

... description: 1932 May 12, Keith K, Dunn, Loveday
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Conversations Preceding the Writing of “Dispensation”

May 12, 1932

Shoghi Effendi said: The Bahá'í Revelation has two Manifestations, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the perfect exemplar, the Center of the Covenant of mankind, the true interpreter of His Words, a perfect human being. To give 'Abdu'l-Bahá a station comparable to Bahá'u'lláh is absolute heresy.

The whole opposition of Muḥammad-‘Alí was based upon his insistence 'Abdu'l-Bahá claimed to be the divine successor of Bahá'u'lláh, occupying a cognate station. Muḥammad-‘Alí declared: “Never so long as I live will I cease to agitate against this imposter who claimed that before the expiration of one thousand years to occupy the same station as Bahá'u'lláh.”

The misguided attitude of the friends in attempting to maintain 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this station was the basis of the whole persecution by the covenant breakers. Again and again 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote disclaiming any station beyond that of Exemplar, Interpreter and Center of the Covenant; but Muḥammad-‘Alí said: “This was only a blind, that while openly stating this he was secretly encouraging his followers to maintain and accept him as the Manifestation.” Those who overestimate the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are quite as reprehensible and have done just as much harm as those who underestimate.

Lorol Gaspard: Do you mean that those who have considered 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a Manifestation are equally as bad as those who have opposed and denied Him?

Shoghi Effendi replied: Yes, that is what I mean, for they continuously furnished the enemy with proofs for their false statements. When the Will and Testament was produced, various believers said Muḥammad-‘Alí could no longer deny the full import of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's meaning, for surely in his last documents (Will) left to voice His directions and desires in perpetuity he could not have failed to claim this exalted station if all His life this had been His aim and intent. When shown the Will Muḥammad-‘Alí said this was negligible compared to the insidious work which had left this impression of Him on the hearts of the believers.

Keith: Shoghi Effendi, what so we do with the Tablet of the Branch? In which Bahá'u'lláh says of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "He is myself, the Shining Place of My Identity?"

Shoghi Effendi: Most certainly Bahá'u'lláh is not referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but I must see the text.

We: Opening the Scriptures we pointed out the passage, "He is Myself," with an asterisk and the words, "'Abdu'l-Bahá."

Keith: It certainly reads that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the Self of God.

Shoghi Effendi: This does not refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This means the Voice of God, referring to Bahá'u'lláh, not to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Turning to the Will and Testament we find the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the Two Manifestations, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and the servitude of all else toward them.

Keith asked: But how does this statement come to be in the Scriptures?

Shoghi Effendi: This book was printed without my knowledge. I was not consulted about it. Sometime after its publication I received a copy which was the first I had ever seen. It is full of errors, many quotations from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh have been cut without putting the dotted line to show this has been done. Had I been consulted I certainly would not have permitted these errors to have occurred.

Keith: How then shall we present the Master? What about the prophecy "The Son shall come in the glory of the Father, and that no man cometh unto the Father save through the Son." How can Bahá'u'lláh represent the second coming of the Son?

Shoghi Effendi: The Son, the Christ that was in Jesus has returned in Bahá'u'lláh in its fullest station. God is the Father, the essence unmanifest. Man cannot know Him or comprehend Him. He can be known only through his Manifestation, the Son, Bahá'u'lláh. That Manifestation of the Son has come in the full glory of the Father. This idea about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that the Son is the Father and the Father the Son, is a reversion to Catholicism. These ideas are pure superstition and could have no basis in reason. You ridicule the Roman Catholics for their irrational ideas and would yourselves fall into the same error. Since Bahá'u'lláh has made 'Abdu'l-Bahá the infallible interpreter of his Words, which then would have the superior weight?

Keith: Bahá'u'lláh, holding the idea that since He was the Manifestation and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not, the former would then be superior to the later.

Shoghi Effendi: Not at all, the Interpreter is the one whose word we must take for He has the power to tell us just what the speaker means. Therefore we must turn to the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to determine this question of stations. In writing to America about the qualifications for voting I quoted from the Will and Testament and referred to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the true Exemplar. What did

the believers take that to mean? Of course I used the utmost delicacy for it might do great harm to have this question too suddenly projected.

Keith: But Shoghi Effendi, we would be considered uninformed and unfit to teach in America if we did not make the Covenant of God equal with the Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh.

