

Letters Written on Behalf of the Guardian

by Universal House of Justice

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12 January 2006

Dear __

We have received an email letter of 23 July 2005 from Mr. _ ... [Personal information omitted]... It would be appreciated if you would convey the following information and the enclosed item to Mr. _ ... [Personal information omitted]... Enclosed you will find a memorandum prepared by the Research Department that should be of assistance to him in resolving his questions. In addition to this information, the Universal House of Justice has asked that we provide the following comments to be conveyed to him.

With regard to your questions about the authority of letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, particularly those sent from the Holy Land during the latter part of his ministry, there is no justification for summarily dismissing the authoritative guidance contained in this body of correspondence. If concerns arise in relation to specific messages or topics addressed, clarification can be sought from the Universal House of Justice.

As to your question concerning when a matter is referred to the Research Department, this is determined by the Universal House of Justice depending on the nature of the inquiry. For example, in reply to questions regarding interpretation of the Text or the findings of general scholarship, the Research Department would provide references from the authoritative texts and offer comments that assist inquirers to draw their own personal conclusions. Other questions that require a decision on a specific case, consideration of general policies, or elucidation of obscure matters would, after consultation by the House of Justice, be referred to the Department of the Secretariat for reply.

Finally, you ask whether Bahá'ís should accept all statements in the Writings as based in fact, unless there is an explicit reference to a particular statement being conditioned on other information. It should be clear from the examples provided in the memorandum of the Research Department that there are some cases where passages from the Writings affirm specific facts and other cases where passages conform to the beliefs of particular peoples. It is, therefore, necessary for the reader to determine the meaning of statements that are not explicit by applying sound hermeneutical principles found in the Teachings. While there is often room for a range of personal interpretation on such matters, and a degree of ambiguity will invariably exist in some cases, usually a common understanding is formed, which will change over time should additional evidence come to light. Differences of personal opinion about the meaning of the Text should not be allowed to create discord or wrangling among the friends.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 12 January 2006

From: Research Department

Letters written on Behalf of the Guardian

In an email letter of 23 July 2005 addressed to the Universal House of Justice, Mr. _ poses a number of questions concerning the degree of authority to be accorded to the letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and to the memoranda prepared by the Research Department, and he enquires whether all statements in the Writings should be accepted as being “based in fact, unless explicitly stated as being conditioned on other information.” The Research Department has studied the issues raised by Mr. _, and we offer the following comments.

Reference is made to statements on the Internet which apparently infer that the Guardian discontinued the practice of reviewing all letters written on his behalf when the amount of correspondence increased. Mr. _ seeks confirmation of the fact that Shoghi Effendi continued to review all letters written on his behalf until the end of his life. The Research Department sets out below the only information it has, to date, been able to locate on this subject.

In a postscript appended to a letter dated 7 December 1930, written on his behalf to an individual believer, Shoghi Effendi described the normal procedure he followed in dealing with correspondence written on his behalf:

I wish to add and say that whatever letters are sent in my behalf from Haifa are all read and approved by me before mailing. There is no exception whatever to this rule.

Given the Guardian’s categorical assertion, it follows that any “exception” to “this rule” would require his explicit permission. For example, in the latter years of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi assigned to the Hand of the Cause Leroy Ioas the special responsibility for monitoring the progress of the

goals of the Ten Year Crusade. In implementing this specific function, Mr. Ioas worked under the close supervision of the Guardian; however, not all of his letters – for example, those simply requesting information about the goals – were viewed by Shoghi Effendi before being transmitted.

Mr. _ also enquires about the relative degree of authority associated with letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi. He indicates that he is puzzled by a statement in a letter written on the Guardian's behalf, which indicates that such letters are "less authoritative," especially since he presumes that Shoghi Effendi would have reviewed these letters prior to their being sent out. It seems likely that the statement referred to by Mr. _ is contained in the following extract from a letter dated 25 February 1951 written on behalf of the Guardian to a National Spiritual Assembly. It is suggested that a careful reading of this statement, which is cited below, will resolve the concern raised by Mr. _ . The extract states,

Although the secretaries of the Guardian convey his thoughts and instructions and these messages are authoritative, their words are in no sense the same as his, their style certainly not the same, and their authority less, for they use their own terms and not his exact words in conveying his messages. (25 February 1951 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles)

Note that the letters written on behalf of the Guardian are also described as being "authoritative." No additional information has, to date, come to light on this subject.

