

After Shoghi Effendi: Guardianship, Lineage, and the Limits of Claim

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to test, by the canons of Bahá'í scripture and the historically recognized practice of the community, the validity of the claims advanced by those who style themselves “Orthodox Bahá'ís,” originating with the assertions of Mason Remey. Our aim is neither partisan invective nor sociological reportage, but a careful theological-legal analysis of the Bahá'í Covenant as it pertains to the institution of the Guardianship. We proceed on the conviction that questions of authority in the Bahá'í Faith are adjudicated by authoritative texts and their proper application, and that unity is safeguarded not by charisma or private interpretation but by fidelity to the constitutional order established in the writings. Accordingly, the argument that follows is intentionally narrow in scope and precise in method: it will confine itself to what the texts authorize, what Bahá'í institutions are empowered to do, and what historical facts are relevant to those textual criteria.

The article unfolds in six movements that correspond to the questions most often confused in Remeyite discourse. First, we clarify how a Guardian of the Faith is chosen, deriving the necessary and sufficient conditions from the relevant foundational texts. Second, we state the functions and duties of the Guardian, showing why these duties presuppose a definite, public, and textually grounded mode of designation. Third, we treat two recurrent confusions: the necessity of explicit appointment by a living Guardian and the relationship between such appointment and the notion of lineage; in the same movement we delineate the role of the Hands of the Cause as supportive and protective, never substitutive. Fourth, we examine whether Mason Remey could, in principle or in fact, have met the requirements sometimes implied by appeals to the term *ghusn* (“branch”), and we explain why office-holding or proximity to authority cannot be transmuted into appointment. Fifth, we offer a brief philological and doctrinal note on the meaning and use of *ghusn* and *Aghsán*, so that appeals to lineage are assessed on their own textual terms rather than by analogy or sentiment. Sixth, we present a concise historical account from the passing of the Guardian in 1957 through the relevant events that followed, not to substitute history for theology but to test contested claims against the already established constitutional criteria.

Methodologically, the paper will proceed by explication of texts, careful attention to institutional competencies, and verification of historical particulars; all quotations will be provided verbatim, and we will distinguish what the texts require from what they merely describe or permit. The guiding question throughout is simple: What must be true, according to authoritative Bahá'í sources, for a person to be Guardian of the Faith? By the end of the study, the reader will see that the Remeyite narrative fails precisely at the points where the Covenant specifies necessity—

designation, qualification, recognition within the constitutional order—and that the integrity of Bahá’í unity rests on those same specifications.

1) How the Guardian of the Faith is chosen

The logic of the Bahá’í Covenant is constitutional rather than charismatic: authority after the “ebbing” of the Manifestation’s physical presence flows by revealed text and by the institutions constituted in that text. Three passages of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* articulate this grammar of succession—who is to be turned to after the Revelation’s completion, how interpretive authority is to be recognized, and how (in a specific legal domain) authority is delegated when a designated person or institution is absent.

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 -- that they may use these endowments for the benefit of the Places which have been exalted in this Cause, and for whatsoever hath been enjoined upon them by Him Who is the God of might and power. Otherwise, the endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá who speak not except by His leave and judge not save in accordance with what God hath decreed in this Tablet -- lo, they are the champions of victory betwixt heaven and earth -- that they may use them in the manner that hath been laid down in the Book by God, the Mighty, the Bountiful. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 42)

This verse legislates charitable endowments; it does not purport to regulate every domain. Yet its legal structure exemplifies a principled chain of custody—first the Aghsán, then (upon their cessation) the House of Justice if established, and, failing that, qualified representatives among “the people of Bahá.” The theological import is clear: rightful administration follows explicit text and defined order, not private charisma or self-assertion (*Aqdas* 42).

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, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 121)

This directive resolves the crisis of legitimacy that follows the Manifestation’s “ebbing”: the community must orient itself toward a specifically designated figure (“Him Whom God hath purposed”), “branched” from the “Ancient Root,” thereby grounding post-revelatory authority in divine designation rather than in diffuse opinion (*Aqdas* 121).

O people of the world! When the Mystic Dove will have winged its flight from its Sanctuary of Praise and sought its far-off goal, its hidden habitation, refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 174)

Here interpretive recourse is mandated: after the Manifestation's ascension, matters "not understood" in the Book are to be referred to "Him Who hath branched," i.e., the person expressly designated to preserve interpretive unity and guard meaning (Aqdas 174).

