

# Biblical References in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*

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## Abstract

Throughout His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes liberal reference to biblical stories, verses, and images. A problem that may arise for many contemporary readers is that of biblical illiteracy; research shows that knowledge of the Bible is at an all-time low at this time. Lack of familiarity with the contexts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s biblical references could not only undermine one’s full understanding of His instruction, but may also render one incapable of following ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example of integrating biblical references into one’s teaching. The purpose of this paper is to explore the contexts of four biblical references found in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* in order to demonstrate the value that biblical literacy brings to the study and implementation of these Tablets.

## Introduction

In His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises the unifying and educative effects of previous Dispensations and

emphasizes that the essential task at this time is “*the promotion of divine teachings which are the foundations of the holy religions*” in order that “*affinity between the hearts of the world of humanity*” may be established [TDP 14.9]. He refers to the spiritual foundations that all religions share as the “*Collective Center of the sacred religions*” [TDP 1411]. In addition to stating this mandate, the Tablets themselves provide examples of how to operate in this Collective Center as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá integrates stories, verses, and images from the Holy Bible in His instruction – every Tablet has at least one biblical image or reference.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the following passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sets out a call to action in the language of the Bible:

*Every one of the important souls must arise, blowing over all parts of America the breath of life, conferring upon the people a new spirit, baptizing them with the fire of the love of God, the water of life, and the breaths of the Holy Spirit so that the second birth may become realized. For it is written in the Gospel: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit [John 3:6].”* [TDP 14.6]

In another Tablet He uses biblical terms in His description of the desired qualities of Bahá’í teachers:

*As regards the teachers, they must completely divest themselves from the old garments and be invested with a new garment. According to the statement of Christ, they must attain to the station of rebirth – that is, whereas in the first instance they were born from the womb of the mother, this time they must be born from the womb of the world of nature.... They must be baptized with the water of life, the fire of the love of God and the breaths of the Holy Spirit; be satisfied with little food, but take a large portion from the heavenly table.... They must make the blind seeing, the deaf*

*hearing, the extinguished one enkindled and set aglow,  
and the dead quickened.* [TDP 13.7]

Most of the terms in the two passages above represent biblical images: heaven as the source of divine teachings [John 3:31]; the Holy Spirit as a blowing breath or wind<sup>2</sup> [John 3:8]; realization of the life of the spirit as a second birth [John 3:3-5]; baptism by water and fire [John 3:22-23; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16]; changing the old garment for the new [Luke 5:36]; helping the blind see, the deaf hear, and the dead live [Matthew 11:5]. Abdu'l-Bahá, the Perfect Exemplar, embraces biblical stories and terminologies and focuses on their spiritual meaning to the degree that the biblical terms themselves become vehicles for His instruction — there is no division between the nomenclature of the Bible and Bahá'í guidance. There are many such examples throughout the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*; in fact, every Tablet contains at least one biblical reference.<sup>3</sup> And it is precisely at this point that we are confronted with the modern problem of biblical illiteracy.

All recent polls and research indicate that biblical literacy in America is at an all-time low.<sup>4</sup> This is a drastic change from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century — the time of the writing of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* — when basic literacy and biblical literacy were “intimately intertwined” in North American public education systems that made liberal use of biblical stories and verses in primers as well as in instructional material at every grade level.<sup>5</sup> Due to changes in perception of the role that religious literature plays in the public arena, America's public schools as well as its civic spaces are now largely devoid of direct biblical content — even though the Bible is widely recognized as the most influential book in the history of Western Civilization.<sup>6</sup> Today's high-school English teachers note that even the simplest biblical allusions in English literature “must be explained to students clueless about the biblical story line and even the most prominent characters in Scripture.”<sup>7</sup> Pollster George Gallup has called the United States “a nation of biblical illiterates.”<sup>8</sup>

Theologian Richard Rohr bemoans the situation as “collective ignorance.”<sup>9</sup> Being a cross-section of the greater community, it is likely that Bahá’ís may be lacking in biblical knowledge as well. This author is not aware of statistical studies in this regard; however, her experience over years of facilitating Bahá’í Bible Study workshops attest to the notion that the average Bahá’í today is no more educated about the Bible than the average American.

