

Understanding Traditional Discourses

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Abstract

In the Bahá'í Writings, one can find many references to ancient traditional stories and figures from biblical scripture. Read with a literal eye, one might assume that all of these references confirm the historical accuracy of those stories and, thereby, support a literal interpretation of the ancient scripture cited. However, in the works of a renowned scholar of the Bahá'í Faith, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání, we find a different mode of interpretation. Using the example of the Book of Exodus from the Hebrew Scriptures, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl explains that, in Their discourses, the Prophets may indulge people's historical understandings and address them according to their local traditions. One implication of his commentary is that even though a Central Figure might refer to a biblical story as if it was a historical fact, this reference would not necessarily confirm the historical accuracy of the story. This paper compares a brief excerpt of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's discourse on this topic to selections of the Bahá'í sacred text and authoritative guidance. The outcome of that comparison will be to suggest that Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's interpretive approach in this regard is sound.

A student of the Bahá'í Writings will notice how the Central Figures of the Faith often include elements of Bible stories and the mention of biblical figures in Their commentaries. Upon reading these references, this question of interpretation may arise: Does the Central Figures' mention of a biblical story as if it really occurred necessarily confirm that story as literal historical fact? Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání (1844–1914), one of the nineteen Apostles of Bahá'u'lláh and often

referred to as the greatest scholar of the Faith, directly addresses this question. In the collection of his works entitled *Miracles and Metaphors*, considered the classic Bahá'í text of hermeneutics¹ (the science of interpretation), he states:

It is clear that the prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and to bring the people nearer to their Source and ultimate Goal. They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers, or natural scientists. Their position in the world of creation is like that of the heart in the body: it has a universal position with a general effect. The position of the learned in the world of earthly dominion is like that of a specific organ. That is, they have a particular position and a special effect. Therefore, the prophets have indulged the people in regard to their historical notions, folk stories, and scientific principles, and have spoken to them according to these. They conversed as was appropriate to their audience and hid certain realities behind the curtain of allusion.

. . . Finally, it is well known that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs, but addressed them according to their local traditions.”²

This explanation connects with a basic pedagogical principle: learning moves from the known to the unknown. A teacher has to start with what the students know – or think they know – and then gradually bring in new information. An implication of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's commentary is that if a Central Figure discourses on some element of the Bible as though it was fact, this reference would confirm those Bible verses as worthy vehicles for spiritual teaching and, because of their familiarity to the target audience, a worthy place to start a discourse, but that reference would not automatically confirm the story as historical fact. This is because the Central Figure might be speaking

according to the prevailing, but not necessarily accurate, historical understandings of the people.

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's interpretive approach is clearly stated. Nevertheless, however profound his importance in the early days of the Faith, his spiritual station as an Apostle of Bahá'u'lláh, and his accomplishments as a scholar, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl is not a Central Figure of the Faith and his writings are not authoritative. My purpose in this study has been to try to confirm or deny Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's interpretive approach by researching this question: Is there authoritative evidence that any of the Central Figures or the Guardian have ever not engaged in disputes with people about their historical beliefs, but have addressed them according to their local traditions? From what I understand from passages gleaned from the Bahá'í sacred text and the guidance of the Guardian and the House of Justice, I believe that the answer to this question is, "Yes," and that Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's interpretive approach is sound. A selection of sacred text and authoritative guidance relevant to this question is presented below.

According to the Prevailing Understanding

In a discourse of Bahá'u'lláh on the Báb's Surih of Joseph, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the Báb revealed that Tablet according to the prevailing knowledge of the people of that time even though their understandings were characterized by ignorance and waywardness. Bahá'u'lláh states:

It is known to thee that the commentary on the Surih of Joseph hath been revealed according to the prevailing understanding of the people of that time. This hath been due to pure bounty haply the wayward and ignorant people may become transported to the realm of knowledge; because much of that which hath been stated therein are the material known to be truth with the people of Qur'án. Had it been revealed according

to that which God desired, no one would have accepted and remained loyal. [Ayát-i-Iláhi, vol. 2, 68]³

This paper is not the place to examine the details of what the people believed to be truth that was based on ignorance and waywardness, or how the Báb spoke to and used their immediate, however faulty, understandings to bring them to a higher revelation of truth. What I believe is apparent here is that this commentary by Bahá'u'lláh could well have inspired Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's statement that "it is well known that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs, but addressed them according to their local traditions."⁴ This teaching should not surprise us. In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh states: *"All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice."* [AHW #67] In the above scenario, we see that revealing a commentary "according to the prevailing understanding of the people of that time" [Bahá'u'lláh, Ayát-i-Iláhi, vol. II, 68] is one way that the Manifestation may teach in accordance with human capacity and understanding.