The *Kitáb-i-‘Ahd* (Book of the Covenant) fixes this designative logic by naming the "Most Great Branch," ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as the Center of the Covenant, thereby operationalizing verses 121 and 174 of the *Aqdas*: the "Branch" to whom the community must turn is specified by *naṣṣ* (explicit designation) in Bahá'u'lláh's own Testament (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-‘Ahd*). In doctrinal terms, this grounds post-revelatory guidance in a single, identified locus of authority—preventing interpretive anarchy and institutional drift.

The *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* then enacts this logic by designating the first Guardian by name, defining his interpretive prerogative, and coupling his office with the future Universal House of Justice. "O my loving friends! After the passing away of this wronged one, it is incumbent upon the Aghṣán (Branches), the Afnán (Twigs) of the Sacred Lote-Tree, the Hands (pillars) of the Cause of God and the loved ones of the Abhá Beauty to turn unto Shoghi Effendi... as he is the sign of God, the chosen branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God... **He is the Interpreter of the Word of God...**" (*Will and Testament*, pt. I). The Testament situates the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice under divine protection and binds obedience with extraordinary force—"Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God..."—and concludes: "**The mighty stronghold shall remain impregnable and safe through obedience to him who is the Guardian of the Cause of God**" (*Will and Testament*, pt. I).

On the method by which any Guardian is to be chosen, the Testament states the rule positively and exclusively. The decisive standard is **explicit appointment by the living Guardian**: "**It is incumbent upon the Guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing.** He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. **Thus, should the first-born of the Guardian of the Cause of God not manifest [these qualities] then must he ... choose another branch to succeed him**" (*Will and Testament*, pt. II). A procedural safeguard then binds the Hands of the Cause to **assent**—not to **elect**—the one whom the Guardian has chosen: "**The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons** that shall at all times be occupied in the important services in the work of the Guardian of the Cause of God... and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, **must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the Guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor. This assent must be given... [by] secret ballot**" (*Will and Testament*, pt. II). The nature of this assent is clarified by the source of the Hands' own authority: "**The Hands of the Cause of God must be nominated and appointed by the Guardian of the Cause of God. All must be under his shadow and obey his command**" (*Will and Testament*, pt. II).

Four doctrinal consequences follow. First, **authoritative interpretation** of scripture resides in the Guardian—“the Interpreter of the Word of God”—and not in councils of scholars or private readings (*Will and Testament*, pt. I). Second, **designation (*naṣṣ*) by the living Guardian** is the decisive criterion for succession; neither popular acclamation nor post-facto inference can substitute for explicit appointment (*Will and Testament*, pt. II). Third, **confirmatory assent** by the nine Hands functions as a juridical safeguard—certifying the Guardian’s **choice**—not as an alternative power to select a Guardian themselves (*Will and Testament*, pt. II). Fourth, a **lineal orientation** is presupposed (“after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendants”), yet primogeniture is expressly subordinated to spiritual and moral qualifications—a clause that simultaneously honors descent and prevents its absolutization (*Will and Testament*, pt. I–II).

Shoghi Effendi’s constitutional exposition locates this rule of succession within the “twin pillars” of the Order—authoritative interpretation (the Guardianship) and legislation (the Universal House of Justice). The Guardianship “does not under any circumstances abrogate, or even in the slightest degree detract from, the powers granted to the Universal House of Justice,” but rather “enhances” its prestige, “safeguards” its unity, and “assures the continuity of its labors” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*). Guidance in this dispensation is “vouchsafed... through institutions... namely the Guardianship... and... the International House of Justice”; individuals “are not in a position to interpret the Teachings” with binding force (letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi; Universal House of Justice citing). The writings further **envisage** the possibility of an interruption in the line of Guardians without implying any defect in the Covenant; later digest material notes that “there are clear indications that the line could be broken,” while the indestructibility of the Covenant is repeatedly affirmed (Universal House of Justice, summarizing the writings).

Taken together, the *Aqdas* injunctions to “turn” to and “refer” matters to the “Branch,” Bahá’u’lláh’s explicit centering of the “Most Great Branch” in the *Kitáb-i-‘Ahd*, and the *Will and Testament*’s institution of the Guardianship and its succession protocol yield necessary and sufficient conditions for the choice of a Guardian: **(1) explicit designation by the incumbent Guardian during his lifetime; (2) manifest spiritual and intellectual qualifications as stipulated; and (3) the secret assent of nine Hands of the Cause elected from among all the Hands** (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 121, 174; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I–II). Within this covenantal logic, legitimacy in the Bahá’í order is created by textually grounded designation and institutional form—not by office-holding, proximity, sentiment, or private construction.

