

Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife

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Abstract

Traditionally, Judeo-Christian and Muslim views of life after death have been given a literal interpretation: bodily resurrection, a day of judgement and the physical reality of heaven and hell. This paper seeks to interpret these beliefs in heaven, hell and the afterlife from a spiritual viewpoint as enunciated in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í perspective of the nature of the soul and its continued existence after the death of the physical body will become apparent in the course of this examination.

Introduction

The writings of the Bahá'í Faith offer an interpretation of the writings of many other holy scriptures on the subject of life after death. These interpretations are often, though not always, at variance with the so-called traditional or literal interpretations espoused by the followers of the other monotheistic religions.

The basis of belief in these interpretations is, for a Bahá'í, fundamental to one's belief in Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age. As Bahá'u'lláh Himself has explained:

“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."*¹

Thus, the use of figurative language to explain spiritual truths, especially events associated with the appearance of a new prophet, have been used by past prophets so that their followers would understand these truths. Hence, such terms as "birth", "death", "resurrection" and so on are not meant to be taken literally, but are used as symbols.

An examination of the references made to heaven, hell and the afterlife in Judaism, Christianity and Islam will reveal the respective eschatologies of these religions, while a comparison with the Bahá'í perspective of such issues will offer a new interpretation of their literal meaning.

1. Judaism

As with many of the earlier religions, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Jewish belief regarding various issues was at a particular time in history. All we really have to go on are the texts that have survived. It seems that views about the afterlife and concepts such as heaven and hell did alter and evolve over time, and became mixed with the cultures associated with the Jewish diaspora. Even today there are many schools of thought including the Orthodox, Conservative and the Reform movement as well as others.

Up to the 2nd century BC, Jews believed that nothing remained after the physical death of the body except a "shade". This entity descended into a deep pit called *Sheol* which is located beneath the earth - a place of gloom and dust inhabited by the just and the unjust alike.

"When I shall bring thee down with them that descend into the pit, with the people of old time, and shall set thee in the low parts of the earth, in places desolate of old, with them that go down to the

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, pp. 49-50.

pit, that thou be not inhabited; and I shall set glory in the land of the living.” (Ezekiel 26,20)

There is no mention of judgement or resurrection and all seem to exist there in a state of sleep.

“So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep.” (Job 14, 12)

Other characteristics ascribed to Sheol are silence, destruction, an absence of knowledge of one's former life or of life in the material plane, lack of material possessions, and complete inactivity.

“... there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, no wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” (Ecclesiastes 9, 10)

Heaven and hell as distinct destinations of the soul after death did not exist in Jewish eschatology at that time. Heaven was simply the dwelling place of God, and when paradise is mentioned it is only in the context of the Garden of Eden rather than the final resting place for righteous souls. Hell or *Gehenna* is a physical place - a valley outside Jerusalem which served as a general rubbish dump and a burial place for criminals. It was only later that it became associated with a place of torment for wicked souls. These views reflect both the Hebrew Bible and the so-called pseudepigraphic literature (non-official scriptures whose origin and authorship are in doubt). Only Enoch (written between the third and first centuries BC by several different authors) mentions Sheol as a kind of holding place, divided into three separate compartments, for souls awaiting a final judgement. Only those who were punished for their sins while on earth would remain in Sheol. The others are resurrected: sinners who died without being punished would be despatched to the horrors of Gehenna, while those who lived a righteous life would find themselves in paradise, having achieved bodily resurrection.

A conceptual change in Jewish belief is apparent in the second and first centuries BC, when resurrection is associated with the coming of a

redemptive figure and the establishment of a messianic kingdom on earth. This is very similar to the Christian concept of the Last Judgement. Among other events that will come to pass is the gathering together of the scattered tribes of Israel into one place when all will be renewed by the breath of God.

"For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers: and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers: and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36, 24-28)

The Judgement will see sinners destroyed and only the righteous resurrected to live eternally in God's kingdom on earth. The pseudepigraphic literature of the 1st century BC mentions a temporary earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah before the final judgement takes place at which time the righteous will be spiritually resurrected while the wicked will remain in Gehenna or Sheol for eternity.

There is a possibility of the Jews having adopted the belief in resurrection from the Zoroastrians whom they encountered in the Persian Empire during the Babylonian Exile since it was only after the Babylonian Exile that the idea of resurrection appeared in Old Testament apocalyptic literature.