Discussion Conducted Conformably

Before a commentary on the biblical story of Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh and the Exodus of the Hebrew tribes from Egypt, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

The events that transpired at the advent of the Prophets of the past, and Their ways and works and circumstances, are not adequately set down in authoritative histories, and are referred to only in condensed form in the verses of the Qur'án, the Holy Traditions and the Torah. . . . To preclude once and for all objections on the part of any of the world's peoples, We shall conduct Our discussion conformably to those authoritative accounts which all nations are agreed upon. [SDC 75]

In the above quote, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that adequate histories of past Prophets are lacking. That would include the Dispensation of Moses. He also states that the histories of past Prophets exist “*only in condensed form*” [SDC 75] indicating, perhaps, that the essence of the Mosaic story has been preserved in largely figurative language. Allegorical stories are capable of holding layers of significant meanings that withstand the test of time, all condensed into powerful narratives. Finally, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states a proviso of His discourse: He will speak “*conformably to those authoritative accounts which all nations are agreed upon.*” [SDC 75] He then proceeds to discourse on the story of Moses and the Exodus precisely as it is presented in the Hebrew scripture – which He had just stated was “not adequately set down.” [SDC 75]

We could use Bahá’u’lláh’s words to paraphrase ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s proviso: the discourse would be “*revealed according to the prevailing understanding of the people of that time.*” [Ayát-i-Iláhi, vol. II, 68] The point being that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discourse on the Exodus events exactly as presented in the Book of Exodus does not automatically confirm the historical facts of those events. This harmonizes with Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s interpretive approach which states that the Prophets did not engage in disputes with people about their historical knowledge, “but addressed them according to their local traditions.”⁵

Bring Stories Out As Though They Were Truth

Before I present the next commentary by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, some background information on the story of the People of the Cave may be helpful. This miracle story, also called The Seven Sleepers, originated as a Christian tradition. The story goes that during the Roman persecution of Christians in Ephesus in 250 AD, seven young Christian men who were pressed to recant their Faith under threat of death by the Roman Empire withdrew to a cave outside of Ephesus to pray. There they fell asleep. Carrying through with the persecution, Roman authorities ordered the mouth of the cave to be sealed as the

young men slept. Three-hundred years later, a farmer opened the sealed cave, and the seven sleepers awoke (thinking they had slept only overnight) to find that Christianity was not only the accepted religion of Ephesus but the state religion of the entire Roman Empire. For centuries, this miracle has been commemorated as a holy day in certain Christian denominations.

The tradition of the People of the Cave also appears in the Qur'án where chapter eighteen, entitled "The Cave," is devoted entirely to that story. Muhammad, Who was specifically asked about the People of the Cave, begins His commentary by stating, "It is We who relate to you their story in truth." [Qur'án 18:13, Sahih Int.] Then Muhammad relays a detailed moment-by-moment rendition of that story even adding elements that were not in the original tradition (such as a cave watchdog named *al Rakim*). Because of this realistic telling in the Qur'án, the miracle of the People of the Cave is honored in Islam, as well.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked about The Cave chapter of the Qur'án, He explained that although Muhammad's reply was stated as though the account was true, the story of the People of the Cave was "just a story" and that Muhammad was indulging the people in their traditional understandings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

In the days of the Prophet, the Jews incited the Quraysh to ask about the People of the Cave. When the question was asked, His Holiness said: "I will inform you tomorrow." . . . Because the Prophet knew that this was just a story, He did not wish to give an answer, nor did He wish to say outright that this is something that has no truth in it, but when He saw that the enemies would not stay their hand, his reply was couched as though it were truth. For certain matters are in reality just stories, but the Divine Manifestations bring them out as though it were truth and discourse upon them. For if they were to deny well-known and established matters, others would consider this evidence of their ignorance. Therefore they bring them out as though they were truth. [Amr va Khalq 2:211]

It is notable that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that this is the practice of not just Muhammad but of all of the Manifestations of God: *“For certain matters are in reality just stories, but the Divine Manifestations bring them out as though it were truth and discourse upon them.”* [Amr va Khalq 2:211] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary could have inspired Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s statement that the Prophets may speak according to the people’s historical notions and folk stories.

Not Necessarily Endorsing Historical Accuracy

The following is a Memorandum which responds to an individual’s question about a discourse of Bahá’u’lláh in the Lawh-i-Hikmat in which Bahá’u’lláh refers to communications between certain ancient philosophers. The question revolves around the issue that western historians would consider communication between certain philosophers implausible because of chronological differences. The Memorandum states:

It is noteworthy that at both the beginning and end of this section of the Tablet, Bahá’u’lláh indicates that He is quoting “some accounts of the sages”. These would have been the historical accounts familiar to the person whom He is addressing in the Tablet. The fact that Bahá’u’lláh makes such statements for the sake of illustrating the spiritual principles that He wishes to convey, does not necessarily mean that He is endorsing their historical accuracy. In this connection, it is interesting to note the answer given by the beloved Guardian’s secretary on his behalf to a question about the “fourth heaven” mentioned in the Kitáb-i-Íqán [pp. 89, 133]. The translation of the passage is as follows:

“As to the ascent of Christ to the ‘fourth heaven’ as revealed in the glorious Book of Íqán, he [the Guardian] stated that the ‘fourth heaven’ is a term used and a belief held by the early astronomers. The followers of the Shi’ah sect likewise held this belief. As the

Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed for the guidance of that sect, this term was used in conformity with the concepts of its followers.”

