

“Some Answered Questions” and Its Compiler

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A young American living in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century had a life-changing experience. As a result, she was steered in a direction utterly different from anything she and her parents had in mind. Laura Clifford Barney was born in 1879 to Alice Pike and Albert Barney. At a very young age her parents took her to Paris, where she studied at a prestigious school for about nine years. In 1892 she returned to the United States and entered Visitation, a Catholic Convent School in Georgetown. She later returned to Paris, and studied philosophy and religion. She was a bright and serious student with an active and enquiring mind, keenly interested in discovering the frontiers of knowledge. Her mother had established a salon in Paris where artists and writers gathered. Laura “often attended her mother’s circle of friends in the French Salon” and “participated in the intellectual discussions among influential writers and artists...” Her “serious questions often led to insightful observations on the part of those present.”¹

During her stay in Paris in early 1900, Laura heard of the Bahá’í Faith and studied its tenets with May Eliss Bolles (Maxwell), the renowned Bahá’í teacher. Heeding the voice of her conscience, Laura embraced the nascent Faith and pursued a lifelong career of service to humanity, which made her world

renown. This paper is about one of her most remarkable achievements that have immortalized her name in the annals of religion. *Some Answered Questions* is the descriptive title of the book she has compiled of answers to the questions she presented to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest Son and Successor of Bahá’u’lláh and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. In a cable sent to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of France on the occasion of her passing in August 1974, the Universal House of Justice, the Supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, said: “She achieved immortal fame through compilation *Some Answered Questions* unique entire field religious history.”

Asking Questions A Potent Means to Expand the Horizon of Knowledge

Human beings have ever used the means of inquiry to unlock the doors of understanding matters initially appearing beyond their ability to comprehend. Thought-provoking questions emanating from the minds of sincere seekers expand the horizon of knowledge; enlightened answers widen the scope of understanding abstruse concepts. The most opportune time for asking questions is when God’s Mouthpiece and the authorized interpreter of the revealed Word live among humankind. Many of the Báb’s Writings have been revealed in response to petitions. The declaration of His Mission to Mullá Ḥusayn followed an exchange of questions and answers leading to the revelation of commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, in response to a question he considered to be the proof of the truth of His Mission, if it were revealed unasked, which came to pass as he had expected.

The Writings of Bahá’u’lláh revealed in response to petitions are numerous. The Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Book that “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” [GPB 139], has been revealed in response to questions He

received from one of the Báb's uncles. The process of the revelation of the laws did likewise begin with enquiries received from the believers early in Bahá'u'lláh's ministry. It was during the years of exile in Adrianople (Edirne of today), almost immediately after His Declaration in Baghdad in 1863 that Bahá'u'lláh permitted all to ask whatever questions they had concerning laws and ordinances needed by humankind. The responses were initially revealed in Persian. Later in 'Akká, in response to further requests, He revealed the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.² Had the early believers not asked questions, the inexhaustible reservoir of divine knowledge, although unsealed, would probably not have been revealed in such pronounced measure.

Although the Báb had forbidden His followers "to ask questions of Him Whom God will make manifest (Bahá'u'lláh) unless their questions were submitted in writing and pertained to subjects worthy of His lofty station" [KA note 146], Bahá'u'lláh relieved them of the prohibition:

In the Bayán it had been forbidden you to ask Us questions. The Lord hath relieved you of this prohibition, that ye may be free to ask what you need to ask, but not such idle questions as those on which the men of former times were wont to dwell. Ask ye that which shall be of profit to you in the Cause of God and His dominion, for the portals of His tender compassion have been opened before all who dwell in heaven and on earth. [KA ¶126]

Bahá'u'lláh continued to encourage the believers to ask questions. In a Tablet revealed in honor of a believer titled *Vafá*, He says:

We have noted the Questions thou hast asked and will readily answer thee. It behoveth everyone in this Day to ask God that which he desireth, and thy Lord will heed his petition with wondrous and undeniable verses. [TB 183]

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's major works published in English have been revealed in response to questions. In addition to *The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)*, they include: *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, *Javáhiru'l-Asrár (The Gems of Divine Mysteries)*; *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat (Tablet of Wisdom)*; *Súriy-i-Vafá (Tablet to Vafá)*; *Lawḥ-i-Siyyid-i-Mihdíy-i-Dahají (Tablet to Siyyid Mihdíy-i-Dahají)*; *Lawḥ-i-Mánikchí Şáhib (Tablet to Mánikchí Şáhib)*; *Responses to questions of Mánikchí Şáhib from a Tablet to Mirzá Abu'l-Faḍl*; *Tablet of the Seven Questions*. In addition to these titles, Shoghi Effendi has included in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* some Tablets or excerpts thereof revealed in response to questions.

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets have been published as provisional translations, such as *Lawḥ-i-Kullu't-Ṭa'ám (Tablet of All Foods)*, *Lawḥ-i-Ṭibb (Tablet to the Physician)*, and others. These Tablets can be found in some Bahá'í journals.

