

Bahá'í Bible Study

Part One

The Nature of the Bible

The Bahá'í Bible Study Series

Bahá'í Bible Study Part One—The Nature of the Bible

Bahá'í Bible Study Part Two—The Image of God

Bahá'í Bible Study Part Three—Evil Concerns

Bahá'í Bible Study Part One—The Nature of the Bible

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PART ONE—THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

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FOREWORD

In March 2005, the Bahá'í Faith's supreme body, the Universal House of Justice, gave to the Bahá'í world an amazing document—one written on its behalf and under its supervision. That document is titled *One Common Faith*.

In that powerful mandate, the House of Justice portrays humanity as undergoing a “universal awakening” that “greatly enhances the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh's message”. It identifies that awakening with people's growing ability—“given the chance”—to see how all of “humanity's sacred texts . . . speak with one voice” in foretelling the coming of God's Kingdom.

And how may Bahá'ís offer people that chance? According to the House of Justice, we can and must do so by inviting others to “explore familiar scriptural passages through the eyes of Bahá'u'lláh”.

JoAnn Borovicka's *Bahá'í Bible Study* workshops do exactly that: They help every reader explore familiar scriptural terrain through Bahá'u'lláh's eyes. Unfamiliar terrain, too! The Old and New Testaments are vast. Their prose, written thousands of years ago, can daunt the modern reader. But Bahá'u'lláh Himself delivers many of His most important teachings in the form of biblical commentary, insightfully geared to the modern mind.

In *One Common Faith*, the House of Justice shows how Bahá'u'lláh's explanations of the Bible and the Qur'án “elevate discussion of religious issues above sectarian and transient considerations” once we ourselves “gain an in-depth understanding of the issues involved”. Its stated goal: “amplifying enormously the Bahá'í community's contribution to public discourse on what has become the most demanding issue facing humankind”—the oneness of religion. *The Bahá'í Bible Study* workshops are a step forward in this learning process.

Gary Matthews
Knoxville, Tennessee

INTRODUCTION

The *Bahá'í Bible Study* project was initiated in the year 2000 in response to requests from several Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith in who wanted to improve their ability to engage in uplifting religious dialogue with their Christian family and friends. The first workshop was held in Lydia, South Carolina; it was a lively dialogue with many joyful and insightful moments and, surprisingly, lots of tears.

In this first workshop certain needs came to light, including the need for greater skill and comfort in using the Bible itself. Although most participants grew up in or still attended Christian churches, and all owned at least one Bible, few were comfortable reading or finding their way around its pages. It became evident that certain knowledge about and skills in using the Bible needed to be gained. Another need that arose, apparently connected to old fears or past unfortunate experiences, was the need for the participants to demonstrate absolute respect for biblical Scripture; that is, there was a degree of easy cynicism about certain biblical stories and Christian beliefs, a cynicism that was not compatible with the absolute respect shown the Old and New Testament Scripture, and the Christian religion as a whole, by the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith. Both these needs were evident in subsequent workshops as well. In response, “Part One: The Nature of the Bible” was developed—it explores the unity of the Bahá'í Faith and Christianity, establishes the Bible as ancient Scripture revered in the Faith, engages the participants in an overview of the Bible as a collection of sacred books with stories familiar to them, and offers instruction and practice in using the Bible reference system.

Additional needs were identified. The oneness of the Manifestations of God was recognized as a basic principle of the Faith, yet many participants from Christian backgrounds harbored fears that in joining the Bahá'í community somehow they had turned their back on Jesus; there were a lot of unexpected feelings about this. *Part Two: The Image of God* addresses this need; in it the participants study and dialogue about the unique spiritual station of the Manifestation, the oneness of the historical appearances of the Manifestation, and the oneness of the Manifestations' names and titles. Bahá'í interpretations of prophecies regarding the “Return” and guidance concerning the “Resurrection” are also explored. Other topics of great interest involved the issue of evil including Satan, antichrist, false prophets, sin, and hell, and these are explored in “Part Three: Evil Concerns.”

Each individual workshop is designed to be completed by a small group in sixty to ninety minutes. The purpose of the entire *Bahá'í Bible Study* series is to:

- Empower the participants with knowledge concerning Bahá'í teachings on biblical topics.
- Cultivate familiarity with and love of the Bahá'í Writings and the Bible.
- Engage in uplifting dialogue about Bahá'í understandings concerning biblical topics.

This series, still a work in progress, is for anyone interested in learning the Bahá'í perspective on biblical topics. Basic knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith is helpful before engaging in the study.

1. THE BIBLE AS SACRED TEXT

KEY POINTS

- In the Bahá'í Faith, the Bible is understood as Scripture.
- The words of the Bible are true in substance.
- Apparent contradictions in biblical texts indicate that the content is meant to be understood metaphorically.

