

From the Editor's Desk

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This year, the worldwide Bahá'í community—as well as those in wider society who are learning, with the Bahá'ís, something of His station—commemorates the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In this commemoration, we contemplate with gratitude those of His gifts to us that we are able to recognize, and acknowledge all pertaining to Him that we cannot understand. In each of the titles bestowed, by the unerring pen of Bahá'u'lláh, upon a Figure “mysterious in His essence, unique in His station, astoundingly potent in both the charm and strength of His character” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*), we catch a glimpse—an impression—a reflection of an immeasurable light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is, in His Father's words, “this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness”, “the Limb of the Law of God,” “the most great Favour unto you,” and “the Trust of God amongst you, His charge within you, His manifestation unto you and His appearance among his favoured servants” (Suriy-i-Ghusn, in *Days of Remembrance*). In addition to these and other titles, awesome and mysterious, we reflect on those stations of the Master, no less inestimable in their import, that directly inform the very pattern of life Bahá'ís are attempting to build. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was, in the words of His

grandson who was perhaps alone in appreciating their full significance, “the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, [...] the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*).

'Abdu'l-Bahá is the authorized Interpreter of His Father's Revelation, along with the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, whom He appointed to the same role. They alone are the unerring cartographers of the Ocean of the Word, whose perfect maps will guide humanity's exploration of it throughout this dispensation.

The appointment through the chain of the Covenant of two Authorized Interpreters, and their conferred infallibility in that role, is one of the characteristic gifts of God to humanity in this age. Like so many of these gifts, its full value escapes us; we have no scales worthy to weigh it. One facet of this gift that merits reflection is the freedom it has bestowed upon each of us—each member of the human race—in our own excursions into that great Ocean.

We might begin this reflection by considering that in our search for knowledge about reality, we read from two books. One is the physical creation that surrounds us: “[e]very created being [...] revealeth His signs.” This is the “book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a most great book” (Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*).

The other is the book of Revelation.

In this age, we are all to be readers, exploring both books in accordance with our capacity and interest. Bahá'u'lláh invites us each to read the book of creation:

Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder. (Lawh-i-Hikmat, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*)

And His invitation to explore the book of Revelation is familiar to many Bahá'ís:

Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths. (*Gleanings*)

He has even commanded us to regularly interact with the Word—"Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)—while clarifying that it is the spirit with which this reading is approached, and not its quantity, that matters:

The prime requisite is the eagerness and love of sanctified

souls to read the Word of God.

To read one verse, or even one word, in a spirit of joy and radiance, is preferable to the perusal of many Books. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

However, in many of our cultural backgrounds, which continue to shape our world and our minds today, the reading of either book—that of creation or of Revelation—is *not* presented as a universal experience, open to all. Each book has had, and still has, its priest-hoods, those who would distinguish between the initiate and the unqualified and say that only the chosen few can read, while the rest must simply listen. And of course, there are those voices that denigrate the very importance of one, or of both, books, and tell us that there is no knowledge to be had there in the first place.

This is in stark contrast to the Bahá'í understanding, in which

[a]ccess to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. (The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván 2010* letter to the Bahá'ís of the World)

Thus, the generation and application of knowledge is the right of all of humanity. With respect to knowledge

gained from the book of existence, this right can be actualized by broadening the scientific enterprise, and making it accessible to all, not only in its technological fruits but in its very process.

As to the book of Revelation, this right to access, and responsibility to generate, knowledge is unlocked by at least two fundamental principles in the Bahá'í Faith: the abolition of the clergy, and the appointment of authorized interpreters. Thanks to the former, all can study—indeed, are enjoined to study—the Revealed Word. Thanks to the latter, all are free from the burden of thinking that either their own, or someone else's, interpretation is perfect, final, and binding.

Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions. (From a letter dated 3 January 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

As the common inheritance of all of humanity, the Writings invite us each to delve into them, to study and reflect on them alone and in community, and

to generously share what we find, ever ready to adapt our understanding to accommodate the insights of others when we find them valuable. And just as the broadening of the scientific enterprise to in some measure include all people in no way detracts from the unique capacity and contributions of highly trained professional scientists, our individual and collective study of the Word of God does not lessen our appreciation for the learned contributions of scholars of the Writings.

