting of the illiterate faithful above the learned opposers of the Faith." (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 71-72) "In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad the Messenger of God the Qur'án; in this day the Bayan; and in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book -- the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme." (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 199-200)

⁷⁸(Bayán-i-farsí, II:4,6;III:2,15;IV:2,4;V4;VII:5;VIII:1

⁷⁹ KI:199-200

⁸⁰ ESW:154-155

⁸¹ K38

⁸² K53

⁸³ KI:199-200

⁸⁴ K99; ESW:128; BWF:58; GL:198

⁸⁵ K148

⁸⁶ K183

⁸⁷ K186

⁸⁸ Bisharat, TB:27

⁸⁹ Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih, TB:68

⁹⁰ Ishraqat, TB:128

⁹¹ Ishraqat, TB:129

⁹² Ishraqat, TB:130

⁹³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 201

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 201-202

⁹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in "Lights of Guidance," 1988, #1431

⁹⁶ "Some Answered Questions" is a collection of questions posed by the American Bahá'í Laura Clifford-Barney, whose married name was Dreyfus, and who transcribed, organized and translated Persian utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá over the course of two years (1904-1906) into English, assisted by her husband, Hippolyte Dreyfus, French Bahá'í scholar and author.

⁹⁷ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to US Publishing Committee, dated 29 December 1931, in "Lights of Guidance," 1988, #1435

⁹⁸ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to individual believer, 18 November 1931, in "Lights of Guidance," 1988, #1437

⁹⁹ Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani, "Burhan-i-Lami'" [The Brilliant Proof], translated from Persian into English by 'Ali Quli-Khan, Kalimat Press, 1998, pp. 44-46

¹⁰⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Lawh-i-Mubárák dar bárih-yi tavárikh-i-falásifah", 1906: 'Abdu'l-Bahá writing in response to the questions of Miss Ethel J. Rosenberg. This Tablet is found in its original Persian text in "Má'idiy-i-Ásmání" (volume II, pp. 64-67/68-71), and in English translation, by the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, in "Ethel Jenner Rosenberg: The Life and Times of England's Outstanding Bahá'í Pioneer Worker," Robert Weinberg (George Ronald, Oxford, 1995, pp. 78-81).

¹⁰¹ Letter written on behalf of the Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 15 February 1926

¹⁰² From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 16 April 1951

¹⁰³ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, dated 22 April 1954

¹⁰⁴ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 14 March 1955

¹⁰⁵ Letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated 21 July 1968

¹⁰⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 104

¹⁰⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 36

¹⁰⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K101; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 129

¹⁰⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K102

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, K167

¹¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 211

¹¹² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 199-202

¹¹³ *Qur'án Suratu'l-Baqara* [2:23]

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 204-205

¹¹⁵ From a Tablet written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá; in Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File (Compiler Helen Hornby; New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), #147

¹¹⁶ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the United States Publishing Committee, December 29, 1931; Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File (Compiler Helen Hornby; New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), #1435

¹¹⁷ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, November 18, 1931; Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File (Compiler Helen Hornby; New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), #1437

¹¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 70

¹¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 167

¹²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 168

¹²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 175-176

¹²² Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 80

¹²³ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 217

¹²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams, in Gleanings, XXXXIX, p. 176

¹²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams, in Gleanings, XXXXIX, p. 176

¹²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i-Ahmad (Arabic), in Bahá'í Prayers, pp. 210-211

¹²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 24

¹²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 221

¹²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, Tarazat, in TB, p. 41

¹³⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyih, in TB, p. 74)

¹³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Suriy-i-Vafa, in TB, p. 186

¹³² Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i-Burhan, in TB, p. 211

¹³³ Qur'án, Suratu'l-'Imram [III:6-7], consulting translations by Sher 'Ali and Yusuf Ali

¹³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, TB, p. 210; Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 97

¹³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 118

¹³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 168-169

¹³⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 110

¹³⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 112

¹³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 134

¹⁴⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 289

¹⁴¹ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, pp. 138, 139, 140

¹⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 254-255; Persian: <http://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/b/KI/ki-184.html>

¹⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 210-211.

¹⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K105; Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 129

¹⁴⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 86-89:

This is one of the instances that have been referred to. Verily by “perverting” the text is not meant that which these foolish and abject souls have fancied, even as some maintain that Jewish and Christian divines have effaced from the Book such verses as extol and magnify the countenance of Muhammad, and instead thereof have inserted the contrary. How utterly vain and false are these words! Can a man who believeth in a book, and deemeth it to be inspired by God, mutilate it? Moreover, the Pentateuch had been spread over the surface of the earth, and was not confined to Mecca and Medina, so that they could privily corrupt and pervert its text. Nay, rather, by corruption of the text is meant that in which all Muslim divines are engaged today, that is the interpretation of God’s holy Book in accordance with their idle imaginings and vain desires. And as the Jews, in the time of Muhammad, interpreted those verses of the Pentateuch, that referred to His Manifestation, after their own fancy, and refused to be satisfied with His holy utterance, the charge of “perverting” the text was therefore pronounced against them. Likewise, it is clear, how in this day, the people of the Qur’án have perverted the text of God’s holy Book, concerning the signs of the expected Manifestation, and interpreted it according to their inclination and desires.

In yet another instance, He saith: “A part of them heard the Word of God, and then, after they had understood it, distorted it, and knew that they did so.”[Qur’án 2:75] This verse, too, doth indicate that the meaning of the Word of God hath been perverted, not that the actual words have been effaced. To the truth of this testify they that are sound of mind.

Again in another instance, He saith: “Woe unto those who, with their own hands, transcribe the Book corruptly, and then say: ‘This is from God,’ that they may sell it for some mean price.”[Qur’án 2:79] This verse was revealed with reference to the divines and leaders of the Jewish Faith. These divines, in order to please the rich, acquire worldly emoluments, and give vent to their envy and misbelief, wrote a number of treatises, refuting the claims of Muhammad, supporting their arguments with such evidences as it would be improper to mention, and claimed that these arguments were derived from the text of the Pentateuch.

The same may be witnessed today. Consider how abundant are the denunciations written by the foolish divines of this age against this most wondrous Cause! How vain their imaginings that these calumnies are in conformity with the verses of God’s sacred Book, and in consonance with the utterances of men of discernment!

Our purpose in relating these things is to warn you that were they to maintain that those verses wherein the signs referred to in the Gospel are mentioned have been perverted, were they to reject them, and cling instead to other verses and traditions, you should know that their words were utter falsehood and sheer calumny. Yea “corruption” of the text, in the sense We have referred to, hath been actually effected in particular instances. A few of these We have mentioned, that it may become manifest to every discerning observer that unto a few untutored holy Men hath been given the mastery of human learning, so that the malevolent opposer may cease to contend that a certain verse doth indicate “corruption” of the text, and insinuate that We, through lack of knowledge, have made mention of such things. Moreover, most of the verses that indicate “corruption” of the text have been revealed with reference to the Jewish people, were ye to explore the isles of Qur’anic Revelation.

¹⁴⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K106

¹⁴⁷ Lawh-i Ta'vil (Tablet on Figurative Interpretation), translation by Juan Cole: <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/trans/vol1/ta-vill.htm>; Arabic: *Iqtidarat* Cairo: Matba`at as-Sa`adah, c. 1924, pp. 279-286. Reprinted, H-Bahai: East Lansing, Mi., 2001: <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/baha/G-L/I/iqtidar/iqtidar.htm>

¹⁴⁸ Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams (Commentary on the Surah of the Sun), translation by Juan Cole, online at: www.personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/shams.htm; Arabic text: *Majmu`ih-i Matbu`ih* ("Collected Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh"). Ed. Muhyi'd-Din Sabri Kurdi Sanandaji Kanimishkani. Cairo: Matba`at as-Sa`adah, 1920. Reprinted, H-Bahai: East Lansing, Mi., 2001: <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/baha/M-R/M/matbuih/misr.htm>

¹⁴⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXXVIII p. 299

¹⁵⁰ The Prayer for Fasting referred to by Bahá'u'lláh is not found in any of the standard issue Bahá'í prayer books and in the Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh.