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1. Concerning the Bible, the Baha'i teachings state that, **“You must know the Old and New Testament as the Word of God.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 201)
 - a. To Bahá'ís, what is the Old Testament?
 - b. To Bahá'ís, what is the New Testament?
 2. An inscription written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a Bible states: **“THIS book is the Holy Book of God, of celestial inspiration. It is the Bible of Salvation, the Noble Gospel. It is the mystery of the Kingdom and its light. It is the Divine Bounty, the sign of the guidance of God.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London, p. 18)
 - a. What catches your attention in the above quote?
 - b. What do you think is meant by **“the mystery of the Kingdom and its light”**?
 - c. What are the five terms that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses to describe the Bible?
 3. **“During the devotional part of the Nineteen Day Feast any part of the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and the Master can be read, also from the Bible and Qur'an, as these are all Sacred Scriptures.”** (From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian, *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*, section 9.22)
 - a. Why can the Bible be read during the devotional portion of the Bahá'í Nineteen Day Feast?
 - b. How is Sacred Scripture different from ordinary literature?
 4. The Bahá'í Faith recognizes the Bible to be spiritually authentic teachings while also acknowledging that it has been affected by historical circumstances:

We cannot be sure of the authenticity, word for word, of any of the past Holy Scriptures except the Qur'an, as they were either not written down during the Prophet's lifetime or have been changed in the course of time and the originals lost (From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian, *Compilation of Compilations*, p. 21)

- a. What is meant by "word for word" authenticity?
- b. Why can't we be sure of the exact word for word authenticity of the Bible?

5. **"When 'Abdu'l-Baha 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."** (From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 495)

- a. Does every Bible verse have to be authenticated as the exact utterance of a Prophet for Bahá'ís to consider it Sacred Scripture?
- b. How can a story be perhaps fictional in detail but true in substance?

6. The House of Justice states, **"many passages in Sacred Scriptures are intended to be taken metaphorically, not literally, and some of the paradoxes and apparent contradictions which appear are intended to indicate this."** (Universal House of Justice, as quoted in "The Resurrection of Christ" Memorandum dated 14 September 1987, Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, p. 4)

- a. What do apparent contradictions in Sacred Scripture indicate?
- b. What does "metaphorical" mean?

7. In response to assertions that the teachings of Jesus Christ have been lost or changed, Bahá'u'lláh proclaims:

We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist amongst the Christians How grievously they have erred! How oblivious of the fact that such a statement imputeth the gravest injustice and tyranny to a gracious and loving Providence! How could God, when once the Day-star of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people . . . cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? What law could be their stay and guide? (Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 89)

- a. Who asserts that the genuine text of the Gospel does not exist among the Christians?
- b. Why has a loving Providence kept the Gospel from disappearing?

REVIEW

- a. What do the Bahá'í Writings say about the nature of the Bible?
- b. From a Bahá'í perspective, is every word of the Bible literally true?
- c. What are some of the historical circumstances that have affected the authenticity of the Bible?
- d. What Sacred Texts can be read in the devotional portion of the Nineteen Day Feast?

2. THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTIANITY

KEY POINTS

- The Founders of the world's religious systems are united in purpose and teaching.
- Bahá'ís distinguish between the Spirit of Christianity and church dogma.
- Divisions of Christianity originated from dogmatic imitation.
- While Bahá'ís believe in the Spirit of Christianity, there is no Christian church today whose dogma Bahá'ís can wholeheartedly embrace.



1. The Bahá'í teachings state the unity of the Founders and teachings of the world's religious systems:

The holy Manifestations Who have been the Sources or Founders of the various religious systems were united and agreed in purpose and teaching. Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are one in spirit and reality. Moreover, each Prophet fulfilled the promise of the One Who came before Him and, likewise, Each announced the One Who would follow.... It is evident, therefore, that the Holy Manifestations Who founded the religious systems are united and agreed; there is no differentiation possible in Their mission and teachings; all are reflectors of reality, and all are promulgators of the religion of God. The divine religion is reality, and reality is not multiple; it is one. Therefore, the foundations of the religious systems are one because all proceed from the indivisible reality. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 197)

- a. How do the Founders of the various religious systems relate to each other in purpose and in teaching?
- b. What do all the Founders of the various religious systems reflect?
- c. How can the foundations of the religious systems be one?

2. The Bahá'í Faith embraces the spirit of Christianity:

As to the position of Christianity, let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that its divine origin is unconditionally acknowledged, that the Sonship and Divinity of Jesus Christ are fearlessly asserted, [and] that the divine inspiration of the Gospel is fully recognized (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 109)

- a. What do Bahá'ís assert about Jesus Christ?
 - b. What do the Bahá'í Writings state about the origin of Christianity?
 - c. What do Bahá'ís fully recognize about the Gospel?
3. While the Bahá'í Faith embraces Christ it also distinguishes between the eternal reality of Christ and dogmatic imitations:

Jesus Christ – may my spirit be a sacrifice unto Him! – laid the foundation of eternal reality, but after His departure many sects and divisions appeared in Christianity. What was the cause of this? There is no doubt that they originated in dogmatic imitations, for the foundations of Christ were reality itself, in which no divergence exists. When imitations appeared, sects and denominations were formed. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 197)

- a. When did sects and divisions appear in Christianity?
 - b. What is the foundation of Christ?
 - c. What are dogmatic imitations?
4. Bahá'ís are instructed to distinguish between the spirit of Christianity and church dogma:

Our belief in Christ, as Bahá'ís, is so firm, so unshakable and so exalted in nature that very few Christians are to be found nowadays who love Him and reverence Him and have the faith in Him that we have. It is only from the dogmas and creeds of the churches that we dissociate ourselves; not from the spirit of Christianity. (A Letter Written on Behalf of the Guardian, *Lights of Divine Guidance*, p. 123)

- a. What do Bahá'ís dissociate from?
 - b. How would you describe the Bahá'í belief in Christ?
5. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* reports that thirty-three thousand eight hundred and thirty (33,830) divisions of Christianity had been identified in 2001 (www.Adherents.com).
- a. Examine a sample of some of these divisions as listed below.
 - b. What would you add to this sample?