In that spirit, we present two exegetical works in this issue of the *Journal*. Exegesis, the attempt to explain or interpret a (typically religious) text, is a venerable field, having played an important part in articulating understandings of sacred books within many religious traditions over time. It has a distinguished history in the Bahá'í Faith. The Central Figures themselves used commentary on, and explanation of, the verses, surahs, and traditions of prior Dispensations as a mode of Revelation. The efforts of individual believers in this field, taking the Bahá'í Writings as their object of study, have yielded insights that have advanced the understanding of the community—as the works of Dr. Dávudí, some of which are published in translation in this issue, attest. Exegesis is a critical study—not in the sense in which criticism is most often used today, but in the sense of an application of human judgment, using tools and approaches developed and refined over time, to the task of uncovering more of what the text may mean. As a scholarly endeavour,

exegesis strives to be systematic, but as it takes for its object of study the Word, it can never be exhaustive. Exegetical work can uncover a little more of the path; the path itself points ever to the unreachable horizon.

The two works published in this issue demonstrate the discipline, rigour, and learning that are required in exegetical contributions to Bahá'í scholarship. At the same time, as we read these works, we can see that the beginning of Bahá'í exegesis is found in the activity that—in short or long bouts, in writing or in silent meditation—each of us is invited to do, and promised that we can do, with no more qualification than a pure heart and a desire to understand: individual engagement with the Word of God. Viewed from that perspective, the work of these authors is not only a contribution to scholarship in its own right, but also an invitation to each of us to engage with the verses they explore and consider the insights they have presented. They have brought up some pearls for us to appreciate—not only for their own great value, but as an encouragement to each of us to learn to dive, and dive ever deeper, into the Ocean.

In translating a collection of essays by Dr. 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí on theology, Dr. Vargha Bolodo-Taefi helps to build a bridge between Persian and English language Bahá'í scholarship. The importance of such a bridge, and of Dávúdí's scholarship in particular, can be estimated from Bolodo-Taefi's introduction, in which he explains the importance of the life and work of a

luminary of the Iranian Bahá'í community to a western audience as yet largely unfamiliar with him. In the essays themselves, Dávúdí draws on a wide range of Writings touching on the questions of the nature of God and of the Manifestation, and Their relationship to Each Other and to ourselves. These questions invite the scholar to correlate statements across the breadth of the Revelation, in order to carefully keep each in context. As Shoghi Effendi writes, “[o]ne might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.” (5 July 1949 to an individual believer, qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations*)

Many of the quotations with which Dávúdí weaves his thesis are translated provisionally into English for the first time here.

Dr. Amrollah Hemmat's exploration of *The Four Valleys*, one of Bahá'u'lláh's most famous mystical texts, also takes a correlative approach. Hemmat enriches our reading of the text by showing how the concepts it addresses resonate across the Revelation and in the works of its authorized interpreters. The light shed by this broader context illuminates facets of meaning that might otherwise remain obscure, particularly given the allusive nature of mystical writing. While Hemmat thus draws from a *breadth* of Writings, this is also a disciplined exploration of the *depths* of a single work. As we follow the author into these waters, our excitement about the insights uncovered

is matched by our wonder at the unlimited scope for further exploration.

It may be helpful, as you read this issue of the *Journal*, to reflect on the coherence of the exegetical study of the Word itself with the role of Bahá'í scholarship in contributing to the discourses of society. This involvement in discourse, featured at the 2021 Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies is, along with community-building and social action, one of the “three simultaneous, overlapping, and coherent areas of action” Bahá'ís are called to by the Universal House of Justice (27 April 2017 to an individual believer). Those familiar with the pattern of community building that the global Bahá'í community has embarked upon will know that study—along with action, reflection and consultation—is an integral part of that endeavour. The importance of study of the Writings and guidance to our contribution to discourses should likewise be self-evident. Indeed, these are reciprocal. The study of the Word on its own terms reveals insights. These insights are brought to bear in our contribution to discourses, with the ever-present humility that stems from understanding the implications of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi's infallible interpretation for our own efforts to understand. In turn, our real-world experience in participating in discourses (and in community building and social action) acts as a light revealing new depths in the Word; we look at it with fresh eyes.

It is the hope of the Editorial Committee that this issue of the *Journal* will

inspire each of us to further immerse ourselves in the Ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's words.

We are also very pleased to present two poems by award-winning poet Mark Jarman. Jarman is the author of numerous books of essays and poetry including *Questions for Ecclesiastes* (1997), which won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Son of a Christian minister, his poems work their way from doubt to belief, from “the nothingness that surrounds us” to an understanding that God plays a vital role in contemporary life.

The images included in these pages are by veteran photographer Rudy Umans, whose creative use of techniques and perspectives manages to convey, even in black and white, nature as an expression of God's Will.

Adorning the cover of this issue is Margaret Bremner's “Catch a Falling Star,” which, with that precious capacity of art to allude to the ineffable, may evoke a spiritual journey, the rain of the grace of God descending on the wayfarer in the valley.