The problem is one of connecting fully with the Bahá’í Writings. When a writer refers to a literary work or the utterance of a historical person, be it religious or secular, he or she demonstrates appreciation of that quotation, knowledge of its origin, and awareness of its context. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quotes a Bible verse or uses biblical terminology, can we not assume His knowledge of the contexts of those words? Context includes things such as surrounding verses, background information, whole stories, and entire chapters. Ignorance of the same on the part of the reader is to miss out on meaning. For example: to quote Martin Luther King’s statement “I have a dream” is to evoke the history of the entire Civil Rights movement in the United States. The simple statement, “A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet,” evokes all of the love and tragedy of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. To quote these passages is to demonstrate knowledge of their larger settings. If one were to unfamiliar with them as a reader, one would be sadly missing out.

It is extremely likely that Bahá’í readers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century were familiar with the contexts of the biblical references found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablets because the verses and stories of the Bible were a dominant presence in public discourse, family reading, and public school education at that time. Indeed, it is very likely that the American Bahá’ís of 1916 and 1917 learned to read through Bible verses and stories. The point that I hope to make in this paper is that readers today who seek to glean as much as possible from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instructions and to follow the example He puts forth in His

Tablets would very likely benefit from study of the biblical stories and verses referenced therein. With this in mind, this paper will explore the biblical contexts of four of the Bible references found in *Tablets of the Divine Plan* and reflect on the value that this knowledge brings to the study of these Tablets.

**“Sown on Good Soil”** [Luke 8:15]

In His 20 March 1916 Tablet to the Central States, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses a Bible reference as He compares teaching the Cause of God to scattering seeds:

*The sons and daughters of the kingdom are like unto the real farmers. Through whichever state or country they pass they display self-sacrifice and sow divine seeds. From that seed harvests are produced. On this subject it is revealed in the glorious Gospel: When the pure seeds are scattered in the good ground heavenly blessing and benediction is obtained.* [TDP 3.3]

Then He states: “*I hope that you may become assisted and confirmed, and never lose courage in the promotion of the divine teachings*” [TDP 3.3]. But what might cause one to “lose courage in the promotion of divine teachings,” especially when the harvest of sowing divine seeds brings “*blessing and benediction*”? [TDP 3.3] Some answers to that question can be found in the Gospel story that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to; that being the Parable of the Sower, a teaching story attributed to Christ that is found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke [Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15].

The Parable of the Sower describes four different outcomes of scattering seeds – the seeds fall variously on a path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil – and then the spiritual meanings of these different outcomes are explained in Scripture following the parable: (1) The seeds fallen on the path are eaten by birds, meaning: “*The seed is the Word of God.*

*When anyone hears the Word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path” [Luke 8:11-12]. (2) Seeds that fall on rocky ground sprout quickly – but then wither and die, meaning: “The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the Word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away” [Luke 8:13]. (3) Seeds that fall on thorns sprout but are eventually choked out: “As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature” [Luke 8:14]. (4) Finally, seeds that fall on good ground bring a plentiful harvest, meaning: “But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” [Luke 8:15].*

When read in its entirety, the Parable of the Sower referred to by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not just list the possible outcomes of teaching endeavors, but also offers insights into spiritual barriers that restrict progress, such as lack of understanding, lack of spiritual roots, and being overwhelmed by the cares and riches of the world. These are challenges that can, with forethought, insight, wisdom, and accompaniment, be overcome in the seeker as well as the teacher.

**“Shake Off the Dust From Your Feet”** [Matthew 10:14]

In His 19 April 1916 Tablet to the United States and Canada, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes three conditions necessary to attain the spiritual station of the “*Hosts of God*”<sup>10</sup> [TDP no. 8.3]. The first condition is absolute “*firmness in the Covenant of God*” [TDP no. 8.8], the second condition is “*fellowship and love amongst the believers*” [TDP no. 8.9], and the third is “*utmost severance*” [TDP no. 8.11]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s description of the third condition includes a Gospel reference:

*Teachers must continually travel to all parts of the continent, nay, rather, to all parts of the world, but they must travel like ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who journeyed throughout the cities of America. He was sanctified and free from every attachment and in the utmost severance. Just as His Holiness Christ says: Shake off the very dust from your feet. [TDP 8.11]*

