

Tipitaka, Mahayana Buddhism supplements these with literally hundreds of sutras or supposed discourses of the Buddha, with each Mahayana sect venerating a different collection of them. Sikhism possesses the *Adi Sahib*, a book of hymns by its gurus and by pre-Sikh mystical poets. Zoroastrianism has the *Avesta* and numerous semicanonical prophetic works and commentaries. Traditional Chinese culture recognized a collection of classical texts, though the number so recognized varied from five to thirteen. Even ancient Greece had a scripture of sorts, Homer's *Iliad*.

The Bahá'í Faith possesses a range of texts of varying levels of sacredness. Within the religion, there are writings by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice; outside the religion there are the scriptures of the previous world religions, some of which are viewed as being more authentic than others.

Scripture within the Bahá'í Faith. Terminology for describing the different levels of the Bahá'í authoritative writings—here defined as the works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice—is incompletely developed. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are viewed by Bahá'ís as Manifestations of God, and therefore as being channels of God's revelation to humanity. As a result their works occupy the highest level within the hierarchy of Bahá'í authoritative writings. Their works may be termed holy writ or word of God. The Universal House of Justice has also used the term creative word to describe the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that the Word of God possesses a creative potency that nothing else can match: "every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation [the Manifestation] is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet" (*Gleanings*, 142). Reciting the Word of God has profound effects on the believer and the world around him: "Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb" (*Bahá'í Prayers*, v).

Because Bahá'u'lláh succeeded the Báb as a Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh often modified or discontinued laws of the Báb; consequently the Báb's teachings are not binding on Bahá'ís. But they remain holy writ, and the Báb's devotional writings are read by Bahá'ís at their meetings and in private prayer.

`Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi were interpreters of the holy writ, especially the words of Bahá'u'lláh. They were not empowered to deliver a revelation from God and were not Manifestations, but since Bahá'u'lláh gave `Abdu'l-Bahá the power to interpret, and `Abdu'l-Bahá in turn gave the authority to Shoghi Effendi, their works are considered binding on Bahá'ís and must be obeyed. Furthermore, `Abdu'l-Bahá is understood to occupy a station that is closer to the level of a Manifestation of God than any other human being who has ever lived (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 132), hence His writings are more sacred than Shoghi Effendi's. In fact, Shoghi Effendi

implies that the term "Bahá'í scripture" applies to the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and `Abdu'l-Bahá alone, and not to his own writings or those of the Universal House of Justice (even though their works are authoritative and binding on the Bahá'ís) (Lights of Guidance, 2d ed., 112).

Some fifteen thousand works by Bahá'u'lláh—mostly letters—are extant in the Bahá'í World Centre's Archives; twenty-seven thousand letters and essays by `Abdu'l-Bahá and seventeen-thousand letters of Shoghi Effendi are also stored there (The Seven Year Plan, 1979-1986: Statistical Report, Riván 1983, 22). No estimate for the number of the Báb's works has yet been published.

The writings of the Universal House of Justice are considered to be neither revelation nor interpretation; rather they constitute legislation and elucidation based on the above Bahá'í authoritative writings.

`Abdu'l-Bahá made it clear in His Will and Testament that they are authoritative and binding. Because Bahá'u'lláh's writings supersede the Báb's, interpretations, elucidations, or legislations based on Bahá'u'lláh's writings by `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, or the Universal House of Justice may reject laws or principles stated by the Báb.

In addition to the authoritative writings of the Bahá'í Faith, a "semicanonical" body of works exists. These include transcriptions of talks `Abdu'l-Bahá gave that He never read and verified for accuracy. Regarding a collection of talks called `Abdu'l-Bahá in London, Shoghi Effendi explained that "nothing can be considered scripture for which we do not have an original text. A verbatim record in Persian of His [`Abdu'l-Bahá's] talks would of course be more reliable than one in English because He was not always accurately interpreted [translated]. However such a book would be of value, and certainly has its place in our literature" (Unfolding Destiny, 208). Thus Shoghi Effendi makes it clear such a collection is not scripture, but is not ordinary Bahá'í literature either.

Also in this "semicanonical" category are pilgrim's notes, descriptions of talks of `Abdu'l-Bahá to visiting pilgrims, collected by the pilgrims themselves. Finally, The Dawn-breakers, an account of the life of the Báb and his disciples written by Nabíl-i-Zarandí but extensively edited and translated by Shoghi Effendi, occupies a kind of "semicanonical" status.

Text Interpretation and Criticism. The Bahá'í authoritative texts are still relatively unexamined by the modern techniques of literary criticism. Few commentaries have been written, and usually they have been prepared by individuals without professional training in literature. Work on the texts, to date, has largely been confined to indexing them, so that related passages can be read together and understood in the light of each other; from this effort several dozen compilations have been published.