Bowker² comments, "at the time when Jesus was alive, there were many competing views of how Jews should live as the true children of the covenant ... what we find in practice is a coalition of traditions and, even

² In *The Meanings of Death*, CUP, Cambridge, 1991, p. 76.

more, a coalition of dreams - dreams based on Biblical promises, and, not least, in those days, dreams of a coming Messiah.”

Contemporary Jewish belief in general seems to indicate that death is not considered a tragedy even when it occurs before old age. Belief in the afterlife, where those who have lived a worthy life are rewarded is the main reason for this view. As to what happens after death, the dominant view is that when the body dies the soul still exists in different places. While part of the soul remains with the body in anticipation of the revival of the dead at the Resurrection, other parts go elsewhere - perhaps to Paradise, or to Gehenna, or even to join another soul in an existing person to assist with its development. This continues until the time that God decrees.

Beliefs originating from the kabbala, the Jewish mystical teachings, which can be traced back to the Biblical prophets indicate the belief in a kind of purgatory called *chibut hakever* or *kaf hakeleh* (also known as Sling Shot) in which the soul is beaten or scrubbed to purge it of its impurities. This is the lot of those who have not merited connection with the All-Mighty. Once this purging (described as being chased by destroying angels from one end of the spiritual world to the other) is complete, one of two things occur: suitably purged, the soul may attain *Shekina* (God's presence) or it may be reincarnated. Some souls return to earth not because they need improvement, but simply out of a desire to help others.

2. Christianity

Christianity did not become recognizably different from Judaism, of which it was seen as a movement, until around 64 AD/CE. It shares with Judaism the books of the Old Testament as part of its holy scripture. Much of what Christians believe about the afterlife is associated with their belief in the resurrection of Christ.

In the New Testament, *Hades* or hell as the place between death and resurrection is mentioned several times, but most descriptively in the parable of Lazarus. (Luke 16, 19-26):

'There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:

And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,

And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was caried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died and was buried;

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."

Elsewhere Hell is described as a "furnace of fire" (Matthew 13, 42,50), "everlasting fire" (Matthew 25, 41) and a place where the wicked shall "go away into everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25, 46). Revelation also provides a graphic description of what awaits those who have sinned: (Revelation 20, 10-13):

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

This however, in contrast to the parable of Lazarus, refers to the final judgement. So while Hades is the intermediate stage between death and resurrection, Hell as described in Revelation is the final and everlasting abode for those whose deeds have been judged to be wicked.

References to humanity's final reckoning are prolific in the New Testament compared with descriptions of what is in store for us individually. Paul asserts that it is only those "*in Christ*" who will be resurrected, although in Acts he is reported to have said that both the righteous and the wicked will be raised. But in any case the general resurrection is linked to that of Jesus ("*the first-born of the dead*" - Colossians 1, 18) which is thought to be instrumental to our "*saving*". As Paul says in Romans 5, 24-5:

"If we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification."

Indeed, the notion of Jesus as saviour is pivotal to Christian belief in the afterlife - if one accepts him one will enter paradise, if not one's lot is hell-fire and damnation with no possibility of resurrection. It is belief more than deeds that will decide one's lot. Even then, according to some Christians, God's grace and mercy are so all-encompassing that even those who have not lived in Christ, so to speak, may be accepted into God's kingdom upon death. As one Christian minister³ said, "*Who am I to judge? God is the final judge and it is not my place to deny a man or his family a Christian burial.*"

Whether resurrection will be a bodily or a spiritual one depends on the particular "brand" of Christianity subscribed to. Many contemporary Christians reject the literal interpretation of biblical references to Hell,

³ Reverend Gareth Huw Thomas, Uniting Church of Australia, in a telephone conversation with the author in April 1998.

preferring to view it as "*isolation from God*". Roman Catholics believe that Hell exists as a place where the wicked will be punished in accordance with the gravity of their sins. This may take the form of permanent isolation from God and the administration of some kind of "fire" that will cause pain to the soul. Even those who die in a state of grace will need to spend some time being cleansed of their imperfections and (venial or minor) sins in Purgatory. The duration and intensity of this punishment may be lessened by people offering prayers and other acts of piety and devotion. In "Life After Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions" Farnaz Ma'sumian states:

"It would seem inappropriate to ascribe physical attributes to this celestial heaven or kingdom of spirits, and neither would it make sense to expect material pleasures or rewards for souls in such a celestial environment." (p. 60)

Likewise the bodily resurrection of Christ after his crucifixion is often disputed. It is Paul who emphasises the spiritual resurrection: "*And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.*" (I Corinthians 15, 45) and later "*Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God;*" (I Corinthians, 15, 50). He speaks of our having both a terrestrial and a celestial body and that it is the latter that is resurrected. His own conversion was the result of his vision of Christ not in the flesh but in the spirit, and he also imputes that the disciples also saw Jesus' celestial rather than his physical body in I Corinthians 15, 44:

"It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."