Shoghi Effendi: This is unwarranted. In the light of the Masters' continuous denials how can the believers think this?

Keith: Owing to the passage in question in the Scriptures, where it reads that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the Self of Bahá'u'lláh, and for another reason that it is a universal belief among the teachers. At a New York Assembly meeting Horace Holley said, "In the Will 'Abdu'l-Bahá was presenting Bahá'u'lláh to the complete effacement of Himself, leaving no testimony and giving no divine station to Himself," which horrified Mrs. Kinney and Archbishop Barrow.

Shoghi Effendi: Horace and I are in full agreement in this matter. Horace, who evidently holds my view, put that foot-note in the Scriptures below the Tablet of the Branch, having taken it bodily from Esslemont's book. (The same evening Shoghi sent Rúhí with a copy of the Tablet of the Branch in Persian to show that this passage did not occur in the original).

Lyle: Are you aware to the what extent the American believers teach these ideas and dogmas? While we are on this subject, may we have another question made clear to us, that has to do with your station?

Keith interrupted: We are told in the Will and Testament that your shade is the shade that shadoweth all mankind, and that to dispute with you is to dispute with God, etc. Surely after reading those words cannot consider you just an ordinary human being.

Shoghi Effendi: But I am. I am a human being like you or anybody else, and I have no divine station. I am under the protection of Bahá'u'lláh. The Master promised to protect me from error, likewise the House of Justice. No one is justified in looking upon me as other than another human.

Keith: According to the Will and Testament, your decisions are binding and your words binding.

Shoghi Effendi: Only to a certain extent. How far does my independence extend with the House of Justice, and what is my relation to it?

Keith: You are its Chairman and Interpreter of the Book of Laws, the Aqdas.

Shoghi Effendi: Yes, but as Chairman I have only one vote, as has any other member. If my vote happens to be with the minority I must cheerfully follow the will of the majority though it be contrary to my wish and conviction.

Keith: Your word is infallible when it comes to interpreting the text.

Shoghi Effendi: Yes, the Guardian alone can determine whether the condition is covered in the Holy text. It is promised that the Guardian is protected by God from making mistakes in these decisions. But apart from that I am like anyone else.

Keith: I have been teaching that is wrong to think of you as a human being. I have been teaching that you know the end from the beginning and have a spiritual status that endows you with super-human knowledge.

Shoghi Effendi: This is entirely wrong. I am a human being endowed with the unfailing protection of Bahá'u'lláh. To proclaim for me a station different from that of humanity or to consider me endowed with superhuman powers is quite unjustified. For example I have no idea what is going on in America at present. I must depend on information for such knowledge.

Keith: The Master tells us your utterances are infallible.

Shoghi Effendi: Under certain explicit conditions. In many instances I give human opinions and suggestions.

Keith: Undoubtedly you speak with unchallengeable authority and we must consider your words authoritative and infallible.

Shoghi Effendi: (smiling) I leave that to your own judgement.

Keith: If I mention this conversation to any of the friends who like me have looked upon you as divinely endowed, they would at once say, "How utterly lacking in spirituality she is, that Shoghi Effendi completely conceals his station from her. If she was spiritually awake he would without doubt reveal his true divinity to her. 'Abdu'l-Bahá used to say the same thing to the believers. They had themselves to know His station before He confided it to them, so likewise the Guardian is testing you with His denials."

Shoghi Effendi: (positively amazed) Do the believers believe that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would deliberately disavow Himself and mislead them? You must utterly disregard such casuistry on the part of believers. (Again and again throughout the long interview he said how dangerous it would be to precipitate this discussion or release this knowledge of the station the Covenant and the Guardian among the believers considering their present conception. Several times Shoghi Effendi said we must use the utmost delicacy, we must make this known very gradually, we must not publicly announce this. Similar warnings were continuously repeated.)

Shoghi Effendi: If the House of Justice should decide that the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh would be removed to the top of Mt. Carmel the remains of 'Abdu'l-Bahá must be removed from the Shrine of the Báb. 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself would feel that it was very unfitting that he should share the Shrine with a Manifestation of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's original plan was the building of nine rooms with the Báb in the center. The three new rooms for the archives completes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wish for the Shrine of the Báb. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was

placed in the Báb's Shrine by the decision of the holy household before my return from England. Undoubtedly 'Abdu'l-Bahá will be removed to another resting place. (Here Shoghi Effendi described the nine terraces that would lead from the foot of Mt. Carmel to the Shrine of the Báb and the nine that would lead to the top whether Bahá'u'lláh was placed there or not.)