Numerous other Tablets revealed in Persian and Arabic, as yet un-translated, have also been revealed in response to questions. Bahá'u'lláh particularly encouraged the friends to ask questions about the laws of the new dispensation almost immediately after His declaration in April 1863. In Adrianople (Edirne) He revealed some laws in response to a number of questions. Later in 'Akká the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was revealed, which incorporates the laws revealed in Adrianople. After the revelation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Jináb-i-Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín was authorized to submit questions concerning the laws. The treatise, titled *Questions & Answers*, an appendix to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, is a compilation he made of Bahá'u'lláh's answers to questions concerning the laws of the Most Holy Book.

The practice of responding to questions continued during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. When the light of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation moved westward and illumined North America, the new adherents' access to the vast ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's writings was confined to drops, because material translated to English was scarce, indeed. The scarcity caused them to turn to

‘Abdu’l-Bahá for answers to questions occupying their minds. One of the newly enrolled believers, a young woman of twenty-one with an active and enquiring mind was Laura Clifford Barney, who after marriage with Hippolyte Dreyfus, became known as Madam Laura Dreyfus-Barney. The answers she received to her numerous questions were of such inestimable value that with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approval, she compiled them into a book, titled *Some Answered Questions*.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the infallible Interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and His Successor, received and answered countless questions concerning various aspects of His Father’s revelation. The responses to these questions are contained in many volumes of His Writings; in Farsi they usually bear the title *Makatíb*, in English they were originally known as *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Those retranslated have been published in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. *Some Answered Questions* is a compilation devoted in its entirety to the questions presented to Him by Laura Clifford Barney and of answers He revealed in response.

The process of asking questions and being enlightened by answers from infallible sources of guidance has been ongoing since the ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause of God (1921-1957) received and answered questions from individual Bahá’ís and institutions throughout the world. Some National Assemblies have compiled and published the answers to questions from their respective communities. The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, has likewise received and answered questions ever since its inception in April 1963. Many volumes containing its messages have been published in Persian and English; many of the messages are in response to questions. A good source of reference for messages issued by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice in response to questions is *Lights of Guidance*.

A more detailed survey of Bahá'í writings in response to questions is a theme worthy of further exploration. The purpose of this brief explanation is to highlight the importance of asking intelligent questions, the answers to which expand the horizon of knowledge.

Questions & Answers and Some Answered Questions – Similarities and Differences

Among a multitude of titles containing Bahá'í Sacred Writings two are devoted entirely to authoritative answers to questions: The first is titled *Questions & Answers*, the second *Some Answered Questions*. The first is a document comprising exclusively of answers Bahá'u'lláh revealed in response to questions about the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. It is by nature of small size and regarded an appendix to the Most Holy Book. Its compiler is Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, one of the erudite, devoted and trusted followers of Bahá'u'lláh. He was a *mujtahid* (specialized in Islamic jurisprudence) before embracing the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths. Bahá'u'lláh authorized him not only to ask questions about the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, but also to compile *Risálih-i-Su'ál va Javáb (Questions & Answers)*.

The second, *Some Answered Questions* consists entirely of answers 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to scores of questions on a variety of subjects from Laura Clifford Barney. The circumstances surrounding the compilation of *Some Answered Questions* were very different from those leading to *Questions & Answers*: Unlike *Questions & Answers*, which was compiled before the Bahá'í Faith had spread to the western hemisphere, *Some Answered Questions* took shape when the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh had reached the shores of North America and spread to parts of Europe. Many westerners, who had embraced the Bahá'í Faith made their way to the Holy Land, to attain the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. Laura Clifford Barney was one of them.

Meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shortly after she had embraced the Bahá’í Faith in Paris confirmed Laura Barney in the belief that He was the living embodiment of divine wisdom and the inexhaustible source of true knowledge, the Person to Whom she could turn for convincing answers to her unanswered questions. To gain a deeper understanding of the subjects that fascinated her mind, she wasted no time in presenting questions to Him, begging for answers. Recognizing her insatiable quest for knowledge and understanding, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá patiently nurtured her inquiring mind and responded to her questions with supreme compassion. However, His tasks were many and time for answering questions was extremely tight.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s decision to respond to Laura Barney’s questions when she was present in ‘Akká seems to have been prompted by other considerations: Laura initially had no knowledge of Persian or Arabic; she spoke English and French. It was of crucial importance to the success of the undertaking for the interpreter to understand and translate her questions accurately. The interpreter had to also convey precisely ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response. Any difficulty in understanding the question or conveying the answer could be rectified speedily when it was done in person. Another major concern was the slowness and unreliability of the postal service during those difficult times in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry, when His internal and external enemies liked nothing better than seeing Him completely annihilated. They colluded to ensure the success of their schemes, which appeared successful when He was incarcerated in the early years of the twentieth century. He was under surveillance, His communications were censored and His life threatened. It was at a time like this, so fraught with danger that Laura Barney’s quest for deeper knowledge was addressed. However, every precaution had to be taken to avoid placing in the hand of the enemy pretexts for adding to the stringent restrictions in force. In person communication proved invaluable; it avoided the pitfalls of communication by mail, at the same time it made clear that no earthly force could hamper

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s will to move the Cause of God forward. With His permission, she presented her questions to Him in person and arranged for His answers to be recorded.