This Gospel reference is comparable to the statement in Matthew 10:14 attributed to Christ: “*If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town*” [Matthew 10:14]. This is just one verse from an entire chapter that is often entitled by biblical scholars “the Mission of the Twelve” in which Christ gives His Apostles instructions and tells them what to expect in the course of their ministries. An examination of this entire chapter reveals a fuller picture of what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was referencing. As stated in the Gospel of Matthew in words attributed to Christ:

*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. [Matthew 10:16-18, 21-23]*

When considering the context of the Gospel verse referenced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we are reminded that detachment from the way one is received when teaching the Faith is more than not getting one's feelings hurt when one is not welcome; it also involves willingly encountering all manner of situations and intense troubles that require great courage such as hostility,

floggings, governmental accusations, betrayals of those closest to you, death, and hatred by the generality of the people.

***“Blessed Are the Poor”*** [Luke 6:20]

In the 8 April 1916 Tablet to the United States and Canada, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directs the friends to teach “*the reality of the Bible, the Gospel and the new divine teachings*” throughout Mexico and Central America, the islands of the West Indies, and South America, and He says to “*attach great importance to the indigenous population of America*” [TDP 6.8]. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá summarizes His call to action with a Gospel verse concerning the poor, stating:

*In short, O ye believers of God! Exalt your effort and magnify your aims. His Holiness Christ says: Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven.*

[TDP no. 6:12]

The Gospel quote cited is just one verse from the “Beatitudes”<sup>11</sup> in Luke 6 – a set of four verses attributed to Christ that occur within a larger teaching often referred to as the “Sermon on the Plain.”<sup>12</sup> The setting of the Sermon on the Plain is presented at the beginning of Luke 6 where it is established that those in power at the time of Christ are opposed to His teachings and plotting against Him. Meanwhile in the countryside, Christ addresses His twelve Apostles, other disciples, and “*a great multitude of people*” from all over who “*had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases*” [Luke 6:17-18]. In the Beatitudes Christ describes something of the nature of His new community and His expectations for His followers. The quote that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to regarding the poor is in the first verse of these Beatitudes:

*Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be*



*filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.”* [Luke 6:20-23, NRSV]

There are many understandings of this Scripture, including that it establishes the inclusive nature of Christ’s community that embraces those marginalized by mainstream society.<sup>13</sup> These verses also make it clear that Christ’s followers – those who would look to His teachings to rectify the inequalities of the present – could expect to be hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to this Scripture is instructive of many things, including the inclusive mandate of the Bahá’í community. It also draws attention to the social conditions in the Americas at the time of the writing of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. In the early 20th century, racism – one of the prime causes of poverty, hunger, and weeping – was enshrined in law in the Americas, and those who would work for racial unity were not only hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed, but often murdered.<sup>14</sup> For Bahá’ís, acceptance of and working for race unity – both within the Bahá’í community and in the greater society – was slow going and a great struggle particularly because at that time, as stated by historian Louis Venters, “majority public opinion and governmental policy at all levels were both running in precisely the opposite direction.” He continues, “Given the pervasiveness of white supremacy, nothing but the persistence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the consciences of individual Bahá’ís kept Jim Crow ideas and practices from taking hold in a nascent faith community.”<sup>15</sup> The Beatitudes in their entirety are supportive of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s persistent guidance to attend to the principles and practices of inclusiveness and race unity – they succinctly state the spiritual

importance of the poor and disenfranchised, the standard of solidarity with the suffering and the oppressed, and the social ostracism one could expect by obeying this mandate.

Included in the Sermon on the Plain, immediately following the Beatitudes, are the “Woes.” These are verses that address those who would ignore or profit off of the suffering and the oppressed:

*But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.* [Luke 6:24-26]

In a world that idealizes power, privilege, money, and status, and where “oppression and injustice toward the poor and the outsider are the universal norm,”<sup>16</sup> the Beatitudes and the accompanying Woes are subversive – they turn the world upside down [Acts 17:6]. The message was revolutionary at the time of Christ and it is revolutionary today. The rich, the full, the satisfied, and those easily accepted by the old order “are challenged and made to face the consequences of their lot”<sup>17</sup> – all are held to a spiritual standard in which being a follower of the Word of God requires hungering for justice, attending to the marginalized, being in solidarity with suffering and the oppressed, and acting on behalf of divine teachings regardless of the status quo. These verses establish that there are dire consequences for resting in one’s comfort zone. And lest one may be tempted to focus one’s energy in enmity to the oppressor instead of the empowerment of the oppressed, the verses following the “woes” in the Sermon on the Plain demand that all believers proactively love their enemies, despite the persecution they may endure:

*But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray*

*for those who abuse you.... Do to others as you would have them do to you.* [Luke 6:27-28]

Continuing with the same theme, the next passage prohibits judging or condemning others and teaches, instead, forgiveness: “*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven*” [Luke 6:37]. The final section of the Sermon on the Plain starts out with a call for obedience attributed to Christ that may be the most poignant verse in the entire Gospel: “*Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?*” [Luke 6:46] There follows a parable on the necessity of obedience to the Word of God:

*I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.* [Luke 6:47-49]

In brief, the Sermon on the Plain (that is, the larger context of the verse quoted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) establishes the absolute inclusive nature of the community of the faithful, the blessedness of the poor, the necessity of reaching out to the powerless and marginalized, the persecution to be expected when acting on behalf of these divine teachings, the hazards inherent in oppression and apathy, the right actions of love, forgiveness, and a nonjudgmental attitudes in any situation, and the necessity of obedience to the Word of God. All of this is evoked by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to the one verse from the Sermon on the Plain: “*Blessed are the poor...*” [TDP 6:12].

It should be of great interest to all the Bahá’is in the Americas that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states the importance of bringing

the Word of God to the poor in four different ways in this Tablet. First, He quotes the verse from the Gospel of Luke that we have examined:

*In short, O ye believers of God! Exalt your effort and magnify your aims. His Holiness Christ says: Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven.*

[TDP no. 6:12]

Then He restates that Scripture in His own words:

*In other words: Blessed are the nameless and traceless poor, for they are the leaders of mankind.* [TDP no. 6:12]

Then He restates the same point with a quote from the Qur'an:

*Likewise it is said in the Qur'an: "And We desire to show favor to those who were brought low in the land, and to make them spiritual leaders among men, and to make of them Our heirs."* [Qur'an 28:5; TDP no. 6:12]

And then He restates that Scripture in His own words:

*Or, we wish to grant a favor to the impotent souls and suffer them to become the inheritors of the Messengers and Prophets.* [TDP no. 6:12]

Abdu'l-Bahá states the standard and then repeats it again, then again, and yet again. The guidance is clear: it is the Will of God that the poor be the "*spiritual leaders among men*" – the "*inheritors of the Messengers and Prophets*" – and it is incumbent upon all "*believers of God*" to "*Exalt your effort and magnify your aims*" in this regard. When one considers that "most of the people who have ever lived on this planet have been oppressed and poor,"<sup>18</sup> the degree to which efforts in this regard must be magnified becomes apparent. And, as demonstrated above, the context of the Gospel verse that 'Abdu'l-Bahá references offers guidance on the manner in

which one must and must not approach this task, as well as an alert to the social ostracism that one might expect on this path.

**“Go Ye Into All the World”** [Mark 16:15]

In four of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to a certain call to action found in the New Testament. In the Tablet to the Northeastern States He writes:

*It is stated in the blessed Gospel: Travel ye toward the East and toward the West and enlighten the people with the light of the Most Great Guidance, so that they may take a portion and share of eternal life.* [TDP no. 1.3]

To the Southern States He refers to the same call to action in these words:

*It is also mentioned in the Gospel: Travel ye to all parts of the world and give ye the glad tidings of the appearance of the Kingdom of God.* [TDP no. 2.3]

Similarly, to the Western States ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

*It is also recorded in the blessed Gospel: Travel ye throughout the world and call ye the people to the Kingdom of God.* [TDP 4.4]

And to the United States and Canada He writes:

*Christ says: Travel ye to the East and to the West of the world and summon the people to the Kingdom of God.* [TDP no. 6.5]

All four of these statements are comparable to verse 16:15 in the Gospel of Mark: “*And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*” [Mark 16:15].<sup>19</sup> As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicates,<sup>20</sup> this call to action is attributed to Christ. Of particular interest is that in Mark’s Gospel this

particular instruction was given by Christ and received by the Apostles *after* Christ's Resurrection.<sup>21</sup>