¹⁵¹ The Bahá'í Fast is a month of 19 days, the month of ‘Ala [Elevation in Arabic], the last month of the year, immediately preceding the Ayyam-i-Ha, which complete the 4 or 5 remaining days before the beginning of the year, with Naw-Ruz [new day] on the Vernal Equinox, which occurs according to the astronomical calculation and marks the first day of spring.

¹⁵² Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 337-338

¹⁵³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K1-2

¹⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, TOBRAKA, p. 262

¹⁵⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Seven Valleys, pp. 39-40

¹⁵⁶ Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh cited by the Universal House of Justice in the April 1973 Introduction to The Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (p. 4); by the Universal House of Justice in the 1992 Preface to The Kitáb-i-Aqdas (p. 6)

¹⁵⁷ Shoghi Effendi, Letter written to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 1935; published in Directives from the Guardian, #11, pp. 3-4; cited by Universal House of Justice in the 1992 Preface to The Kitáb-i-Aqdas (pp. 6-7)

¹⁵⁸ http://bahai-library.com/uhj_applicability_laws_aqdas

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Applicability of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

On 9 May 1993, each National Spiritual Assembly was sent a copy of a letter written to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iceland on 9 June 1974, which listed those laws not at that time binding upon the Western world. The covering letter noted that the law of Huququ'lláh had been made universally binding at Ridvan 1992. On 28 December 1999, the Universal House of Justice wrote to the Bahá'ís throughout the world informing them of the universal application of the remaining aspects of the laws of prayer and fasting.

Therefore, to bring the information up to date, we have been asked to send you the enclosed list of laws not yet universally applied, to replace the one sent to you in May 1993.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

For Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure

cc: The Hands of the Cause of God (with enclosure)
International Teaching Centre (with enclosure)
Boards of Counsellors (with enclosure)
Counsellors (with enclosure)

Laws of the Kitáb-I-Aqdas not yet Universally Applied

28 December 1999 Following the universal application of the laws on prayer, fasting and the recitation of the Greatest Name, the Universal House of Justice has provided the following list of laws noted in the Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-I-Aqdas which are not at present universally binding upon the friends. The numbers of the sections are given for ease of reference.

IV.C.1.i

The laws governing betrothal.

IV.C.1.J

The law concerning the payment of a dowry by the groom to the bride on marriage.

IV.C.1.1&m

The laws concerning the travelling of a husband away from his wife.

IV.C.1.n&o

The laws relating to the virginity of the wife.

IV.C.2.b

That part of the divorce law relating to fines payable to the house of Justice.

IV.C.3

The law of inheritance. This is normally covered by civil laws of intestacy at the present time.

IV.D.1.a

The law of pilgrimage.

IV.D.1.d

The law of the Mashriqu'l-adhkar is gradually being put into effect.

IV.D.1.f

The Bahá'í Festivals are being celebrated by the western friends on their anniversaries in the Gregorian calendar until such time as the Universal House of Justice deems it desirable to pass supplementary legislation necessary for the full implementation of the badi calendar.

IV.D.1.j

The age of maturity applies only to Bahá'í religious duties as yet. On other matters it is subject to the civil law of each country. The age of administrative maturity in the Bahá'í community has, for the time being, been fixed at 21.

IV.D.1.k

For the burial of the dead the only requirements now binding in the West are to bury the body (not to cremate it), not to carry it more than a distance of one hour's journey from the place of death, and to say the Prayer for the Dead if the deceased is a believer over the age of 15.

¹⁵⁹Bahá'u'lláh, *The Persian Hidden Words*, #5

¹⁶⁰Bahá'u'lláh, *The Persian Hidden Words*, #69

¹⁶¹Bahá'u'lláh, *The Persian Hidden Words*, #76

¹⁶²Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 76

¹⁶³Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 114

¹⁶⁴Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K70

¹⁶⁵Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXXIX, p. 305

¹⁶⁶Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 57

¹⁶⁷Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 156

¹⁶⁸Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 256

¹⁶⁹ h.ijáb and satir are Persian equivalents of the Arabic word Mutashabihatun in the Qur'án (III:7)

¹⁷⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 255; Persian: <http://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/b/KI/ki-184.html>

¹⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 41

¹⁷² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 41-42

¹⁷³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 43

¹⁷⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 76

¹⁷⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 75

¹⁷⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 78

¹⁷⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 79

¹⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 47

¹⁷⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 70

¹⁸⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 112

¹⁸¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 123

¹⁸² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 172

¹⁸³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, Chapter 16, pp. 81-86:

A subject that is essential for the comprehension of the questions that we have mentioned, and of others of which we are about to speak, so that the essence of the problems may be understood, is this: that human knowledge is of two kinds. One is the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses—that is to say, things which the eye, or ear, or smell, or taste, or touch can perceive, which are called objective or sensible. So the sun, because it can be seen, is said to be objective; and in the same way sounds are sensible because the ear hears them; perfumes are sensible because they can be inhaled and the sense of smell perceives them; foods are sensible because the palate perceives their sweetness, sourness or saltiness; heat and cold are sensible because the feelings perceive them. These are said to be sensible realities.

The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual—that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses. For example, the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing; on the contrary, they are intellectual realities. So love is a mental reality and not sensible; for this reality the ear does not hear, the eye does not see, the smell does not perceive, the taste does not discern, the touch does not feel. Even ethereal matter, the forces of which are said in physics to be heat, light, electricity and magnetism, is an intellectual reality, and is not sensible. In the same way, nature, also, in its essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality. In explaining these intellectual realities, one is obliged to express them by sensible figures because in exterior existence there is nothing that is not material. Therefore, to explain the reality of the spirit—its condition, its station—one is obliged to give explanations under the forms of sensible things because in the external world all that exists is sensible. For example, grief and happiness are intellectual things; when you wish to express those spiritual qualities you say: “My heart is oppressed; my heart is dilated,” though the heart of man is neither oppressed nor dilated. This is an intellectual or spiritual state, to explain which you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures. Another example: you say, “such an individual made great progress,” though he is remaining in the same place; or again, “such a one’s position was exalted,” although, like everyone else, he walks upon the earth. This exaltation and this progress are spiritual states and intellectual realities, but to explain them you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures because in the exterior world there is nothing that is not sensible.

So the symbol of knowledge is light, and of ignorance, darkness; but reflect, is knowledge sensible light, or ignorance sensible darkness? No, they are merely symbols. These are only intellectual states, but when you desire to express them outwardly, you call knowledge light, and ignorance darkness. You say: “My heart was gloomy, and it became enlightened.” Now, that light of

knowledge, and that darkness of ignorance, are intellectual realities, not sensible ones; but when we seek for explanations in the external world, we are obliged to give them a sensible form.

Then it is evident that the dove which descended upon Christ was not a material dove, but it was a spiritual state, which, that it might be comprehensible, was expressed by a sensible figure. Thus in the Old Testament it is said that God appeared as a pillar of fire: this does not signify the material form; it is an intellectual reality which is expressed by a sensible image.