Duties of the Guardian of the Faith

In the Bahá’í Covenant the Guardianship is charged with a cluster of theological and administrative functions whose scope and force are defined by authoritative texts. First and foremost, the Guardian is named the “Interpreter of the Word of God.” This exclusive, authoritative function is conferred in the *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* when Shoghi

Effendi is designated “the sign of God, the chosen branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God ... He is the Interpreter of the Word of God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). This interpretive prerogative is not shared with any other individual or body; as Shoghi Effendi clarified, “There are no other Interpreters whatsoever and no individual may interpret. This is strictly forbidden” (Letter on behalf of the Guardian, 4 June 1957). Through this function the Guardian safeguards the text’s meaning across contexts and epochs, delimiting the sphere of legislation and ensuring that all derivations remain anchored to Revelation.

Protection of the Cause, unity of the community, and obedience to the appointed Center form a second axis of duty. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá binds the security of the “mighty stronghold” of the Faith to obedience to the Guardian, commanding “the members of the House of Justice, ... all the Aghsán, the Afnán, [and] the Hands of the Cause of God” to show “obedience, submissiveness and subordination unto the Guardian of the Cause of God,” warning that opposition “will make a breach in the Cause of God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). This protective charge is not merely hortatory. The Hands of the Cause are put “under the direction of the Guardian,” are commanded to be “ever watchful,” and, when faced with incipient rebellion against him, to “cast [the offender] out from the congregation of the people of Bahá” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). In this way, the Guardian’s protective duty is exercised both directly—by interpretive and disciplinary acts—and indirectly—through the auxiliary institution of the Hands acting under his direction.

A third axis concerns the Guardian’s constitutional relationship to the Universal House of Justice. The same Testament that restricts legislation to matters “not to be found in the explicit Holy Text” (*Will and Testament*, pt. I) simultaneously designates “the Guardian of the Cause of God” as “its sacred head and the distinguished member for life,” stipulating that if he cannot attend “in person” he “must appoint one to represent him” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). The same paragraph entrusts to the Guardian the right “at his own discretion” to expel any member of that body who “commit a sin, injurious to the common weal,” whereupon a new member is to be elected (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). These provisions identify the Guardian as the permanent presiding head of the House (by presence or appointed representative), and as the custodian of its moral integrity. They simultaneously preserve the House’s sphere—enacting what the Text does not explicitly legislate—while ensuring, through the Guardian’s interpretive authority, that all enactments remain conformable to Revelation.

A fourth set of duties concerns stewardship over certain sacred trusts. The *Will and Testament* directs that the fixed money offering (Huqúqu’lláh) “is to be offered through the Guardian of the Cause of God,” to be expended “for the diffusion of the Fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Word, for benevolent pursuits and for the common weal” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). This channeling of a divinely ordained trust through the Guardian underscores his fiduciary duty vis-à-vis the sources that sustain teaching, benevolence, and the outward work of the Cause.

The Guardian’s duties also embrace direct oversight of, and collaboration with, elected institutions. The Hands of the Cause—nominated and appointed by the Guardian, “under [his] direction”—are charged “to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, [and] to improve the character of all men,” and the Guardian must “continually urge

them to strive and endeavor” to discharge these aims (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). In parallel, the Universal House of Justice, elected by the believers, is the legislative organ “unto [which] all things must be referred” in matters beyond the explicit Text; by constitutional design the Guardian’s headship and interpretive office guarantee an organic unity between exegesis and legislation.

From these duties one may see why valid appointment and universal recognition are not ancillary but intrinsic to the Guardianship. The Guardian’s interpretive authority presupposes public certainty as to the identity of the Interpreter named in the Testament; the protective and disciplinary powers presuppose community assent to his headship; the constitutional prerogatives in relation to the House of Justice presuppose a single, universally recognized person capable of presiding—or appointing a representative—and, if necessary, exercising expulsion for grave moral breach. The Testament itself therefore ordains a transparent, testable procedure: the Guardian “must” appoint his successor “in his own life-time,” and a body of nine Hands—elected by and from all the Hands—“must give their assent” to that choice by secret ballot (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). In other words, the very *exercise* of the Guardian’s duties requires that his station be conferred and recognized according to the explicit terms of the Covenant—a recognition ritually and institutionally secured by the Hands’ assent and by the community’s universal turning.