Keith: In the light of what you have said, 'Abdu'l-Bahá I presume would be placed at the bottom.

Shoghi Effendi: Undoubtedly that would be His wish.

Lyle: It has always been impossible for me to believe that 'Abdu'l-Bahá station was equal to the station of Bahá'u'lláh the Supreme Manifestation, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá the teacher.

Shoghi Effendi: Now you are going to the opposite extreme. Yesterday there was overstating, now you are understating. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not a teacher, an apostle, or a chosen one, for there might be others. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is quite apart and different from anyone who has ever appeared on earth before. A perfect human being! Can you conceive a perfect human being? The phrase that best expresses 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the True Exemplar, the Center of the Covenant. It is just as grave a mistake to over-estimate 'Abdu'l-Bahá as to underestimate Him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá never claimed to be a Manifestation; all His life He suffered from that assumption. But we must never go to the other extreme and confuse anybody else with Him or His station.

Keith: Is that why Bahá'u'lláh calls Him the greatest mystery of God?

Shoghi Effendi: Just so, His station is a mystery.

Lorol: Then if he is just a human being can we evolve to the same station in time?

Shoghi Effendi: No, no one can ever attain to the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Lorol: But surely humanity will sometime reach perfection.

Shoghi Effendi: No. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that humanity will evolve and develop infinitely. To reach perfection means that advancement stops; that there is nothing further to be attained, mankind will ever continue his development towards perfection but no one will attain to or occupy the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. If you are asked to explain this you must say it is a mystery. A mystery is not irrational, it does not run counter to reason, it transcends reason.

Keith: You mean just as science sees a mystery in the great primal energy becoming ninety-two chemical elements?

Shoghi Effendi: No, the mystery of nature may later become manifest, a spiritual mystery can never be grasped by the human mind.

Keith: Then I have been teaching wrong all these years.

Shoghi Effendi: It astonishes me that these ideas are so prevalent in America.

Keith: When Elizabeth Greenleaf and I were here six years ago why was this not explained to us?

Shoghi Effendi: The subject was not breached and I did not realize that these were your conclusions. You must not worry for having taught this way, it will right itself. As new believers come into the Faith this idea will be forgotten. Nothing can be done about the past. The past is over. Devote yourself to giving the right conception to those you teach from now on. It would do incalculable harm to try to rectify this impression now.

Lyle: The old believers would put any one out of the Cause who dared spread this teaching.

Shoghi Effendi: Undoubtedly, but our eyes must be turned toward the throngs that will come into the Faith in the future, not toward the present believers. We must endeavor to teach the new generation of believers, not the present one. If the friends are not clear on this question ask them to write me. I have so far approached this question with the utmost delicacy, as in the qualifications for voters. No one has ever questioned me about this. If they had I should have been constrained to answer fearlessly and fully. If the friends write to me I will give them the same answer I am giving you.

Keith: Reverting to yesterday's discussion I want to get this matter clear. If you are a human being just as muddled, veiled, confused and [coping] as I am why is it according to the Will and Testament we must obey you? Why is it when I receive a cable from you to come to Haifa would I rather throw myself into the bay than refuse? Why did I not explain this then go down to Poona and conduct my class?

Shoghi Effendi: In human affairs I make suggestions and recommendations. When I interpret the Words I am guided by Bahá'u'lláh.

Keith: Why does 'Abdu'l-Bahá call down the fierce indignation of God upon those who disobey you?

Shoghi Effendi: That is only when I insist or command, then my interpretation is infallible. The believers must distinguish between what I recommend or definitely state.

Keith: Can you imagine the friends refusing to follow your recommendations?

Shoghi Effendi: They must discriminate.

(We then brought up the question of praying to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.)

We: Many believers pray to the Master. Is this proper?

Shoghi Effendi: Bahá'u'lláh is the source we must pray to naturally.

Keith: (insisting) Is it wrong to pray to 'Abdu'l-Bahá?

Shoghi Effendi: No, it is not wrong to pray to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in an intercessory capacity.

Keith: Like the Roman Catholics pray to the Virgin Mary?

Shoghi Effendi: Yes.

Keith: Then it is not actually wrong to pray to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá?

