

Editorial Statement

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies provides a forum for exploring the most important issues facing Bahá'í Studies today. The following two essays were triggered by Christopher Buck's review of Michael Sours's book *The Prophecies of Jesus* in a recent issue (5.2) of the *Journal*. In this forum Michael Sours replies to the initial review, and Christopher Buck responds to these comments.

The arguments, however, go far beyond the specific instance, relating directly to crucial issues facing Bahá'í scholarship. Michael Sours and Christopher Buck both use careful and thorough—one might say academic—methods of scholarship, and both quote Bahá'í scriptures to support their points. But they use their methodologies and quotations for different purposes: one to analyze a specific portion of the Gospel of Matthew in detail and draw out its implications for presenting the Bahá'í Faith to Bible-centered Christians; the other to discuss the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity in technical, academic language within a pluralistic approach, less focused on a specific text than on general issues and principles. These two different purposes arise from very different assumptions, necessitate different uses of scriptures (Bahá'í and Christian), and produce very different conclusions.

In the process, some important questions are raised: What constitutes Bahá'í scholarship? What are its distinctive requirements, if any? Is apologetics as a genre a legitimate aspect of Bahá'í scholarship? How should Bahá'ís treat biblical prophecy and its interpretation in Bahá'í scriptures in their own writings? What should one do when the principles presented by Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá are at variance with the strongly held assumptions or positions of those of other faiths, of those who carry out interfaith dialogue, or of those who undertake research in this field of study? Should one explain the Bahá'í Faith's positions, justify them, promote them, or ignore them? How selective should one be in using Bahá'í scriptures when writing about other religions? Should one tell all or shape one's arguments to one's audience? Do the Bahá'í writings portray other religions as primarily corrupt and declining, or as vital and developing, or (paradoxically) both? To the debate about these important questions, is added questions about the importance of apologetic literature, not only in the history of religions but in the academic scholarly discipline of theology as well.

The editors take no side in the debate but feel the reader should keep in mind several passages from the Bahá'í writings. The first concerns the nature of Bahá'í scholarship. The Bahá'í writings stress the importance of scholarship in the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community and in the application of the Bahá'í teachings to the problems facing humanity. While the Writings refer to several erudite Bahá'ís as "scholars," they also define the term "scholar" in such a way that it could potentially apply to every believer:

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars—people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.¹

This definition of scholarship does not stress academic degrees or dispassionate search for truth, but commitment to the Bahá'í Faith, deep knowledge of it, and an effort to relate it to the thoughts and problems of the world—in short, efforts that a very wide range of Bahá'ís can undertake. Should one think this definition is at variance with the usual English use of the term, a quick check of most dictionaries reveals that a “scholar” is someone who is “learned” and scholarship is “erudition”—definitions that are quite vague and which can lead to broad interpretation.

In short, there is no precedent in either the Bahá'í writings or the English language for insisting that scholarship must be done by people with advanced degrees who teach or conduct research at universities. Such exclusive definition of scholarship is not warranted.

The above quotation also implies that apologetics can be scholarship. The following statement is fairly specific:

There is an answer in the teachings for everything; unfortunately the majority of the Bahá'ís, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing. . . .²

The above quotation makes it clear that apologetics (“to reply to and refute the claims and attacks” of others) requires both “scholarship” and “wisdom.” No doubt some apologetics—if done poorly—would not be scholarship, but apologetics can be scholarship, based on the broad definition of the term advocated in the Bahá'í writings.

The distinction between apologetics and scholarship is useful, however, and can be maintained with some relabeling of the concepts as apologetics and academic scholarship. The latter is not only legitimate scholarship but also of central importance to the Bahá'í Faith's future; and it is a type of scholarship where apologetics usually plays a minor role at best.

Above all, this forum should stimulate each of us to turn to the Bahá'í writings for further consideration of the nature and boundaries of Bahá'í

1. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendí, dated 21 October 1943, cited in *Deepening*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 35–36.

2. From a letter dated 25 September 1942 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of the British Isles* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 439.

scholarship, academic and otherwise. The Bahá'í emphasis on unity places special ethical and spiritual obligations on Bahá'í thinkers and authors who need both to appreciate and to encourage the work of fellow scholars, even when it contrasts sharply with their own approaches. They must recognize and accept that the various efforts of other scholars all have their part to play in Bahá'í scholarly discourse and that one's own contributions can only be partial and fallible. Writing on the Bahá'í Faith is analogous to consultation; it requires one to state one's views as clearly, concisely, and politely as possible and to strive for detachment from one's own opinions. Individual perspectives cannot achieve their full power and influence until seen in the light that comes from the clash of differing understandings. Only when each perspective is put forth in such a way that it encourages the contributions of others will the fullest light of truth emerge from the multiple presentations.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO REVIEW OF *THE PROPHECIES OF JESUS*