Status of Research Department Memoranda

Mr. _ raises a number of issues concerning the authority of memoranda prepared by the Research Department and wishes to know whether "believers could resubmit their questions, if they felt it necessary to have a more 'authoritative' answer than the Research Department could provide." We cite, below, an extract from an English translation of a letter dated 26 January 2003 in Persian, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, which contains guidance pertaining to some of the issues raised by Mr. _ :

According to the guidance of the House of Justice, letters received at the Bahá'í World Centre are sent to various Departments, according to their topic. For instance, all the letters related to the Research Department are sent to that Department so that, with the guidance of the House of Justice, appropriate responses could be prepared which are then sent out through its Department of the Secretariat.

In response to your question, it should be said that while the answers from the Research Department are prepared according to the instructions of the House of Justice, they should be regarded as opinions of that Department. These views, although quite useful and helpful in illuminating and clarifying the issues or questions at hand, should not be regarded as being as authoritative as the guidance and pronouncements of the Universal House of Justice. The House of Justice has decided that material prepared by the Research Department should be sent out unchanged to the recipients, as it would like the friends to consider and study the material with great diligence. Of course, accepting the comments and opinions of the Research Department does not hinder the friends from using their own judgement in understanding and explaining issues. The personal understandings of the Bahá'ís in these cases are, of course, respected in their own right.

Bahá'í Writings Based in Fact?

Mr. _ expresses the view that in order to develop “a coherent unity of thought among believers” it is necessary to resolve the issue concerning whether “Bahá'ís should accept all statements in the Writings as based in fact, unless explicitly stated as being conditioned on other information.” He elaborates his point by referring to statements in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For example, he notes that in “The Promulgation of Universal Peace”¹ the Master indicates that the Pentateuch prescribes “the cutting off of the hand of the thief.” In this regard, he asks if Bahá'ís are “to confidently accept that this was in fact ... the law (and subsequently lost to the scriptures), or that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was merely doctrinally

infallible, and that the essential point was the principle He was trying to convey.” He, thus, seeks clarification of a statement in a letter dated 3 June 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice that appears on a Web site. This letter distinguishes between the nature of the infallibility of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of the Guardian as it relates to “subjects not pertaining to the Faith.” The extract in question is as follows:

2. There is nothing in the Writings that would lead us to the conclusion that what Shoghi Effendi says about himself concerning statements on subjects not directly related to the Faith also applies to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Instead we have assertions which indicate that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s position in the Faith is one for which we find “no parallel” in past Dispensations. For example, Bahá’u’lláh, in addition to His reference to the Centre of His Covenant as the “Mystery of God,” states that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá should be regarded as God’s “exalted Handiwork” and “a Word which God hath adorned with the ornament of His Own Self, and made it sovereign over the earth and all that there is therein.” And from Shoghi Effendi we have the incontrovertible statement that the Guardian of the Faith while “overshadowed” by the “protection” of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Báb, “remains essentially human,” whereas in respect of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Shoghi Effendi categorically states that “in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.”

By way of introduction we wish to note that the statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred to by Mr. _ are from the Master’s published talks. It was the custom that, as He delivered these talks, His words were written down in Persian, and the words of the translator were taken down in English, bringing the reliability and accuracy of the translations and the transcriptions into question. As a consequence, the authority of most talks and verbal utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not the same as that accorded to His written Text. This principle and the general status of such compilations as “The Promulgation of Universal Peace” and “Paris Talks” are elaborated in the

following extract from a letter dated 9 March 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer:

Among the utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, foremost is the compilation of His immortal talks entitled "Some Answered Questions." The original of this important compilation is preserved in the Holy Land; its text was read in full and corrected by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. The translation, although not perfect, was considered by the Guardian to be adequate for the time being; in due course it will be thoroughly checked and improved, of course. Unfortunately, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not read and authenticate all transcripts of His other talks, some of which have been translated into various languages and published. For many of His addresses included in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace" and "Paris Talks," for example, no original authenticated text has yet been found. However, the Guardian allowed such compilations to continue to be used by the friends, and the Universal House of Justice has indicated that the same ruling applies to "Star of the West." In the future each talk will have to be identified, and those which are unauthenticated will have to be clearly distinguished from those which form a part of Bahá'í Scripture. This does not mean that the unauthenticated talks will have to cease to be used — merely that the degree of authenticity of every document will have to be known and understood.

