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Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. By Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai. I. B. Tauris, 2025. xx + 473 pages. \$157.50 hardcover; \$126.00 ebook.

The Bahá'í Faith has two founders: the Báb (1819–1850) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), distinctively characterized as the “twin Founders” by Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), “Guardian” of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957. This plural concept of “the founders” is important to consider in the context of this review. In academic Bábí and Bahá'í studies, the publication of *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith*—the ebook edition of which was released by Bloomsbury on January 23, 2025—is a landmark publication event. This work represents the fullest scholarly study so far of the pre-eminent Bahá'í scripture, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, “the Most Holy Book.”

In the book's introduction, the co-authors—Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai—open by declaring that, “Bahá'u'lláh's self-proclaimed

objective was to ‘build anew the whole world’” (5). They note that “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is Bahá’u’lláh’s most important and influential work” and that “its composition was perhaps the most distinguished act of Bahá’u’lláh’s life” (5). Thus, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas could be regarded as the heart and soul of all Bahá’í scriptures.

The authors assert that “The Kitáb-i-Aqdas has a dialogic relationship with the [Persian] Bayán” (10), the preeminent scripture of the Bábí religion. This assertion clarifies the long-standing question as to how many of the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, as set forth by Bahá’u’lláh, actually represent laws originally set forth by the Báb—either adopted, adapted, abrogated and/or otherwise modified by Bahá’u’lláh. This is a major finding. A future study should explore this “dialogic relationship” in more depth and detail.

The introduction also points out five challenges. First, since the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is “written in a nonlinear and ostensibly random style . . . the frequently shifting subjects may be difficult to follow” (13). Second, “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas’s provisions are tersely set out, often with little explanation” (13). Another challenge is that “the work assumes the reader’s knowledge of Bahá’u’lláh’s foundational teachings” (13). Moreover, the book’s “historical context [in] nineteenth-century Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and the forty-year ministry of Bahá’u’lláh” tend to complicate its understanding (13). Finally, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas “alludes to practices, scriptures, or traditions from various faiths, especially the Bábí religion and Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity, Judaism, and others” (13), which also need attention. In addressing these challenges, the authors cite Italian Bahá’í scholar, Alessandro Bausani, that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas constitutes “‘an energetic impulse rather than a rigid canonical code’” (427), which the authors have demonstrated throughout their treatise on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

The authors’ linguistic expertise informs the sum and substance of their analysis of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and their linguistic analysis of the original Arabic is superb. Because “Bahá’u’lláh has infused some existing words with new meanings” (61), an intimate knowledge and mastery of Arabic is required for discovering neologisms, especially those pertaining to justice, a key concept in the thought and writings of Bahá’u’lláh.

One notable example of how the authors provide a fuller understanding of Bahá’í laws is seen in Bahá’u’lláh’s prohibition of slavery: “It is forbidden you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for him who is himself a servant to buy another of God’s servants, and this hath been prohibited in His Holy Tablet” (K72, www.bahai.org/r/434961812). Read narrowly, this law could be understood as forbidding slave trading, but not slave ownership—yet both are proscribed. The authors further note: “This interpretation finds support in a prayer Bahá’u’lláh penned almost two decades before the writing of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and nearly a decade before the declaration of Bahá’u’lláh’s

mission” (349, www.bahai.org/r/625753576). The authors state that “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas’s prohibition against trading in slaves is historic, as it is the first known scripture of a religion that categorically forbids the buying and selling of enslaved persons” (348).

A project of this field-specific stature foreseeably will have a second edition. This reviewer identified some small errors and lacunae that need rectification. I would also make the following recommendations. Using endnotes rather than footnotes would improve the flow of reading immensely. It would also be helpful if the authors state specifically where scholars may differ on various topics, rather than simply directing readers to compare writers on their own. I would also suggest that when the authors cite *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, which they frequently do, that they indicate which talks are authenticated by transcripts of the original discourse in Persian, and which are not. A final recommendation would be to more carefully consider the discussion of “mode,” or better, “modes,” in the volume.

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá’í Faith is essential reading for academic Bábí and Bahá’í studies. It is destined to become a “must read” and enduring classic in its field. Recommended for university libraries, as well as college and community college libraries, for graduate courses in Bahá’í studies, and for individual readers interested in Bahá’í studies. It is well worth its cost.