Reviewer: Christopher Buck

Published: *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5.2 (1992): 79–86

Christopher Buck's characterization of *The Prophecies of Jesus* as "apology" (79) seems entirely fair and appropriate. Among Buddhists, it is said that the greatest gift one can give is the *dharma* (or law¹). Apologetics—the way one chooses to defend and justify the religious way of life one has adopted—is often an inevitable part of this gift giving. Nevertheless, it is disappointing to discover that a reviewer would choose to review a book with such an emphasis on proving that the book and its author are not scholarly. Even so, there would be no necessity for responding to Buck's critique were it not for his characterization of the book as "anti-Judaic" and a "denigration of Christianity" (81, 85).

It is not possible, as the reviewer states, that a book can be both "excellent apology" and "anti-Judaic." It is entirely contrary to Bahá'í teachings to promote any publication that is actually anti-Judaic. However one defines anti-Judaic, put as it was in context with the Holocaust, it appears very negative and disturbing. The review states that "this anti-Judaic (not anti-Semitic) line of argumentation is *perhaps* more Christian than Bahá'í" (81, emphasis added)—a statement, which by extension might be taken to imply that anti-Judaic argumentation could actually be Bahá'í.

The misunderstanding appears to begin with a passage the reviewer isolated from the text of *The Prophecies of Jesus*. This passage makes a link between the Jewish rejection of Christ and the ensuing historic suffering of the Jewish community, most notably the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70. Buck notes this and asks pointedly, "Are the Romans then exonerated as instruments of God's wrath?" He then implies that the book suffers from the perverse reasoning that led to the systematic persecution and killing of Jews by certain Christians (81).

It is well known and accepted that the Jewish insurrection against Roman rule in A.D. 70 motivated the Romans to destroy the Jewish Temple and eventually to expel the Jews from Palestine. In *The Prophecies of Jesus* it is noted that this probably would not have happened if the Jewish community as a whole had accepted Jesus' leadership. The plausibility of such a scenario does not depend on any Christian-inspired bias against Jews or even belief in Christ.

This reasoning is by itself entirely secular, reducing the events to a question of political and moral leadership. The book, however, also presents a theistic² interpretation of such historical events. In the Hebrew scriptures, for example,

1. The term *dharma* is perhaps equivalent to the Jewish term *Torah*. Not merely a code of laws, but a way for attaining a sanctified life, what Bahá'u'lláh describes as the "choice Wine" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* [Bahá'í World Centre, 1992] 21).

2. The Bahá'í Faith is a "theistic" religion as distinct from deism. Stated simplistically, theism is the belief that a personal God exists, meaning a God who is actively involved in human history and redemption. Deism is the belief that God exists but is no longer involved in creation.

the Book of Jeremiah states that God will destroy the Temple (Jer. 7:1–15). In *The Prophecies of Jesus* the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 is presented in light of that prophecy. This type of interpretation of historical events does, in fact, attribute catastrophes to God.

This interpretation should not seem surprising in a book examining religious texts from an admittedly religious point of view. This way of viewing historic events is characteristic of the Hebrew, quranic, and Bahá'í scriptures. That is, some events affecting communities are understood in relation to the communities' rejection or acceptance of God's messengers or teachings. In biblical scripture, the mythic expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the narrative of the Flood, as well as numerous historical events, are attributed to such divine retribution. It is not a new way of interpreting historical events, and, contrary to the review's suggestions, it is not anti-Judaic, neither generally nor specifically.

The review, however, asserts that there is an anti-Judaic bias in *The Prophecies of Jesus* because the reviewer thinks that the book singles out Jews for their rejection of Christ while failing to argue that Christians suffered a similar fate for their rejection of the Prophet Muḥammad (81–82). In fact, it is also pointed out in *The Prophecies of Jesus* that Christians suffered as a result of their rejection of Muḥammad:

We can only speculate what the course of history might have been if all of the Christian world had accepted Islam and truly followed the teachings of the Qur'ān. Europe and much of Byzantium resisted Islam and sunk into the 'dark ages', while a large portion of Christendom—Syria, all of North Africa and most of what is commonly referred to as the Holy Land—accepted Islam and went on to build a civilization more advanced than any civilization Europe had ever experienced. We can assume that the centuries of violent religious warfare, most notably the crusades, could have been prevented. (85)

This line of argumentation is carried forward in *The Prophecies of Jesus* to include Christians, Muslims, and even the entire world community today.³ In fact, *The Prophecies of Jesus* states that such tribulations affect all religions:

3. Some of these inaccuracies in the review may have resulted simply from a cursory reading of *The Prophecies of Jesus*. The reviewer suggests repeatedly that *The Prophecies of Jesus* omits important or relevant facts, but these assertions are contradicted by the text of the book. For example, the reviewer provides a quotation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá attributing European civilization to Islam—implying that this important point was omitted from the commentary and thus underscoring the lack of scholarship in the book and the book's alleged anti-Judaic bias. In this instance, the reviewer does not acknowledge reference to R. M. Savory's *Introduction to Islamic Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and the statement that "European culture is greatly indebted to Muslim scholars, philosophers and centers of learning, such as Toledo, for the recovery of classical Greek knowledge which inspired the period we call the Renaissance" (*Prophecies* 85). In addition to this statement the following quotation appears in *The Prophecies of Jesus*: "By the time its [Toledo's] importance began to fade, at the close of the thirteenth century, it had furnished scholars with Latin versions of many of the principal works of Greek and Arabic science and philosophy. There was no intellectual centre in Europe that was not touched in some way by, that did not owe some debt to, the school of Toledo" (James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, quoted in *Prophecies* 54).

As pointed out before, the tribulation [Matthew 24:21] can be understood as the period of spiritual crisis that emerges when a religion declines. In the Christian era of this period, according to Bahá'í teachings (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 26-33), would correspond to the time before the appearance of Muhammad. Inasmuch as Christians did not embrace Islam, this time of tribulation did not end, but continued. Eventually, this tribulation also occurred in Islam. Today it can be said that the tribulation is a condition embracing the entire world and is the outcome of the decline all previous religions are experiencing. (*Prophecies* 96)

The review also does not mention reference in *The Prophecies of Jesus* to an important statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá regarding the future destiny of the Israelites:

Moreover, materially as well (as spiritually), the Israelites will gather in the Holy Land. This is irrefutable prophecy, for the ignominy which Israel has suffered for well-nigh twenty-five hundred years will now be changed into eternal glory, and in the eyes of all, the Jewish people will become glorified to such an extent as to draw the jealousy of its enemies and the envy of its friends.⁴

It would be impossible to survey biblical prophecy from a Bahá'í point of view and not discuss this "well-nigh twenty-five hundred years" of Jewish suffering.

The question should therefore be asked: Is it appropriate and consistent with Bahá'í teaching to view the destruction of the Jewish Temple as an act of divine retribution? Shoghi Effendi surveys a series of catastrophic events affecting the Ottoman Empire and Islam, including the Balkan wars, which claimed the lives of thousands of people. In these devastating events, he writes, ". . . every follower of the persecuted Faith of Bahá'u'lláh recognized evidences of the directing Hand of the departed Founder of his religion, Who, from the invisible Realm, was unloosing a flood of well-deserved calamities upon a rebellious religion and nation."⁵ To this dramatic statement, he adds:

Compare the evidences of Divine visitation which befell the persecutors of Jesus Christ with these historic retributions which, in the latter part of the first century of the Bahá'í Era, have hurled to dust the chief adversary of the religion of Bahá'u'lláh. Had not the Roman Emperor, in the second half of the first century of the Christian Era, after a distressful siege of Jerusalem, laid waste the Holy City, destroyed the Temple, desecrated and robbed the Holy of Holies of its treasures, and transported them to Rome, reared a pagan colony on the mount of Zion, massacred the Jews, and exiled and dispersed the survivors?⁶

4. *Prophecies* 36, n. 38; quoted from *Lights of Guidance*, comp. Helen Hornby, 2d ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 499.

5. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 175-76.

6. *The World Order* 176.

Shoghi Effendi then quotes the words of Jesus predicting the destruction of Jerusalem because the Jewish inhabitants "knewest not the time of thy visitation" (i.e., failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah) (176).

This is not an isolated attack on the Jews, but rather a religious (theistic) way of viewing historic events characteristic of past sacred scriptures and Shoghi Effendi's writings. In 1941, in the early stages of World War II, Shoghi Effendi refers to contemporary events as a "judgment of God," both a "retributory calamity and an act of holy and supreme discipline."⁷ This interpretation of historic events does not mean that people should die and suffer because they rejected, or if they reject, Bahá'u'lláh; neither does it exonerate the Nazis as instruments of God's wrath. It merely and rightly points out the connections between the world's rejection of God and consequent suffering around the planet. It does not mean that everyone who suffered deserved to suffer or suffered a chastisement in accordance with a specific failing. It does not pretend to imply that even Bahá'ís could escape the consequences of this "wind of God."⁸ Although a religious person can view tragic events as the "judgment of God," it also does not preclude that he or she should "ardently pray for the mitigation of its severity" and "intelligently labor to assuage its fury. . . ."⁹

It is likewise possible to argue that America today has turned away from God and consequently, is suffering from epidemic crime, drug abuse, divorce, etc. This point of view obviously does not mean that every American is godless or that Americans as a specific people deserve to suffer, nor does it exonerate drug dealers and murderers as instruments of God's wrath. It is not an anti-American interpretation of events, nor would such an interpretation preclude drawing similarities with other nations.