Some of the Major Branches of Christianity

African indigenous Christian: Kimbanguist and over 10,000 other independent denominations

Catholic: Old Catholic, Aglipayan, Uniate, Roman Catholic, non-Latin Rite

Latter Day Saints: Mormons, Restoration, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, Community of Christ

Mennonite: Amish, Plain Churches

New Thought: Christian Science, Unity Church, Religious Science, Divine Science

Orthodox/Eastern: Chalcedonian, Nestorian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Jacobite, Syrian, Armenian, Greek

Pentecostal: Assemblies of God, Church of God, Church of God in Christ, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God

Protestant: United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, International Council of Community Churches, Lutheran, Baptist, Fundamentalist, Born-again, Evangelical

6. The following passage clarifies the relationship of the Baha'i Faith to the churches:

We, as Bahá'ís, can never be known as hypocrites or as people insincere in their protestations and because of this we cannot subscribe to both the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh and ordinary church dogma. The churches are waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ; we believe He has come again in the Glory of the Father. The churches teach doctrines – various ones in various creeds – which we as Bahá'ís do not accept; such as... confession, or, in some creeds, the denial of the Immaculate Conception. In other words there is no Christian church today whose dogmas we, as Bahá'ís can truthfully say we accept in their entirety – therefore to remain a member of the Church is not proper for us, for we do so under false pretenses. We should, therefore, withdraw from our churches but continue to associate, if we wish to, with the church members and ministers. (A Letter Written of Behalf of the Guardian, *Lights of Divine Guidance*, p. 123)

- a. What are the churches waiting for and how does this compare to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith?
- b. Why is it inappropriate for Bahá'ís be members of churches?
- c. Why do you think is the value of association with people of different

religious beliefs?

REVIEW

- a. Do Baha'is believe in Jesus Christ?
- b. What has caused divisions in Christianity?
- c. What do Baha'is dissociate from?
- d. If Baha'is believe in Jesus Christ, why don't they belong to Christian churches?

3. MYSTERIES UNRAVELLED

KEY POINTS

- For thousands of years the meanings of the words of the Prophets have been “sealed.”
- Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation contains interpretive guidance concerning mysteries in the Holy Books.
- Bahá'ís are called upon to know the significances of the mysteries of the Bible.



1. The Bahá'í Writings explain that the Bahá'í Revelation marks the end of the time of prophecy and the beginning of the era of fulfillment. Bahá'u'lláh said, **“The Prophetic Cycle hath, verily, ended. The Eternal Truth is now come. He hath lifted up the Ensign of Power, and is now shedding upon the world the unclouded splendor of His Revelation”** (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 60). One of the features of this era of fulfillment is that, **“The mysteries of the Holy Books have become explained in the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh. Before He appeared, these mysteries were not understood. Bahá'u'lláh opened and unsealed these mysteries”** (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 196).
 - a. What mysteries have become explained in the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh?
 - b. What has ended with the Bahá'í Revelation?
2. In the biblical Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, the prophet is inspired to declare that the words of the “book” are closed up and sealed till the “time of the end”:

And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation. . . . And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: . . . And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. (Daniel 12:1-4, 8-9, KJV)

- a. What was the answer to Daniel's request for an explanation of his prophetic vision?
 - b. What was Daniel told to do with the words and the Book?
 - c. When would the Books be opened and the words unsealed?
 - d. What is meant by "the time of the end"?
3. The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude), one of the major works of Bahá'u'lláh, is noted for fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel that the words will be unsealed at the time of the end:

Foremost among the priceless treasures cast forth from the billowing ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ranks the Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude), ... [This book] broke the "seals" of the "Book" referred to by Daniel, and disclosed the meaning of the "words" destined to remain "closed up" till the "time of the end." (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 138)

- a. What work of Bahá'u'lláh specifically broke the "seals" of the "Book" and disclosed the meaning of the "words" destined to remain "closed up" till the "time of the end"?
 - b. Why does Shoghi Effendi refer to the Kitáb-i-Íqán as a "priceless treasure"?
4. Summarizing the importance of the Kitáb-i-Íqán in relation to religious history, a Bahá'í historian writes:

Until the Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed, the significance of the Missions of all the Prophets of God, the purpose of Their Revelations and the true meaning of Their words had remained undisclosed. With the revelation of this book, the significance of the "words" which according to Daniel were "closed up and sealed till the time of the end" (Daniel 12:8) became apparent. The "seal" which Providence for thousands of years had placed upon the Holy Books of all religions was removed. (Taherzede, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 160)

- a. What has been disclosed with the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán?
 - b. What "seal" was removed in the Bahá'í Revelation?
5. By unsealing the Holy Books, the Kitáb-i-Íqán has laid the foundation for the unity of religion. Shoghi Effendi states:

Well it may be claimed that of all the books revealed by the

Author of the Bahá'í Revelation, this Book [the Kitáb-i-Íqán] alone, by sweeping away the age-long barriers that have so insurmountably separated the great religions of the world, has laid down a broad and unassailable foundation for the complete and permanent reconciliation of their followers. (God Passes By, p. 139)

- a. What evidence do you see that different interpretations of Sacred Scripture have acted as barriers between the world's great religions?
- b. What problems do these barriers cause?
- c. What do you see as the value in the complete and permanent reconciliation of the followers of the great religions?
- d. What can be accomplished by study of the Kitáb-i-Íqán?