The Final Judgement and the second coming of Christ (often known as the Parousia) are mentioned extensively throughout the New Testament and are even considered as imminent. Humankind will be judged by or through Christ and the dead will be resurrected with spiritual bodies. The Book of Revelation describes two stages during which different categories of the departed are raised. The first to be raised will be the martyrs:

"I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in the hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead live not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection."
(Revelation 20, 4-5)

The second resurrection takes place after Satan, previously imprisoned for one thousand years in a bottomless pit, is released and his army consequently defeated and he himself thrown into a lake of fire and brimstone to be tormented night and day for ever and ever. (Revelation 20, 7-10):

"And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison,

And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.

And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them."

The righteous, however, will be saved:

"...the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."
(Revelation 21, 3-4)

3. Islam

For Islamic beliefs we turn to the Qu'ran, considered by Muslims to be the word of God as revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. It summons man to submit to God and do His Will or suffer the consequences in the afterlife. Thus, those who submit will enter the garden of paradise, while those who do not undergo severe punishment. In addition to the Qu'ran, Muslims refer to the stories and sayings of the prophet (the Hadith or the Tradition) and other customs to determine their understanding of death, although not in a way that would be contrary to the authority of the Qu'ran.

Hell is reserved for those who commit sacrilege and blasphemy, hypocrites, polytheists, those who go astray, those who deny God's signs, transgressors, sinners and the arrogant. Their destiny is the "*scourge of Hell*" (S32;20). The wrongdoers "*shall be left to endure its torments on their knees.*" (S19; 68), and those damned by their sins shall "*drink boiling water and be sternly punished for their unbelief*" (S6; 70). There is no respite from the torture, for once one's skin has burned, it will be renewed to be burned anew! (S4;55). Hell also goes by the name of Jahannan or Al-Gehennam (similar to the Hebrew Gehenna).

It is interesting how descriptions for Paradise centre on the metaphor of luxuriant "*Gardens under which rivers flow*". This undoubtedly has to do with the arid desert climate of the country where Muhammad preached. Paradise is also known in Arabic as Al-Jannah and translated as the Garden of Reward. Those who qualify are those who turn to Islam, and the rewards are not just metaphorical. The majority of Muslims believe these descriptions to be literal - in other words, as actual places in another part of God's creation. Again, only those with true faith and good works shall inhabit this exalted creation:

"He shall abide for ever in the gardens of Eden, in gardens watered by running streams. Such shall be the recompense of those that purify themselves." (S20; 76)

"Allah ... will reward them for their steadfastness with robes of silk and the delights of Paradise. Reclining there upon soft couches, they shall feel neither the scorching heat nor the biting cold. Trees will spread their shade around them, and fruits will hang in clusters over them. They shall be served with silver dishes, and beakers as large as goblets; silver goblets which they themselves shall measure; and cups brim-full with ginger-flavoured water from the Fount of Selsabil. They shall be attended by boys graced with eternal youth, who to the beholder's eyes will seem like sprinkled pearls. When you gaze upon that scene you will behold a kingdom blissful and glorious. They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and rich brocade, and adorned with bracelets of silver. Their Lord will give them pure beverage to drink. Thus you shall be rewarded;" (S76; 12-22)

Paradise is also described as a place of peace where the righteous *"will dwell in peace with Allah."* (S6; 127). In addition to all these material delights the faithful will experience the sublime joy of beholding Allah: *"On that day there shall be joyous faces, looking towards their Lord."* (S75; 22)

Both Hell and Paradise are seen as real. This comment by Bowker⁴ explains:

"Whereas Jews and Christians may (some do not) regard particular imaginations of heaven and hell as conceptual episodes, whose rise and fall can be traced, Muslims cannot do so: the descriptions of the Garden and the Fire are not conceptual episodes - they are not even concepts: they are places and circumstances, the reality of which will be eschatologically verified, as the Qu'ran frequently reminds us, though it does not use that language!"

