

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh *

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Accepting the Manifestation of God and following His commands are two inseparable duties, as instructed in the very first paragraph of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Laws. Foremost among these commandments were Bahá'u'lláh's first allusions to His Covenant through the designation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His successor, the establishment of the institution of the Guardianship as a hereditary office and of the Universal House of Justice as an infallible governing body. These and other ordinances were characterised by Bahá'u'lláh as "*the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy among My creatures*"¹ being part of the eternal Covenant of God with humanity. This article describes Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, the nature of Covenant-breaking as well as the spiritual foundation for being firm in such a fundamental principle.

The Kitáb-i-'Ahd

Bahá'u'lláh, the Supreme Manifestation of God, passed away in 'Akká on the morning of 29th May 1892. Nine days later, His Will and Testament was read to the believers, including pilgrims and members of the families of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb. In that document, also known as Kitáb-i-'Ahd (The Book of Covenant), 'Abdu'l-Bahá was appointed as the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the authorized Interpreter of His teachings, to whom all believers should turn. Never before in religious history a Manifestation of God had formulated such an explicit Covenant with His followers, assuring not only the continuity of divine guidance, but also the unity of the Bahá'í Faith in light of His promise that this is the "*day which will not be followed by night*".²

In the same document, Bahá'u'lláh clearly and explicitly places the rank and station of His second son, Muhammad-'Alí after 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This did not come as a surprise for most believers who were already familiar with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's noble character and vast knowledge. Almost twenty years before, as stated before, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been appointed the successor of the Manifestation of God. In the Most Holy Book, we read:

* A modified version of this paper was published in the *Australian Bahá'í Bulletin*, 2008.

When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed [‘Abdu’l-Bahá], Who hath branched from this Ancient Root. ³

Muhammad-‘Alí’s Rebellion

What followed after Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension was a sad history of intrigues and machinations protagonised by Muhammad-‘Alí. He fiercely engaged in a rebellious and destructive power-seeking behaviour, tried to usurp ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s authority and to gain control of the Faith for himself. He had hoped to succeed in creating a faction and assume the role of leadership. For several years after this, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concealed His brother’s faults, until such time that Muhammad-‘Alí’s conduct became so evident, virulent and damaging that the Master had no choice but to declare Muhammad-‘Alí as a breaker of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant and, therefore, expel him from the ranks of the believers.

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a document that all Bahá’ís should study, exposes Muhammad-‘Alí’s evil deeds leading to his excommunication, including an attempt on the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, forging Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, joining the enemies of the Faith to attack and destroy it, maliciously misrepresenting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the government through falsifying documents and handing out Bahá’u’lláh’s original tablets. All these misdeeds and attacks on the part of Muhammad-‘Alí towards the Centre of Baha’u’llah’s Covenant caused the government to once again imprison ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Muhammad-‘Alí died unrepentant in 1937 at the age of 85, only to see the futility of his discordant efforts. Such was his spiritual confusion and misery that he was buried with Muslim rituals, abandoned by many who initially supported his claims. Of him Bahá’u’lláh had warned: “*Should he for a moment pass out from under the shadow of the Cause, he surely shall be brought to nothing*”. ⁴

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith

‘Abdu’l-Bahá passed away in 1921 appointing His eldest grandson Shoghi Effendi, ‘the sacred and youthful branch’, ⁵ as the first Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith and as the authorized interpreter of the Bahá’í scriptures. In His Will and Testament, the Master instructed that: “*He that obeyeth him not, hath not obeyed God; he that turneth away from him, hath turned away from God and he that denieth him, hath denied the True One. Beware lest anyone falsely interpret these words...*” ⁶ Shoghi Effendi laboured ceaselessly for thirty-six years to establish the administrative order of the Bahá’í Faith throughout the world until his death in 1957. His ministry was crowned with the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963.

Shoghi Effendi passed away without a successor. According to the provisions of the Will and Testament, Shoghi Effendi had to appoint during his lifetime one of his linear descendants as the next guardian, or choose one of the Bahá'u'lláh's direct male descendants. However, Shoghi Effendi did not have children and all the other Bahá'u'lláh's male descendants, also known *Aghsán* (“branches”), had broken the Covenant by the time of his death by allying to Muhammad-‘Alí. Therefore, Shoghi Effendi himself was in a position where he could not to appoint a second Guardian in a way that satisfy the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament.