6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Although in most of the states and cities of the United States, praise be to God, His [Bahá'u'lláh] fragrances are diffused, and souls unnumbered are turning their faces and advancing toward the Kingdom of God, yet in some of the states the Standard of Unity is not yet upraised as it should be, nor are the mysteries of the Holy Books, such as the Bible, the Gospel, and the Qur'án, unraveled. Through the concerted efforts of all the friends the Standard of Unity must needs be unfurled in those states, and the divine teachings promoted, so that these states may also receive their portion of the heavenly bestowals and a share of the Most Great Guidance. (Tablets of the Divine Plan, p. 27)

- a. What needs to be unraveled?
- b. Why should the divine teachings be promoted?
- c. Whose responsibility is it to promote the divine teachings of the Bahá'í Revelation?

7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

I beg of God through the confirmation and assistance of the True One thou mayest show the utmost eloquence, fluency, ability and skill in teaching the real significance of the Bible. Turn toward the Kingdom of ABHA and seek the bounty of the Holy Spirit. Loosen the tongue and the confirmation of the Spirit shall reach thee. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá volume 2, p. 243)

- a. In what should Bahá'ís show eloquence, fluency, ability, and skill?

b. How can one become informed about the significance of the Bible?

REVIEW

- a. What mysteries have become explained in the Bahá'í Revelation?
- b. What book has laid the foundation for the reconciliation of the religions?
- c. Of what value are the Bahá'í Writings in efforts to understand more about the Bible?

4. TWOFOLD LANGUAGE

KEY POINTS

- One of the keys that unlocks the mysteries of the Bible is the principle of the two-fold language of Scripture.
- Two-fold language refers to the unveiled (literal) and veiled (symbolic) meanings in Scripture.
- Jesus Christ and the Apostles model spiritual interpretation of Scripture.



1. Bahá'u'lláh states that Scripture is characterized by a two-fold language:

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. The other language is veiled and concealed, . . . In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: “Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people.” (Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 254)

- a. What are the two languages of Scripture?
 - b. Which of the two languages of Scripture requires spiritual interpretation?
2. Referring to stories in the Book of Genesis, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, **“The texts of the Holy Books are all symbolical, needing authoritative interpretation”** (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* p. 219). A logical question concerning the symbolic interpretation of Scripture is: “The Bahá’í teachings interpret much of the Bible symbolically, but is this practice in agreement with the teachings of Christ?” Study of the Gospels reveals that Christ and His Apostles consistently interpret the Old Testament symbolically to explain the *spiritual* meaning of that Scripture, thereby giving biblical authority and example for the symbolic interpretation of the words of the Bible. For example, Old Testament prophecy states that the Lord would come **“by fire and by His sword”** (Isaiah 66:16) and defeat God’s enemies (Isaiah 66:6, KJV). Although Jesus never had a literal sword, He did claim to come with a sword. The Gospel of Matthew attributes this verse to Christ: **“I came not to send peace, but a sword”** (Matt 10:34, KJV). Only a spiritual interpretation allows for the fulfillment of this prophecy. St. Paul describes the spiritual interpretation of sword as **“the sword of the**

Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17, KJV).

- a. What requires authoritative interpretation?
 - b. In what way did Jesus Christ fulfill Isaiah’s sword prophecy?
3. Throughout the Gospels many events are recorded where Jesus confronts those who interpret His teachings literally instead of symbolically (spiritually). For example, read chapter three verses one through eleven from the Gospel of John:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto Him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. Nicodemus answered and said unto Him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? (John 3:1-11, KJV)

- a. How did Nicodemus first understand “born again?”
 - b. What did Jesus describe as the symbolic meaning of “born again?”
 - c. In what way is “born again” a spiritual reality?
 - d. Identify where Jesus chastises Nicodemus for his literal interpretation of “born again.”
4. Another example of Jesus correcting the literal understanding of His words is found in chapter sixteen of the Gospel of Matthew. In this story, Jesus warns His disciples to **“beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”** Literally, leaven is an ingredient that is used in making bread. In this case Jesus was using the word leaven to symbolize the doctrines (spiritual food) of the Jewish religious leaders. The disciples, however, thought Jesus was telling them not to eat the literal bread offered by the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus corrects their understanding:

And when his disciples were come to the other side [of the river], they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees

and of the Sadducees. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have taken no bread. Which when Jesus perceived, he said unto them, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? ...How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. (Matt 16:5-12, KJV)

- a. How did Jesus respond to His disciples when they took His words literally?
 - b. What did the disciples finally understand?
 - c. How do you think the doctrine of the Jewish religious leaders could have been harmful to Christ's disciples?
5. Studying the authoritative interpretation of the symbolism in the Bible is a step toward unity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá counsels that:

All the texts and teachings of the holy Testaments have intrinsic spiritual meanings. They are not to be taken literally. I, therefore, pray in your behalf that you may be given the power of understanding these inner real meanings of the Holy Scriptures and may become informed of the mysteries deposited in the words of the Bible so that you may attain eternal life and that your hearts may be attracted to the Kingdom of God.... (Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 458)

- a. Of what should we become informed?
- b. Where can one find authoritative interpretation of the Bible?
- c. What is the outcome of understanding the inner meanings of the Holy Scriptures?
- d. Which texts and teachings of the holy Testaments have intrinsic spiritual meanings?