The Day of Judgement, the day when the dead will be revived, is another literal event:

⁴ Bowker, John, *The Meanings of Death*, CUP, Cambridge, 1991, p. 127.

"I swear by the Day of Resurrection, and the self-reproaching soul! Does man think We shall never put his bones together again? Indeed, We can remould his very fingers!" (S75; 1-4)

The sequence of events will be as follows: first the raising up of the dead, second the delivery of each man's record into his hand (either right - for the righteous or left - for the wicked, according to his deeds), third the judgement of the virtuous and the sinners, and finally the admittance of the righteous into Paradise and the despatch of the wicked to the eternal torments of Hell. Immediately preceding the raising of the dead will occur two (or three) trumpet blasts. None except God knows when the Day of Judgement will take place, not even Muhammad whose duty is to "warn those that fear it" (S75, 44).

However there are many signs recorded in the Hadith as to when this will occur. Some of these are the sun rising in the west, the eclipse of the Moon, the coming of the Antichrist, the eruption of Gog and Magog, the appearance of the Beast or the Anti-Christ, the return of Christ and the appearance of the Al-Mahdi (the Rightly Guided One) as well as various cataclysmic events. Many of these signs are similar to those depicted in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. After the Judgement time will come to an end, the universe will disappear and nothing shall remain except Allah, paradise for the blessed and Hell for the doomed.⁵

4. Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Writings offer an interpretation of the writings of some holy scriptures other than its own, particularly on the subject of the life hereafter, as well as the Bahá'í view of the origin, nature and progress of the soul once it has become separated from the body.

The soul, as distinct from the body albeit related to it, comes into being at the moment of conception and endures forever.

⁵ Sherif, Faruq, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*, Garnet Publishing, Reading, 1995.

*"Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure."*⁶

When freed from the confines of its physical body upon death, the soul continues its unending progress through the spiritual worlds - worlds beyond time and space. That is all we are permitted to know as

*"The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men."*⁷

We are told, however, that the soul can be assisted to progress, not through our conscious effort (we can only do that here) but through God's grace (the main means) or by others saying prayers on our behalf and good deeds performed by others in our name.

There is much in the Writings that we are told about the soul in general and this helps us understand the purpose of our physical existence. Our material existence is necessary, it is said, so that our souls may acquire the spiritual capacities necessary for existence in the realm of the spirit. This workshop of life requires a teacher to enable us to learn and develop those qualities that will equip us for the next life. Such a teacher must exemplify all the virtues in their conduct and provide us with the laws that will provide for our development. The divine teachers are of course the prophets of God.

This world is seen as

"but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality ... a vapour in a desert, which the thirsty

⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 155-6.

⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 156-7.

*dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion."*⁸

*"The meaning of eternal life is the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the flower receives the gift of the season, the air, and the breezes of spring. Consider: this flower had life in the beginning like the life of the mineral; but by the coming of the season of spring, of the bounty and the clouds of the springtime, and of the heat of the glowing sun, it attained to another life of the utmost freshness, delicacy and fragrance. The first life of the flower, in comparison to the second life, is death."*⁹

Life in this world is compared to the unborn child in the womb of its mother - during its preparation for life in this world the foetus develops organs, limbs, and so on that are necessary for its survival. So it is with our preparation for the spiritual world to come - we must (but consciously) develop the spiritual capacities needed for our souls to progress. Our principal duty in this world is to know God and to worship Him. We do this by recognizing His Manifestation for this Day and by obedience to His Laws.

Paradise as a place of material delights is regarded as a symbol of the spiritual condition of the soul when it attains God's good pleasure.

*"As to Paradise: It is a reality and there can be no doubt about it, and now in this world it is realized through love of Me and My good-pleasure. Whosoever attaineth unto it God will aid him in this world below, and after death He will enable him to gain admittance into Paradise whose vastness is as that of heaven and earth ..."*¹⁰

This is the case whether the soul is still in contact with the physical body or in the spiritual plane. Thus, heaven can be regarded as the joy of loving

⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 56.

⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-I-Iqan*, pp. 120-121.

¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 70-71.