One major difference between *Questions & Answers* and *Some Answered Questions* is that in the case of *Questions & Answers*, questions were submitted in writing, answers were likewise revealed in writing. *Some Answered Questions* comprises responses to questions presented in person but recorded as they were uttered. To ensure authenticity, before *Some Answered Questions* was published, the responses were reviewed and approved by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Laura Barney outlines how the process began and moved forward: “While I desired from the very beginning that the Master’s utterances be recorded in Persian, it was only when the Master mentioned that at some time these transcripts would have to be reviewed and corrected, that He made the decision that His utterances be also recorded in Persian.” She adds: “... the Master not only corrected Mírzá Munír’s first draft,³ but after the corrections were incorporated ‘Abdu’l-Bahá again reviewed the corrected version and signed each corrected subject.”⁴

Unlike *Some Answered Questions*, which was published immediately after it was approved by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the text of *Questions & Answers*, though compiled during Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry, remained unpublished until 1910. Its English translation was published together with the authorized English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in 1992. The reason for the delay in the publication of *Questions & Answers* was the necessity for Bahá’u’lláh’s Book of Laws to be translated and annotated under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice. Without the Book, the appendix would have had no source of reference.

Although Zaynu’l-Muqarrabín and Laura Clifford Barney enjoy the honor of being the compilers of *Questions & Answers* and *Some Answered Questions* respectively, some differences set them apart: Zaynu’l-Muqarrabín was a man from

Iran, the state religion of which has been Islam for centuries. He was well versed in Islamic jurisprudence. Laura Barney did not belong to a religious class. She was an emancipated young woman raised in the cradle of liberation. As stated earlier, Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín was authorized to present questions in writing to Bahá'u'lláh exclusively about the laws of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Laura Barney enjoyed the opportunity to present questions to 'Abdu'l-Bahá on subjects of her choice. She also enjoyed the permission to arrange for the publication and dissemination of *Some Answered Questions* in two languages almost immediately after it was compiled, while *Questions & Answers* took more than two decades to be published in Persian and much longer to be published in English and other languages. Unlike Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, Laura Barney had no familiarity with Persian and/or Arabic when she set foot on the path of search, yet her "imperishable service", as Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Cause of God, says,

was to collect and transmit to posterity in the form of "Some Answered Questions," 'Abdu'l-Bahá's priceless explanations, covering a wide variety of subjects, given to her in the course of an extended pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and undertook the complex task of compiling the book. [GPB 260]

The Compiler of Some Answered Questions

From among the early western believers Laura Clifford Barney was most qualified to undertake the compilation of *Some Answered Questions*. Not only did she have scholastic qualifications and intellectual maturity for undertaking the task, but also possessed the inherent qualities needed to successfully accomplish the goal. Additionally, she had the means to have the compilation published in a befitting manner in Persian and English, and disseminated internationally. To accomplish her objective, she made repeated visits to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and persevered until the daunting task was complete.

Learning was her lifelong objective. When a question occupied her mind she enthusiastically pursued the path of search until she found the answer. She was both meticulous and methodic in her work. Above all she was a dedicated believer and utterly devoted to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, she had complete faith in Him as the Centre of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. When she was unsure about the accuracy of a piece of information, she sought clarification. Before publishing the book, she did her utmost to ensure that every detail was checked carefully and highest standards were observed.

The process of asking questions probably started with Laura Barney submitting them in writing. Soon it became clear that the scope of her endeavor and the complexities involved made it most difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the work through correspondence. Also, with the heavy responsibilities ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shouldered and the little time He had available to achieve so much, expounding on Laura Barney’s complex questions could be achieved efficiently and with speed if she were present in ‘Akká. Therefore, she received permission to present her questions in person. Being in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá while He responded to her questions proved of crucial importance, because it provided her with the opportunity to pay careful attention to the answers as they were uttered, and could seek clarification if the interpreters did not convey the response clearly, or if she had difficulty understanding the concept.

To reach the Holy Land, which was part of the Ottoman Empire at the time, the western pilgrims travelled to France, whence to Egypt and the Holy Land, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his family continued to live as exiles after Bahá’u’lláh ascended to the Celestial Realm. The pilgrims waited in Egypt until called by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Since restrictions were in place, only a few could visit Him at a time. As a result, the pilgrims were afforded the opportunity to get to know the Bahá’ís residing in Egypt, the most prominent of whom was Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl. The

opportunity was priceless: The pilgrims not only recovered from the rigors of travel but also used the time to prepare themselves spiritually for the realization of their long-awaited dream; their visit to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant. Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl was available to answer their questions and help them prepare for the sanctity of the experience they were about to witness. The person who made the most of her stay in Egypt and gathered many a priceless gem from Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s treasury of knowledge was Laura Barney. Encouraged by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, she never failed to consult him when she needed sound advice. Seeing her vast capacity for acquiring knowledge, Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl unhesitatingly tutored and deepened her understanding of Bahá’í history and teachings. He was her beloved teacher, the person she appreciated for his rare qualities of knowledge, wisdom, humility and generosity of heart and mind. To show her appreciation for his assistance, while he was alive,⁵ she never failed to help him in spreading the light of the knowledge of the Faith among humankind. She financed the publication of some of his writings in English. She also paid for his trip to and sojourn in Paris for about three and a half months, she likewise financed his trip to and stay in the United States lasting over three years.

