

that these twelve had "...a specific commission to assume the role of a prophet and to speak God's word to the people." [3] Furthermore Jesus assured them that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit to those truths which He had not yet given them. [4] The Holy Spirit also guided the church in its collection and selection of books. [5] In this way, say evangelical Christians, Christ provided for the writing of the New Testament.

On the other hand liberal scholars draw our attention to the following facts: The Gospels, despite their attribution to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were not necessarily written by the apostles of Jesus. [6] There are inconsistencies between the Gospels, especially with regard to historical detail, which makes them fallible documents. [7] And the theologian Rudolph Bultmann, who assessed each Gospel element in order to establish whether it was original or had been borrowed from the Old Testament or from contemporary Jewish thought, or invented, concluded that "...we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus..." [8]

Perhaps the crucial difference between the two views just described is that, although both recognise the complex historical process involved, the evangelical writers assert that the Holy Spirit guided that process at every step.

Bahá'í Scholarship and the Bible

Bahá'u'lláh writes concerning the Books of Christians and the peoples of other Faiths:

"...the words of the verses themselves eloquently testify to the truth that they are of God." [9]

For Bahá'ís, Bahá'u'lláh's writings are divine revelation, and such passages as this are very affirming of the Bible. It may be surprising, therefore, to learn that there has been a lively exchange of views among Bahá'í scholars as to what Bahá'ís believe about the various books of the Bible and their authors, particularly the works of Saint Paul.

1. A current discussion

This exchange began in 1967 when a Christian theologian, Dr Kurt Hutten, accused Bahá'ís of an "inability to carry on a serious dialogue, defective knowledge of the Christian Faith, lack of theological "further education" and "helplessness faced by the message of the Cross" [10]. In a well argued response Udo Schaefer appeared to be unduly critical of Saint Paul's role in the development of Christian dogma. [11] William Hatcher favourably reviewed Schaefer's work in World Order magazine [12], and subsequently Bahá'í contributors responded with a range of opinions about Saint Paul, some critical and some strongly supportive. [13] My own conclusion drawn from this "debate" is that Bahá'ís recognise Paul as an Apostle and ought to hold him in very high esteem, but that there is no substantive evidence that his writings have the authority of the Word of God. As one of the writers stated: "Paul's writings do not constitute divine revelation for a Bahá'í." [14]

2. Preparing for a Bahá'í-Christian dialogue

In a recent series of books[15] Michael Sours offers a spirited defence of the view that the whole Bible, including the works of Saint Paul, and regardless of the historical difficulties (which Sours does not neglect), should be used by Bahá'ís as if it had the authority of the Word of God. Sours supports his view with comprehensive reference to the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In effect he is arguing for a view of Biblical authority not far removed from the evangelical end of the spectrum, but balanced by a refreshingly positive attitude to the process of Bahá'í-Christian dialogue itself.

3. Mírza Abú'l-Fadl

Mírza Abú'l-Fadl was praised and recommended by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and has been justifiably called the most learned and erudite Bahá'í scholar¹⁶.

Regarding the Old Testament, Fadl said that it contained two types of teaching: a) revelation from God, such as the 10 commandments of Moses, the Psalms of David and the books of the Prophets, and b) historical information, such as the books Joshua, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles "...which contain no statement, sign or hint of being divine speech and therefore should not be considered as revelation." [17]

Concerning the Book of Christ, he wrote that "The Holy Gospels alone contain teachings which can be regarded as the true Words of God; and these teachings do not exceed the contents of a few pages." [18]

Mírza Abú'l-Fadl's contributions are original and lucid, and appear to me to be in harmony with the understanding of the Bible which is argued for in the present paper.

The Bahá'í Authoritative Writings and the Bible

An explanation for the lack of agreement on this subject among Bahá'í scholars is that the Bahá'í writings can be used to support more than one view. By Bahá'í writings I refer to those which Bahá'ís consider to be infallible in some domain, and these include the Quran and those works by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice.¹⁹ Following is a brief survey of these references [20] highlighting the way in which they might be used to support widely differing perspectives on the Bible, followed by some possible solutions to this problem.