Finally, because the Guardianship and the House of Justice are declared, together, to be “under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One,” “whatsoever they decide is of God” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, pt. I). The Guardian’s functions—authoritative interpretation, protection of the Faith’s unity, presiding headship of the House of Justice, moral discipline within its ranks, direction of the Hands, and fiduciary stewardship—thus delineate an office at once doctrinal and constitutional, whose legitimacy is inseparable from clear appointment in life and from the community’s universal recognition through the means ordained in the Text.

The Meaning of Ghusn and Aghsán

In Bahá’í usage the Arabic *ghusn* (“branch”) and its plural *aghsán* (“branches”) are technical, lineal designations, distinct from the broader botanical metaphors applied to all believers. The texts consistently use *Aghsán* for the male descendants of Bahá’u’lláh and *Afnán* (“twigs”) for the kindred of the Báb; the *Will and Testament* addresses them together—“the *Aghsán* (Branches), the *Afnán* (Twigs) of the Sacred Lote-Tree”—precisely to bind both lineages, along with the Hands and the believers, to the Guardian’s authority and the constitutional order. In this juridical–theological register, *Ghusn/Aghsán* functions as a title of station within Bahá’u’lláh’s household, not as a generic honorific.

Within that lineal horizon the Covenant assigns specific ranks and names. The *Kitáb-i-‘Ahd* makes explicit that “the object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch [‘Abdu’l-Bahá],” and further decrees: “Verily God hath ordained the station of the Greater Branch [Muḥammad-‘Alí] to be beneath that of the Most Great Branch [‘Abdu’l-Bahá].” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-‘Ahd*.) These titles situate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the designated center among

the Aghsán and fix Muḥammad-‘Alí’s subordinate rank. In the same family of titles, Mírzá Mihdí—the amanuensis and youthful companion of Bahá’u’lláh in exile—is remembered as the Purest Branch, his passing at twenty-two mourned in the writings; noting this completes the picture of how “Branch” epithets precisely mark stations within Bahá’u’lláh’s lineage.

This technical meaning is reinforced by usage in the Tablets. In the Lawḥ-i-Ibn-i-Dhi’b (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf), Bahá’u’lláh speaks of “Thy Branches (sons),” showing the term’s ordinary reference to His male offspring; in the Súriy-i-Ghusn and related “Tablet of the Branch” passages, He extols the Greatest Branch with exalted predicates—“Branch of Holiness,” “Limb of the Law of God,” “Trust of God”—and signals the command that “whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God,” thereby anchoring the covenantal sense of ghusn in designation and obedience.

A third, needed distinction separates these technical titles from the inclusive botanical imagery that democratizes dignity across the whole community. Scripture repeatedly describes the believers as the “leaves” and the “fruit” of one Tree—“Of one tree are all ye the fruit and of one bough the leaves...”—a metaphor of unity and moral vocation, not a charter of hereditary office (Bahá’u’lláh, qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *The Goal of a New World Order*). The Will and Testament itself presupposes this boundary when it commands the Aghsán—as a lineal class—together with the Afnán, the Hands, and the believers, to “show their obedience, submissiveness and subordination unto the Guardian of the Cause of God,” which would be unintelligible if “branch” here merely meant “any believer” or “any virtue.”

This is why moral allegory must not be conscripted to manufacture claims of covenantal station. A didactic passage preserved in Má’idiḥ-yi Āsmānī reads: “Regard faith as a tree. Its fruits, leaves, branches, and twigs have been and are trustworthiness, truthfulness, integrity, and patience.” Treating these “branches” (virtues) as if they conferred Ghusn status would commit a category mistake. Pressed to its logical end, the confusion yields a reductio: shall we now enthrone Mr. Trustworthiness, Mr. Truthfulness, Mr. Integrity, or Mr. Patience as Guardian? Metaphor cannot overrule explicit text; juridical titles (Ghusn/Aghsán, Afnán) remain tied to lineage and to the covenantal designations that the Central Figures made—and the Will and Testament constitutionalized—within the Bahá’í Order.

[Could Mason Remey have been a *ghusn* \(“branch”\)—and thus a Guardian?](#)

No. Read against the Covenant’s own grammar—and in light of the historical record already treated in §1 (“How the Guardian is chosen”), §2 (“Duties of the Guardian”), and §3 (“The Meaning of *Ghusn* and *Aghsán*”)—Remey’s pretension fails at every hinge-point of legitimacy.