Never before in a religious dispensation had a woman the opportunity to submit a wide range of questions to an infallible Centre of Authority and receive His detailed and authoritative answers. In addition to the questions Laura Barney asked in person, she submitted questions in the missives she sent to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. A few Tablets revealed in her honor, which have been published, confirm this. One case in point is the Tablet revealed in response to her question about the institution of Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, another is about the wisdom of burying the dead.

Laura Barney gave careful consideration to the nature of questions she asked, also to the organization of the material she compiled. According to Stockman, “The book explored eighty-

four questions covering such subjects as “The Resurrection of Christ’, ‘The Holy Spirit’, ‘The trinity’, ‘Predestination’, ‘Modification of Species’, ‘The Progress of Man in the Other World’, ‘Healing by Spiritual Means’, ‘The Influence of the Stars’ and ‘Strikes’. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was also asked to comment on specific verses in Revelation and Isaiah and to describe the missions of Abraham, Moses and Jesus.”⁶ In her preface to the book, Laura Barney explains how the book came about:

During my several visits to ‘Akká, these answers were written down in Persian while ‘Abdul-Bahá spoke, not with a view to publication, but simply that I might have them for future study ... In these lessons He is the teacher adapting Himself to His pupil, and not the orator or poet.

This book presents only certain aspects of the Bahá’í Faith, which is universal in its message and has for each questioner the answer suited to his special development and needs.

In my case the teachings were made simple, to correspond to my rudimentary knowledge, and are therefore in no way complete and exhaustive ... [SAQ 2014, xix]

Describing the organization of the contents of *Some Answered Questions*, Laura Barney says: “Originally they were not given in any special order, but have now been roughly classified for the convenience of the reader.” She confirms the addition of a Table of Contents “merely to indicate the subjects treated of”, adds that the Persian text has been closely followed and that “many of the Persian and Arabic names have been written in their simplest form without strictly adhering to a scientific system which would be confusing to the average reader” [SAQ xx].

Living in Paris, a city far closer to the Holy Land geographically than any part of the United States, was a great advantage. It afforded Laura Barney repeated trips to and from

Egypt with relative ease and speed. She then traversed the distance between Port Sa'id and Holy Land in a relatively short time. The means of transport were in those days by sea. Her flexibility made it possible for her to go at short notice and stay for as long as it was possible and prudent. She was ecstatic and truly grateful for whatever time she was allowed to spend close to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family. When she was not busy formulating questions, presenting them, listening and recording the answers, organizing her work and studying the Faith with the holy family, she was able to learn Persian, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged her to do.

Learning Persian proved helpful in enhancing Laura Barney's understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's utterances. She also taught English and French to the daughters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, particularly Rúhá Khánum and Munavar Khánum, the youngest two.

Laura Barney's visits were of varying duration, at times extended to many months. Between 1900 and 1908 she visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá several times. According to H.M. Balyuzi, it was during her "repeated and extended visits to the Holy Land ... during those months, stretched over several years, that a book unique in the entire range of the Writings of the Founders of the Faith took shape. The book was *Some Answered Questions*. Questions came from Laura Barney and 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered them."⁷ Laura Barney presented her questions when 'Abdu'l-Bahá had time to spare, invariably at mealtime. His response was translated on the spot by a resident Bahá'í proficient in both English and Persian.

To record the answers in English, initially Laura Barney made notes. Later she was allowed to bring with her a stenographer. On her visit to 'Akká in 1904 she was accompanied by Ms. Ethel Rosenberg, an English Bahá'í, who recorded on the spot 'Abdu'l-Bahá's translated explanations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answers were also recorded in Persian for the benefit of the members of the family who were not present at the table.⁸ Afrukhtih, one of

the interpreters, explains that Mírzá Munír, the son of Mírzá Muḥammad-Qulí, the faithful half-brother of Bahá'u'lláh, was assigned the task.⁹ The *Foreword* to the latest revised edition of *Some Answered Questions* prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre states:

Arrangements were made for one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sons-in-law, or for one of His three secretaries of that time, to take down in Persian the text of His replies. From the resulting collection of notes a selection was made; 'Abdu'l-Bahá then corrected these notes twice in His own hand, sometimes substantially revising them in the process as well as carefully reviewing the final wording. [SAQ 2014, xii]

Laure Barney herself prepared the English translation of *Some Answered Questions* on the basis of the approved Persian text. The descriptive title was carefully selected and approved by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In the preface to the first English edition, published in 1908 she explains the conditions under which 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded to her questions:

"I HAVE GIVEN TO you my tired moments," were the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as He rose from table after answering one of my questions.