The Prophecies of Jesus was written primarily for a Christian audience, people who are familiar with the concept of redemptive history and who commonly attribute events even in their own lives to divine influences. Nevertheless, one would have hoped the reviewer understood the theistic basis for this type of exegesis and identified its scriptural antecedents. There are frequent examples of such exegesis in the Bible, the Qur'án, and the works of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. If a Bahá'í rejects this traditional theistic understanding of history, how can she or he reconcile it with her or his recognition of Bahá'í scripture—scripture that is characterized by such interpretations? Bahá'u'lláh writes:

How many Manifestations of Holiness, how many Revealers of the light everlasting, have appeared since the time of Moses, and yet Israel, wrapt in the densest veils of satanic fancy and false imaginings, is still expecting that the idol of her own

7. *The Promised Day is Come*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 4.

8. *Promised Day* 3.

9. *Promised Day* 4.

handiwork will appear with such signs as she herself hath conceived! Thus hath God laid hold of them for their sins, hath extinguished in them the spirit of faith, and tormented them with the flames of the nethermost fire.¹⁰

This is very strong language, not unlike the language of Jewish prophets found in the Hebrew scriptures; yet, it would be very unjust if these words were taken out of context and misinterpreted as "anti-Judaic."¹¹ The point is not that the Jews literally deserve to suffer some form of fiery punishment or that God reserves such a fate for Jews alone or for all Jews. The point is rather that people do suffer as a result of the choices they and *others* make, and Bahá'u'lláh has expressed this in a theocentric way in order to achieve the moral and spiritual advancement of humanity. It is entirely consistent with the way the biblical scriptures are written.

The basis of such interpretations of history is spiritual instruction: to dissuade people from making the kinds of choices that lead to suffering for themselves and *others*, for both the guilty and the innocent. In such exegesis all things are governed according to God's redemptive plan, including suffering that is far beyond the severity of any penalty prescribed in scripture for a given crime or sin. From the perspective of this type of mystical awareness, God is both the "Salvation of the worlds" and the "Destroyer of the worlds."¹² Many scholars and contemporary thinkers reject the idea of redemptive history and view such interpretations of history with disdain.

10. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* [The Book of Certitude], trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950) 18.

11. It may also be worth noting that in 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have urged a congregation of Jews to accept Christ. This exhortation disturbed them and the rabbi. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, however, later reiterated his point stating, "When you [the Jewish people] glorify and honor the memory of Christ, rest assured that the Christians will take your hands in real fellowship. All difficulty, hesitancy and restraint will vanish. Consider the troubles and persecutions heaped upon you in Russia for your fanaticism of unbelief. And you must not think that this is ended. This humiliation will continue forever. The time may come when in Europe itself they will arise against the Jews. But your declaration that Christ was the Word of God will end all such trouble. . . . Is it not thoughtless, ignorant prejudice which restrains you from doing so? Declare that, verily, the Word of God was realized in Him, and all will be right" (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982] 414). Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged tolerance towards Jews and the abandonment of historic prejudices, yet they also maintained the belief that the Jewish people should accept the other Manifestations of God, such as Christ. Today, in some ecumenical circles it is regarded as politically incorrect to believe that Jews or any other religious community should give up many of their traditional practices and accept another religion.

12. The Fire Tablet in *Bahá'í Prayers*, 3d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) 215.

It is perhaps this discomfort with the concept of redemptive history that also leads Buck to try to eliminate rejection of Jesus as a causal factor in Jewish suffering. The review selectively quotes 'Abdu'l-Bahá in order to attribute such suffering instead to "corrupt leadership," thereby suggesting that the two issues can be separated. Moreover, this position implies that Jews need not have accepted Jesus (then or today) and that there is no divine retribution for rejecting God's messengers. If true, then surely it can also be argued that there is no causal connection between the world's rejection of Bahá'u'lláh and the suffering now afflicting humanity. In this way, the review suggests that the argumentation in *The Prophecies of Jesus* is both flawed and inconsistent with Bahá'í teachings. On the one hand, the reviewer seems uncertain as to whether or not the argument is Bahá'í or Christian. On the other hand, he believes it is inconsistent with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings; the review makes the point that 'Abdu'l-Bahá attributes Jewish suffering to corrupt leadership. The rejection of Jesus, the claims and leadership of Bar Cochba, and the militarism are all related to the issue of leadership at that time. There is no reason to believe that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's references to corrupt leadership were intended to reduce events to mere social forces and to separate God's judgment from the historical processes that followed from such corrupt leadership. For many religious people, to argue that God has no role in human destiny is to argue that there is no judgment of God, no divine punishment, no justice hereafter, and no redemption.