Christ says, "The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father." Was Christ within God, or God within Christ? No, in the name of God! On the contrary, this is an intellectual state which is expressed in a sensible figure.

We come to the explanation of the words of Bahá'u'lláh when He says: "O king! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing." This is the state of manifestation: it is not sensible; it is an intellectual reality, exempt and freed from time, from past, present and future; it is an explanation, a simile, a metaphor and is not to be accepted literally; it is not a state that can be comprehended by man. Sleeping and waking is passing from one state to another. Sleeping is the condition of repose, and wakefulness is the condition of movement. Sleeping is the state of silence; wakefulness is the state of speech. Sleeping is the state of mystery; wakefulness is the state of manifestation.

For example, it is a Persian and Arabic expression to say that the earth was asleep, and the spring came, and it awoke; or the earth was dead, and the spring came, and it revived. These expressions are metaphors, allegories, mystic explanations in the world of signification.

Briefly, the Holy Manifestations have ever been, and ever will be, Luminous Realities; no change or variation takes place in Their essence. Before declaring Their manifestation, They are silent and quiet like a sleeper, and after Their manifestation, They speak and are illuminated, like one who is awake.

¹⁸⁴ As to the record in the Bible concerning Adam's entering paradise, His eating from the tree and His expulsion through the temptation of Satan: These are all symbols beneath which there are wonderful and divine meanings not to be calculated in years, dates and measurement of time. Likewise, the statement that God created the heaven and the earth in six days is symbolic. We will not explain this further today. The texts of the Holy Books are all symbolical, needing authoritative interpretation. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 219-220)

We are told in the Holy Scripture that the New Jerusalem shall appear on earth. Now it is evident that this celestial city is not built of material stones and mortar, but that it is a city not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens. This is a prophetic symbol, meaning the coming again of the Divine Teaching to enlighten the hearts of men. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 84)

Behold again, the Christians are expecting the stars to fall and Christ to appear in the clouds, yet these are but symbols. They are awaiting a Christ from a heaven that does not exist.

Let us awake! Let us acquire a new intelligence in order to interpret the symbols and become acquainted with the mysteries. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, pp. 36-37)

The prophecies deal with dates and symbols which proclaim the end of each dispensation. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 43)

This sacred day when the sun illumines equally the whole earth is called the equinox and the equinox is the symbol of the divine messenger. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 74)

The rising of the sun at the equinox is the symbol of life and the human reality is revived; our thoughts are transformed and our intelligence is quickened. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 74)

“Alas, alas! the world has not discovered the reality of religion hidden beneath the symbolic forms!”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 188)

¹⁸⁵ Qur’án III:7 in other translations:

He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part there of that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: “We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord;” and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding. (Yusuf Ali)

He it is Who hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture wherein are clear revelations - they are the substance of the Book - and others (which are) allegorical. But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. None knoweth its explanation save Allah. And those who are of sound instruction say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed. (Pickthall)

He it is who hath sent down to thee “the Book.” Some of its signs are of themselves perspicuous; - these are the basis of the Book - and others are figurative. But they whose hearts are given to err, follow its figures, craving discord, craving an interpretation; yet none knoweth its interpretation but God. And the stable in knowledge say, “We believe in it: it is all from our Lord.” But none will bear this in mind, save men endued with understanding. (Rodwell)

He it is who has revealed to thee the Book, of which there are some verses that are decisive, they are the mother of the Book; and others ambiguous; but as for those in whose hearts is perversity, they follow what is ambiguous, and do crave for sedition, craving for (their own) interpretation of it; but none know the interpretation of it except God. But those who are well grounded in knowledge say, ‘We believe in it; it is all from our Lord; but none will remember save those who possess minds. (Palmer)

¹⁸⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 49

¹⁸⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 52

¹⁸⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 76

¹⁸⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 81

¹⁹⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 227

¹⁹¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 281

¹⁹² Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, #99; *Gleanings*, XCVIII, p. 198; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 128

¹⁹³ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 255

- ¹⁹⁴ Qur'án III:7
- ¹⁹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 16-17
- ¹⁹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 19-20
- ¹⁹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 23-24
- ¹⁹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 28
- ¹⁹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 32-33
- ²⁰⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 36-37
- ²⁰¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 41-42
- ²⁰² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 78
- ²⁰³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 82-83
- ²⁰⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 105
- ²⁰⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 145
- ²⁰⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 104
- ²⁰⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 181-182
- ²⁰⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 213
- ²⁰⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 237
- ²¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 248
- ²¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 256-257
- ²¹² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K53
- ²¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K180
- ²¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 69
- ²¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 122
- ²¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 181-182
- ²¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 256
- ²¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams, in Gleanings, LXXXIX, p. 176

²¹⁹ Ghusn in Arabic indicates male descendency, hence, one of the sons of Bahá'u'lláh

²²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K121

²²¹ Ghusn in Arabic indicates male descendency, hence, one of the sons of Bahá'u'lláh

²²² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K174

²²³ Ghusn-i-'A'zam, title given to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Bahá'u'lláh

²²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-'Ahdi, in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 221

²²⁵ Inasmuch as great differences and divergences of denominational belief had arisen throughout the past, every man with a new idea attributing it to God, Bahá'u'lláh desired that there should not be any ground or reason for disagreement among the Bahá'ís. Therefore, with His own pen He wrote the Book of His Covenant, addressing His relations and all people of the world, saying, "Verily, I have appointed One Who is the Center of My Covenant. All must obey Him; all must turn to Him; He is the **Expounder** of My Book, and He is informed of My purpose. All must turn to Him. Whatsoever He says is correct, for, verily, He knoweth the texts of My Book. Other than He, no one doth know My Book." The purpose of this statement is that there should never be discord and divergence among the Bahá'ís but that they should always be unified and agreed. In His prayers Bahá'u'lláh also said, "O God! Whosoever violates My Covenant, O God, humiliate him. Verily, whosoever violates My Covenant, O God, erase and efface him." In all His Tablets, among which is the Tablet of the Branch, He has mentioned and explained the attributes and qualities of the Personage to Whom He referred in the Book of His Covenant. He has fully expounded the function and potency of that Personage, so that no one shall say, "I understand this from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh," for He has appointed the Center, or **Expounder**, of the Book. He said, "Verily, He is the appointed one; other than He, there is none," intending that no sects or prejudices should be formed, and preventing every man here and there with a new thought from creating dissension and variance. It is as though a king should appoint a governor-general. Whosoever obeys him, obeys the king. Whosoever violates and disobeys him, violates the king. Therefore, whosoever obeys the Center of the Covenant appointed by Bahá'u'lláh has obeyed Bahá'u'lláh, and whosoever disobeys Him has disobeyed Bahá'u'lláh. It has nothing to do with Him (Abdu'l-Bahá) at all—precisely as the governor-general appointed by the king—whosoever obeys the governor-general obeys the king; whosoever disobeys the governor-general disobeys the king.