With regard to the two references in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," to the punishment in question, the first appears in a talk dated 12 October 1912 and the second in a talk of 8 November 1912. The World Centre does not have a Persian transcript for the 12 October talk but the Persian transcript for the second talk is published in "Khitábát." Study of this transcript reveals that the Persian version does not correspond to the English translation, and the reference to the punishment in question does not occur.² In this instance, it seems to us that the apparent association of the punishment in question with the Torah and Jewish law may well be an artifact of the

unreliability of the English transcript of the talk in which it occurs.

As to Mr. _'s request for further clarification concerning the implications of the statement concerning the degree of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's infallibility contained in the letter dated 3 June 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice and which is cited earlier in this memorandum, it is suggested that Mr. _ might find it useful to study the complete letter from which the passage of interest is drawn, since the letter contains additional elucidation about the nature of divinely conferred infallibility. Another useful resource is Shoghi Effendi's comprehensive explanation of the uniqueness of the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that appears in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh."³

Additional questions are raised concerning the historical accuracy of statements by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. For example, Mr. _ mentions Bahá'u'lláh's references to the period in which Empedocles and Pythagoras lived and asks whether Bahá'is believe, "as a matter of faith that modern historians are wrong on these points, or again, that the doctrine alone is infallible."⁴ To assist Mr. _ in thinking about these issues, we call to his attention the guidance contained in the following extract from a letter dated 3 November 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer. The letter states,

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of ... and has directed us to convey the following in response to your question about Empedocles and Pythagoras referred to in the Lawḥ-i-Hikmat.

In a Tablet written in response to questions raised about this Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies the perspective toward statements made by Bahá'u'lláh in the Lawḥ-i-Hikmat which differ from the current concepts of western historians. The Master states that histories of the times before Alexander the Great are very confused and that when the subject came under scholarly discipline in later times the greatest difficulty was, and still is, experienced in giving dates with any certainty. He further points out that the Words of

Bahá'u'lláh are the standard and that the statements made in the Tablet of Wisdom are in accordance with certain of the historical records of the East.

In reference to the specific passage in the Lawḥ-i-Hikmat regarding Empedocles and Pythagoras being contemporaries of David and Solomon, the following is an excerpt from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer who enquired about this passage:

We must not take this statement too literally; “contemporary” may have been meant in Persian as something far more elastic than the English word. (15 February 1947)

It is noteworthy that at both the beginning and end of this section of the Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that He is quoting “some accounts of the sages.” These would have been the historical accounts familiar to the person whom He is addressing in the Tablet. The fact that Bahá'u'lláh makes such statements for the sake of illustrating the spiritual principles that He wishes to convey, does not necessarily mean that He is endorsing their historical accuracy. In this connection it is interesting to note the answer given by the beloved Guardian's secretary on his behalf to a question about the “fourth heaven” mentioned in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. The translation of the passage is as follows:

As to the ascent of Christ to the “fourth heaven” as revealed in the glorious Book of Íqán, he [the Guardian] stated that the “fourth heaven” is a term used and a belief held by the early astronomers. The followers of the Shí'ah sect likewise held this belief. As the Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed for the guidance of that sect, this term was used in conformity with the concepts of its followers.

NOTES

¹ See “The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912,” rev. ed.

(Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, 1995 printing), p. 365 and p. 404.

² “Khitábát, Talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1984), see p. 615.

³ See, particularly, “The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters” (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2004 printing), pp. 131-139.

⁴ See “Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas” (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 2005 printing), p. 145.