

Interpretation and Elucidation

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Introduction

The word 'Interpreter' or the act of 'interpretation' is used sometimes to refer to God's Manifestations. However, it is more commonly used to apply to Appointed Souls who have been specifically invested with the authority to interpret Their Utterances. Such interpretations are regarded authoritative and binding.

Regarding the first usage, we read for example from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh the following: *"He hath in every age and cycle, in conformity with His transcendent wisdom, sent forth...One Who is indeed the Expounder, the true Interpreter"* (TAB 161). A typical example of this kind of function is Bahá'u'lláh's revelation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán where He expounds and interprets the metaphors and mysteries hidden in the scriptures of the past.

The second usage which is in line with the theme of this discussion, applies to the specific authority conveyed by the Manifestation of God to appointed individuals. We find the following, for example, from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh: *"Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believeth that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom"* (GWB 175).

Of course individual believers can also give their own interpretation and comprehension of the teachings, and these could be interesting, but they can never be binding on the friends. The Universal House of Justice has explained this question very clearly: "A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings" (MUHJ 88).

Two Appointed and Authorized Interpreters

In this Dispensation there were two and only two Authorized Interpreters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

Regarding 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh refers to Him as the "*Mystery of God*", the "*Limb of the Law of God*", He through Whose "*knowledge and wisdom*" the world will be "*illuminated*", and Who is "*an ocean of bounty unto all men..*"(WOB135– 6) In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh clearly enjoins upon His followers: "[R]efer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock" (KA #174). Based on such assertions 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared: "*I am the Interpreter of the Word of God*", He again writes: "*I am the manifest Interpreter of the Word of God*" (WOB 133 & 132).

As to Shoghi Effendi, in His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to him as the "*Expounder of the words of God*" (WT 11), and the

“Interpreter” (WOB 148). And Shoghi Effendi in reference to himself clearly states that “he has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá’u’lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (WOB 151).

In the quotation above, the word “purport” means that which is intended, while the word “implications” means that which is implied but not plainly expressed. Thus the function of an Authorized Interpreter is to unveil for us the intention and hidden meanings of what is outwardly and explicitly revealed. This seems to be why Shoghi Effendi in his *“God Passes By”*, does not only refer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Interpreter of the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, but the *“Interpreter of His Mind”* (GPB 245).

As stated above such Appointed Interpreters, such Depositories of the hidden secrets of God’s Utterances, and such Disclosers of the Mind of the Author or Authors of revealed words, were confined to two inspired Luminaries, namely ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

What is Elucidation?

To elucidate is to make clear something which is unclear, or to determine that which is indefinite. We see for example that Shoghi Effendi has written that some of the laws of the Aqdas needed subsidiary “elaboration and elucidation”, and for this purpose Bahá’u’lláh revealed a number of Tablets after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas during the latter part of His life (GPB 216). In their writings both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi had to elucidate certain matters, as was called for.

If their elucidations stemmed from their inner knowledge of the intent of a sacred text revealed, then undoubtedly such pronouncements would fall in the category of interpretations. If however, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi, as Inspired Heads of the

Faith, were clarifying what steps needed to be taken in a situation which was indefinite, then the elucidation or preferably the guidance given would clearly not be a form of interpretation.

The Universal House of Justice has explained the difference between the two situations in one of its letters, from which we quote: “The elucidations of the Universal House of Justice stem from its legislative function and as such differ from interpretation. The divinely inspired legislation of the House of Justice does not attempt to say what the revealed word means—it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the Sacred Text and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable” (From a letter to an individual believer dated 15 December 1994).

Among the powers and duties of the Universal House of Justice, in accordance with its Constitution, is “to analyse, classify and coordinate the Writings”(CUHJ 5). The terms as quoted are the exact words used in one of Shoghi Effendi’s letters, explaining the duties of the Universal House of Justice. It is not too difficult to understand that such ‘analysis’ and ‘coordination’ of texts would be necessary for the Universal House of Justice to enable it to take decisions on “*questions that are obscure*” as stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament, when He was listing the duties of the Universal House of Justice (WT 20).

Obscure Questions

One of the immediate ‘obscure’ matters that the Universal House of Justice had to elucidate soon after its election was whether the institution of the Guardianship as an on-going institution had terminated or was it to be extended into the future. The House of

Justice's decision was conveyed on 6 October 1963. It read that "there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi" (MUHJ 14). The decision had a preamble stating that the decision was taken after "prayerful and careful study of the Holy Texts" and consultation with the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land. We could say that this was elucidation through legislation.

In the days of the Guardian the American National Spiritual Assembly asked Shoghi Effendi about the nature of the Court of Arbitration mentioned in the Writings. Shoghi Effendi's reply was as follows: "[R]egarding the nature and scope of the Universal Court of Arbitration , this and other similar matters will have to be explained and elucidated by the Universal House of Justice , to which, according to the Master's explicit Instructions, all important and fundamental questions must be referred" (BA 47). This would certainly be another form of elucidation through legislation.

The House of Justice Explains

In one of its main messages, the Universal House of Justice dealt with the question of the difference between interpretation and elucidation. It would be best to end this essay by quoting the relevant section of that message on this subject:

There is a profound difference between the interpretations of the Guardian and the elucidations of the House of Justice in exercise of its function to "*deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.*" The Guardian reveals what the Scripture means; his interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied. Upon the Universal House of Justice, in the words of the Guardian, "has been conferred

the exclusive right of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the Bahá'í writings." Its pronouncements, which are susceptible of amendment or abrogation by the House of Justice itself, serve to supplement and apply the Law of God. Although not invested with the function of interpretation, the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth. Unity of doctrine is maintained by the existence of the authentic texts of Scripture and the voluminous interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi together with the absolute prohibition against anyone propounding "authoritative" or "inspired" interpretations or usurping the function of Guardian. Unity of administration is assured by the authority of the Universal House of Justice. (F64. WOB, p. 153.)

"Such," in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "is the immutability of His revealed Word. Such is the elasticity which characterizes the functions of His appointed ministers. The first preserves the identity of His Faith, and guards the integrity of His law. The second enables it, even as a living organism, to expand and adapt itself to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society" (Letter dated 21 March 1930, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 23)" (MUHJ 56).