Therefore, you must read the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh. You must read the Tablet of the Branch and regard that which He has so clearly stated. Beware! Beware! lest anyone should speak from the authority of his own thoughts or create a new thing out of himself. Beware! Beware! According to the explicit Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh you should care nothing at all for such a person. Bahá'u'lláh shuns such souls. I have expounded these things for you, for the conservation and protection of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, in order that you may be informed, lest any souls shall deceive you and lest any souls shall cause suspicion among you. You must love all people, and yet if any souls put you in doubt, you must know that Bahá'u'lláh is severed from them. Whosoever works for unity and fellowship is a servant of Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahá'u'lláh is his assistant and helper. I ask God that He may cause you to be the very means of agreement and unity, that He may make you radiant, merciful, heavenly children of the divine Kingdom; that you may advance day by day; that you may become as bright as these lamps, bestowing light upon all humanity. Salutations and farewell! ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 322-324)

Inasmuch as there was no appointed **explainer** of the Book of Christ, everyone made the claim to authority, saying, "This is the true pathway and others are not." To ward off such dissensions as these and prevent any person from creating a division or sect the Blessed Perfection, Bahá'u'lláh, appointed a central authoritative Personage, declaring Him to be the **expounder** of the Book. This implies that the people in general do not understand the meanings of the Book, but this appointed One does understand. Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh said, "He is the **explainer** of My Book and the Center of My Testament." In the last verses of the Book instructions are revealed, declaring that, "After Me," you must turn toward a special Personage and "whatsoever He says is correct." In the Book of the Covenant Bahá'u'lláh declares that by these two verses this Personage is meant. In all His Books and Tablets He has praised those who are firm in the Covenant and rebuked those who are not. He said, "Verily, shun those who are shaken in the Covenant. Verily, God is the Confirmer of the firm ones." In His prayers He has said, "O God! Render those who are firm in the Covenant blessed, and degrade those who are not. O God! Be the Protector of him who protecteth Him, and confirm him who confirms the Center of the Covenant." Many utterances are directed against the violators of the Covenant, the purpose being that no dissension should arise in the blessed Cause; that no one should say, "My opinion is this"; and that all may know Who is the authoritative **expounder** and whatsoever He says is correct. Bahá'u'lláh has not left any possible room for dissension. Naturally, there are some who are antagonistic, some who are followers of self-desire, others who hold to their own ideas and still others who wish to create dissension in the Cause. For example, Judas Iscariot was one of the disciples, yet he betrayed Christ. Such a thing has happened in the past, but in this day the Blessed Perfection has declared, "This person is the **expounder** of My Book and all must turn to Him." The purpose is to ward off dissension and differences among His followers. Notwithstanding this safeguard and provision against disagreement, there are certain souls here in America and a few in 'Akká who have violated this explicit command. For twenty years these violators have accomplished nothing. Have they accomplished anything in Chicago? The friends here must be like the friends in San Francisco. Whenever they sense the least violation from anyone, they should say, "Begone! You shall not associate with us." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 382-383)

There are none who waver in the East, none who oppose the Covenant of God. There is not a single soul among the Bahá'ís in Persia who is opposed to the Covenant. They are all steadfast. If any soul wishes to speak in this Cause, they will ask, "Is this a word of your own, or is it by the authority of the Center of the Covenant? If you have the authority of the Center of the Covenant, produce it. Where is the letter from Him? Where is His signature?" If he produces the letter, they will accept it. If he fails to do so, they say, "We cannot accept your words because they emanate from you only and return to you. We have no command from the Blessed Perfection, Bahá'u'lláh, to obey you. He has revealed a Book in which He has covenanted with us to obey an appointed Center of the Covenant. He has not covenanted with us to obey you. Therefore, the statement you make is rejected. You must furnish proof of your authority and sanction. We are commanded to turn to one Center. We do not obey various centers. The Blessed Perfection has made a Covenant with us, and we are holding to this Covenant and Testament. We do not listen to anything else, for people may arise who speak words of their own, and we are commanded not to pay attention to them."

It was not so in former dispensations. Christ, for instance, did not appoint a center of authority and **explanation**. He did not say to His followers, "Obey the one whom I have chosen." Upon one occasion He asked His disciples, "Whom say ye that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Christ, wishing to make firm the faith of Peter, said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church," meaning that the faith of Peter was the true faith. It was a sanction of Peter's faith. He did not say that all should turn to Peter.

He did not say, "He is the branch extended from my ancient root." He did not say, "O God! Bless all who serve Peter. O God! Degrade those who are not obedient to him. Shun him who is a violator of the Covenant. O God! Thou knowest that I love all who are steadfast in the Covenant." This has been revealed, however, in all the Books, Writings and Epistles of Bahá'u'lláh regarding the appointed Center of the Covenant in this dispensation. Therefore, the Bahá'í dispensation is distinguished from all others in this fact, the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh being that no one could arise to cause differences and disunion. After the departure of Christ various sects and denominations arose, each one claiming to be the true channel of Christianity, but none of them possessed a written authority from Christ; none could produce proof from Him; yet all claimed His sanction and approval. Bahá'u'lláh has written a Covenant and Testament with His own pen, declaring that the One Whom He has appointed the Center of the Covenant shall be turned to and obeyed by all. Therefore, thank God that Bahá'u'lláh has made the pathway straight. He has clearly explained all things and opened every door for advancing souls. There is no reason for hesitation by anyone. The purpose of the Covenant was simply to ward off disunion and differences so that no one might say, "My opinion is the true and valid one."

Any opinion expressed by the Center of the Covenant is correct, and there is no reason for disobedience by anyone. Be watchful, for perchance there may be violators (naqidin) of the Covenant among you. Do not listen to them. Read the Book of the Covenant. All have been commanded to obey the Covenant, and the first admonition is addressed to the sons of Bahá'u'lláh, the Branches: "You must turn to the appointed Center; He is the **expounder** of the Book."

Should any soul so clearly violate and disobey this command, can he even say he is a Bahá'í? If anyone disobeys the explicit command of Christ, can he truthfully say he is a Christian? (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 386-387)

²²⁶ O handmaid of God! It is recorded in the Torah: And I will give you the valley of Achor for a door of hope. This valley of Achor is the city of ‘Akká, and whoso hath **interpreted** this otherwise is of those who know not. (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #139, p. 162)

To ensure unity and agreement He has entered into a Covenant with all the people of the world, including the **interpreter** and **explainer** of His teachings, so that no one may interpret or explain the religion of God according to his own view or opinion and thus create a sect founded upon his individual understanding of the divine Words. The Book of the Covenant or Testament of Bahá'u'lláh is the means of preventing such a possibility, for whosoever shall speak from the authority of himself alone shall be degraded. Be ye informed and cognizant of this. Beware lest anyone shall secretly question or deny this to you. There are some people of self-will and desire who do not communicate their intentions to you in clear language. They envelop their meanings in secret statements and insinuations. For instance, they praise a certain individual, saying he is wise and learned, that he was glorified in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, conveying this to you in an insidious way or by innuendoes. Be ye aware of this! Be awakened and enlightened! For Christ has said that no one hides the lamp under a bushel. The purport of my admonition is that certain people will endeavor to influence you in the direction of their own personal views and opinions. Therefore, be upon your guard in order that none may assail the oneness and integrity of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause. Praise be to God! Bahá'u'lláh left nothing unsaid. He explained everything. He left no room for anything further to be said. Yet there are some who for the sake of personal interest and prestige will attempt to sow the seeds of sedition and disloyalty among you. To protect and safeguard the religion of God from this and all other attack, the Center of the Covenant has been named and appointed by Bahá'u'lláh. Therefore, if anyone should set forth a statement in praise or recognition of another than this appointed Center, you must ask him to produce a written proof of the authority he follows. Let him show you a trace from the pen of the

Center of the Covenant Himself, substantiating his praise and support of any other than the rightful one. Inform him that you are not permitted to accept the words of everyone. Say to him, "It is possible to love and praise a person today, to accept and follow another tomorrow and still another next day. Therefore, we cannot afford to listen to this or that individual. Where are your proofs and writings? Where is your authority from the pen of the Center of the Covenant?" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 455)

