

**THE COVENANT OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH****Author:** Adib Taherzadeh**Publisher:** George Ronald, Oxford, 1992, 473 pages**THE MINISTRY OF THE CUSTODIANS 1957–1963: AN ACCOUNT OF THE STEWARDSHIP OF THE HANDS OF THE CAUSE**With an introduction by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum**Publisher:** Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1992, 485 pages

Succession disputes irreparably fractured both Christianity and Islam. How has the Bahá'í Faith avoided significant schism, and what is to stop future division? Two books published in 1992, the hundredth anniversary of Bahá'u'lláh's Lesser Covenant, tackle these questions.

The first book, Adib Taherzadeh's *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, succeeds in “an attempt to provide some basic material . . . for the study of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh . . .” (xi). It deals with the Greater Covenant of the Báb and the Lesser Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh in three large sections. A brief chapter on the Greater Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh (and a more systematic look at succession problems in other Abrahamic religions) would have made it more complete.

Written to edify Bahá'ís, the book consciously leaves many assumptions unquestioned and much Bahá'í terminology uninterpreted. Its strength is its breadth: it covers a century and a half of Bábí and Bahá'í history, emphasizing texts and personalities central to leadership changes and challenges. It contains some new information in English about Bahá'u'lláh's family and other Covenant-breakers. A remarkable extract from Mírzá Badí'u'lláh's previously unpublished “epistle of repentance” describes how Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí, arch-breaker of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and master calligrapher, forged and interpolated Bahá'u'lláh's writings in trying to discredit 'Abdu'l-Bahá (152–53). Other useful new material comes from the memoirs of Ḥaydar-'Alí and Yúnis Khán. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's acidic rebuttal (235–36) of the Commission of Enquiry's spurious allegations is extraordinary.

The author's insights are often illuminating, particularly explanations of Bahá'u'lláh's family's infidelity (“ . . . they saw Him as an ordinary human being . . . just a great man . . .” [169]) and the absence of Shoghi Effendi's will (378–79). Plentiful cross-references link the book with rest of *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* series by the same author.

The book contains some confusing statements, though, arising mostly from too little explanation. For example, the author distinguishes the Most Great Spirit from the Holy Spirit (38–39), and says the former “was manifested on this planet for the first time through Bahá'u'lláh” (43). But this might be seen to contradict Shoghi Effendi's explanation:

It was on that occasion [Síyáh-Chál] that the "Most Great Spirit," as designated by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, revealed itself to Him, in the form of a "Maiden," and bade Him "lift up" His "voice between earth and heaven,"—that same Spirit which, in the Zoroastrian, the Mosaic, the Christian, and the Muhammadan Dispensations, had been respectively symbolized by the "Sacred Fire," the "Burning Bush," the "Dove," and the "Angel Gabriel." <sup>1</sup>

Note that Shoghi Effendi says "that *same* Spirit" came to Bahá'u'lláh as a Maiden, not "directly manifested Itself" (39), as Taherzadeh suggests. These distinctions are important given that Bahá'ís believe in the unity and intrinsic equality of God's Manifestations, and further exploration of this concept is necessary.

Another example is an explanation on page 159 where the author says that "unequivocal written" Covenants were not made by previous Manifestations because their followers were immature. This could be seen otherwise: the immature need, more than others, to be clearly told what to do. Later, the author claims that following the establishment of the Universal House of Justice, Covenant-breakers "will never be able to divide the Faith into sects . . ." (410). What is probably meant is that it will never be divided *significantly* by sects. But sects exist, and the academic community has studied them. Balch et al.<sup>2</sup> use the widely accepted Stark-Bainbridge criteria to describe Leland Jensen's "Bahá'ís Under the Provisions of the Covenant" as a sect.