This interruption in the hereditary line of guardians had been foreseen in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Bahá'u'lláh Himself had anticipated that the line of *Aghsán* with conferred authority might eventually terminate with the supreme authority of the Faith resting finally on the Universal House of Justice:

Endowments dedicated to charity revert to God, the Revealer of Signs. None hath the right to dispose of them without leave from Him Who is the Dawning-place of Revelation. After Him, this authority shall pass to the Aghsán, and after them to the House of Justice—should it be established in the world by then... Otherwise, the endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá who speak not except by His leave...⁷

These verses allude to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi who were the two *Aghsán* with authority in the line of succession. The *people of Bahá* cited in the above passage refers to the ministry of the Custodians (1957-1963), immediately after Shoghi Effendi’s deaths. In such capacity, the Hands of the Cause of God, in their capacity as “*chief stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic world order*”,⁸ carried forward Shoghi Effendi’s work until the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. By *chief steward* is meant the second-in-charge who, in the captain’s absence, keeps the ship on its course and brings safe it to port.⁹

No Second Guardian

Given that Shoghi Effendi did not leave written instructions about his succession, the Hands of the Cause of God left the decision on the issue of a second guardian to the Universal House of Justice. This was so because it within the divine prerogatives of that body to deal with “matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book”¹⁰. In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words:

It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself.¹¹

In October 1963, few months after its first election, the Universal House of Justice pronounced that,

*After prayerful and careful study of the Holy Texts ... and after prolonged consideration ... the Universal House of Justice finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.*¹²

The possibility of the Universal House of Justice functioning without a Guardian was also considered in the second part of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, where the supreme body is portrayed operating only through its nine elected members, and yet its conferred infallibility being uncompromised. “God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth...,”¹³ is Bahá’u’lláh’s assurance of permanent divine guidance. According to the supreme body, “*a careful study of the Writings and interpretations on any subject on which the House of Justice proposes to legislate always precedes its act of legislation*”.¹⁴ One can only ponder on the enormous amount of interpretations on Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings produced by the two interpreters, the Master and the beloved Guardian, over a period of sixty-five years. While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed approximately 16 000 tablets in addition to records of His talks in the western hemisphere, Shoghi Effendi wrote about 36 000 letters, messages books and various translations of major Bahá’u’lláh’s works.

Bahá’u’lláh’s descendants

As per Bahá’u’lláh’s descendants, they all had shamelessly broken the Covenant, joined Muhammad-‘Alí and his associates and were all expelled from the Faith by the time of Shoghi Effendi’s passing. By being cut off from the Holy Tree,¹⁵ all Bahá’u’lláh’s *branches* fell onto the ground, dried out, ceased to exist as such and lost forever their glorious lineage. Having forfeited their birthrights for their faithlessness, the kinship simply vanished and therefore a *family* of Bahá’u’lláh does not exist as such. He Himself has indicated: “*Know thou of a truth: He that biddeth men be just and himself committeth iniquity is not of Me, even though he bear My name*”.¹⁶ In brief, the only surviving member of Bahá’u’lláh’s family who remained loyal to the Covenant was the Hand of the Cause ‘Amatu’l-Bahá Ruhíyyih Khánum, Shoghi Effendi’s widow, who passed away in the year 2000.

Similarly to Muhammad-‘Alí’s ambition for leadership at the passing of Bahá’u’lláh, there were individuals who appointed themselves *guardians* after the passing of Shoghi Effendi and were therefore expelled from the Faith.¹⁷ What is evident from these accounts of defection and betrayal was the strong foundation upon which the Bahá’í Faith has been designed. Bahá’u’lláh has said:

*The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an enduring foundation. Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men's fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structures.*¹⁸

What is Covenant-breaking?

A Covenant breaker is a Bahá'í who defies the authority of the head of the Faith which at different periods were Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and nowadays the Universal House of Justice. According to the supreme body,

*When a person declares his acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God he becomes a party to the Covenant and accepts the totality of His Revelation. If he then turns round and attacks Bahá'u'lláh or the Central Institution of the Faith he violates the Covenant.*¹⁹

The breaking of this important spiritual principle by a person who has become a Bahá'í intertwines with sentiments of ego, selfishness and leadership. It is also due to lack of faith in Bahá'u'lláh's revelation which comprises the institutions designed and envisioned by Him. It has nothing to do with the principle of independent investigation of truth but rather with the principle of obedience. Becoming a member of the Bahá'í Faith requires total acceptance of the institutions and teachings, because the Bahá'í Faith comes in only one package and one version, so to speak. Firmness in the Covenant also means abiding by the instructions of the Universal House of Justice, "the source of all good and freed from all error"²⁰ In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words:

*To none is given the right to put forth his own opinion or express his particular conviction. All must seek guidance and turn unto the Center of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error... Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself.*²¹

In general, the Universal House of Justice recommends:

*The best countermeasure to Covenant-breaker initiatives and the greatest protection for the Cause is for the believers to acquire a deeper appreciation of the station and purpose of Bahá'u'lláh and to become well-grounded in His Covenant".*²²

Firmness in the Covenant

The first condition is firmness in the Covenant of God”, says ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “For the power of the Covenant will protect the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh from the doubts of the people of error. It is the fortified fortress of the Cause of God and the firm pillar of the religion of God. Today no power can conserve the oneness of the Bahá’í world save the Covenant of God; otherwise differences like unto a most great tempest will encompass the Bahá’í world. It is evident that the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else... Therefore, in the beginning the believers must make their steps firm in the Covenant so that the confirmations of Bahá’u’lláh may encircle them from all sides, the cohorts of the Supreme Concourse may become their supporters and helpers, and the exhortations and advices of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, like unto the pictures engraved on stone, may remain permanent and ineffaceable in the tablets of all hearts. ²³

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