I have attended more meetings in New York than in all the other cities combined. Day and night, individually and collectively you have listened to the teachings and exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh. I have proclaimed unto you the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God and explained the wishes of the Blessed Perfection. I have set forth that which is conducive to human progress and shown you the humility of servitude. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have been clearly **interpreted**. The time has now come when I must leave you; therefore, this will be our farewell meeting. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 460)

²²⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 455-456

²²⁸ Bahá'í Administration, pp. 7,191; God Passes By, p. 325

²²⁹ Bahá'í Administration, p. 35; Citadel of Faith, p. 62; Dawn of a New Day, p. 67; God Passes By, pp. xv, xvii,26,108,123,214,242,244,245,248,315,323,325,326; Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, p. 93; Messages to America, p. 95; Messages to the Bahá'í World, 1950-1957, pp. 103,165; Messages to the Indian Subcontinent, p. 353; The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 4,35,110,127,132,133,134,136,138,144,151,153,156

²³⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Will and Testament, p. 11; translated by Shoghi Effendi, appointed Interpreter of the Faith in the Will and Testament

²³¹ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 148-151, 154

²³² Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada by Leroy Ioas, dated 4 June 1957; published in "Messages to Canada," pp. 260-261

²³³ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Emeric Sala, dated 19 February 1947; published in "Messages to Canada," p. 89

²³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 255

²³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Gems of Divine Mysteries, p. 11

²³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Gems of Divine Mysteries, p. 35

²³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, Gems of Divine Mysteries, p. 52

²³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 26

²³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 80-81

²⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 82

²⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 83-84

²⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 126-127

²⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 220

²⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 255

²⁴⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 255

²⁴⁶ Khazeh Fananapazir discovered this hadith and conveyed it to an internet list on 30 October 2004. It is found in al-Sayyid Hashim al-Bahrani, *Kitáb al-burhan fi tafsir al-Qur'án*. 4 vols. Tehran, 1375/1955), p. 496. Khazeh reported: "The Compiler finished compiling it and passed away in 1107 A.H. It represents his interpretative of the Qur'anic verse (XVIII:109): "Qul law kana albahru midadan likalimati rabbee lanafida albahru qabla an tanfada kalimatu rabbee walaw ji/na bimithlihi madadan" which Yusuf Ali translates with: "Say: If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it, for its aid."

²⁴⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams*, in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 175

²⁴⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams*, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 175

²⁴⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #33, pp. 67-68:

O servant of God! We have noted what thou didst write to Jinab-i-Ibn-Abhar, and thy question regarding the verse: 'Whoso layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God, ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying impostor.'

The meaning of this is that any individual who, before the expiry of a full thousand years—years known and clearly established by common usage and requiring no interpretation—should lay claim to a Revelation direct from God, even though he should reveal certain signs, that man is assuredly false and an impostor.

This is not a reference to the Universal Manifestation, for it is clearly set forth in the Holy Writings that centuries, nay thousands of years, must pass on to completion, before a Manifestation like unto this Manifestation shall appear again.

It is possible, however, that after the completion of a full thousand years, certain Holy Beings will be empowered to deliver a Revelation: this, however, will not be through a Universal Manifestation. Wherefore every day of the cycle of the Blessed Beauty is in reality equal to one year, and every year of it is equal to a thousand years.

Consider, for example, the sun: its transit from one zodiacal sign to the next occurreth within a short period of time, yet only after a long period doth it attain the plenitude of its resplendency, its heat and glory, in the sign of Leo. It must first complete one full revolution through the other constellations before it will enter the sign of Leo again, to blaze out in its full splendour. In its other stations, it revealeth not the fullness of its heat and light.

The substance is, that prior to the completion of a thousand years, no individual may presume to breathe a word. All must consider themselves to be of the order of subjects, submissive and obedient to the commandments of God and the laws of the House of Justice. Should any deviate by so much as a needle's point from the decrees of the Universal House of Justice, or falter in his compliance therewith, then is he of the outcast and rejected.

As to the cycle of the Blessed Beauty—the times of the Greatest Name—this is not limited to a thousand or two thousand years....

When it is said that the period of a thousand years beginneth with the Manifestation of the Blessed Beauty and every day thereof is a thousand years, the intent is a reference to the cycle of the Blessed Beauty, which in this context will extend over many ages into the unborn reaches of time.

²⁵⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 132:

“Whoso layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God,” is the express warning uttered in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, “ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying imposter. We pray God that He may graciously assist him to retract and repudiate such claim. Should he repent, God will no doubt forgive him. If, however, he persists in his error, God will assuredly send down one who will deal mercilessly with him. Terrible indeed is God in punishing!” “Whosoever,” He adds as a further emphasis, “interpreteth this verse otherwise than its obvious meaning is deprived of the Spirit of God and of His mercy which encompasseth all created things.” “Should a man appear,” is yet another conclusive statement, “ere the lapse of a full thousand years—each year consisting of twelve months according to the *Qur’án*, and of nineteen months of nineteen days each, according to the *Bayan*—and if such a man reveal to your eyes all the signs of God, unhesitatingly reject him!”

²⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K121

²⁵² *Ibid.*, K174

²⁵³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #186, pp. 213-214:

The point at issue is clear, direct and of utmost brevity. Either Bahá'u'lláh was wise, omniscient and aware of what would ensue, or was ignorant and in error. He entered, by His supreme pen, into such a firm Covenant and Testament with all the Bahá'ís, first with the Aghsan, the Afnan and His kindred, and commanded them to obey and turn toward Him. By His supreme pen He hath explicitly declared that the object of the following verse of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is the Most Great Branch:

‘When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.’ Its meaning briefly is this: that after My ascension it is incumbent upon the Aghsan, the Afnan and the kindred, and all the friends of God, to turn their faces to Him Who hath branched from the Ancient Root.

He also plainly saith in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: ‘O ye people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.’ Addressing all the people of the world He saith: When the Mystic Dove flieth away from the orchard of praise to the Most Supreme and Invisible Station—that is, when the Blessed Beauty turneth away from the contingent world towards the invisible realm—refer whatever ye do not understand in the Book to Him Who hath branched from the Ancient Root. That is, whatever He saith is the very truth.

And in the Book of the Covenant He explicitly saith that the object of this verse ‘Who hath branched from this Ancient Root’ is the Most Mighty Branch. And He commandeth all the Aghsan, the Afnan, the kindred and the Bahá'ís to turn toward Him. Now, either one must say that the Blessed Beauty hath made a mistake, or He must be obeyed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá hath no command for the people to obey save the diffusion of the fragrances of God, the exaltation of His Word, the promulgation of the oneness of the world of humanity, the establishment of universal peace, and other of the commands of God. These are divine commands and have nothing to do

with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whoever wisheth may accept them, and anyone who rejecteth them may do as he pleaseth.

²⁵⁴ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 134:

“When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended,” proclaims the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, “turn your faces towards Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.” And again, “When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.”

In the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, moreover, Bahá'u'lláh solemnly and explicitly declares: “It is incumbent upon the Aghsan, the Afnan and My kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch. Consider that which We have revealed in Our Most Holy Book: ‘When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root.’ The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch (Abdu'l-Bahá). Thus have We graciously revealed unto you our potent Will, and I am verily the Gracious, the All-Powerful.”

²⁵⁵Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-'Ahd, in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp. 22-222

²⁵⁶ Susan Maneck, "Wisdom and Dissimulation: The Use and Meaning of Hikmat in the Bahá'í Writings and History," *Bahá'í Studies Review* 6 (1996): <http://bahai-library.com/articles/hikmat.html> This is confirmed by a letter written by the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, dated 27 June 1996: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_equality_monogamy_uhj.html

²⁵⁷ Fadil Mazandarani, editor, Amr va Khalq, vol. 4, (Tihran: 1974/5-131 B.E.), pp. 175-76.