1. Evidence supporting an evangelical view

Many statements in the Qur'an and Bahá'í sacred literature confirm the Bible and 'the Scriptures' in general terms. The strongest of these statements would include:

"We sent forth Noah and Abraham, and bestowed on their offspring prophethood and the Scriptures... After them We sent other apostles, and after those Jesus the son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel..." [21] (the Qur'an)

"Regard not yourselves as being like unto the people to whom the Qur'an or the Gospel or the other Scriptures of old were given." [22] (The Báb)

Manifold are the verses that have been repeatedly revealed in all the heavenly Books and the holy Scriptures,..." [23] (Bahá'u'lláh)

"You must know the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God" [24] ('Abdu'l-Bahá)

"Surely the Bible is the book of God" [25] ('Abdu'l-Bahá)

Furthermore various specific texts of the Bible are quoted and interpreted, including Genesis, the Old Testament Prophets, each of the Gospels, several of the New Testament epistles and the Revelation of St. John.

Obviously these descriptions of, and references to, the Bible do support the perspective that the Bible is the Word of God, and some explanation will be required if we choose an alternative standpoint.

2. Evidence supporting the liberal view

Nothing in Bahá'u'lláh's writings directly asserts any limitations or shortcomings of the Bible. Some conclusions could be made by implication however:

a) The Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently refer to the Gospels as a 'record' of events, for example: "To this testify the records of the four Gospels" [26] and one might interpret this as meaning a mere historical record. Shoghi Effendi lends weight to this possibility when he writes that "The Bible is not wholly authentic" [27].

b) Bahá'u'lláh contradicts a point of historical detail in the Old Testament when he relates the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael [28]. Genesis 22:9 says that this son was Isaac.

However to conclude from such examples that historical and textual processes have rendered the spiritual element unreliable would be invalid for Bahá'ís. There are too many assurances of the Bible's spiritual efficacy. One of the most important of these asserts that God's justice and mercy have guaranteed the authenticity of the Gospel as the Book of Jesus:

"...We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist amongst the Christians, that it hath ascended unto heaven. How grievously they have erred! How oblivious of the fact that such a statement imputeth the gravest injustice and tyranny to a gracious and loving Providence! How could God, when once the Day-star of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people, and ascended unto the fourth heaven, cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? What would be left to that people to cling to..." [29]

3. Evidence supporting a 'middle' view:

The following quotations reveal much about the separate components of the Bible.

"That city is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel[30]..."[31] (Bahá'u'lláh)

"...through the translation of the New Testament, the little volume of the Gospel, the Old Testament, the Torah, has been translated..."[32] (Bahá'u'lláh)

"...all the Prophets of Israel were centers of inspiration; Christ also was a receiver of inspiration, but what a difference between the inspiration of the Word of God and the revelations of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Elijah!"[33] ('Abdu'l-Bahá)

"When 'Abdu'l-Bahá states we believe what is in the Bible, He means in substance. Not that we believe every word of it to be...the authentic saying of the Prophet."[34] (written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi)

Perhaps the most relevant conclusions one may draw from these and other similar passages are that:

a) Even though the books of the Old and New Testaments are not word-for-word the utterances and historical facts of the revelations they describe, nevertheless many of them convey, by some method, a reliable and authoritative account of God's guidance.

b) Just as scholarly analysis of the Bible reveals that it is a complex and diverse collection which may be categorised on historical and textual grounds, there appears to be some basis for a Bahá'í view which classifies individual parts of the Bible according to the way they are regarded in the Bahá'í sacred literature.

Put another way, these two conclusions demonstrate that, for Bahá'ís, the status of the Bible as a whole lies somewhere, as yet not well-defined, between the extremes of 'The Word of God' and 'a collection of historical documents', but not at either one of these positions.