As it was on this day, so it continued; between the hours of work, His fatigue would find relief in renewed activity; occasionally He was able to speak at length; but often, even though subject might require more time, He would be called away after a few moments; again, days and even weeks would pass, in which He had no opportunity of instructing me. But I could well be patient, for I had always before me the greater lesson — the lesson of His personal life. [SAQ xix]

The 1904 visit of Laura Barney and Ethel Rosenberg coincided with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's re-incarceration. The strict

conditions imposed on Bahá'u'lláh and His family after their arrival in 'Akká in 1868 had eased over the years affording them some freedom of movement. The relaxation of the stringent restrictions had made it possible for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to meet with western pilgrims in small groups and to initiate the construction of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel. After Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's half-brother, unhappy with the provisions of his Father's Book of the Covenant, which bestowed upon him a station beneath that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, started a campaign to discredit Him. Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí's constant agitation and baseless accusations against 'Abdu'l-Bahá resulted in the dispatch of a commission of enquiry by the central government, which resulted in the re-imposition of restrictions on Him. One of the affected areas was the number of visitors He could receive, not more than a few at a time. That Laura Barney and Ms. Rosenberg visited Him at that time was in itself an extraordinary event. The purpose of the visit was for Laura to present her questions to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in person and for Ms. Rosenberg to have His translated responses recorded in English. During their prolonged stay, they lived in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's House,¹⁰ and enjoyed the incomparable blessing that living with the members of His family, particularly the Greatest Holy Leaf, afforded them. The visit extended over many months.

Living in the rarefied atmosphere of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's House accentuated the spiritual susceptibilities of the person who had come with a mind surging with questions. In His presence, her power of absorption and reflection were most intense. Deprived of these blessings, it would have been most difficult for Laura Barney to accomplish what she did. During her 1904 visit, she was inspired to make available to others, who did not have the priceless opportunity of hearing from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lips answers to the questions she was privileged to put before Him. It was at that time that arrangements were made for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's responses in Persian to be recorded for the benefit of those who could not be there in person. This text

was later corrected and signed by Him, as stated earlier in this account.

Laura's knowledge of history and scripture, also her familiarity with topics of interest to intellectuals of the time made her an ideal person to formulate questions for presentation to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Her organizational ability and meticulous pursuance of tasks at hand were assets she employed with great success. Never did she lose sight of what she wanted to ask, ever was she ready for the opportunity to present her questions and imbibe His answers. Fully aware of the unique honor 'Abdu'l-Bahá had graciously bestowed on her and of the preciousness of the moments He spared to answer her questions made Laura Barney all the more attentive and committed to her work. In the process she also learned the value of patience, not one of her intrinsic characteristics. In addition to the many questions her active mind formulated, a few probably came from other believers who submitted their questions through her.

Laura Barney loved life near 'Abdu'l-Bahá and preferred a place like 'Akká, a penal colony with its harsh environment to a life of luxury and comfort, to which she was used. During her visits, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded with loving kindness to the questions she presented to Him at the dining table, the only time He could spare to respond to her questions. At the table, in addition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the interpreter, Laura Barney and Ms. Rosenberg, were usually seated several pilgrims and resident believers. In consideration of traditional Middle-Eastern practices, female members of the holy family did not eat with the men if they were not close relatives. Therefore, one of the resident Bahá'ís versed in English, often Youness Khán Afroukhteh, served as interpreter. But when the family gathered at breakfast and only female western pilgrims were present, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's youngest daughters, Rouha Khánum and Munavar Khánum served as interpreters. It seems that they helped also with interpretation at the table when male pilgrims and resident Bahá'ís were not present.

Afroukhteh says the members of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s family “realized that if Miss Barney had not immersed herself in the depths of this divine Ocean, those precious gems would have remained undiscovered forever; those heavenly jewels would have been left concealed in the depths of the storehouse of meanings. And now that these hidden gems had come to light, what could be better than to record them in the Persian language so that they might remain intact and inviolate for posterity in the annals of the Faith. So they asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to assign an amanuensis to attend the meetings and take down in Persian each and every gem-like word.” He adds that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá approved the request and “Mírzá Munír, son of the departed Mírzá Muḥammad-Qulí was assigned the task...”¹¹ Afroukhteh says later in his book: “I was not aware that Miss Barney had desired a Persian compilation of the book from the outset.”¹²

When in ‘Akká, Laura Barney lived in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s House and spent considerable time associating with the ladies of the Holy Family and deepening her understanding of the verities of the Faith. Afroukhteh says: “During her one year stay, she not only became familiar with the fundamental principles and mysteries of the Cause of God but also emerged as a source for the diffusion of these divine blessings among the people.”¹³

Laura Barney’s recognition of the One Whose innate knowledge provided infallible answers to whatever puzzled her mind was key to her success in seeing to completion the task she had undertaken. Many were the pilgrims who attained ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s presence. Some asked questions, many did not. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was most generous in giving of His time to meet them and respond to their entreaties. Even non-Bahá’ís who sought His presence were not turned away; they were accommodated with utmost kindness. Myron Phelps is an example. But none achieved what Laura Barney accomplished. She sought and received permission to ask numerous questions, hear the answers and arrange for them to be recorded. “As a result of Laura Barney’s probings, answers to many questions of eternal

significance, as well as those reflecting a Western or Christian orientation, became a part of the Bahá'í sacred writings. The book has always been one of the most popular Bahá'í texts."¹⁴ Speaking of the manner the book came to be, Stockman says:

... Laura Barney, a Persian-speaking American Bahá'í, frequently visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká and asked Him questions about the Faith, often over the dinner table — much to the exasperation of the Persians present, who were not used to anyone, let alone a woman, closely questioning 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Barney took extensive notes which were informally circulated. Eventually 'Abdu'l-Bahá read, modified and approved her notes of His replies and gave her permission to publish them. Because He had approved the exact wording in the original Persian, the book became a part of Bahá'í scripture.¹⁵

Were one to enumerate outstanding attributes in a person singled out to be the recipient of the bounty bestowed on Laura Barney, top on the list would be: Utter dedication to the Centre of the Covenant, an inquisitive mind, sound knowledge of scripture and history, familiarity with issues current in early twentieth century, perseverance, meticulousness, keen interest, mature understanding, flexibility, patience and gratitude. Laura appreciated the value of the honor vouchsafed to her and did her utmost to accomplish the task to the best of her ability. Nonetheless, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's gracious approval of her undertaking to turn the outcome of her incessant probing, at a time when He was beset by incalculable difficulties, into a book for future generations to benefit from is the single most important element in eternalizing her name in the annals of the Bahá'í Faith. Concerning the circumstances surrounding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life when He answered Laura Barney's questions, Balyuzi says:

Weighed down with the oppression of the times; facing hostile officials resolved to destroy Him — officials

dispatched under the guise of a ‘Commission of Enquiry’ from the seat of Ottoman autocracy, ‘the Enquiry’ set afoot by the treachery of His own kith and kin; balked momentarily in the greatest enterprise He had undertaken – raising the mausoleum of the Báb on Mount Carmel; every minute of the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was filled with sorrow demanding vigilant action and unflinching fortitude. Such were the moments that He gave to Laura Clifford Barney as she sought knowledge and understanding.¹⁶

Laura Barney initially had no intention of publishing the text of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s answers to her questions. However, realizing the value of the answers to others, she sought His permission to publish the material:

... these answers were written down in Persian while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke, not with a view to publication, but simply that I might have them for future study But I believe that what has been so valuable to me may be of use to others, since all men, notwithstanding their differences, are united in their search for reality; and I have therefore asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s permission to publish these talks. [SAQ xix]

When permission was granted, Laura Barney carefully checked the contents against the original words spoken by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “The Persian text has been closely followed, at times even to the detriment of the English, a few alterations being made in the translation merely where the literal rendering seemed too involved and obscure ...” [SAQ xx]

To make the collected material accessible to all, Laura Barney herself arranged for its publication in English. The choice of a befitting and descriptive title for the book was important. Laura Barney received ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approval for it to be called *Some Answered Questions*. The original Persian was titled *Al-Núru’l-Abhá fi Mufaviḍáti-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. While

arrangements were being made for the publication of the book in Persian and English, Hippolyte Dreyfus, a distinguished French lawyer, who had become a Bahá'í in Paris in early 1901 and later married Laura Barney, translated it to French. The French translation under the title *Les Leçons de Saint Jean-d'Acre* was published about the time the English translation and Persian original were published.

Laura Barney was an active promoter of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, especially among the elite class in whose circle she moved and with whom she had close contact. She travelled widely to spread the teachings of the Blessed Beauty, particularly the principles of the oneness of humankind and international peace. Her international travels began with a trip to Russian Turkistan, the Turkmenistan of today, and Iran in the summer of 1906. She was on that trip accompanied by Marianne Jerard and Hippolyte Dreyfus. While in Iran, she witnessed the disturbances associated with the constitutional revolution, which had reached its climax that summer. After marriage with Hippolyte Dreyfus in April 1911, together they made a trip to the Far East in 1914. It coincided with World War I, forcing them to cut short their trip and return to France, where Hippolyte served in the army and Laura rendered invaluable service to the wounded soldiers. The War made her all the more conscious of the pivotal need of international peace. According to Dr. Giachery,

At the end of that global conflict she placed her faith in the League of Nations and represented the International Council of Women in that body, playing an important role in cultural exchange. She was the only woman named by the League Council to sit on the Sub-Committee of experts on Education, a post which she held for many years, beginning in 1926. On 23 July 1925 she was appointed Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur. In that same year she formed under the aegis of the League of Nations the 'Liaison Committee of Major

International Organizations to promote through Education better Understanding between Peoples and Classes' and became a permanent member of the committee as well as its liaison officer. In 1934 she became a member of the Advisory Committee of the League of Nations on Teaching; she was also a member of the French Committee on Intellectual Co-operation.¹⁷

Laura and Hippolyte made another trip to the Far East and Southeast Asia in 1921. It lasted several months and culminated in the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's redeeming message to places never reached before. They were in Burma when the news of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension reached them. They were among the individual believers Shoghi Effendi invited to gather in Haifa for consultation.¹⁸

Laura Barney carried out successfully the assignments 'Abdu'l-Bahá entrusted to her. One can imagine there were many. She travelled extensively and lectured eloquently "on the impelling necessity of a united world. She was a true pioneer in this field of activity at a time when the world was still geographically and politically divided and quite insensible to the call of spiritual unity. Her enthusiasm for this ideal never lessened", says Dr. Giachery.¹⁹ Her devoted services won her the unique title of Amatu'l-Bahá (Handmaid of Bahá). She is the only western female believer so designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.²⁰ Vast and illuminating as her Bahá'í services, international travels, undertakings and generous contributions to various projects have been, what has made her a unique personality among the Bahá'ís of renown is her probing mind, a crucial element in the successful completion of *Some Answered Questions*.