²⁵⁸ Op. cit.

²⁵⁹ Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, pp. 130-131, refers to two Tablets addressed to Miss Ethel Rosenberg which "contain important references concerning the practice of monogamy in the Cause."

²⁶⁰ Tablet quoted in Note 89, p. 206, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

²⁶¹ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 214; Directives from the Guardian, #11, p. 4; Summary Statement to the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine, 14 July 1947; Unfolding Destiny, p. 131

²⁶² Anthony A. Lee, Peggy Caton, Richard Hollinger, Marjan Nirou, Nader Saiedi, Shahin Carrigan, Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, and Juan R. I. Cole, authors, "The Service of Women on the Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith," paper written in 1988, published on h-bahai as Documents on the Shaykhi, Babi and Bahá'í Movements, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May, 1999). Much of the information on this topic is derived from this paper. The establishment of the House of Justice, in Iran and in the United States, is described here:

"Although the Kitáb-i-Aqdas was revealed in 'Akka in 1873, it was withheld for some time by Bahá'u'lláh before it was distributed to the Bahá'ís of Iran.[Synopsis, pp. 5-6] It appears that it was not until around 1878 that the Bahá'ís of Tehran received copies of the book and began to implement some of its laws in their personal lives. Upon reading the Kitáb-i Aqdas, Mirza Asadu'llah Isfahani, a prominent Bahá'í teacher living in Tehran, was particularly struck by the

command of Bahá'u'lláh that a House of Justice should be established by the Bahá'ís in every city. Mirza Asadu'llah is an important figure in Bahá'í history: he eventually married the sister of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wife; he was (as we shall see) one of the earliest Bahá'í teachers sent to America by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to instruct the new Western believers and he later accompanied 'Abdu'l-Bahá on his travels in Europe. In any case, in 1878 he was the first to undertake the organization of a local House of Justice in Iran. He took the initiative to invite eight other prominent believers to form a body, responding to the laws of the Kitáb-i Aqdas, which they referred to as bayt al-'adl (House of Justice) or bayt al-a'zam

(the Most Great House). The organization of this first House of Justice was kept a secret, even from the believers. However, it met sporadically in the home of Mirza Asadu'llah for a couple of years. After consulting with this body, the prominent Bahá'í men who had been invited to attend its meetings would seek to take action as individual Bahá'í teachers that would implement its decisions.

Around 1881, the Tehran House of Justice was reorganized and more members were added. The House adopted a written constitution and pursued its activities with more organization and vigour than before. The constitution mandated, however, that the meetings remain strictly confidential, hidden from the body of the believers. This constitution also assumes that the members of the House would all be men (aqayan). Naturally, considering the social conditions in Iran at the time, no other arrangement was possible.

“Some of the minutes of this early House of Justice survive today. It was a gathering of the older and more prominent Bahá'í men of Tehran. Meetings were attended by invitation only, and at times included fourteen members or more. Eventually, this meeting came to be called the Consultative Gathering (majlis-i shur), while the house where the body met was referred to as the House of Justice (bayt al-'adl). These meetings sought to assist and protect the Bahá'ís through consultation on various problems. The House in Tehran sent Bahá'í teachers to other cities in Iran to organize Houses of Justice there. Again, the decisions of the House were always carried out by individuals, and the consultations remained secret. The organization of this body eventually met with some controversy. One important Bahá'í teacher, Jamal-i Burujurdi, who later - in the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá - would become a notorious Covenant-breaker, objected strongly to the organization of a House of Justice in Tehran. Because of these objections, the Bahá'ís involved on the House appealed to Bahá'u'lláh for guidance. Bahá'u'lláh replied with a Tablet in which He approved of the House of Justice and strongly upheld the principle of consultation in the Bahá'í Faith.” [All information in this section concerning the first House of Justice of Tehran is based on Ruhullah Mihrabkhani, Mahafil-i shur dar 'ahd-i Jamal-i Aqdas-i Abha, (Assemblies of consultation at the time of Bahá'u'lláh) in Payam-i Bahá'í, nos. 28 and 29, pp 9-11 and pp 8-9 respectively.]

²⁶³ In this paper, the following four passages are cited, which describe women as "rijal" in this Dispensation:

Today the Bahá'í women (lit., the leaves of the Holy Tree) must guide the handmaidens of the earth to the Lofty Horizon with the utmost purity and sanctity. Today the handmaidens of God are regarded as gentlemen (rijal). Blessed are they! Blessed are they! (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Ahmad Yazdani, Mabadiy-i Ruhani, Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 104 Badi', p 109.

Today whoever among the handmaidens attains the knowledge of the Desire of the World [i.e., Bahá'u'lláh] is considered a gentleman (rajul) in the Divine Book. (Ibid.)

...many a man (rajul) hath waited expectant for God's Revelation, and yet when the Light shone forth from the horizon of the world, all but a few turned their faces away from it. Whosoever from amongst the handmaidens hath recognized the Lord of all Names is recorded in the Book as one

of those men (rijal) by the Pen of the Most High. (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Women: Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, comp. by The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1986, #7, p 3)

Verily, according to Bahá'u'lláh, women are judged as gentlemen (rijal). ('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Ahmad Yazdani, Maqam va Huquq-i Zan dar Diyanat-i Bahá'í, vol. 1, Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 107 Badi')

²⁶⁴ Genesis 1:26-27

²⁶⁵ Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K51, Q101; Bisharat #13, TB:26; Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih, TB:69; Ishraqat, TB:125, 128, 134; cited 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 183

²⁶⁶ See the same expression used in the Tablet dated 1909.

²⁶⁷ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Haifa: BWC, 1978, #38, pp. 79-80; translated and published for the first time in Tablets of Abdul-Baha, vol I, p. 90

²⁶⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 182-183

²⁶⁹ Posted to the Internet by Tony Lee: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_umumi.html is Mrs. Corinne True's letter, dated 25 February 1902 (Document No. 11137 in the International Bahá'í Archives)

²⁷⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Mrs. Corinne True, 24 July 1909, microfilm, National Bahá'í Archives; translation by Dr. Farid, 29 July 1909: "In the law of God, men and women are equal in all rights save in the Universal House of Justice; for the Chairman and the members of the House of Justice are men according to the Text of the Book. Aside from this, in all the rest of the Associations, like the Convention for the building of the Mashrek-el-Azkar, the Assembly of Teaching, the Spiritual Assembly, Philanthropic Associations Scientific Association, men and women are co-partners in all the rights."