Lorol: No, if you want to be foolish enough to do so.

Keith: Is that true Shoghi Effendi?

Shoghi Effendi: That is much too strong. It would not be foolish to pray to the Master but the next generation will have forgotten to do it. It is only those who know and revered ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who will hold to this practice, but it will later be discarded.

Lorol: There are those who pray to you Shoghi Effendi.

Shoghi Effendi: This is absolutely heretical. Such things are not permissible. It is wrong to address me as Lord or Master, or Thee or Thine. I had to send a very abrupt cable to the friends in Bombay to prevent them from celebrating my birthday. If this starts now there will be no end to it. The first Guardian’s birthday, the first Guardian’s death, the tenth Guardian’s accession. They would have 400 Guardian’s celebrations in 365 days. Nor must they refer to me as His Holiness. These things have no place in our Faith, they savour of popishness.

Keith: There is a picture of you in the Bahá’í hall at Karachi, labeled “His Holiness, Shoghi Effendi.”

Shoghi Effendi: (emphatically) Then they must take it down.

Keith: Oh my! I should not have mentioned this!

Lorol: Why not if it is wrong?

Shoghi Effendi: I have requested, I have suggested, but now the time has come when I must insist in no unmistakable terms that these things must cease. For instance this is what we have been speaking about when I say I am infallible, that is, when I insist. In this I am infallible.

Lorol: When did Bahá’u’lláh declare Himself?

Shoghi Effendi: He declared himself three times, first as the Báb predicted in certain odes in 1852-53, where the Báb makes veiled references to Bahá’u’lláh’s station as Supreme Manifestation. You will remember in “The Son of the Wolf” how Bahá’u’lláh speaks of His first intimation that He is the Promised One. It was as if a fire ran through His veins and He was consumed with a power that overmastered Him. The second declaration was to a few friends when He was leaving Baghdád, according to the Báb’s second date, in 1863. Then in Adrianople between 1864 and 68 He proclaimed it to the world in His epistles to the Kings. In “Some Answered Questions” we learn that the Manifestation was chosen from birth but was not conscious of it until the time His Mission approached. Many fought against it at first, but all Manifestations went through

this long struggle of preparation, such as Moses in the Burning Bush, Jesus in the Wilderness, Buddha under the Bo Tree, and Bahá'u'lláh in the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih, who spent a longer time than others because His preparation was greatest. Bahá'u'lláh spent two years in the mountains alone. He was also went to leave Şubḥ-i-Azal free to try to establish his cause. I assign preparation for His ministry as one of the reasons for His self-imposed exile. The greatness of Bahá'u'lláh's Manifestation is shown by His having a Manifestation as a forerunner, but He is greater than the Báb for He came for the whole world. We must never give out the impression that one Manifestation of God was greater in power or wisdom than another. They are only greater in what They manifest.

(We constantly use the words Cause and Movement and Shoghi Effendi asked us to try and eliminate these words as they did not convey the deep significance of the Bahá'í Faith or World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and advised us to teach new believers to use these two expressions and never to permit anyone to use the name "Bahá'ism.")

Prayer

Shoghi Effendi: We can trace the evolution of the Bahá'í Faith by the terms adopted, then changed. First organization was adopted, then administration, now it will take on "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh."

We: In many places the believers use the healing prayers continuously in regular meetings. Many object to this practice.

Shoghi Effendi: No one in any assembly should insist upon saying the healing prayers, but we must acquiesce if someone should want one. When we have general rules, we become dogmatic and inflexible. But friends who do not care to sit through long prayers regularly may go or stay as they wish. This does not determine anyone's spirituality but there must be no criticism or controversy on the matter. Great patience is required to unite the differing elements in our Faith. Time is the best healer. These differences of opinion will disappear with time. We might remember the words of St. Augustine, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity."

Government

Shoghi Effendi: The attack that was recently published by the Soviet Government has done more to spread the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith than years of teaching to disseminate. Regarding the League of Nations: The principle under the League of Nations will break but the institution will develop; whether this League or another. This change will be brought about by the coming war which is inevitable. The greatest benefit of the First War was the bringing about of the League of Nations. Unlike the last war the coming war will be a war to end war. The problems brought about by the last great war have been beneficial to humanity as they are bringing nearer the disintegration of those

institutions contrary to the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Since Bahá'ís cannot purify politics you must keep out of them for they are based on fraud, rivalry, and secrecy, which is against our principles. Their practices are foolish, childish, and mischievous. Bahá'ís cannot vote in political parties. They are against our principles. Believers may hold administrative but not political posts.