Laura Barney made many trips to 'Akká before *Some Answered Questions* was published. In her letter to Youness Khán, she provides first-hand information about her trips to the Holy Land during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry and about the manner *Some Answered Questions* was compiled and published.

In it she clarifies that “[t]he English and French editions were translated directly from the final Persian text corrected by the Master himself.” She also indicates that “the Master not only corrected the first draft made at a certain period by Mírzá Monir (Munír), but afterwards it was copied out and re-read by Abdu’l Bahá who corrected and signed each one of these Talks.” She also says:

... it was on my third visit to Akká that I arrived with Miss Rosenberg. I spent the winter of 1904 there. I visited Egypt briefly and in the spring of 1905 paid a visit to my mother, after which we both returned to the Holy Land. I left again in the midsummer of 1905, returning to ‘Akká in the fall of that year. I spent a part of the winter in Cairo and returned to ‘Akká and Haifa by the end of spring. After that summer, I journeyed to Iran and then came back to Europe, and in the fall returned to ‘Akká. On my return, *Some Answered Questions* had been corrected and permission had been granted for its publication.

The following year, the Persian version as well as the English and French versions of the book were published and distributed. In the second edition of the book two additional subjects were added.²¹

Laura Barney supervised the preparation of the text in English and Persian. She personally selected publishers for both editions, which came out in 1908. The French translation of the book was also published the same year.

The publication of *Some Answered Questions* coincided with the year the Young Turks revolution forced the Ottoman authorities to free political prisoners. As a result, the strict restrictions on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life were lifted. Laura Barney returned to Haifa in 1908. This visit was different from her previous trips to the Holy Land. Not only did she celebrate the

accomplishment of the formidable task, but also the freedom that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had been denied for so long.

Dissemination of *Some Answered Questions*

In the early years of the twentieth century when *Some Answered Questions* was published, marketing techniques were as yet undeveloped compared with what they are today. To disseminate the book widely, Laura Barney had copies mailed to major newspapers and to places where the light of the Faith had spread. This step was crucial if the book was to help the teaching work. The popularity of the book can be measured by the number of times it has been republished. After its publication in 1908, a US edition was published in 1918, republished in 1930, 1954, 1964 and 1981. The first pocket-size edition was published in 1984, reprinted in 2011. The book has undergone revisions authorized by the Universal House of Justice. The last revision was by a Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre in 2014.

The publication of *Some Answered Questions* in Persian and two popular languages of the time, as well as its wide dissemination among the believers, notabilities familiar with the Faith, and through important newspapers in America, England, France and India was the first large scale publicity of its kind that the Bahá’í Faith enjoyed early in its history. The book informed a significant segment of the world’s population of the views of the Centre of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and the authorized interpreter of His writings on subjects that occupied their minds. It also enlightened and enthused the Bahá’ís at a time when available Bahá’í writings in English and French were scarce, providing those unfamiliar with the Faith with authentic information on a variety of topics.

A prominent Persian figure, to whom Laura had sent a copy of *Some Answered Questions* was Muḥammad-Valí Khán, Sipahdar-i-A‘zam. When Muḥammad-‘Alí Sháh was deposed and his eldest son Sultan Aḥmad Mírzá installed on the Iranian

throne, Sipahdar-i-A‘zam “became the first prime minister of the restored constitutional regime.”²² He was forced to resign in 1911, when the abortive attempt of Muḥammad-‘Alí Sháh to win back the throne took place. According to Balyuzi,

[H]e was in Paris in March, at the time when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was still visiting the French capital. Either then, or possibly sometime earlier, Mme Laura Dreyfus-Barney had presented to him a copy of the Persian version of *Some Answered Questions* by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. One day Sipahdar-i-A‘zam opened the book to read the story of Badí‘, and as he read he recalled an incident of his early youth, and wrote his recollections in the margin.²³

The notes written in Persian describe how Badí‘ delivered the Tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh to Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh and how brutally he was put to death in the summer resort of Lar in Mazandaran, where the Sháh was on a hunting expedition. The Sipahdar explains how he heard the account and gives the name of the man in charge of torturing Badí‘, to force him disclose information about the Bahá’ís he knew in Tihiran. When nothing worked, including the use of bastinado and beating, even branding, his head was smashed with a pounder. The Sipahdar’s note of 2 March 1913 in the margin of page 39 of the Persian version of *Some Answered Questions* reads:

Tonight I could not sleep. Mme Dreyfus had sent me this book and I had not yet read it. It is early morning. I opened the book and read on till I reached the theme of Letters to the Kings, and to Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh. Because I had been there on that journey and had heard this account personally from Kázim Khán-i-Farrásh-Báshí, I wrote it down.