The review overlooks the overall purpose and structure of the book and seems to deride the various sections of the book dealing with "False Christs," "Catastrophes," etc., stating that *The Prophecies of Jesus* represents Jesus as a "prophet of doom for his own religion" (82). However, the outline of the commentary is, as might be expected, governed by the structure of Jesus' discourse, which, as it happens, tends to stress catastrophic events and apocalyptic imagery. If the book had instead constructed a "social agenda" as the reviewer deems more beneficial, then it would not have been a verse-by-verse commentary on chapter 24 of Matthew's Gospel, but rather, something else that has already been done many times by other more qualified Bahá'í authors. *The Prophecies of Jesus* is an attempt to view the most important prophetic sermon of Jesus in its entirety. It provides an opportunity to view biblical prophecy in context with Bahá'í sacred writings and with the aid of secondary commentary. Perhaps most important, the book documents and demonstrates that almost all the different aspects of Bahá'í interpretation related to Jesus' prophecies have been accepted and voiced by prominent conservative Christian authors and scholars at various times before or after the birth of the Bahá'í Revelation.

Today, the academic world of religious studies is often characterized by extreme, partisan views. It is no secret that scholars tend to stigmatize one another's work as secular or fundamentalist depending on the point of view

from which they themselves write. *The Prophecies of Jesus* tries to set aside these partisan views. Much of the research that went into the book took into consideration the writings and views of Christian scholars who are not respected or regarded as credible by secular academics today. Since the book was written mainly with mainstream Christian readers in mind, this approach seemed appropriate. In his critique, the reviewer shows a positive desire to build bridges with Christians, but it would be even more commendable if he extended this desire to include all types of Christians.¹³ When the reviewer claims *The Prophecies of Jesus* has “no attraction for the Christian reader” (86), it appears that he has a certain type of Christian in mind, Christians altogether different from the broad audience of mainstream Christians for which the book was intended.

The Prophecies of Jesus was written for the millions of Christians who still believe in the Bible as a source of inspired revelation and who rely upon it for spiritual guidance. The contents of the book were documented and researched extensively, keeping in mind that there are Christians well versed in textual studies, philology, archeology, etc., even among the evangelical community, and that the book should be able to withstand their scrutiny. Bahá'ís should, of course, write books that build bridges with Christians from all schools of thought, traditional and otherwise, sectarian and ecumenical. There is, no doubt, room for different approaches. Each audience has its own requirements, and the attempt to write for any audience should not eliminate the need for careful study and research. Critical biblical studies—for example, scholarly literature disputing the authenticity of the Olivet Discourse, the Book of Daniel, biblical prophecy, the divinity of Jesus, etc.—were not examined in *The Prophecies of Jesus* since such views have not been embraced by the intended audience. Such arguments and theories can also lead to confusing complications, since they contradict many statements that appear in Bahá'í scripture. Critical biblical studies are, however, of great importance to Bahá'í Studies and need exploration by Bahá'í researchers.

The review raises a number of important questions about Bahá'í scholarship and its relationship to apologetics. The overall objections seem to be prompted by a concern to reserve the term “scholarship” for those whose views would be regarded as more politically correct in the world of academia. When Bahá'í publishers describe books as “scholarly” in their marketing literature, this may

13. Stereotyping certain Christians as “fundamentalist” and then rejecting their research and views seem inconsistent with Bahá'í teachings. Such labeling dehumanizes people and erects barriers to constructive dialogue and learning. With this in mind, it is regrettable to resort to characterizations of certain Christians as fundamentalist and therefore a “retardant” in God's plan. No one group of Christians agrees with all Bahá'í teachings. It is important to seek out the areas of agreement that may exist with every group of people, including conservative Christians.

bring the book to the attention of the academic community, and the book may then influence how scholars and leaders of thought regard Bahá'í scholars. This concern is understandable since Bahá'ís who are professional academics are, in fact, working hard to reach other scholars and leaders of thought. Unfortunately, gaining the respect of such people involves not only scholarly methodology but also a careful diplomatic presentation of the Bahá'í teachings. Many Bahá'í teachings are not shared or viewed positively among academics. The presentation of the Bahá'í Faith to such persons must therefore be tailored and fashioned into what could be regarded as a certain type of apologetic presentation. And this is precisely the real issue. The reviewer believes that, in an academic context, *The Prophecies of Jesus* contains topics and views that add up to an undiplomatic presentation of the Bahá'í Faith. To help prevent such books from coming to the attention of academics and leaders of thought, it is important not to characterize such books as "scholarly"—this is the reviewer's message to those involved in marketing Bahá'í books.