First, *ghusn*/*Aghsán* are technical, lineal titles fixed by the texts, not transferable honorifics. Bahá’u’lláh explicitly addresses His “Branches” as His sons and ranks the “Most Mighty Branch” and the “Greater Branch,” thereby defining *Aghsán* as His male descendants and identifying the referents (‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Muḥammad-‘Alí) within His Household. This lineal

meaning—not fraternal courtesy—grounds the Covenant’s structure. (See §3; cf. *Kitáb-i-‘Ahd* and related passages summarized earlier.) That structure is then presupposed by the *Will and Testament*, which binds “the Aghsán, the Afnán, the Hands of the Cause of God” and the members of the House of Justice to show “obedience, submissiveness and subordination unto the Guardian of the Cause of God,” and warns that “he that opposeth him hath opposed the True One.”

Second, the only valid pathway to Guardianship is the one the *Will and Testament* stipulates: the sitting Guardian must “appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor”; if the first-born does not possess the requisite spiritual and moral qualities, “then must he ... choose another branch to succeed him”; and the nine Hands of the Cause, elected from among all the Hands, “must give their assent” to that choice by secret ballot. These safeguards are cumulative; prestige, proximity, or later inferences cannot substitute for *nass* plus the Hands’ assent (see §1).

Third, office-holding is not ontology. Remey’s sole institutional plank—the presidency of the (appointed) International Bahá’í Council—was never equated by the texts with either lineal *Aghsán* status or with the hereditary office of Guardian. The Guardian himself distinguished the permanent, elected Universal House of Justice (whose prerogatives he vigorously upheld) from provisional administrative measures that served as forerunners to it; nothing in the sources turns an appointed presidency into a hereditary headship (§2). Cf. Shoghi Effendi’s clarification that the Guardianship “does not ... detract from” the powers of the House of Justice but “stabilizes its supreme position” and safeguards its unity—language that presumes two distinct institutions with distinct titles and foundations.

Fourth, the Guardian’s prerogative to “interpret the Word of God” is a juridical function that presupposes valid appointment and communal recognition; it is not a private scholarly claim (see §2). The *Will and Testament* makes that interpretive authority unique to the Guardian, links obedience to him with the very impregnability of the Faith’s “mighty stronghold,” and places the Hands under his direction for protection and propagation. To claim that mandate without the Covenant’s textual pathway is to hollow out the very office one claims.

Fifth, even on the “impossible hypothesis” that a non-Aghsán could somehow be designated, the Testamentary procedure is still fatal to Remey’s case: no appointment “in [the Guardian’s] own life-time,” and no assent of the nine resident Hands by secret ballot, means no Guardian (§6 will document the Hands’ search, findings, and collective certification that Shoghi Effendi left no will and no heir). The text is unequivocal on both steps.

Sixth, the reductio of the Remeyite position exposes its incoherence: to suggest that, among twenty-seven Hands, twenty-six misapprehended the Covenant’s most crucial requirement while the one Hand who happened to be IBC president alone “saw truly,” is effectively to impugn the Guardian’s judgement in appointing those very Chief Stewards. The Testament assigns to the Hands the vigilance to “cast out” anyone who begins to oppose the Guardian; Shoghi Effendi placed them under his direction precisely to protect unity (§2 and §6).

Seventh, rhetorical appeals to age, charisma, or personal closeness are simply irrelevant beside the Covenant’s safeguards. The Testament knows nothing of “seniority succession”; it knows

nass and the nine Hands' assent. Where those are absent, claims collapse—regardless of an individual's years of service or proximity to the Guardian (see §1–§2).

Finally, a word about metaphor and title, since Remeyite argument often blurs them. As §3 established, botanical imagery (“tree,” “leaves,” “branches,” “twigs”) democratizes spiritual dignity, but juridical titles (*Aghsán*, *Afnán*) are technical and lineal. To treat any occurrence of “branch/twig” language as conferring *Aghsán* status is the same category mistake that would enthrone “Mr. Trustworthiness” or “Ms. Truthfulness” as Guardian because virtues are poetically called the tree's “branches and twigs.” The *Will and Testament* itself presupposes this distinction when it binds the *Aghsán*—together with the whole community—to the Guardian's authority.

Conclusion. Remey was not an *Aghsán*; he was never designated by Shoghi Effendi “in his own life-time”; and there was no assent of the nine resident Hands by secret ballot. The presidency of an appointed, provisional council cannot conjure a *nass* that never was. On the Covenant's own terms, therefore, Remey could be neither *ghusn* nor Guardian.

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