The Bahá'í understanding of Christ's Resurrection is that it was "*a true resurrection*" [SAQ 23.7], a spiritual awakening in the hearts of Christ's Apostles after the devastation of the crucifixion, after which they taught the Cause of Christ. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*We explain, therefore, the meaning of Christ's resurrection in the following way: After the martyrdom of Christ, the Apostles were perplexed and dismayed. The reality of Christ, which consists in His teachings, His bounties, His perfections, and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and had no outward appearance or manifestation – indeed, it was as though it were entirely lost. For those who truly believed were few in number, and even those few were perplexed and dismayed. The Cause of Christ was thus as a lifeless body. After three days the Apostles became firm and steadfast, arose to aid the Cause of Christ, resolved to promote the divine teachings and practice their Lord's admonitions, and endeavoured to serve Him. Then did the reality of Christ become resplendent, His grace shine forth, His religion find new life, and His teachings and admonitions become manifest and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ, which was like unto a lifeless body, was quickened to life and surrounded by the grace of the Holy Spirit.*

*Such is the meaning of the resurrection of Christ, and this was a true resurrection.* [SAQ 23.6-7]

Because the verse cited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá ("*And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" [Mark 16:15]) is set in the context of the Resurrection, inherent in this verse is the need to overcome perplexity,

dismay, and other paralyzing factors that can turn the Cause of the Manifestation into a “*lifeless body*” [SAQ 23.6]. A factor that often causes perplexity and dismay is past failure; therefore, it is interesting that the vast propensity for human failure is demonstrated in the Scripture preceding Mark 16. For example, in Mark 14 (the chapter that tells of the activities of Christ and the Apostles immediately before and during His arrest) it is told that the Apostles repeatedly failed to stay awake in prayer with Christ at the Garden of Gethsemane even though He asked them — three times — to stay awake [Mark 14:32-41]. With the immanence of the crucifixion, the Apostle Peter failed in His support of Christ by denying Him three times [Mark 14:66-72]. And, as predicted by Christ [Mark 14:27], all of His Apostles failed in their allegiance to Him and became “deserters” after He was arrested [Mark 14:50]. It is telling that Christ’s specially chosen Apostles are completely absent throughout the story of His arrest and crucifixion in Mark 15. Additionally, when the women who first experienced the Resurrection shared the living Reality of Christ with certain Apostles, the Apostles “*believed not*” [Mark 16:11]. It is to these Apostles — those who failed Christ in various ways in the past — who Christ calls to action and on whose shoulders the work of His Cause depends. In fact, in the Gospel story, right before Christ gives the call to action to His Apostles He upbraids them for their failings:

*Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”* [Mark 16:14-15]

One of the messages in this Scripture is that despite past and repeated human failure, those with eyes to see are still called upon to represent and teach the Word of God. As stated by New Testament scholar C. M. Tucket, Mark’s story implies that “failure can be and is overcome. The power of forgiveness and

restoration is in the end greater than human failure and its consequences.”<sup>22</sup> The history of Christianity, today the most widespread religion in the world, testifies to the success of these original teachers despite their human failings.

Another theme inherent in Mark 16:15 is the need to take the teachings of the Manifestation of God everywhere – including hostile territory – and the inevitability of suffering in the path of teaching the Word of God. Although the Apostles became followers in the pastoral environment of the Galilee, an area that was relatively accommodating to Christ’s teachings, Christ never promised “a glorious, trouble-free existence.”<sup>23</sup> Earlier in the Gospel, Christ walked with the Apostles from Galilee to Jerusalem – the seat of authority and power that would reject His teachings. During the walk to Jerusalem He assured His Apostles that “*The cup that I drink you will drink*” [Mark 10:39]. Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem Christ was arrested, put on trial, mocked, tortured, and killed. Therefore, the mandate to “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*” [Mark 16:15] includes being prepared to teach in areas hostile to the Word of God and to endure persecution.