Admittedly, *The Prophecies of Jesus* was not intended for the readership the reviewer has in mind, and it is not essential to characterize books like it as scholarly, regardless of the methodology used or research involved. Nevertheless, the reviewer's objections and concerns suggest that the term "scholarship" should be reserved for the work of those whose primary aim is to reach academics and leaders of thought. This ideological definition of "scholarship" deserves some thought. It may be that as the Association for Bahá'í Studies evolves, the time will come when it can best serve the interests of the Bahá'í community by becoming an association for those who are professional academics aspiring to interact with the academic world. Such a development would of course mean that the Association would not be purely about Bahá'í Studies but rather about studies that best interact with academia. This would help safeguard the concerns of the reviewer, but it would mean that other researchers—those who are not professional academics, whose livelihood is not linked directly to their work, and who are not restrained by any particular ideological school of thought—would need some other outlet for the exchange of the research and studies that they do.

MICHAEL W. SOURS

BOOK REVIEWER'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON REVIEW OF *THE PROPHECIES OF JESUS*

Commentator: Michael W. Sours

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My review of *The Prophecies of Jesus* was an analytical review, such as one would find in *Religious Studies Review*. The generous language I used to praise the text for its strengths has been overshadowed by my criticisms, which, evidently, require further explanation. The review was written from two vantages: (1) from an academic perspective, pressing a distinction between apology and scholarship, and (2) as a prospective interfaith encounter (indicated by the series title, *Preparing for Bahá'í-Christian Dialogue*), I questioned the polemical argument that earlier religions had been "corrupted."¹

The several nuances of the term "scholar" in Bahá'í parlance, in my opinion, invite further clarification. Only recently has there been a formal differentiation of scholarship and apologetics in Bahá'í Studies: a "Special Supplement on Apologetics"² in the 1992 *Bahá'í Studies Review* suggests an acceptance of this distinction within Bahá'í Studies.

The distinction between scholarship and apology in a Bahá'í context had been raised over twenty years ago by a Cambridge scholar. Professor Ellwell-Sutton, reviewing a Bahá'í publication on his predecessor Edward Granville Browne, wrote: "Mr. Balyuzi's book is therefore apologetics, polemics, but not objective scholarship. And let it at once be added that it is none the worse for that."³ Note that the truth-value of the work is not impugned. Only the method is commented on. As a recent contribution to Bahá'í literature on prophecy-fulfillment, *The Prophecies of Jesus* is not uncharacteristic of the same genre, written from within other religious traditions. What scholars refer to as "end-time speculation" and "realized eschatology" serves a function for those who consume it. Commenting on a recent Harvard study on prophecy belief in modern American culture, reviewer David Steenburg of McMaster University states: "Primarily it [end-time speculation] serves to validate the faith of its

1. The book states that "Muhammad came to call people back to God at a time when the Faith of God had declined and been corrupted," (84) and that "the abomination of desolation represents the corruption of Islam" (87).

2. "Special Supplement on Apologetics," *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 2.1 (1992). This section features three articles, all of which concern the problem of opposition to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'í responses to such attacks are within the province of apologetics.

3. L.P. Ellwell-Sutton, review of *E.G. Browne and the Bahá'í Faith* by H.M. Balyuzi (Oxford: George Ronald, 1970) in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1972): 70.

proponents, who find in the 'correspondence' of Scripture and current events proof of a providential order and confirmation of their biblicism."⁴

While I do not wish to rehearse the pros and cons of the distinction between apologetics and scholarship as discrete categories, which constitutes a lively debate within Religious Studies (now being called the "Study of Religion"), arguing from within a Bahá'í framework does little to address professional considerations within the hall of the academy. Suffice it to say that, in my opinion, it is sometimes more "religious" to be non-religious in an academic setting. The more effective representation of the Bahá'í Faith in an academic context is perhaps the professional approach, in which religious sentiments are suspended in favor of a discourse that is intersubjectively available. The goal is not to "teach," but to inform. The same mandate is given to Bahá'í public information officers.

There is a critical need at present to address a curriculum problem in which the Bahá'í Faith is either totally excluded within Religious Studies or is, at best, subsumed within Islamic Studies, where it leads a tense and precarious existence. Those who teach Religious Studies professionally should, as with all other significant traditions, take a professional interest in Bahá'í Studies.