Historical and critical study of the corpus also has barely begun. For some of the writings of the Báb, considerable scholarship will be necessary to

establish the standard text, because the original manuscript no longer exists. Establishing a standard text is only rarely a problem for the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. Eventually it will be necessary to determine, for each work, when and to whom it was written; to what communication it was in response to, and does the communication provide context for understanding the response; was the communication in a different language than the response, and how was the communication translated so that the response could be composed; what other works, containing what themes, did its author compose at about the same time; and how was the response understood by its recipient.

Translation. The Bahá'í Faith, unlike Islam, generally does not oppose the translation of its authoritative texts into the vernacular language. For Muslims, translation is a major issue because translating the Word of God requires interpretation of its meaning, and no individual is empowered to make such interpretation. But in the Bahá'í Faith this is not a significant concern. Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged many translations, often advised translators what texts to translate, interpreted the meanings of texts if necessary, and guided Bahá'í communities in setting up systems for ensuring the translations' accuracy. Shoghi Effendi was empowered to interpret the Bahá'í scriptures, and he translated them into an English of unparalleled beauty and precision. Shoghi Effendi's translations have become the model for subsequent translation of Bahá'í scriptures. Dictionaries of Shoghi Effendi's Arabic-English and Persian-English equivalents have been compiled to assist in translation of additional scriptures into English, and translations into non-Islamic languages are usually made from the English translation, not from the original text. Currently passages from the Bahá'í scriptures have been translated into over 800 languages; by 1983 the Short Obligatory Prayer had been translated into 501 languages.

There is one exception to the policy of encouraging the translation of the Bahá'í authoritative writings, and that involves translation of Bahá'í scripture from Arabic to Persian. For over a thousand years Persians have written many of their religious and philosophical works in Arabic, and when they write such works in Persian they use a heavily Arabicized vocabulary and style. Hence translating texts from pure Arabic into a mixture of Arabic and Persian is not done. Persian Bahá'ís are expected to learn enough Arabic to read Bahá'í prayers in the original. When it is necessary, footnotes offering a Persian explanation of an Arabic text may be provided.

Scripture Outside the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh notes that "every leaf of these Books and Scriptures thou hast, moreover, allotted to each one of the peoples and kindreds of the earth" (Prayers and Meditations, 143). Here He states a basic Bahá'í position: that at one time or another God has sent a Manifestation, and a revelation, to every part of the earth. Because of this principle, the Bahá'í Faith recognizes the sacred writings of previous religions as scripture, though it does not accord equal status to the different scriptures. As a general rule, the works embodying the most recent revelations

are viewed as the most authentic; the farther back in time a revelation occurred, the less accurately it is likely to have been preserved. Usually the Bahá'í view corresponds with the judgment of historians and textual critics.

Shoghi Effendi states that "apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Revelations," the Qur'án constitutes "the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God" (*Advent of Divine Justice*, 49). The Bahá'í Faith thus recognizes the revelation of God through Muhammad (as preserved in the Qur'án) as authentic; however, it has been superseded by the revelation to the Báb and particularly to Bahá'u'lláh, and thus its teachings are not binding on the Bahá'ís. The Qur'án can be seen as a sort of Old Testament to the Bahá'ís.

The Bible's Old and New Testaments are very frequently quoted in the Bahá'í authoritative texts, and are often referred to as scripture.

`Abdu'l-Bahá praised the Bible highly: "this book is the Holy Book of God, of celestial Inspiration. It is the Bible of Salvation, the noble Gospel. It is the mystery of the Kingdom and its Light. It is the Divine Bounty, the sign of the guidance of God" (*Hasan Balyuzi, `Abdu'l-Bahá*, 145). Thus the Bible is a work that Bahá'ís study, venerate, and respect. But Shoghi Effendi notes that unlike the Qur'án, "the Bible is not wholly authentic" and implies that the text of the Bible may contain historical errors (*Lights of Guidance*, 1st ed., p. 370). Thus Bahá'ís recognize the historical problems that arose in the transmission of God's revelation from spoken to written form. The Bible's teachings, like the Qur'án's are not binding on Bahá'ís and are viewed as having been superseded by the Bahá'í revelation.

In His writings `Abdu'l-Bahá refers to prophecies in the Zoroastrian scriptures; but Shoghi Effendi adds that "the Avesta is not to be regarded as the authentic compilation of the writings of the Prophet [Zoroaster]" and "the Zoroastrians. . . themselves know their scriptures are not in the original form, and therefore are not absolutely authentic" ("Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster and Related Subjects," in *The Compilation of Compilations*, 21). Regarding Hinduism and Buddhism, Shoghi Effendi says that "we cannot be sure of the scriptures of Buddha and Krishna" (*Lights of Guidance*, 2d ed., 503), and that no one possesses the Buddha's "authentic writings" ("Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster and Related Subjects," 21). Shoghi Effendi often advised Bahá'ís to turn to historians and religious scholars in order to learn about Hinduism and Buddhism (*Ibid.*, 19, 20, 21; *Lights of Guidance*, 1st ed., 382).