The Apostles to whom the Mark 16:15 call to action was addressed did rise to lives of teaching, travel, and persecution, as did thousands of early Christians. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

*In the days of Jesus only a few individuals turned their faces toward God; in fact only the twelve disciples and a few women truly became believers, and one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot apostatized from his Faith, leaving eleven. After the ascension of Jesus to the Realm of Glory, these few souls stood up with their spiritual qualities and with deeds that were pure and holy, and they arose by the power of God and the life-giving breaths of the Messiah to save all the peoples of the earth. Then all the idolatrous nations as well as the Jews rose up in their might to kill the Divine fire that*



*had been lit in the lamp of Jerusalem. "Fain would they put out God's light with their mouths: but God hath willed to perfect His light, albeit the infidels abhor it" [2 Qur'an 9:33]. Under the fiercest tortures, they did every one of these holy souls to death; with butchers' cleavers, they chopped the pure and undefiled bodies of some of them to pieces and burned them in furnaces, and they stretched some of the followers on the rack and then buried them alive. In spite of this agonizing requital, the Christians continued to teach the Cause of God, and they never drew a sword from its scabbard or even so much as grazed a cheek. Then in the end the Faith of Christ encompassed the whole earth. [SDC 81]*

According to the biblical context connected to Mark 16:15 discussed above, an enlarged understanding of that single verse, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation," may be understood as: Go, all of you whose souls have been resurrected by the recognition of the Word of God. Take with you all of your human inadequacies and, despite your past failures, go into all the world – including areas that are unfamiliar, deemed undesirable, or threatening – and proclaim the good news of the Word of God to the whole creation regardless of the suffering and persecution that you will, no doubt, endure on this path.

In light of the context of Mark 16:15, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, "*It is also mentioned in the Gospel: Travel ye to all parts of the world and give ye the glad tidings of the appearance of the Kingdom of God*" [TDP 2.3] is more than a general call to action; it includes acceptance of personal inadequacy, forgiveness of failure, a call for courage, and a reminder that sacrifice is integral to service in the Cause of God.

## Reflections on the Value of Biblical Literacy in the Study of the Tablets of the Divine Plan

This brief overview of the contexts of four biblical verses referenced in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* demonstrates the richness that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá draws on while quoting the Bible. For example, when examined in the context of the entire Parable of the Sower, His statement “*When the pure seeds are scattered in the good ground heavenly blessing and benediction is obtained*” [TDP 3.3] includes alerts on barriers to spiritual progress as well as encouragement to be steadfast regardless of the outcome of teaching. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction to “*Shake off the very dust from your feet*” [TDP 8.11] not only draws on ancient biblical imagery symbolizing detachment, but, when understood in its full context, also makes the point that this “dust” includes all manner of severe tests and difficulties that may arise while spreading the Word of God. His use of the verse, “*Blessed are the poor, for theirs shall be the Kingdom of Heaven*” [TDP 6:12] evokes the entire Sermon on the Plain including its message of the Manifestation’s solidarity with the oppressed, the spiritual bankruptcy of haughty power, the inevitable persecution that arises when speaking out for the oppressed, the absolute necessity of forgiving and refraining from judging others, and an appeal for obedience to the Word of God. And when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in four different Tablets, refers to the Gospel call to action, “*Travel ye throughout the world and call ye the people to the Kingdom of God*” [TDP 4.4], we find that the greater context of that Scripture teaches the necessity of a resurrection of the Spirit in one’s heart, acceptance of multiple human faults, and the warning that courage will be needed to endure the sacrifice that is necessary when spreading the Cause of Justice. From a few words in black and white, each quotation leaps into multiple shades of color when the contexts are explored – when biblical literacy is expanded.

There are many secular arguments for increased biblical literacy. In the words of the Supreme Court, the Bible is “the world’s all-time best seller”<sup>24</sup> and has had a role in every major movement in Western Civilization.<sup>25</sup> Its imagery, idioms, themes, characters, and stories are infused in music, literature, and art from Beethoven to Garth Brooks, Shakespeare to Toni Morrison, and Michelangelo to Andy Warhol. For Bahá’ís there is another argument for biblical literacy: Bahá’í literacy and biblical literacy are intertwined. As seen in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often uses the language of the Bible in His instruction. It is of value to Bahá’ís to know that language in all of its richness in order to connect with the nuances of Bahá’í text delivered in the form of biblical references – something we see not only in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, but in the Writings of all of the Central Figures of the Faith. A brief search of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reveals over one hundred direct mentions of the Gospel, over one hundred and fifty direct mentions of Moses, and over two hundred direct mentions of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> These numbers don’t include the many additional biblical allusions, quotations, prophecies, and references to biblical stories that can be found throughout the Bahá’í Writings.