REVIEW

- a. What is the two-fold language of Scripture?
- b. What is the difference between literal and spiritual interpretations of Scripture?
- c. Where in the Bible can we find examples of Jesus Christ modeling spiritual interpretation of Scripture? The Apostle Paul?

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION

KEY POINTS

- Expectations for the literal fulfillment of Messianic prophecies resulted in the rejection of Jesus Christ.
- The purpose of Old Testament prophecy is in its symbolic significance, not its literal meaning.
- Jesus Christ fulfilled the Messianic prophecies in a spiritual, not a literal sense.



1. For some, the rejection of Christ demonstrated the error of a literal interpretation of Scripture:

When Christ appeared, the Jews rejected Him, although they were expecting His manifestation and in their temples and synagogues were crying and lamenting, saying, “O God, hasten the coming of the Messiah!” Why did they deny Him when He announced Himself? Because they had followed ancestral forms and interpretations and were blind to the reality of Christ. They had not perceived the inner significances of the Holy Bible. They voiced their objections, saying, “We are expecting Christ, but His coming is conditioned upon certain fulfillments and prophetic announcements” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 198).

- a. What were people praying for at the time of Christ?
- b. Why did many people deny that Jesus Christ was the Messiah?

2. Read this selection of Messianic prophecies described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The Old Testament references are listed:

When Christ came they denounced and slew Him, saying: “This is not the One for whom we wait. Behold when the Messiah shall come, signs and wonders [Is 8:17-18] shall testify that He is in truth the Christ. We know the signs and conditions, and they have not appeared.

_____The Messiah will arise out of an unknown city. [John 7:27]

___ **He shall sit upon the throne of David, [Is 9:7]**

___ **and behold, He shall come with a sword of steel, [Is 66:15-16]**

___ **and with a sceptre of iron shall He rule! [Is 10:34]**

___ **He shall fulfill the law of the Prophets, [Is 42:21]**

___ **He shall conquer the East and the West, [Zech 8:7]**

___ **and shall glorify His chosen people the Jews. [Jer 30:18]**

___ **He shall bring with Him a reign of peace, during which even the animals shall cease to be at enmity with man.” [Is 11:6] (*Paris Talks*, p. 54, spacing and references added)**

- a. Check the Messianic prophecies above that are familiar to you.
 - b. What surprises you in this list?
 - c. What do you think it means to “fulfill the law of the Prophets”?
 - d. What do you think it means to “conquer East and West”?
3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that many who rejected Christ presented arguments such as:

“Among the signs of His appearance is one that He shall come from an unknown place, whereas now this claimant of Messiahship has come from Nazareth. We know his home, and we are acquainted with his mother.

“Second, one of the signs or Messianic conditions is that His scepter would be an iron rod, and this Christ has not even a wooden staff.

“Third, He was to be seated upon the throne of David, whereas this Messianic king is in the utmost state of poverty and has not even a mat.

“Fourth, He was to conquer the East and the West. This person has not even conquered a village. How can he be the Messiah?

“Fifth, He was to promulgate the laws of the Bible. This one has not only failed to promulgate the laws of the Bible, but he has broken the law of the Sabbath.

“Sixth, the Messiah was to gather together all the Jews who

were scattered in Palestine and restore them to honor and prestige, but this one has degraded the Jews instead of uplifting them.

"Seventh, during His sovereignty even the animals were to enjoy blessings and comfort, for according to the prophetic texts, He should establish peace to such a universal extent that the eagle and quail would live together, the lion and deer would feed in the same meadow, the wolf and lamb would lie down in the same pasture. In the human kingdom warfare was to cease entirely; spears would be turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares. Now we see in the day of this would-be Messiah such injustice prevails that even he himself is sacrificed. How could he be the promised Christ?" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 198)

- a. What are seven arguments against Christ as the coming of the Messiah?
- b. What catches your attention in these arguments?

4. Literal expectations resulted in many peoples' denial of Jesus the Christ.

All the words of the prophets were fulfilled, but because the Jews held tenaciously to hereditary interpretations, they did not understand the inner meanings of the Holy Bible; therefore, they denied Jesus Christ, the Messiah. The purpose of the prophetic words was not the outward or literal meaning, but the inner symbolical significance. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 199)

- a. Why were the inner meanings of the Jewish Scriptures misunderstood at the time of Jesus Christ?
- b. What is the purpose of the prophetic words?
- c. What is symbolism?

