

Dates in *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*: A response

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Documents relevant to this issue include: The original article, Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue: Some Key Issues Considered A letter from the House complete with a memorandum, "Changes Made to "Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era" Regarding the Explanation of Daniel 12:12" Another letter from the House complete with a lengthy memorandum, "Daniel's Prophecies" a letter from the US National Spiritual Assembly on the same topic. Peter Terry's rebuttal "Truth Triumphs: A Bahá'í Response to Misrepresentations of the Bahá'í Teachings and Bahá'í History" A lengthy informal essay by David Friedman, "A Bahá'í response to Francis Beckwith's article 'Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue: Some Key Issues Considered'" As well, Douglas Martin's review of William Miller addresses issues of Christian polemicism.

September 24, 1992

Dear Bahá'í Friend:

The National Spiritual Assembly has received your letter dated 21 September 1992 concerning Francis Beckwith and questions he has raised in his book the Bahá'í Faith about the text of recent editions of J.E. Esselmont's Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, we are sending the following.

Mr. Francis Beckwith is a Christian who has spoken and written against the Bahá'í Faith from the point of view of fundamentalist Christian doctrine. The National Assembly has not written any refutations of his work and does not feel this would be productive at the present time. However, the National Assembly does provide the following comments about the prophecy of Daniel of the 1335 days and the reason for the removal of passages pertaining to this prophecy from J.E. Esselmont's Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era to individuals who inquire.

In a letter dated 11 November 1969, the Universal House of Justice has discussed the changes made for the new edition of Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era. Although Mr.

Esslemont had interpreted certain statements made by `Abdu'l-Bahá to mean that Universal Peace would be firmly established in the year 1957, the explanations of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel are somewhat complicated and incomplete. Therefore, the paragraph in which Mr. Esslemont calculates the date from the Hijrah has been omitted in recent editions of the book.

In a letter dated 4 May 1946 written on behalf of the Guardian, the following clarifications of Mr. Esslemont's comments were given:

As regards the statement in Esslemont: We cannot be absolutely certain of what the Master said because it is not in a Tablet; He did state, however, in 2 Tablets, that this date will see the triumph of the Cause. Reference is made to these Tablets in "The Passing of `Abdu'l-Bahá," and the Master's words quoted.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, in a Tablet quoted on page 28 of "The Passing of `Abdu'l-Bahá", appears to identify the prophecy with the year 1963:

Now concerning the verse in Daniel, the interpretation whereof thou didst ask, namely, "Blessed is he who cometh unto the thousand three hundred and thirty five days." These days must be reckoned as solar and not

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lunar years. For according to this calculation a century will have elapsed from the dawn of the Sun of Truth... (i.e., a century after 1863).

Another Tablet quoted in the same place indicates:

O servant of God! The afore-mentioned thousand three hundred and thirty-five years must be reckoned from the day of the flight of His Holiness Muhammad, the Apostle of God, (Hegira) salutations and blessings rest upon Him, at the close of which time the signs of the rise, the glory, the exaltation, the spread of the Word of God throughout the East and the West shall appear.

(Further prophecies of Daniel are discussed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in Some Answered Questions, part 1, chapter 10).

The Guardian indicated that Daniel's prophecy alluded to the year 1963. Referring to the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad [1863], the Guardian indicated:

The "hundred lunar years" destined to immediately precede that blissful consummation (1335 days), announced by Daniel in that same chapter, had commenced."

(God Passes By, page 151).

In another letter written on behalf of the Guardian in December 1953, the prophecy is linked to the completion of the goals of the Ten Year Crusade (1953-63):

....The 1335 days is figured according to the solar calendar, but in adjusting the 1335 days, one must take into consideration the time at which the prophecies were given and change them into solar time, which would bring the date to 1963.