Resolving Apparent Contradictions

If the foregoing conclusion is correct, however, we still have a difficulty: how do we resolve the apparent contradiction, already noted, that the authoritative Bahá'í texts recognise human limitations in the construction of the Bible, yet sometimes use the Bible as if it could be regarded as the undifferentiated and undiluted Word of God? Several possibilities may be considered:

1. Bahá'í References

First, Bahá'í references may themselves vary in authority. For example the books Paris Talks and The Promulgation of Universal Peace, referred to above, are in fact transcriptions of talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and, although meticulously

recorded, may not be completely accurate records of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words.

At an even more fundamental level, it may be suggested that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's infallibility did not extend to the whole field of Biblical studies and history. Bahá'ís believe that only the Manifestations of God, such as Bahá'u'lláh, possess essential infallibility. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian (Shoghi Effendi) and the Universal House of Justice are granted conditional infallibility operating in their own spheres.[35] Of course this should not detract in the least from the uniquely exalted station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's covenant and the "Mystery of God", and whose spheres of infallibility included the station of 'perfect exemplar of the Bahá'í life' and the authorised interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

Rather, it is a reminder of Shoghi Effendi's caution that we should neither underestimate nor overestimate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station.[36]

2. Terminology

Second, when dealing with revelations of the past, where the actual words of the Prophet were not or could not have been reliably recorded, it may be necessary to adopt a flexible definition of terms such as 'the Word of God'. Ultimately the Word of God is something metaphysical and eternal.[37] When manifested in the world, divine truths are revealed which can never be adequately contained in human language and written text. But even given this understanding we still refer to the accurate records of the actual words of Mohammed, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the Word of God. On the other hand, the Guardian clarified that the term "verses of God" does not include the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and he likewise indicated that this term does not apply to his own writings[38]. However such a strict dichotomy could not be applied to the Bible without having the undesirable effect of greatly diminishing the faith Christians have in it as a reliable source of divine guidance.

A more appropriate way of regarding the Bible is that its authors were uplifted and inspired because of their spiritual and physical proximity to the "Word of God", and were able to reflect the meaning of "the Word" with a substantial degree of reliability. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained:

"The Apostles were even as Letters, and Christ was the essence of the Word Itself; and the meaning of the Word, which is grace everlasting, cast a splendour on those Letters."[39]

This would account for references to the writings of Saint Paul because such references are used when they accord with "the Word", without making any general endorsement of the authority of Paul's words.

Therefore much of the Bible might be correctly called 'The Word of God' if we are prepared to relax our definition of that phrase.

3. Sensitivity

Third, we should understand the ultimate purpose of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá when introducing the Bahá'í revelation to Christians.

Their mission was no less than to lead every soul to reunion with God, and to establish the foundations of world unity and peace. Engaging the followers of Christ in controversy over secondary issues would have obscured that purpose. Rather than offer a strict and exclusive categorisation of where and how the Word of God was to be found in the Bible, they instead built upon the legitimate sense of sacredness and holiness which the people attached to these books and avoided weakening their Faith.

In this light we can see that the apparently contradictory references to the bible are not intended to be misleading but rather they are the result of the 'Teacher' sensitively accommodating himself to the needs and limitations of the 'students' and leading them closer to the truth. As Bahá'u'lláh counsels:

"Every person who in some degree turneth towards the truth can himself later comprehend most of what he seeketh. However, if at the outset a word is uttered beyond his capacity, he will refuse to hear it and will arise in opposition." [40]

The first of the three possibilities suggested above - defining spheres of infallibility - is beyond the scope of this paper and is mentioned only as a possibility rather than a premise for my argument.

The second and third possibilities demonstrate that while an evangelical perspective of Biblical authority might appear to be valid for Bahá'ís, in fact it is an insecure foundation for scholarship and dialogue.

Unresolved Questions

It seems that the Gospels and a number of other Biblical texts belong in a category (or categories) above mere human language but short of the infallible and creative Word of God revealed by the Manifestations. What is this category and which books belong to it? Is it only applicable to the Jewish and Christian revelations? How does God or the Holy Spirit operate to guarantee that the writers' efforts conform to the special qualities of this category? Can this category be objectively recognised prior to its endorsement in a subsequent Revelation? To the extent that Bahá'ís recognise the Canons of the Old and New Testaments, do we thereby acknowledge the authority of the Church decisions which defined those Canons?

