

## MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice  
From: The Research Department

Date: 25 August 1989

### **John the Baptist and interpretation**

The Research Department has studied the questions about John the Baptist and the function of interpretation which were contained in the letter dated 29 May 1989 from Mr. Friedo Zölzer to the Universal House of Justice. Specifically, Mr. Zölzer cites excerpts from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and one written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice. The letter dated 30 November 1930 written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf states that John the Baptist, "according to various authorities was himself the originator of laws which abrogated the teachings current among the Jews". The letter dated 24 August 1975 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice stated that the "teachings of John did not abrogate any of the laws of the Mosaic Dispensation". Mr. Zölzer seeks clarification of the apparent contradiction raised by the juxtaposition of these two extracts, and he enquires about the extent of the authority of statements of an interpretative nature which do not appear to fit clearly into the domain of the functions specified for the Universal House of Justice. We provide the following response.

#### **1. John the Baptist**

##### **1.1 *The Station of John the Baptist***

John the Baptist is accorded a very high station in the Bahá'í Writings. For example, in the "Kitáb-í-Badí'", Bahá'u'lláh refers to John the Baptist as a Prophet and Messenger. Also, in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" (published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), see pp. 118–19), Shoghi Effendi quotes a passage from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings in which He identifies Himself with several Manifestations and Holy Ones of God, one of whom is John the Baptist. The following extract from a letter dated 14 August 1934 written on behalf of the Guardian to two believers affirms:

Concerning your question relative to the names of the prophets referred to ... (in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh", they are as follows: Abraham, Moses, Joseph, John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ, Imam Ḥusayn, the son of Imám 'Ali, who was the legitimate heir of Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh.

It is important to note, however, that the Bahá'í Writings do not specifically refer to John the Baptist as an independent Manifestation of God. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi's comments about the uniqueness of the "twofold station" of the Báb as being the "most distinctive feature of

the Bahá'í Dispensation", serves to underline this point. The Guardian wrote:

There can be no doubt that the claim to the twofold station ordained for the Báb by the Almighty, a claim which He Himself has so boldly advanced, which Bahá'u'lláh has repeatedly affirmed, and to which the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has finally given the sanction of its testimony, constitutes the most distinctive feature of the Bahá'í Dispensation. It is a further evidence of its uniqueness, a tremendous accession to the strength, to the mysterious power and authority with which this holy cycle has been invested. Indeed the greatness of the Báb consists primarily, not in His being the divinely-appointed Forerunner of so transcendent a Revelation, but rather in His having been invested with the powers inherent in the inaugurator of a separate religious Dispensation, and in His wielding, to a degree unrivaled by the Messengers gone before Him, the scepter of independent Prophethood.<sup>1</sup>

### **1.2 The Teachings of John the Baptist**

When the references in the Writings to the teachings of John the Baptist are examined—see, for example, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 64–65; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), pp. 157–58, and p. 171; *Some Answered Questions*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), pp. 94–95—it is evident that John the Baptist called the Jews to repentance, to purify their lives and to prepare for the advent of Christ. While John the Baptist's "laws", no doubt, stood in sharp contrast to the practices and concepts of the Jewish people at that time, or, as the "various authorities" referred to by the Guardian's secretary stated, John's "laws ... abrogated the teachings current among the Jews", this does not necessarily indicate that he abrogated the laws of the Mosaic Dispensation, *per se*. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions*, p. 94, asserted that:

... most certainly God abrogated the laws of the Old Testament at the time of Christ.

Hence, it would seem that there is no discrepancy between the statement written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and that written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice.

## **2. The Function of Interpretation**

We enclose for Mr. Zölzer's study two extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice. The first distinguishes between the authoritative interpretation which is the province of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian and the divinely inspired legislation of the House of Justice. The second clarifies the qualitative difference between interpretation and the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice.

Enclosures (2)

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<sup>1</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 123.