There is one

thing of importance for the Bahá'ís to understand; and that is, that this prophecy refers to

happenings within the Faith, not occurrences outside the Faith. It refers specifically to the

spread of the Faith over the face of the earth. This will be accomplished when the Bahá'í

Faith is firmly established in all the virgin areas outlined in the Ten-Year Crusade, and the

other goals of the Crusade are completed. Thus it behooves us to work day and night to

accomplish this glorious goal.

The Universal House of Justice explains in its letter of November 11, 1969, mentioned above, that:

these passages do not give exactly the same date and cover a period of time rather than a specific year. However, it is apparent from the Guardian's letter dated 30th

June 1952 that the crucial date in this period is Ridvan 1963, the occasion of the

celebration of the centenary of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh.

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Thus, it is clear that Mr. Esslemont's interpretation of the statements made to him by

`Abdu'l-Bahá cannot be wholly supported by the authorized texts of `Abdu'l-Bahá and the

explanations of the Guardian. As you know, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era has often been

used to introduce the Bahá'í Teachings to the public, and, as such, it was important that

the teachings be represented as accurately as possible in the text. The fact that changes

have been made to Mr. Esslemont's original text has been clearly pointed out in

the
prefaces to the various editions of the book. The preface to the 1937 edition,
prepared by
the Bahá'í Publishing Committee, explained:

As Dr. Esslemont himself recognized, the Faith entered a new phase of its
history after the ascension of `Abdu'l-Bahá. The result is that the author's
views, some of
them written prior to 1921, no longer on certain aspects of the subject
correspond to the
evolutionary character of the Faith. His treatment of events and social
conditions then
existing, moreover, no longer appears fully relevant. Unavoidably, a few errors
of fact had
entered his text, while his explanation of the stations of the Bab and of
`Abdu'l-Bahá have
been replaced in the minds of Bahá'ís by the authoritative interpretations
since made by the
first Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi. The present edition therefore
represents a
revision made by the American National Spiritual Assembly, acting under the
advice and
approval of Shoghi Effendi. These revisions in no respect alter the original
plan of Dr.
Esslemont's book, nor affect the major portion of his text. Their purpose has
been to
amplify the author's discussion in a few passages by the addition of material
representing
the fuller knowledge available since his lamented death, and newer translations
of his
quotations from Bahá'í Sacred Writings.

From the Preface to the 1950 Edition:

...This edition does not displace the text as it has appeared since major
revision was made in the book under the direction of the Guardian of the Faith
in 1937, as
the time has not come for anything like a thorough recasting of the book to
make its
references to world conditions completely contemporaneous...It should be added
that any
further revision of the text in the future is subject to approval by Shoghi
Effendi. The
Committee has no authority to pass upon revisions which may be desired by
Bahá'ís of
other countries for their particular need.

Finally, the Bahá'í Publishing Trust prefaced its 1970 edition as follows:

Since 1937 no revision has been made to the text of Dr. Esslemont's book, although in 1950 some minor corrections were introduced. On the other hand, the diffusion and development of the Bahá'í Faith since that time have been tremendous, and there has been added to the Bahá'í

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bibliography a rich legacy of incomparable expositions, translations, and historical accounts from the pen of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Faith and the appointed interpreter of its Sacred Writings. It has therefore been deemed necessary to bring the book up to date in order to maintain its usefulness for modern readers. This has been done with a minimum of alteration to the text, and chiefly by the use of footnotes and of an epilogue giving the current statistics of the Bahá'í Faith...

We thank you very much for your response to the questions of the seeker who had read this book and hope that the above will be of use should you encounter such questions again in the future. We are also enclosing a copy of a review of a book by William Miller which refutes issues similar to those raised by Francis Beckwith.

With warm regards,
For the Office of the Secretary

enclosure

[Note: I do not know what book review is intended, as no enclosure was included in my copy of this letter. However, it is very likely that the review intended was the one written by Universal House of Justice member Douglas Martin of William Miller's *The Bahá'í Faith: Its History and Teachings*. This review is available here.

-J.W.]

— Dates in *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*: A response to Francis Beckwith (Used by permission of the curator)