God and drawing closer to Him by following the teachings of God's messenger and by acquiring virtues.

Elsewhere in the Bahá'í Writings paradise has been described as:

*"to be exposed to God's Manifestation in His Day, to hear His verses and believe in them, to sail upon the sea of the heavenly kingdom of His good-pleasure, and to partake of the choice fruits of the paradise of His divine Oneness."*¹¹

and also *"to obey God's commandments"*¹².

The rewards of the next world are *"peace, the spiritual graces, the various spiritual gifts in the Kingdom of God, the gaining of the desires of the heart and the soul, and the meeting of God in the world of eternity."*¹³

We are told that the soul will retain its consciousness and individuality and remember its physical life on earth including recognizing other souls and communing spiritually with them. In addition, if marriage bonds have been spiritual they will also survive into the next world. The soul will also be able to converse with the prophets of God and His chosen ones, and we will become aware of all the mysteries of the universe.

Hell can also be experienced while we are still alive - it is interpreted as being far from God, and being deprived of His good pleasure. Exclusive focus on one's material nature and desires are obvious examples of a soul's torture in this life. The soul in this condition can be described as being condemned to the "fire" of unbelief and to the "wrath" of God. Punishment for such souls in the next life is likely to *"consist in being deprived of the special divine blessings and the absolute bounties, and falling into the lowest degree of existence."*¹⁴

¹¹ Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 88-89.

¹² Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 77.

¹³ Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁴ Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 98-99.

Concerning judgement of our lives after death, Bahá'is believe that we become aware of our past good and bad deeds immediately after death, so that we may actually experience a state of bliss or loss accordingly. This corresponds with the literal references to heaven and hell in other scriptures. The rewards of heaven would thus be nearness to God and everlasting joy, whereas the punishments of hell would be remoteness from God and being deprived of His blessings¹⁵. The rewards of heaven are not restricted to Bahá'is, incidentally, but are extended to "every pure, every refined and sanctified soul".¹⁶

With reference to the resurrection of Christ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "*The resurrections of the Divine Manifestations are not of the body*" and that their teachings have a spiritual and divine signification. Christ's resurrection is given a completely spiritual interpretation:

*"the disciples were troubled and agitated after the martyrdom of Christ. The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and was not resplendent and manifest. No, rather it was lost, for the believers were few in number and were troubled and agitated. The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body; and when after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body until the life and the bounty of the Holy Spirit surrounded it."*¹⁷

The events predicted in the scriptures of other religions as characterising the Last Days are explained by Bahá'u'lláh in his Book of Certitude

¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 224.

¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 154.

¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Question*, pp. 103-105.

(Kitab-i-Iqan) as being symbolic. The events were described in this way so that people could, in their own capacity, understand them. The Day of Resurrection is the day when a new messenger appears to guide the people back to spiritual truth. The spiritually dead, if they are able to accept the new messenger, are thus brought out of the graves of disbelief.

Conclusion

While literal interpretations of scriptural references to heaven, hell and the Day of Judgement continue to be upheld in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Bahá'í Faith offers a new, spiritual, interpretation of these beliefs.

Bahá'u'lláh, as the latest in a line of prophets who have appeared throughout history to guide humanity, re-affirms the spiritual teachings of all religions and at the same time opens our eyes to the allusions of the holy scriptures of the past – explaining them and revealing their spiritual meaning:

“whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the Manifestation of Holiness, he verily is of those that have attained unto ‘life’ and ‘resurrection’ and have entered into the ‘paradise’ of the love of God. And whosoever is not of them, is condemned to ‘death’ and ‘deprivation’, to the ‘fire of unbelief, and to the ‘wrath’ of God. In all the scriptures, the books and chronicles, the sentence of death, of fire, of blindness, of want of understanding and hearing, hath been pronounced against those whose lips have tasted not the ethereal cup of true knowledge, and whose hearts have been deprived of the grace of the holy Spirit in their day.”¹⁸

For those who ascribe to these new interpretations,

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, pp. 76-7.

*"The flames of hell have been made to blaze, and heaven hath been brought nigh; the celestial gardens are in flower, and fresh pools are brimming over, and paradise gleameth in beauty ... the veil hath fallen away, the curtain is lifted, the clouds have parted, the Lord of Lords is in plain sight,"*¹⁹

while the unaware are *"are still mired down in their empty dreams."*²⁰

¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections of the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 14-15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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