In efforts to better inform academics about the Bahá'í Faith, one caveat is in order: Professionals in the Ivory Tower will not be receptive to what they perceive as prophecy-fulfillment discourse from the Watchtower. While academic studies are a quest for demonstrable truth, truth that is intersubjectively available, truth that satisfies strict canons of verifiability and falsifiability, apologetics operates within a mission statement, a worldview. At its finest, it does serve to better inform, to rectify misunderstandings, and to defend against attacks in a religious context. Good apologetics can display a level of acumen that may justly be recognized as employing methods of critical analysis and *epoché* (value suspense) in pursuit of objectivity, but these are tools of the academic trade, so to speak, not the profession itself. Good apologetics may attain a level of sophistication that may be described as "academic" or "scholarly" in a broad sense, but it should never be classified as "academics" or as "scholarship" in the strict sense. However, in Bahá'í parlance, "Bahá'í scholarship" could be a euphemism for Bahá'í apologetics.

In regard to the use of the term "anti-Judaic": In the review of *The Prophecies of Jesus* I distanced my use of the term "anti-Judaic" from "anti-

4. D. Steenburg, review of *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* by Paul Boyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 22.3 (1993): 383.

Semitic." The former is polemically indexed; the latter is racist. In context, this is what I said: "This anti-Judaic (not anti-Semitic) line of argumentation is perhaps more Christian than Bahá'í." With its Abrahamic heritage, the Bahá'í Faith has inherited centuries-old patterns of discourse. In Islamic Studies and, more broadly, in the Study of Religion, use of the terms "anti-Judaic-," "anti-Christian-" and "anti-Islamic polemics" is commonplace.

In New Testament studies, for instance, there is consensus on the fact that the Gospels have an anti-Judaic agenda, and that Christian literature has played out a scenario that in effect blames the victims. For example, Helmut Koester of Harvard University states: "Among other changes of Mark's passion narrative, Matthew introduced the passage about Pilate's washing his hands in innocence (27:24-25), which has been called a fateful anti-Judaic polemic. This polemic, however, was not directed against 'the Jews' as such, but against the leaders of the people (see Matt. 27:20) and the people who are led astray by them. Thus, Matthew continues the traditional polemic against the leaders which began in the prophetic tradition of Israel and was developed particularly in the Jewish wisdom movement."⁵

In their Abrahamic legacy, Bahá'í texts echo some of this "anti-Judaic" polemic in order to illustrate themes of rejection and persecution. This arises out of biblical Judaism itself, from the prophetic critique one finds in the Minor Prophets—a critique of the sacrificial cult and an indictment of the persecution and murder of Prophets that resurfaces in Stephen's speech in Acts 7. (For this criticism Stephen was stoned, becoming the first known Christian martyr.) That Bahá'í texts carry forward this kind of polemic does not mean that the Bahá'í Faith is in any way anti-Judaic in orientation. Quite the reverse is true.

Whether in Matthew or in Bahá'í texts, I submit that references to "the Jews" is meant primarily Jewish leaders of antiquity, particularly those who were accomplices in the execution of Jesus *by the Romans*, and those Jewish leaders who instigated persecution of Christians, a persecution far more egregious under the Romans. This is why I raised the question—an appeal to absurdity: "Are the Babylonians and Romans exonerated as instruments of God's wrath?" Refuting the French philosopher Voltaire, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks: "Our purpose is to show how true religion promotes the civilization and honor, the prosperity and prestige, the learning and advancement of a people once abject, enslaved and ignorant, and how, when it falls into the hands of religious leaders who are foolish and fanatical, it is diverted to the wrong ends, until this greatest of splendors turns into blackest night."⁶ Note that it is not "the Jews" *en masse* referred to here, but rather certain Jewish leaders contemporary with Jesus who were culpable of complicity with the Roman state

5. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume Two: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982): 177.

6. *Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail with Ali-Kuli Khan, 3d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975): 80.

in the execution of an innocent man.

Again I will be "selective" in quoting Bahá'u'lláh, who writes: "Such deeds [persecution] and words [rejection] have been *solely* instigated by leaders of religion (*magar az ru'asá'-yi-nás dar dín*), they that worship no God but their own desire, who bear allegiance to naught but gold, who are wrapt in the densest veils of learning, and who, enmeshed by its obscurities, are lost in the wilds of error" (emphasis added).⁷ I have "selectively" quoted from the first two Bahá'í books ever to be officially published—the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and the *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih*. I have shown that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá alike have laid their critical axe at the root of historical Jewish rejectionism—actions taken by Jewish leaders at the time of Christ and during the first persecutions of Christians for which crimes any perpetrator would be culpable.

Of the two texts cited by Sours in his response, the unauthoritative text (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 414, with no Persian original) speaks of Judaism's perpetual abasement; whereas the authentic text vaticinates Israel's future (now present) glory. In the context of actual dialogue, there seems to be a far more important dialogue occurring between the Bahá'í Administration and the highest levels of state Judaism than can possibly be imagined at the present time between the Bahá'í Faith and Christendom. The author's defense of the principle of divine retribution visited on the Jews has not sufficiently taken into account the nuances of other Bahá'í texts relating to Judaism. Apart from whether or not this is "anti-Judaic" polemic in strict academic jargon, it can surely cause offense to Jews.