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Most of these questions involve the role of God's providence or, in Christian terms, the Holy Spirit. As mentioned earlier, the crucial distinction between the liberal and fundamentalist viewpoints concerns whether or not the influence of the Holy Spirit is acting to ensure the reliability of the Biblical texts.

Bahá'u'lláh substantially resolved this problem for Bahá'ís when He confirmed that God's justice and mercy guarantee the authenticity of the Gospel texts. [41] This may be interpreted as an endorsement of the Church's belief that the Holy Spirit guided the writers and the church, although it is not so specific as to endorse the strict black and white delineation of the Biblical

canon.

At the individual level, however, the influence of the Holy Spirit may enable the Word of God to be recognised by its intrinsic merits.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote of the Gospel that

"...the words of the verses themselves eloquently testify to the truth that they are of God." [42]

Horace Holley wrote:

"For a revelation is essentially personality, human life, character, destiny. Printed, it remains only a philosophy or dream until, somehow, by an overwhelming, passionate desire for spiritual excellence, the Prophet Himself is felt as a living immediate presence and being, when the words leap out as from moving lips..." [43]

and Mírza Abú'l-Fadl suggested that

"The People of Bahá ...distinguish the Words of God from the words of man, through their perfect efficacy in the guidance of souls, enlightenment of hearts, quickening of nations, reformation of character, reorganisation of society, institution of wonderful, everlasting and refining laws...The Bahá'ís name this quality the "creative and dominating power". [44]

Although these passages suggest some avenues for objective reasoning concerning the Biblical texts, it seems that an individual's response to God's word is primarily a personal thing, dependent upon purity of mind and heart. We would be unlikely to make much headway in Bahá'í-Christian dialogue if we appealed to criteria which have a high subjective content.

Conclusion

The Bahá'í viewpoint proposed by this essay has been established as follows: The Bible is a reliable source of Divine guidance and salvation, and rightly regarded as a sacred and holy book. However, as a collection of the writings of independent and human authors, it is not necessarily historically accurate. Nor can the words of its writers, although inspired, be strictly defined as 'The Word of God' in the way the original words of Moses and Jesus could have been. Instead there is an area of continuing interest for Bahá'í scholars, possibly involving the creation of new categories for defining authoritative religious literature.

What implications does this have for Christian-Bahá'í dialogue? Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated great reverence for the Bible, and so should Bahá'ís. As for using it in teaching I would recommend directing Christian seekers to the illuminating explanations of Christian topics abundantly available in the Bahá'í writings, without venturing too far into those Biblical texts which have not been specifically referred to or explained.

When we engage in deeper dialogue with Christians, not necessarily for teaching, then I think the proposed view will earn considerable respect. On the

one hand we are able to accept the results of responsible Biblical scholarship without fear of having our beliefs undermined. On the other, we can reassure those who seek the security of a 'fundamentalist' viewpoint that the reliability of the Bible as a guide to salvation has been asserted by Bahá'u'lláh, and its high station reaffirmed.

Endnotes

1. Thanks are due to the Universal House of Justice for the assistance of their Research Department, and to the Association For Bahá'í Studies Australia, Miguel Gil, Sen McGlinn, Dr Shawki H. Marei, Michael Curtotti and Dr Graham Hassall for their comments on an early draft of this paper.
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3. Stott, J.R.W., *The Authority of the Bible*, (booklet), Inter-Varsity Press, Langdon, 1976, pp.19,20.
4. John 14:25-26, 16:12-13. These verses are quoted in Hammond & Wright, *op.cit.*, p.29, and Stott, *op.cit.*, p.23. Bahá'u'lláh interpreted this very differently in the "Lawh-i-Aqdas" in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1978, p.11.
5. Bruce, F.F., *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, Inter-Varsity Press, Michigan, 1987, p.21.
6. Wilson, I., *Jesus: The Evidence*, Book Club Associates, London, 1984, p.32.
7. *ibid.*
8. Bultmann, R., quoted in Wilson, *ibid.* pp.38,39.
9. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqan: The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, N.Y., 1931, p.84.
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11. Schaefer. *op.cit.*, pp...
12. Hatcher, W.S., "The Quest for the Metaphysical Jesus", in *World Order*, Summer, 1978, pp.35-42.
13. Cole, J.R., letter to editor in *World Order*, Winter 1978-79, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Wilmette, pp.7,8., and various contributors to "A Forum: Concerning Saint Paul" in *World Order*, Summer 1979, pp.5-12.
14. McLean, J., "The Deification of Jesus", in *World Order*, Spring/Summer, 1980, *op.cit.*, p43. This is unlikely, however, to be the end of Bahá'í discussion on the issue. In *The Arc of Ascent*, (George Ronald, Oxford, 1994, ch.5) John S. Hatcher argues comprehensively that Paul was faithful to Jesus' message, but that he has been misinterpreted by Christians. Although Hatcher