5. What do you think is the symbolic (spiritual) significance of the Messianic prophecies listed below?

- a. Will come from an unknown place
- b. Will have a sword of iron
- c. Will be seated on the throne of David
- d. Will conquer East and West
- e. Will promulgate the laws of the Bible
- f. Will establish universal peace

6. Compare your ideas with the following interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:
- a. **“The Messiah was to come from an unknown place. This did not refer to the birthplace of the physical body of Jesus. It has reference to the reality of the Christ — that is to say, the Christ reality was to appear from the invisible realm — for the divine reality of Christ is holy and sanctified above place.**
 - b. **“His sword was to be a sword of iron. This signified His tongue which should separate the true from the false and by which He would conquer the kingdom of hearts.**
 - c. **“He was seated upon the throne of David, but His sovereignty was neither a Napoleonic sovereignty nor the vanishing dominion of a Pharaoh. The Christ Kingdom was everlasting, eternal in the heaven of the divine Will.**
 - d. **“By His promulgating the laws of the Bible the reality of the law of Moses was meant. The Sinaitic law is the foundation of the reality of Christianity. Christ promulgated it and gave it higher, spiritual expression.**
 - e. **“He conquered and subdued the East and West. His conquest was effected through the breaths of the Holy Spirit, which eliminated all boundaries and shone from all horizons.**
 - f. **“The wolf and the lamb were to drink from the same fountain. This was realized in Christ. The fountain referred to was the Gospel, from which the water of life gushes forth. The wolf and lamb are opposed and divergent races symbolized by these animals. Their meeting and association were impossible, but having become believers in Jesus Christ those who were formerly as wolves and lambs became united through the words of the Gospel.”** (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 199, spacing and numeration added)

REVIEW

- a. What are some of the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah?
- b. Give some examples of literal interpretation of these prophecies.
- c. How does the New Testament demonstrate that strict literal interpretation of Scripture caused many to deny Jesus the Christ?
- d. How were the Messianic prophecies fulfilled with the coming of Christ?

6. Practical Bible Skills

KEY POINTS

- The Bible is divided into two major sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- Individual books of the Bible can be found easily by using the Bible's Table of Contents.
- The Biblical reference system uses three identifiers: name of book, chapter number and verse number.

You will need a Bible to complete the work in this section.



1. There are many versions of the Bible. These include different translations such as the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the American Standard Version and the New International Version. There are also paraphrased versions such as The Living Bible that update phrases and use a looser, more familiar writing style. The name of the version of a Bible can usually be found on the outer cover, the cover page, or the spine of the book. Find the version of the Bible you are using.
2. For the purposes of this course, we will examine the King James Version which is a traditional Protestant version of the Bible. The King James Version of the Bible is composed of sixty-six books.¹ These books are divided into two sections: the Old Testament which has thirty-nine books and the New Testament which has twenty-seven books.
 - a. How many books are in the King James Version of the Bible?
 - b. How many books are in the Old Testament?
 - c. How many books are in the New Testament?
3. Most Bibles have a table of contents in the introductory pages that lists the names of the books it contains and the page numbers where these books can be found. Bibles may arrange the table of contents in different ways. It is important to be familiar with the table of contents in your Bible so that you can use it with ease. In order to familiarize yourself with how your Bible's table of contents is arranged, examine it through the following exercise.

¹ There has never been 100% consensus in the Christian world as to exactly what books should be included in the Bible, therefore you may have or come across Bibles with more than sixty-six books, or Bibles that name some of the books somewhat differently.

- a. Find the table of contents in the introductory pages of your Bible.
- b. Examine your table of contents and bookmark it so that you can find it easily as you do the exercises in this workbook.
- c. Read the following ways that a Bible's table of contents might be arranged and check all that apply to table of contents in your Bible.

The Table of Contents in My Bible

Old Testament

- Lists the books of the Old Testament in sequential order (starts with Genesis and ends with Malachi)
- Lists the books of the Old Testament in alphabetical order (starts with Amos and ends with Zephaniah)

New Testament

- Lists the books of the New Testament in sequential order (starts with Matthew and ends with Revelation)
- Lists the books of the New Testament in alphabetical order (starts with Acts and ends with Titus)

Old and New Testaments

- Lists all the books of the Old and New Testaments together in alphabetical order (starts with Acts and ends with Zephaniah)
- Lists all the books of the Old and New Testaments together in sequential order (starts with Genesis and ends with Revelation)

4. To look up Bible verses, one needs to know about the Bible reference system. The reference system uses three identifiers: name of book, chapter number, and verse number. For example, the biblical reference "Proverbs 2:6" indicates the Book of Proverbs, chapter two, verse six. Find Proverbs 2:6 in your Bible by following these directions.
 - a. Open your Bible to the table of contents.
 - b. Find the page number for the Book of Proverbs (Old Testament).
 - c. Turn to the Book of Proverbs in your Bible.
 - d. Notice the large numbers that indicate chapters in that book. Find chapter 2 in the Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 2).
 - e. Verses in the chapter are labeled with smaller numbers. A verse may be a sentence or a part of a sentence. Find verse six in the second chapter of the Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 2:6).

The verse you found should be the same or similar to this: "For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding"

(Proverbs 2:6, KJV).

5. Different versions of the Bible may translate words differently. This is okay. Reading different versions of one verse often helps with understanding. For example, read these four versions of John 6:63 (The Gospel of John, chapter six, verse sixty three.)