(3 November 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)⁶

The above guidance directly states that “The fact that Bahá’u’lláh makes such statements for the sake of illustrating the spiritual principles that He wishes to convey, does not necessarily mean that He is endorsing their historical accuracy.” This guidance is reminiscent of Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s statement that the Manifestations are not sent as historians, but as spiritual teachers.

In addition, the guidance from the Guardian quoted in the above Memorandum explains that Bahá’u’lláh used the term “fourth heaven” in the Kitáb-i-Íqán in conformity with the understandings of the Shi’ahs to whom the Tablet was directed. (Islamic cosmology includes various traditions involving seven heavens.) Thus, we have another example from the sacred text that lends credence to Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s interpretive approach which recognizes that the Prophets may indulge understandings and speak according to what the people ‘know,’ but that this does not necessarily endorse those understandings.

Irrespective of Authenticity or Reliability

The following guidance on behalf of the House of Justice responds to an inquiry about an apparent contradiction between a discourse of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which He dismisses the biblical story of Lot as a “confused dream” and a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi which appears to give legitimacy to the same story.

In his email letter of 14 February 2015, Mr. ___ provides a provisional translation, obtained online, of an extract of a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concerning the story of Lot and his daughters found

in the Old Testament.⁷ In this extract ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that the “story of Lot and his daughters and the apostasy of some of the prophets recorded in the Torah and the Psalms” are “confused dreams” that “are the words of historians among the People of the Book for which God has revealed no authority”. Mr. ___ then refers to an extract of a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, found in *Lights of Guidance*⁸, which states that, according to the text of Genesis 19:29–38, Lot bears no responsibility for the actions of his daughters. Mr. ___ concludes by asking how the Guardian could give legitimacy to the story in light of the statements made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Tablet. The Research Department offers the following response.

To date, nothing has been found in the letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in the Archives at the Bahá’í World Centre pertaining to the above-mentioned extract of a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. However, we note that various statements of the Guardian regarding the authenticity of the Bible are consistent with the statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá regarding the story of Lot. For example, in a letter dated 11 February 1944 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, we read: “*When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states we believe what is in the Bible, He means in substance. Not that we believe every word of it to be taken literally or that every word is the authentic saying of the Prophet.*”

With this in mind, it would appear that, in the letter to which Mr. ___ refers, the Guardian is commenting on the meaning of the story of Lot and his daughters as found in the Bible, irrespective of its authenticity or reliability, and that he is not maintaining that the text of Genesis 19:29–38 is to be understood literally.⁹

The above guidance, that Shoghi Effendi was commenting on the meaning of the story of Lot irrespective of its authenticity or reliability could be seen as a paraphrase of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement entered earlier in this paper that “*certain matters are in reality just stories, but*

the Divine Manifestations bring them out as though it were truth and discourse upon them." [‘Amr va Khalq 2:211] To comment on the meaning of a story irrespective of the story’s authenticity or reliability also evokes Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s statement that the Prophets may address people according to their local traditions.

Discussion

Returning to the question of this study: Is there authoritative evidence that any of the Central Figures or the Guardian have ever not engaged in disputes with people about their historical beliefs, but have addressed them according to their local traditions? It is the opinion of this writer that the answer is, “Yes” and that Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s interpretive approach in this regard is sound. Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Guardian, the House of Justice, and Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl use different but harmonizing descriptors of this phenomenon:

- Tablets may be “*revealed according to the prevailing understanding of the people of that time.*” [Bahá’u’lláh, Ayát-i-Iláhi, vol. 2, 68]
- The Central Figures may conduct discussions “*conformably to those authoritative accounts which all nations are agreed upon.*” [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, SDC 75]
- “[C]ertain matters are in reality just stories, but the Divine Manifestations bring them out as though it were truth and discourse upon them.” [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Amr va Khalq, 2:211]
- The Central Figures may use terms of certain religious sects “*in conformity with the concepts of its followers.*” [The Guardian¹⁰]

- “The fact that Bahá’u’lláh makes such statements for the sake of illustrating the spiritual principles that He wishes to convey, does not necessarily mean that He is endorsing their historical accuracy.” [Memorandum¹¹]
- “Finally, it is well known that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs, but addressed them according to their local traditions.” [Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl] ¹²
- In a Tablet recorded in Gleanings, Bahá’u’lláh asks: “What language should He Who is the Mouthpiece of God choose to speak, so that they who are shut out as by a veil from Him can recognize His glory?” [GB LIII] I propose that the examples cited in this paper demonstrate that a language that the Central Figures and the Guardian may choose to speak according to Their wisdom is the language of traditional understandings, and this may include discourses on meaning-filled biblical stories that may not represent literal historical facts. This phenomenon begs the question: How might one distinguish between statements that indulge the people’s historical beliefs about biblical scripture and those that confirm the historicity of those stories or figures?