does not draw any conclusions from this concerning Saint Paul's authority, it is not inconsistent with the evangelical view that Paul's words are the Word of God.

15. Sours, M.W., Preparing for a Bahá'í/Christian Dialogue: vol.1: Understanding Biblical Evidence, and vol.2: Understanding Christian Beliefs, Oneworld Publications Ltd, Oxford, vol.1(1990), vol.2(1991)
16. Cole, J.R., in "editor's note", Mírza Abú'l-Fadl, Letters & Essays 1886-1913, Kalimat Press, Los Angeles, 1985, p.xiv.
17. Mírza Abú'l-Fadl in Miracles and Metaphors, Kalimat Press, Los Angeles, 1981, pp.11,12.
18. Mírza Abú'l-Fadl in The Bahá'í Proofs, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1983, p.220.
19. The classification of Bahá'í literature is described in Collins, W.P., Bibliography of English-Language Works on the Babi and Bahá'í Faiths 1844-1985, George Ronald, Oxford, pp.xi - xiv.
20. An attempt has been to review the Bahá'í literature available in English as comprehensively as possible, using Heggie, J., Bahá'í References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, George Ronald, Oxford, 1986. and Refer: Indexing and Retrieval Software, ver 1.2, Crimson Publications, San Juan Capistrano, 1995.
21. See chapter in The Qur'an titled "Iron", verse 57:25-28, in Dawood, N.J., (Transl.), The Koran, Penguin, Middlesex (4th edn.), 1974, p.109.
22. The Báb, Selections from the Writings of The Báb, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1976, p.136.
23. Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqan, op.cit., p101.
24. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1982, p.201.
25. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, UK, 1972, p.47.
26. Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqan, op.cit., p.22.
27. Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, UK, 1981, p432.
28. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Birmingham, 1949, p.76.
29. Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqan, op.cit., pp.89-90.
30. The term "Gospel" could have several meanings, eg: "the four gospels", "the good news brought by Jesus", or "the message of the New Testament generally". In my opinion the context of this and the following quotation makes "the four gospels" the meaning most probably intended in these quotations.
31. Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqan, op.cit., p.199.

32. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, op.cit., p.366.
33. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Wilmette, 1981, p.150.
34. Quoted in Hornby, H., (compiler), *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 2nd edn., Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 1988, p.494.
35. Aspects of the infallibility of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith are discussed in Kavetsky, A., "Infallibility", in *Proceedings of the Bahá'í Studies Conference 1987*, Association for Bahá'í Studies (Australian Committee), 1987, pp.75-91, and Momen, M., in *Herald of the South, The National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand*, October 1987.
36. Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1960, pp.44-45.
37. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1978, pp.140-141.
38. see Notes to Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1992, p236, #165.
39. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1978, p.60.
40. Bahá'u'lláh, in "Guidelines for Teaching", (compilation), in *The Compilation of Compilations Vol.II*, Bahá'í Publications Australia, Sydney, 1991, p.293.
41. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqan*, op.cit., pp.89,90.
42. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqan*, op.cit., p.84.
43. Holley, H., *Religion for Mankind*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1956, p.16.
44. Mírza Abú'l-Fadl, *The Bahá'í Proofs*, op.cit., p.161.

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