In addition to accessing the richness of biblical references in the Bahá’í Writings, increased biblical literacy empowers one to have meaningful and distinctive conversations with friends from religious traditions who especially revere the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. As stated previously, in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá demonstrates that one way to communicate in the “*Collective Center of the sacred religions*” is to interweave sacred traditions in one’s discourse [TDP 14.11]. Familiarity with as well as love of such traditions, both of which are evidenced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, would be essential for sincerity in these conversations so vital to establishing “*affinity between the hearts of the world of humanity*” [TDP 14.9].

## Questions for Further Study

Although not in the purview of this paper, this study brings up additional questions worthy of exploration including: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes reference to the Qur’an in ten of the fourteen *Tablets of the Divine Plan*<sup>27</sup> – how does knowledge of the contexts of the Qur’anic references enhance our understanding of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance? Many of His Qur’anic references are in combination with biblical references<sup>28</sup> – what insights can we glean from His interweaving of specific Qur’anic and biblical verses? In 1916-17, the recipients of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* were predominantly of Christian background and probably had little knowledge of the Qur’an – what does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s choice of Islamic verses tell of what He especially wanted the West to know about Islam? And finally, when studied in the entire context of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, in what way does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s use of biblical and Islamic references transform the conventional meanings of those traditions?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá also integrates verses and images from the Qur'an in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Perhaps the Bible references were used because they were familiar to His readers; perhaps references to the Qur'an were used because His readers needed to develop familiarity with Islamic Scripture. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on biblical references.

<sup>2</sup> Note: *rûah* (Hebrew) and *pneuma* (Greek) can both be translated as breath, wind, or spirit (Kieffer, p. 966).

<sup>3</sup> See TDP 1.3; 2.3; 3.3; 4.4, 4.5; 5.2; 6.5, 6.6, 6.12; 7.3; 8.2, 8.11; 9.2; 10.9; 11.2; 12.4; 13.2, 13.7; 14.6, 14.10.

<sup>4</sup> Prothero, p. 2, 38-39, 164; Gallup and Castelli, p. 60; Kwon

<sup>5</sup> Prothero, p. 70; see also 79

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- <sup>6</sup> Prothero, p. 164
- <sup>7</sup> Evans, William B. *The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Magazine* (March/April 2013, pp. 10-11) January 24, 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The People's Faith: American Faith in the 90's*. New York: Macmillan, 1989, p. 60.
- <sup>9</sup> Rohr, p. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Also referred to as the “*heavenly armies*” (TDP 8.1), the “*armies of God*” (TDP 8.2), and “*Apostle of Bahá'u'lláh*” (TDP 8.4).
- <sup>11</sup> The term beatitude comes from the Latin noun *be titūdō* which means “happiness.”
- <sup>12</sup> The four Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Plain found in the Gospel of Luke are comparable in many ways to the eight Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:3-12.
- <sup>13</sup> See Franklin, p. 935
- <sup>14</sup> Venters, pp. 42, 47, 59, 75, 96, 99
- <sup>15</sup> Venters, p. 53
- <sup>16</sup> Rohr
- <sup>17</sup> Franklin, p. 935
- <sup>18</sup> Rohr
- <sup>19</sup> The publisher of *Tablets of the Divine Plan* indicates that all four of these statements are comparable to Mark 16:15. These verses also evoke a later passage in the same Gospel: “*And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation*” (Mark 16:20, sometimes placed after Mark 16:8, NRSV).
- <sup>20</sup> See TDP 6.5
- <sup>21</sup> The story of the crucifixion and burial of Christ is found in Mark 15; the story of the Resurrection is found in Mark 16.
- <sup>22</sup> Tucket, pp. 991-992
- <sup>23</sup> Tucket, p. 921
- <sup>24</sup> Prothero, p. 167
- <sup>25</sup> Prothero, p. 59, 167
- <sup>26</sup> [www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts)
- <sup>27</sup> TDP 1.3; 2.3; 4.3; 5.2; 6.12; 9.2, 9.3, 9.12; 11.2; 12.8; 13.2; 14.2, 14.10
- <sup>28</sup> TDP 1.3; 2.3; 5.2; 6.12; 9.2; 14.10