King James Version: **“It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”** (John 6:63, KJV)

Amplified Version: **“It is the Spirit Who gives life [He is the Life-giver]; the flesh conveys no benefit whatever [there is no profit in it]. The words (truths) that I have been speaking to you are spirit and life.”** (John 6:63, AV)

New American Standard Version: **“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”** (John 6:63, NASV)

New International Version: **“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”** (John 6:63, NIV)

- a. What are some of the differences between these four versions?
- b. Which version do you prefer? Why?

REVIEW

- a. Of what is the Bible composed?
- b. What are the two main divisions of the Bible?
- d. What version is your Bible?
- e. What are the three identifiers in the Bible reference system?

7. THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES

KEY POINTS

- The first five books of the Old Testament are traditionally called the Five Books of Moses.
- Genesis and Exodus contain many well-known stories.
- Spiritual and social laws are found in all of these books.
- Spiritual laws are eternal. Social laws are specific to time and place.
- Stories in the Torah have spiritual and sometimes literal meaning.

You will need a Bible to complete the work in this section.



1. The first five books of the Old Testament are traditionally called the Five Books of Moses; they are also called the Torah (Hebrew for “teachings”) or the Pentateuch (Greek for “five scrolls”). Find the Five Books of Moses in the table of contents of your Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
2. The Books of Genesis and Exodus, contain many well-known stories. Read the following selection of highlights from Genesis and Exodus. Check those that are familiar to you and circle those that you would like to research in the future.

Highlights from Genesis and Exodus

- ___ The Story of Creation (Genesis 1:1–2:3)
- ___ Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:7-3:24)
- ___ Cain and Abel (Genesis 4)
- ___ Noah’s Ark (Genesis 6–9)
- ___ The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9)
- ___ Abraham’s Sacrifice of His Son (Gen 22:1–9)
- ___ How Jacob Tricks Esau (Gen 25:19–34; 27)
- ___ Jacob’s Ladder (Genesis 27:42–28:22)
- ___ Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors (Genesis 37)
- ___ Pharaoh’s Dreams (Genesis 39–41)

____ Moses and the Burning Bush (Exodus 1–4)

____ The Israelites Escape from Egypt (Exodus 5–14)

____ The Ten Commandments (Exodus 19–24)

____ The Golden Calf (Exodus 32–34)

a. Share what you marked with your partner or group and explain what caught your interest.

3. All of the books of the Torah contain Mosaic Laws, both spiritual and social. In the following passages 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the nature of spiritual laws:

The divine religions embody two kinds of ordinances. First, there are those which constitute essential, or spiritual, teachings of the Word of God. These are faith in God, the acquirement of the virtues . . . , praiseworthy moralities, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences – in brief, the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics. This is the fundamental aspect of the religion of God, and this is of the highest importance because knowledge of God is the fundamental requirement of man. . . . This is the essential foundation of all the divine religions, the reality itself, common to all. Abraham promulgated this; Moses proclaimed it. Christ and all the Prophets upheld this standard and aspect of divine religion.
(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 403)

- a. What is an example of an eternal spiritual law of God?
- b. What is the fundamental aspect of the religion of God?
- c. What is the fundamental requirement of man?
- d. What did Christ and all the Prophets uphold?

4. Unlike spiritual laws that are eternal, social laws are temporary because they change according to the needs of time and place:

Second, there are laws and ordinances which are temporary and nonessential. These concern human transactions and relations. They are accidental and subject to change according to the exigencies of time and place. These ordinances are neither permanent nor fundamental. . . .

For example, . . . during the time of the Abrahamic

Prophethood it was considered allowable, because of a certain exigency, that a man should marry his aunt, even as was lawful and expedient for a man to marry his own sister, even as Abel, Cain and Seth, the sons of Adam, married their sisters. But in the law of the Pentateuch revealed by Moses these marriages were forbidden and their custom and sanction abrogated. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 403, 365)

- a. What is an example of a religious law that has changed over time?
- c. What is the difference between social laws and spiritual laws?

5. All of the books of the Torah contain social as well as spiritual laws. For example, the Book of Leviticus prescribes hundreds of laws for sacrificial atonement in the event of sin. The need of the heart to recognize guilt, make restitution for wrong-doing, and to humbly appeal to Divinity for forgiveness is based on eternal spiritual law; the manner in which one prays to Divinity for forgiveness—in the case of the Old Testament including animal sacrifice—is based on temporary social laws.

- a. Read this passage from the Book of Leviticus (meaning “book for the Levites”).

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: When any of you sin and commit a trespass against the LORD by deceiving a neighbor in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbor, or have found something lost and lied about it—if you swear falsely regarding any of the various things that one may do and sin thereby— when you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt. And you shall bring to the priest, as your guilt offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the LORD, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and incur guilt thereby. (Leviticus 6:1-7)

- b. What two things does the Mosaic social law prescribe for deceiving a neighbor?
- c. Why is the need to realize guilt, make restitution, and pray for forgiveness related to spiritual law?

6. For another example of a Mosaic law, read Numbers 15:32–36 in your Bible.
- In the Mosaic law, what was the punishment for breaking the Sabbath?
 - What catches your attention in the Numbers 15:32–36 passage?
 - Is the Mosaic Sabbath law a social or a spiritual law? Why?