Problems also arise from imprecise language. For example, the statement, "Bahá'u'lláh . . . envisaged men to be more suited for its [the Universal House of Justice's] membership" (401) than women, assumes the provision has to do with suitability rather than anything else. To say that " 'Abdu'l-Bahá . . . had all the powers of Bahá'u'lláh conferred upon Him" (201) is, strictly speaking, to say 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a Manifestation of God (which is not true). The sweeping reference to the Manifestations of old, who "spoke about the soul but did not explain its nature or reveal *any* of its mysteries" (6, emphasis added), is contradicted even by the one quranic verse used to support it. The statement "The Faith does not harbour egotistical personalities" (167) is optimistic.

Puzzling too are a few of the author's passing remarks. He hints at the supernatural, "It is significant that on that day [of Dayyán's murder by Azalís], a sandstorm of exceptional severity swept over the city of Baghdád and obscured the light of the sun for some hours" (72). Apparently, no irony is intended when, a few pages later, Bahá'u'lláh is cited chiding people who "foolishly consider

1. *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America, 1932–1946* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1947) 100.

2. R. W. Balch, G. Farnworth, S. Wilkins, "When the Bombs Drop—Reactions to Discontinued Prophecy in a Millennial Sect," *Sociological Perspectives* 26.2 (1983):137–58.

such events as supernatural acts and regard them as miracles!” (92). Dubious material, such as a tradition allegedly derived from an unnamed Greek book, published to mock Mírzá Yahyá (“ . . . the hair on his back resembles that of a camel and on his chest is similar to that of a goat” [95]), is gratuitous.

The book is also repetitive about Covenant-breakers. One by one they are described, and only their names differ. The universal formula—they were all given special favors by the religion’s leaders, had ambitions, became arrogant, led scandalous personal lives, were refractory to counselling, and lived a hundred years to see nothing come of their attempts—is tiresome and simplistic. The Aghsán had different challenges from Mason Remey, as did Avárih. Ibrahim Kheirallah is covered in only three pages (246–49) without reference to Richard Hollinger’s<sup>3</sup> or Robert Stockman’s<sup>4</sup> works. Ahmad Sohrab gets much more attention by comparison, leaving us no criteria by which to judge their relative importance (and post-Remey Covenant-breakers almost completely neglected).

Despite its breadth, this book is far too long. The prologue (including its discussion of birthday parties) seems irrelevant, and several chapters—such as “‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Action” and “Building the Shrine of the Báb”—need better justification for inclusion. Quotations—and there are scores of them—would have been better used sparingly for illumination rather than as long tracts for surrogate narration (e.g., two-and-a-half pages from *God Passes By* [53–55] and three-and-a-half pages from Ḥaydar-‘Alí [172–75]). This would have made not only for improved readability but also for more space. Important topics, such as the roles of the original Hands of the Cause and Bahíyyih Khánum during succession crises (mentioned only briefly [216, 291]) could then have been tackled adequately.

Analogies abound: sometimes they are useful, but Western readers may be put off by their fecundity. In the span of two pages (102–3), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá becomes a “wall,” then a “receptacle,” then a “lowest valley,” and eventually a “moon.” References are often missing. When important assertions or direct quotations are made (e.g., pages 14, 16, 25, 57, 151, 170, 210–11, 343–45) or when malicious gossip is repeated (e.g., Avárih described as an opium smoker [334]), their absence becomes problematic. There are few typographical errors; however, an important exception is the year of Bahá’u’lláh’s death, 1892 (incorrectly stated as 1982 [148]). The book might have been more effective if it had been more rigorously edited to remove repetitive and formulaic expressions.

One of this book’s final chapters, “The Chief Stewards,” is the subject of the second book under review. *The Ministry of the Custodians 1957–1963* publishes

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3. R. Hollinger, “Ibrahim George Kheiralla and the Bahá’í Faith in America,” in J. R. Cole and M. Momen eds., *Studies in Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1984) 95–133.

4. R. Stockman, *The Bahá’í Faith in America*, Part 1, Origins (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985).

for the first time letters and cables written by the Hands of the Cause during their leadership of the Bahá'í Faith from the time of Shoghi Effendi's passing until the first election of the Universal House of Justice.