Lyle: What do we do when we are compelled to vote as honest citizens? It is demanded of every American citizen to vote and serve the country in time of war. How can we obey the laws of the United States and not vote or fight in case of war?

Shoghi Effendi: The Quakers had this same non-political policy. You must ask for exemption as conscientious objectors. If a penalty is incurred such as prison or fine, then you must obey, but you must offer to serve in any capacity other than actually killing your fellow-men. Apply to your government for exemption from service in case of war.

League and Loyalty

Shoghi Effendi: Bahá'ís must make every effort to have America enter the League of Nations, but with the rightful purpose. America must uphold the League to exercise sovereign power. We must conform to the requirements of our government to the extent that the assemblies in Russia, when they were told that they must give secret information, to close the schools, stop printing Bahá'í literature, cease foreign correspondence. This was not disloyalty to the Bahá'í Faith, it was only a temporary dislocation and interruption. But if the believers are requested to recant or give up their Faith, this would be absolute disloyalty to the Faith, and they would rather be martyred.

Shoghi Effendi: Today the Americans are leading the Bahá'í world. The East has enthusiasm and devotion but no training. Unless the East takes on courage, directness, and straightforwardness, which is what the West can teach the East, the center may shift from the East to the West.

Lorol: Just how is America leading the Bahá'í world?

Shoghi Effendi: America is the first country to formulate the declaration of trust and obtain legal recognition, which is a model for all the national spiritual assemblies in the future to follow. Even some of your local spiritual assemblies, like New York and Chicago have been incorporated. It was excellent thing for Horace Holley to have suggested copywriting the name Bahá'í.

[^] The idea that there could be an exclusive right to use the name Bahá'í in the USA was overturned in court action in the late 1930s

Keith: Under the declaration of trust the Bahá'ís now have legal status. We can appeal to the government and receive their protection can we not?

Shoghi Effendi: Certainly: This gives Bahá'ís recognized legal status.

Keith: This legal status will also protect us against those who wish to proceed against the Bahá'í Faith. Meaning that if anyone tried to set up another Assembly in the same city the Bahá'ís would be protected by law against opposing persons.

Lorol: There is a general belief that you can prophesy, that you did definitely assure Mrs. Mathews or her immediate family by cable that she would recover. This at a time when all hope had been abandoned by the finest specialists in America.

Shoghi Effendi: I have no knowledge of making any definite statement for Mrs. Mathews recovery. I assured them of my prayers and faith. I do not think I sent such a cable, but if they can produce it then I must have been guided. But I do not believe such a positive assurance can be produced.

Lorol: For many reasons I have lost interest and enthusiasm in teaching and do not feel qualified to attempt again to offer myself as a teacher. Will you kindly pray for me that I may be able to overcome the antagonism I feel toward certain so-called Bahá'ís. I feel that I cannot teach now.

Shoghi Effendi: You must not allow yourself to be touched by this chatter of idle minds. You must go ahead and teach. I am deeply grateful for the unique manner in which you have served the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh and will pray and supplicate that divine bounty will reassure you and lift these burdens from your heart. I shall never forget the services you have rendered the Faith and am deeply appreciative.

Lyle: Have you any suggestions to offer regarding the future operation of Nine Gables? For instance would you advise specializing in anything or experimenting with two or three lines such as orcharding, vegetable growing or perhaps adding sheep or other cattle?

Shoghi Effendi: I should advise more than one enterprise. Have you any pictures of Nine Gables? I would like very much if you took some films of N.G. and sent me some copies, also of Mount Salvat.

Persia

[this is presumably addressed to Keith who was going there]

Shoghi Effendi: While in Persia endeavor to impress upon the Persian believers the non-political character of the Bahá'í Faith.

Prominent Persians wish to occupy high political positions. The administrative offices which we may occupy are secondary, while the Persian craves position, power, prestige, glory. They must discipline themselves and restrain these ambitions. You must not be afraid to speak clearly on this subject. Courage, directness, and straightforwardness is what the West must teach the East. While very tactful present these subjects with clearness, firmness, and frankness. Do

not mention this directly but intimate that unless the Orient can take on those characteristics the center may shift from East to the West.

[END]