In spite of their historical problems, the writings of the previous religions are recognized in the Bahá'í authoritative writings as a form of scripture for the Bahá'ís. In practice, this means that they can be used in community worship, such as in the devotional portion of Feast (*Lights of Guidance*, 2d ed., #821; where Shoghi Effendi says that other scriptures can be read at Feast, but that reading Bahá'í scriptures is preferable) or the public worship program at a Bahá'í House of Worship (*Lights of Guidance*, 2d ed., p. 607). Interestingly, the writings of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House

of Justice are not used in these contexts. The reason for this, presumably, is because the writings of Shoghi Effendi and the House of Justice are not devotional,[2] but interpretive and legislative in character; and `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that the spiritual teachings of God's Manifestations are eternal, hence their devotional value continues to be present.

Use of Bahá'í Scripture. The Bahá'í Faith is a religion of the book par excellence. The Universal House of Justice has said that the ability to read is a "fundamental right and privilege of every human being" specifically because it gives immediate access to the Word of God ("The Importance of Literacy," in *The Six Year Plan: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice* [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991], 54). The religious life of the individual has many aspects to it (see *Worship*) but central to most of them is the use of Bahá'í scripture. Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the believer to "recite. . . the verses of God every morning and evening" and adds that "whoso reciteth them not hath truly failed to fulfill his pledge to the Covenant of God" (*The Importance of Deepening Our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith*, 1). Thus reading and meditating on the words of Bahá'u'lláh are an obligatory part of the devotional life of each Bahá'í. Memorization of Bahá'í scripture is also encouraged.

Obligatory prayer is a daily part of Bahá'í devotion; Bahá'u'lláh revealed three obligatory prayers (Arabic, alát), and it is up to each Bahá'í to repeat one of them each day, following whatever ritual actions or requirements the prayer specifies. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá composed hundreds of prayers (Arabic, du'á and munáját), in response to specific requests from believers, and these prayers have been compiled into prayer books. Usually when Bahá'ís pray they use these prayers, instead of praying to God with their own words. Revealed prayers exist for a wide range of purposes, such as healing, remembering the departed, marriage, tests and difficulties, teaching the Faith to others, assistance, and praying for various family members. Prayers exist to say on special occasions, such as Naw-Rúz, Riván, and the anniversaries of events in the lives of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá. In addition, Bahá'u'lláh revealed several prayers of unusual beauty and potency, such as the Tablet of Amad, the Long Healing Prayer, the Fire Tablet, and the Tablet of the Holy Mariner.

Bahá'í community worship focuses almost exclusively on scripture. At Bahá'í Houses of Worship the devotional programs are assembled solely from Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í scripture; sermons and rituals are not allowed. Even the music that is sung usually is based on, or inspired by, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í scripture. The devotional portion of Feast consists largely of recitation of passages from Bahá'í scripture. As far back as 1904 American Bahá'ís published hymns based on passages from Bahá'í scripture, and these were sung primarily at Bahá'í community devotions.

An important part of Bahá'í devotional culture is the chanting of Bahá'í scripture in Persian and Arabic; even a few western Bahá'ís have

learned how to do it. Bahá'í chanting has not yet developed in English and other western languages, though it may in the future; in His Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh states that one of the obligations of a father is to take his children to the House of Worship and teach them how to chant the word (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 49). It is also common at large Bahá'í gatherings to have Bahá'í prayers and passages from Bahá'í scriptures recited in several languages, even if only one person in the audience understands that language. Such a form of devotion respects the statement of Bahá'u'lláh that reciting the verses of God will "cause the heart of every righteous man to throb"—whether he knows the language or not—while it honors the Bahá'í principle of unity in diversity.

Bahá'í scripture plays several other unique roles in the Bahá'í community. "The Greatest Name" (bahá and its Arabic superlative form, abhá), the most sacred word in the Bahá'í Faith, is usually displayed in one's house in calligraphic form; a form of it (Alláh-u-Abhá) is used to greet other believers and is to be repeated ninety-five times daily. Calligraphic renderings of passages from Bahá'í scripture are often used as a form of art to decorate homes and meeting places. Bahá'í Houses of Worship, like many mosques, often are adorned with passages from the Bahá'í scriptures. Some works of Bahá'í scripture have been published in beautifully illuminated calligraphic form. Writings by Bahá'ís and even conversational language often contain allusions to passages in the Bahá'í scriptures, thus giving Bahá'í subculture a unique vocabulary and set of symbols.

Bibliography. An excellent article about scripture by William A. Graham may be found in Mircea Eliade's *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan, 1987). Graham has written a book-length treatment of the same subject titled *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

Notes.

[1] A canon is an official list of scriptural works. Books that are semi-canonical either are accepted as canonical by some members of the religion, or are accorded an intermediate status between official scripture and non-scriptural status.

[2] The exceptions are devotional writings by Shoghi Effendi that were written in Persian; Shoghi Effendi allowed them to be used in feasts in Iran (*Lights of Guidance*, 2d ed., p. 245).

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