According to Rúhíyyih Khánum's introduction, this chronologically ordered compilation "does not pretend to be a history . . ." (xix). To a casual reader, it may even seem like a tedious reference book, but Bahá'í historians will welcome it as the first serious attempt to fill the lacuna in source material between 1957 and 1963. Interspersing the book's many messages of exhortation and progress reports are useful and often fascinating texts about one of the Bahá'í Faith's most crucial transitions: the evolutionary move from hereditary to elected authority.

Twenty-seven Hands of the Cause outlived Shoghi Effendi; "the Custodians" were nine among them selected to steer the Bahá'í Faith from its World Centre. Their first concern, after realizing Shoghi Effendi had not appointed a successor, was to speak with one voice. To this end, at the first meeting in November, 1957, individual notes were burned after meetings, no officers were appointed, and the work was divided on the basis of language. Their first message was titled "Unanimous Proclamation of the 27 Hands of the Cause" (28). Even Corinne True, 96 years old and too frail to journey to Israel, legally endorsed this statement.

Two "agonizing" (10,16) questions dogged their first deliberations. First: What was to be the relationship between the institution of the Hands of the Cause and the Bahá'í Faith's elected bodies? It spurred a "soul-searching" (10) debate; according to Rúhíyyih Khánum, "We Hands burned in the fire of this weighty decision . . ." (10). Their foresight and judgment, though, proved remarkable. By requesting Bahá'ís not to vote for the Hands in elections (and by a discreet policy of not putting "themselves forward in any way" at the first International Convention [423]), a clear separation of powers was established, preventing potential conflicts of interest (especially in relation to both the formation of the Universal House of Justice and its elected forerunner, the International Bahá'í Council).

The second question was even thornier: Was Shoghi Effendi the last Guardian? Opinions differed. At the Hands' first "conclave"—perhaps an unintentionally pregnant term that refers to the gathering at which cardinals elect a pope—they issued no statement about it. A few months later, the United States National Spiritual Assembly (which included Hand of the Cause, Horace Holley, its secretary) announced the door was "closed to any hope for a future second Guardian . . ." (61). The Custodians ordered a stop to the circulation of this statement, as it was not the opinion of the entire body of Hands of the Cause (64–66).

But the differences persisted: "Year after year we could come to no conclusion about whether the Guardianship was closed for the period of this Faith" (16). Only a challenge—Mason Remey's claim to be the infallible

Guardian late in 1959—brought a decisive result. A sharp prod from the United States National Spiritual Assembly for action against Mr. Remey [226], poignant snapshots of the Hands' painful but resolute decision to expel their previously distinguished colleague, and his own unconvincing justifications [232] are all recorded.

For a book of historical documents, it also strikes a surprising chord of contemporary relevance for the Bahá'í world. The Hands' main concerns—mass teaching (303, 315, 339, 382), construction (of three Houses of Worship), and the protection of Bahá'ís in Morocco and Turkey—are mirrored by some of today's important challenges: expansion, Arc-building, and the ongoing persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. Technology has advanced since the Custodians directed the Bahá'í world by airmail, cable, and telephone, but their example of effective, collective global leadership is timeless.

The final “Declaration by the Custodians” in June, 1963, passed control to the Universal House of Justice and abolished the office of the Custodians (433). “The entire history of religion shows no comparable record of such strict self-discipline, such absolute loyalty, and such complete self-abnegation by the leaders of a religion . . . ,” wrote the Universal House of Justice (2).

Individual heroism had triumphed. But the Bahá'í Faith's greatest protection at its most perilous hours were—and will continue to be—its sacred Writings. According to Rúhíyyih Khánum, “Above all, we owed the power we were able to exert during this unique crisis to the web of tight, written texts of our teachings that . . . could not be violated . . . ” (xx). This is the resounding message of both *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh* and *The Ministry of the Custodians*.