A year and a half later, on the journey to Karbila, this Kázim Khán went mad. The Sháh had him chained and he died miserably. The year I went to Tabriz, as the Governor-General of Adharbayjan, I found a grandson

of his, begging. ‘Take heed, O people of insight and understanding.’²⁴

In a Tablet revealed in honor of Laura Dreyfus-Barney over a decade after *Some Answered Questions* had been first published, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that He always awaited receiving her joyous news indicating that she was holding in her hand *Some Answered Questions* and using its proofs and arguments to stir and enthuse the friends and handmaids of the Merciful and generating fervor among them, for she had been singled out for the honor, He said.²⁵

Laura Barney continued to ask questions after the publication of *Some Answered Questions*. Some of her questions were in writing, in response to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed Tablets. One case in point is her question about strikes, the response to which was included in the second edition of *Some Answered Questions*. Another is her question about the institution of Mashriqu’l-Adhkár.

The Fate of the Persian Original of *Some Answered Questions*

Fully cognizant of the inestimable value of the Persian original of *Some Answered Questions*, corrected and signed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Laura made a conscious decision to send it to Shoghi Effendi. In her letter of Aug. 7th, 1937 to Youness Khán Afroukhteh, she conveys this crucial piece of information: “Last winter I had Mrs. Angiz Khánúm Tabrizi deliver to Shoghi Effendi the final draft of the book as corrected and signed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”²⁶ She had in her possession a treasure trove of precious items. She had been in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during the difficult early years of the twentieth century, had compiled *Some Answered Questions* during those perilous years and kept with her the documentation. She had other papers of historical value. About three years before World War II broke out, she felt moved to send the items to

Shoghi Effendi rather than keeping them in Paris. As a result of her timely action before the onset of World War II, the precious documents and the items she sent to the Bahá'í World Centre were spared, but her other papers and belongings were confiscated, probably destroyed during the Nazi occupation of Paris.

Selected Tributes to *Some Answered Questions* and Its Compiler

Among the many tributes to the compiler of *Some Answered Questions*, one stands out as a powerful testimony to Laura Barney's sound understanding of the responses she received to her questions. Afroukhteh says: "One day as He rose from the table, while expressing a bit of weariness, He happily remarked, 'It is encouraging that after all this labour, at least she understands the concepts. This is refreshing. What would I have done if after all this effort she still failed to comprehend the issues?'"²⁷

Praising the book and its compiler, Horace Holley says: "In *Some Answered Questions*, Laura Barney accurately recorded 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answers to questions related to the Prophets, to man's destiny, his attributes and powers, to immortality and the life hereafter, which have long been cherished as an ideal introduction to this new age of universal religion." [SDC viii]

H. M. Balyuzi describes the book in more detail and praises its compiler:

... in this book, *Some Answered Questions*, the supreme genius of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is overwhelmingly manifest. Men who have devoted precious years of their lives to study and research – to the building of arguments, the laying of premise, and the marshalling of facts – have never presented the fundamentals of life and belief, the basic truths of the universe around them, and the mainsprings of action, with such lucidity and coherence as are here

apparent. Nor can they hope to rival, much less to match ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s all-encompassing wisdom. And these were words spoken without previous intimation of the nature and purport of the query. Not only do His answers arrest attention and compel thought, the strength wedded to the crystal clarity of the language enchants the mind. His statements are unencumbered, His similes most apt. His reasoning is flawless. His conclusions are unhedged and emphatic, informed with authority. *Some Answered Questions* has no equal, and the service rendered by its compiler has been characterized by the Guardian of the Faith as ‘imperishable.’²⁸

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NOTES

- ¹ *Alice Pike Barney, Her Life and Art*, p. 133
- ² *Amr va Khalq*, vol. 1, p. 10, also vol. 3, p. 352.
- ³ Mírzá Munír, the son of Mírzá Muḥammad-Qulí, Bahá'u'lláh's faithful half-brother, was assigned the task of recording 'Abdu'l-Bahá's utterances.
- ⁴ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, pp. 342-343
- ⁵ Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl passed away in 1914, when the Dreyfus-Barneys were in the Far East.
- ⁶ *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2, p. 238
- ⁷ *'Abdu'l-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 82
- ⁸ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, pp. 318-319
- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family then lived in the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá in 'Akká.
- ¹¹ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, pp. 318-319
- ¹² *Ibid*, p 344
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p 315
- ¹⁴ *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2, p. 238
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Abdu'l-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 82-83
- ¹⁷ *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. XV, p. 537
- ¹⁸ *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 55
- ¹⁹ *The Bahá'í World*, vol XV, p. 535
- ²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá bestowed the same title on 'Alaviyih Khánúm, the widow of the martyred 'Aliján Máhfurúzakí. She was a fearless woman, very successful in teaching the Cause of God in Mazandaran, Iran.
- ²¹ From Laura Dreyfus-Barney's letter of Aug. 7th, 1937 to Dr. Youness Khán (*Memories*, p. 343-344)
- ²² *Bahá'u'lláh, the King of Glory*, p. 303
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 307-309
- ²⁵ Gist of part of a Tablet revealed in Laura Barney's honor, *Makatíb-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*, volume 3, p. 316
- ²⁶ Laura Dreyfus-Barney's letter to Youness Khán dated 7 August 1937.
- ²⁷ *Memories of Nine Years in 'Akká*, p. 316
- ²⁸ *'Abdu'l-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 83