²⁷¹ Cited in letter written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand dated 31 May 1988: <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/women.uhj.html>

²⁷² House of Spirituality (Albert R. Windust, librarian) to Board of Consultation, Kenosha, Wisconsin, 23 July 1910, House of Spirituality Papers, National Bahá'í Archives

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the members of the Spiritual Assembly, and Mr. Bernard M. Jacobsen, Kenosha, Wisconsin, 4 May 1911, House of Spirituality Papers, National Bahá'í Archives

²⁷⁵ Star of the West, vol. III, no. 10 (August 20, 1912), p. 16

²⁷⁶ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 28 July 1936; cited in Letter of the Universal House of Justice addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, dated 31 May 1988: <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/women.uhj.html>

²⁷⁷ Letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Directives from the Guardian, #211, p. 79)

²⁷⁸ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 27 May 1940; cited in Letter of the Universal House of Justice addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, dated 31 May 1988: <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/women.uhj.html>

²⁷⁹ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Dawn of a New Day, p. 86; Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Indian Subcontinent, p. 192

²⁸⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K174

²⁸¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Bisharat, in TOBRAKA, p. 26

²⁸² Bahá'u'lláh, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiiyyih, in TOBRAKA, p. 68

²⁸³ Bahá'u'lláh, Ishraqat, in TOBRAKA, p. 125

²⁸⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Ishraqat, in TOBRAKA, p. 129

²⁸⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Will and Testament, pp. 19-20

²⁸⁶ Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 9 April 1923; in Bahá'í Administration, p. 47; cited in The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 645

²⁸⁷ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 149

²⁸⁸ Shoghi Effendi, Letter dated 21st March 1930, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 23

²⁸⁹ Universal House of Justice, Letters dated 9 March 1965, on The Appointment of the Guardian; in Wellspring of Guidance, p. 52

²⁹⁰ Universal House of Justice, "The Universal House of Justice's Power of Elucidation," in Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, The Third Epoch of the Formative Age, pp. 645-646: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_power_elucidation.html

²⁹¹ Universal House of Justice, Constitution:
<http://bahai-library.com/published.uhj/constitution.html>

²⁹² Bahá'u'lláh, Tafsír Súratu'l-Shams, in Gleanings, LXXXIX, pp. 75-176

²⁹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, #182, p. 208

²⁹⁴ From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer on 19 March 1946, cited in Letter written by the Department of the Secretariat dated 27 April 1995 and addressed to an individual believer: <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/theocracy.html>

²⁹⁵ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 7 June 1946, published in Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand, no.75, pp. 85-86

²⁹⁶ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 7 June 1946, published in Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand, no. 80, p.88; and in Messages to the Antipodes, p.241

²⁹⁷ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 24 February 1947; * (the text ends here) published in The Importance of Deepening, p. 228; in Lights of Guidance, 1999 edition: #1571, p. 477

²⁹⁸ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 5 July 1947, published in The Importance of Deepening, pp. 228-229

²⁹⁹ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 4 October 1950, published in Unfolding Destiny, pp. 457-458

³⁰⁰ From a letter written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 7 December 1969; published in Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973, Wilmette: BPT:1976, p. 38

³⁰¹ Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 3 June 1997, in <http://bahai-library.org/uhj/challenge.uhj.html>

³⁰² Letter of the Universal House of Justice, in Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 158; Messages 1968-1973, p. 40

³⁰³ Dann May, "A Preliminary Survey of Hermeneutical Principles," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 1.3, 1989, p. 41

³⁰⁴ http://bahai-library.com/sours_seeing_eye_god.html

³⁰⁵ Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir, "Some Interpretive Principles in the Bahá'í Writings," *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 2.1 (1992)

³⁰⁶ Universal House of Justice, from a letter to an individual believer dated 7 December 1969, in Messages, p. 42; also cited were a letter to an individual dated October 1963, in Wellspring of Divine Guidance, p. 13; letter to a National Spiritual Assembly dated 9 March 1965, in Wellspring, p. 52

³⁰⁷ Citing in endnote #11, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian dated 19 February 1947; they also cite another letter in this footnote, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and dated 27 November 1933, the bearing of which does not pertain to this principle.

³⁰⁸ Ruhyyih Khanum, wife and secretary of the Guardian.

³⁰⁹ Glenford E. Mitchell, member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States; and of the Universal House of Justice.

³¹⁰ Ruhyyih Khanum, The Priceless Pearl, London: BPT, 1969, p. 213; "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" was a letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of the West and dated 8 February 1934, found in the compilation entitled, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 95-157

³¹¹ Glenford E. Mitchell, "The Literature of Interpretation: Notes on the English Writings of Shoghi Effendi," *World Order*, 7.2 (winter 1992-1993), p. 24

³¹² Jack McLean, "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 5.1 (1992), pp. 35-36

³¹³ Juan Cole, "Commentary, Interpretation in the Bahá'í Faith," *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 5.1 (1995)

³¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 68

³¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 191-192

³¹⁶ Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 211

³¹⁷ Kitab-i-Aqdas, K157

³¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 256

³¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams, in Gleanings, LXXXIX, p. 175

³²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K53

³²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K174

‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave his interpretation of this verse in one of his Tablets (Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, #186, pp. 213-215):

He also plainly saith in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: ‘O ye people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock.’ Addressing all the people of the world He saith: When the Mystic Dove flieth away from the orchard of praise to the Most Supreme and Invisible Station—that is, when the Blessed Beauty turneth away from the contingent world towards the invisible realm—refer whatever ye do not understand in the Book to Him Who hath branched from the Ancient Root. That is, whatever He saith is the very truth.

And in the Book of the Covenant He explicitly saith that the object of this verse ‘Who hath branched from this Ancient Root’ is the Most Mighty Branch. And He commandeth all the Aghsan, the Afnan, the kindred and the Bahá'ís to turn toward Him. Now, either one must say that the Blessed Beauty hath made a mistake, or He must be obeyed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá hath no command for the people to obey save the diffusion of the fragrances of God, the exaltation of His Word, the promulgation of the oneness of the world of humanity, the establishment of universal peace, and other of the commands of God. These are divine commands and have nothing to do with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Whoever wisheth may accept them, and anyone who rejecteth them may do as he pleaseth.

Now some of the mischief-makers, with many stratagems, are seeking leadership, and in order to reach this position they instil doubts among the friends that they may cause differences, and that these differences may result in their drawing a party to themselves. But the friends of God must be awake and must know that the scattering of these doubts hath as its motive personal desires and the achievement of leadership.

Do not disrupt Bahá'í unity, and know that this unity cannot be maintained save through faith in the Covenant of God.

³²² Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i-Aqdas, TB, p. 15

³²³ Bahá'u'lláh, Tajalliyat, in TB, p. 48

³²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih, in TB, p. 71

³²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih, in TB, p. 78

³²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 97-98

³²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 172

³²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 210-211

³²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 237-238

³³⁰ Glorious Station is maqam-i-mahmúd: see Qur'án 17:81; in Bahá'u'lláh, Seven Valleys, p. 40

³³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K182

³³² Bahá'u'lláh, The Four Valleys, pp. 53-54

³³³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 46

³³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 33

³³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Four Valleys, pp. 53-54

³³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 20

³³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 37

³³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 57-58

³³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 58-59

³⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 69

³⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 129-130

³⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 146

³⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 161-162

³⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 188

³⁴⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 200

³⁴⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, A Traveller's Narrative, p. 39

³⁴⁷Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 171

³⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 208-209

³⁴⁹Ibid, p. 118

³⁵⁰Ibid., p. 222

³⁵¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas, volume I, 1908, p. 195

³⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy, p. 102

³⁵³ Bahá'u'lláh, Suriy-i-Haykal, in The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 19

³⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Tafsir Suratu'l-Shams, in Gleanings, LXXXIX, pp. 175-176

³⁵⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K134

³⁵⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K168

³⁵⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 199-200

³⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K138

³⁵⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K168

³⁶⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K105

³⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i-Ta'wil, provisional translation by Mehran Ghasempour (<http://bahai-library.com/provisionals/lawh.tawil.ghasempour.html>), with insertions in brackets by the author of this paper.