In two of the examples presented in this paper, the Central Figures state provisos that could be seen as alerts that the discourses will be revealed according to prevailing understandings. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that He is speaking “*conformably*” to what the people believe. Similarly, in the 2 November 1987 Memorandum it is pointed out that in the Lawh-i-Hikmat Bahá’u’lláh prefaces His commentary on the ancient philosophers with a statement that He is “*quoting some accounts of the sages.*” Perhaps readers

could train themselves to be sensitive to such alerts. But we can also see from other examples that the Central Figures do not always give such notice. For example, when Bahá'u'lláh uses the term “fourth heaven” in the Kitáb-i-Íqán [¶98] He does not alert the reader that He is about to speak conformably to the prevailing understandings of a particular religious sect. It would follow that readers cannot depend on getting written notice that a Central Figure is about to speak according to prevailing understandings.

Although the question of how one might distinguish between statements that indulge the people's historical beliefs and those that confirm the scriptural stories as literal events is intriguing, there is reason to believe that it is not the most important question. Consider, for example, Bahá'u'lláh “Responses to questions of Mánikchí Sáhíb” found in *The Tabernacle of Unity*. Mánikchí Sáhíb had requested distinct rulings on an array of seemingly contradictory religious traditions. Which was most acceptable in the sight of God? In His response, Bahá'u'lláh does not engage in the disputes surrounding those traditions but confirms the unity of the divine process that is evident in all of them. In His discourse on differing religious principles Bahá'u'lláh states, “*These differences are not worthy of mention. The eye of divine mercy casteth its glance upon all that is past. It behoveth us to mention them only in favourable terms, for they do not contradict that which is essential.*” [TU 2.18] Bahá'u'lláh also repeatedly states the following imperative as the ultimate answer to all of Mánikchí Sáhíb's inquiries about differing religious traditions: “*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.*” [TU 2.5, 2.7, 2.16, 2.31]

In light of this Tablet and the guidance and sacred text explored earlier in this paper, one might consider that when a Central Figure of the Faith refers to an ancient biblical story He may be engaging that tradition in favorable terms because it does not contradict that which is essential, is well known among the people, and is judged to be a worthy vehicle to convey eternal spiritual verities. The question of the

historicity of the tradition cited pales in comparison to the imperative to “*Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.*” [TU 2.5, 2.7, 2.16, 2.31] The most pertinent questions may be: What is the essential spiritual instruction in this discourse that draws on an ancient tradition? What does it teach about the needs of this age? What do I need to do today to embody the spiritual principles that the Central Figure is teaching through that tradition?

I closing, I’d like to return to this excerpt from Mirza Abu’l-Fadl’s commentary in *Miracles and Metaphors* which speaks eloquently to a phenomenon that, I believe, has been confirmed in the sacred and authoritative text explored in this paper:

It is clear that the prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and to bring the people nearer to their Source and ultimate Goal. They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers, or natural scientists. Their position in the world of creation is like that of the heart in the body: it has a universal position with a general effect. The position of the learned in the world of earthly dominion is like that of a specific organ. That is, they have a particular position and a special effect. Therefore, the prophets have indulged the people in regard to their historical notions, folk stories, and scientific principles, and have spoken to them according to these. They conversed as was appropriate to their audience and hid certain realities behind the curtain of allusion.

. . . Finally, it is well known that neither the Prophet Muhammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs, but addressed them according to their local traditions.”¹³

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NOTES

- 1 See Stockman and Winters, chapter 30: “Hermeneutics and Interpretation”
- 2 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, p. 9-10
- 3 Provisional translation by Foad Seddigh, also found in Laáí ael-Hiekmat, vol. 2 page 57
- 4 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, p. 9-10
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Memorandum 3 November 1987 cited in “Socrates” Memorandum, 22 October 1995.
- 7 <http://www.kashkul.org/2010/09/09/the-true-torah/>
- 8 See Hornby, #1689
- 9 Memorandum 29 March 2015 (29 March 2015, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, see “Socrates” Memorandum to the Universal House of Justice, last entry)
- 10 “Socrates” Memorandum 22 October 1995
- 11 “Socrates” Memorandum 22 October 1995
- 12 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, p. 9-10
- 13 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, p. 9-10