Treating Judaism as exclusively a pre-Christian religion is a classic historical entrapment of the apologetic approach. Equating ancient Israel (i.e., the Bible) with present-day Judaism and identifying Judaism's only legitimate definition as Biblical is not likely to impress academics, much less Jews themselves, who know better.⁸ The religion of modern Israel is, broadly speaking, rabbinic Judaism, a post-Christian religion in terms of its formation and historical development. There are several biblical forms of Judaism that correspond to different sources in the Torah (documents marked by different names for God). Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism are contemporary manifestations of rabbinic Judaism. Let us recognize that present-day forms of Judaism are not to be equated with biblical Judaism(s). If it is argued that Judaism has had to

7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. The Book of Certitude, tr. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970): 214 [Persian text: 166]. Sours cites a passage from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Sours, "Response" 4) in which all the Jews are criticized for their messianic beliefs. A little further on in the text, however, Bahá'u'lláh criticizes the people of all religions (*jamí'-i-umam* /Persian text: 15) for the same indifference.

8. My thanks to Professor Andrew Rippin of the University of Calgary for pointing out this problem to me.

atone for the death of Christ, a more compelling argument is that Christian Europe and America should atone for the Holocaust.

Historically, in Christian discourse, rejection of Jesus by first-century Jewish leaders has practically taken on the dimensions of a kind of "original sin" of Judaism. It could be argued that to blame subsequent generations of Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus is absolute injustice and complete predestination. Yet there is change in the Christian world with respect to the Jews, changes that Bahá'ís would do well to take note of. There is a discernible "spirit of the age" behind ecumenical reform and doctrinal adjustment. The new catechism of Catholicism indoctrinates equality of men and women, and recognizes the role of other religions in God's plan of salvation. The Catholic Church has renounced its treatment of Jews in the past. Is this the same Catholicism of a century ago?

In point of historical fact, Jews were among the first to recognize Christ, and among the first to "recognize" the legitimacy of the Bahá'í Faith. Just as some Jews rejected Christ, the first to accept Christ were also Jews. In the study of Christian origins, one discovers that the phenomenon of Jewish Christianity was the dominant influence in the first several decades of the early Church. Even the statement, "the Jews had rejected Christ" (83) is offensive to present-day Jews, who historically had nothing to do with rejecting Christ. Some Jews actively rejected Christ. Other Jews accepted Christ, and were the first to do so. Given the history of *Christian* persecution of Jews, it is understandable why more Jews did not convert. Because Christian societies throughout history have rejected and despised Jews, it should come as no surprise that embracing Christianity has not been a viable option for Jews.

Returning to polemic, I submit that in Bahá'í texts, "the Jews" refers primarily to reactionary, anti-Christian Jewish leaders. These Jews are not the same as present-day Jews, nor is biblical Judaism(s) the same religion as contemporary Judaism. Have the Jews "rejected" Bahá'u'lláh? Is this not an invidious question, an all-or-nothing proposition? Yet there has been partial recognition. In the Knesset's according special status to the Universal House of Justice, the State of Israel has somehow "recognized" the Bahá'í Faith, in the form of a special, legislative recognition.

Judaism has, in a special way, extended its recognition to the Bahá'í Faith. What reciprocal recognition should be forthcoming from Bahá'ís in the context of dialogue? Biblical Judaism apart, what should characterize Bahá'í discourse as it relates to post-Christian, present-day Judaism? The Bahá'í concept of the Major Plan of God necessarily recognizes the instrumentality of all of the religions of the world in global transformation. "Progressive Revelation" might imply that not just one religion progresses from age to age, but all religions, to varying degrees. What is the role of Judaism in the world now, according to Bahá'í worldview? I think that Judaism (and, in principle, Christianity and Islam as well) is necessarily adumbrated in the following statement by the

Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi:

Fundamental Principle of Religious Truth

The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.⁹

Applying this style of discourse to Judaism itself, the Bahá'í position becomes quite clear: Judaism is divine in origin, identical in its aims, complementary in its functions, continuous in its purpose, and indispensable in its value to humankind. The same Bahá'í recognition may be extended to Christianity and to Islam as well. To oversimplify: scholarship is science; apology is religion; dialogue is diplomacy. In presenting, in positive Christian terms, the Bahá'í ethos of "fulfillment," Bahá'í apologists might wish to consider moving beyond a disease-model approach (i.e., "corruption") to a more wholistic, developmental model of religion in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are shown to be experiencing renewal in the throes of decline.

CHRISTOPHER BUCK

9. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, rev.ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 57-58.