³⁶² Qur'án 4:45

³⁶³ Qur'án 2:75

³⁶⁴ Qur'án 2:79

³⁶⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 86-88

³⁶⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 15

³⁶⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 17

³⁶⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 17

³⁶⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 19

³⁷⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 29

³⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 31

³⁷² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 34-35

³⁷³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 40

³⁷⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 43-44

³⁷⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 69

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113

³⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 115,116

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 119

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-166

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 168

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168-169

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 182

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 185

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187

³⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 187-188

³⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 188-191

³⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 208-209

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 213

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 213-214

⁴⁰² Ibid., pp. 214-215

⁴⁰³ Ibid., pp. 224-225

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 244

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 248

⁴⁰⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 24-25

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 53-54

⁴⁰⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *GL:XXXIX:175-176*

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., *LXXXIX:176-177*

⁴¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K37

⁴¹¹ Ibid., K105; *ESW:129-130*

⁴¹² Ibid., K165

⁴¹³ Ibid., K168

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., K177

⁴¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *TB*, p. 186

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p. 211

⁴¹⁷ *Qur'án* 2:85

⁴¹⁸ *Qur'án* 33:40

⁴¹⁹ *Qur'án* 33:47

⁴²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 168-169

In this passage, Bahá'u'lláh points out that all Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last of the prophets, citing the fortieth verse of the *Qur'án's* thirty-third chapter, while ignoring or misinterpreting the forty-seventh verse of that same chapter, which promises "attainment unto the divine Presence". He proceeds to explain, in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (pp. 169-170) and in *Epistle to the Son*

of the Wolf (pp. 115-118, 153, 172) the meaning of this promise, and the impossibility of the cessation of Revelation or of the institution of Prophethood.

- ⁴²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K165
- ⁴²² Bahá'u'lláh, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyih, in TB, p. 58
- ⁴²³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 14-15
- ⁴²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 22-23
- ⁴²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 43
- ⁴²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 47
- ⁴²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 70
- ⁴²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 91
- ⁴²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 102
- ⁴³⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 120
- ⁴³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 122-123
- ⁴³² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 144
- ⁴³³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 146
- ⁴³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 147
- ⁴³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 149
- ⁴³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 151-152
- ⁴³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 168
- ⁴³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 187
- ⁴³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 188
- ⁴⁴⁰ Qur'án 7:57; in Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 191
- ⁴⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 192-193
- ⁴⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 195-196
- ⁴⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 202
- ⁴⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 211

- 445 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 237
- 446 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 255
- 447 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 56-57
- 448 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 459-460
- 449 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 173
- 450 Qu'ran 6:127, in Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 175
- 451 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pp. 237-238
- 452 Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 33
- 453 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, K182
- 454 Bahá'u'lláh, Tajalliyat, in TB, p. 50
- 455 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 238
- 456 From a letter written by Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 6 April 1928, published in Unfolding Destiny, p. 423
- 457 Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 32
- 458 Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, p. 17
- 459 Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 63
- 460 Shoghi Effendi is referring here to the policy of pre-publication review, which was instituted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His ministry, and which was intended to be provisional in nature.
- 461 Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, pp. 63-64
- 462 From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated September 5, 1936, in Dawn of a New Day, p. 60
- 463 From a note written by Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, dated 20 March 1929; published in Messages to Canada, pp. 30-31
- 464 From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer by Ruhi Afnan, dated 25 August 1926; in US Bahá'í News, #45 (October 1930); Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 11; The Compilation of Compilations, vol. I, p. 212, 358; The Importance of Deepening our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith, p. 29
- 465 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 27 May 1966, in Wellspring of Guidance, Messages 1963-1968, p. 88
- 466 Universal House of Justice, note #130, pp. 221-222, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas

- ⁴⁶⁷ Universal House of Justice, letter dated 31 January 1995, Questions on Scholarship
- ⁴⁶⁸ http://bahai-library.com/uhj_individual_rights_freedom
- ⁴⁶⁹ Dann May, "A Preliminary Survey of Hermeneutical Principles," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 1.3 (1989), p. 41
- ⁴⁷⁰ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated September 5, 1936, in Dawn of a New Day, p. 60
- ⁴⁷¹ From a letter written by Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 6 April 1928, published in Unfolding Destiny, p. 423
- ⁴⁷² Universal House of Justice, note #130, pp. 221-222, The Kitab-i-Aqdas
- ⁴⁷³ Bahá'u'lláh, Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyih, in TB, p. 70; Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 23
- ⁴⁷⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_criticism
- ⁴⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Talk on 23 June 1912 in Montclair, New Jersey, from notes by Frank E. Osbourne, who is mentioned at the beginning; in The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 212
- ⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷⁸ Conversation between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Hans Springer in Haifa, Palestine, on June 30, 1914; recorded in the Diary of Ahmad Sohrab; published in SW, VII:3, p. 21
- ⁴⁷⁹ May, Dann J., "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity and the Challenge of Radical Pluralism", Master of Arts (Interdisciplinary Studies), December 1993: <http://bahai-library.com/theses/religious.unity/>
- ⁴⁸⁰ Moojan Momen, "Relativism: A Basis For Bahá'í Metaphysics", In Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions Vol. 5, ed. Moojan Momen. (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988): <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html>
- ⁴⁸¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, K173
- ⁴⁸² Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i-Hikmat, in TB, pp. 138-139
- ⁴⁸³ Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-'Ahdí, in TB, p. 221
- ⁴⁸⁴ Universal House of Justice, in a letter written to all National Spiritual Assemblies and the Continental Boards of Counselors, dated 24 April 1972: <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/counselors.html> Also note #183, p. 245, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, published in 1992.
- ⁴⁸⁵ Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 14 March 1996: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_laypeople_scholarship.html
- ⁴⁸⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Lawh-i-Bayt-ul-'Adl-'Azam va 'Úsúl-i-Qadá'í:

<http://bahai-library.com/provisionals/bayt.adl.usul.qadai.au.html>; a portion of this Tablet was published in the Introduction to Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1992), p. 5; the whole text was cited in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer dated February, 2001: <http://www.bahaistudies.net/takfir.html>

⁴⁸⁷ Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 20 July 1997, published in Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith, Extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, published in Canada, 1998: http://bahai-library.com/compilation_issues_study_bahai.html

⁴⁸⁸ Jack McLean, "Prolegomena to a Bahá'í Theology," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 5.1 (1992), p. 36

⁴⁸⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Lawh-i-Bayt-ul-'Adl-'Azam va 'Úsúl-i-Qadá'í: <http://bahai-library.com/provisionals/bayt.adl.usul.qadai.au.html>; a portion of this Tablet was published in the Introduction to Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1992), p. 5; the whole text was cited in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer dated February, 2001: <http://www.bahaistudies.net/takfir.html>

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 19 March 1946, cited in compilations on scholarship, dated 1979, 1983, 1999; and in letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Sen McGlenn, dated 27 April 1995: <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/theocracy.html>

⁴⁹² From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 7 June 1946, published in Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand, no.75, pp. 85-86

⁴⁹³ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 24 February 1947, published in Lights of Guidance, 1999 edition: #1571, p. 477

⁴⁹⁴ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 5 July 1947, published in The Importance of Deepening, pp. 228-229

⁴⁹⁵ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 4 October 1950, published in The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community, pp. 457-458

⁴⁹⁶ From a letter written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 7 December 1969, published in Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973, Wilmette: BPT:1976, p. 38

⁴⁹⁷ Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 3 June 1997: <http://bahai-library.org/uhj/challenge.uhj.html>

⁴⁹⁸ Letter of the Universal House of Justice, in Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 158; Messages 1968-1973, p. 40

⁴⁹⁹ JRI Cole, "Commentary, Interpretation in the Bahá'í Faith," *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 5.1 (1995)

⁵⁰⁰The Universal House of Justice, 1999 Apr 07, "Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith," p. 1