7. The fourth Book of Moses is called Numbers because it describes the way the tribes of Israel were counted in a census. It also relays stories of the Israelites' thirty-eight years of wandering in their journey to the Promised Land. The story of the journey to the Promised Land contains examples of the twofold language of scripture because the story has both spiritual and literal meaning. Concerning this journey, the Bahá'í teachings explain that:

It was both spiritual and physical. They journeyed to the Promised Land and geography and history both prove that this was a physical journey. The crossing of the Red Sea has a spiritual meaning. It was a spiritual journey, through and above the sea of corruption and iniquity of the Pharaoh and his people, or army. By the help of God through Moses, the Israelites were able to cross this sea safely and reach the Promised Land (spiritual state) while Pharaoh and his people were drowned in their own corruption. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 499)

- What proves that the Israelites' journey was, at some time in history, a physical journey?
 - What is the spiritual meaning of the story of the crossing of the Red Sea ?
8. The fifth Book of Moses is called Deuteronomy meaning “the law repeated.” True to its name, it reviews Mosaic ordinances. One of these is the law of “an eye for an eye” that commands punishment equal to the crime: **“And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”** (Deuteronomy 19:21). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the apparent harshness of the Mosaic Law:

Laws embodying drastic punishments were enacted by Moses—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. . . . These laws and penalties were applicable to the people of that period, who dwelt in the wilderness and desert under conditions where severity was necessary and justifiable. But in the time of Jesus

Christ this kind of law was not expedient; therefore, Christ abrogated and superseded the commands of Moses. (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 106)

- a. Why was drastic punishment required at the time of Moses?
- b. What is one of the laws of Moses that Christ abrogated (changed)?
- c. Is the law of “an eye for an eye” a social law or a spiritual law?

REVIEW

- a. What is the Torah?
- b. What are the two kinds of religious laws?
- c. What is an example from the Bible of how religious laws change according to the needs of the time?

8. Books of History

KEY POINTS

- The twelve books following the Torah are traditionally grouped as the Books of History.
- The Books of History describe the rulers, conquerors, conditions, and movements of the tribes of Israel.
- One of the spiritual themes of these stories is the cycle of glory and degradation experienced by humanity by alternately obeying and disobeying divine laws.

You will need a Bible to complete the work in this section.



1. Following the Books of Moses are twelve books traditionally grouped as biblical history.
 - a. Find these books in your Bible's table of contents: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.²
 - b. Read these highlights from the Books of History. Check the stories that are familiar to you and circle those which you would like to research in the future.

Highlights from the Books of History

___ God gives Joshua instructions (Joshua 1:1–9)

___ Samson and Delilah (Judges: 16:18–22)

___ Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:1–18)

___ David & Goliath (1 Samuel 17:41–49)

___ King David's reign over Israel (II Samuel 7:24–29)

² The Books of Samuel and Kings are sometimes titled 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 3 Kings, and 4 Kings.

___ King Solomon's Temple is built (I Kings 6:11–22)

___ Nebuchadnezzar invades the Holy Land (II Kings 25:8–13)

___ Genealogy of the Israelites (1 Chronicles. 1:1–16)

___ Historical review of Israel including details of the initial building of Solomon's Temple (II Chronicles 3:1–14)

___ King Cyrus of Persia orders the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple (Ezra 1:1–4)

___ Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:11–20)

___ The story of Purim – the salvation of the Jews in Persia (Esther 8:3–8)

3. In a brief summary of the Books of History, 'Abdu'l-Baha describes how these stories illustrate the cycle of glory and degradation that comes from alternately obeying and disobeying the laws of God:

In brief, Moses – upon Whom be peace! – founded the law of God, purified the morals of the people of Israel and gave them an impetus toward nobler and higher attainments. But after the departure of Moses, following the decline of the glory of Solomon's era and during the reign of Jeroboam there came a great change in this nation. The high ethical standards and spiritual perfections ceased to exist. Conditions and morals became corrupt, religion was debased, and the perfect principles of the Mosaic law were obscured in superstition and polytheism. War and strife arose among the tribes, and their unity was destroyed. The followers of Jeroboam declared themselves rightful and valid in kingly succession, and the supporters of Rehoboam made the same claim. Finally, the tribes were torn asunder by hostility and hatred, the glory of Israel was eclipsed, and so complete was the degradation that a golden calf was set up as an object of worship in the city of Tyre. Thereupon God sent Elijah, the prophet, who redeemed the people, renewed the law of God and established an era of new life for Israel. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 406)

- a. Read 1 Kings 12:24-32 in your Bible and find out why, according to this story, King Jeroboam wanted to distract the people from their Lord.
- b. What do you think are some examples of modern-day golden calves?

4. 'Abdu'l-Baha continues:

History shows a still later change and transformation when this oneness and solidarity were followed by another dispersion of the tribes. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, invaded the Holy Land and carried away captive seventy thousand Israelites to Chaldea, where the greatest reverses, trials and suffering afflicted these unfortunate people. Then the prophets of God again reformed and reestablished the law of God, and the people in their humiliation again followed it. This resulted in their liberation, and under the edict of Cyrus, King of Persia, there was a return to the Holy City. Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon were rebuilt, and the glory of Israel was restored. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 406)

- a. According to the above passage, who brought on the liberation of the Israelites?
 - b. What roles do humility and humiliation play in the cycle of spiritual glory and degradation?
 - c. What is the difference between humility and humiliation?
6. To get an idea of the invasion of the Holy Land by Nebuchadnezzar, read 2 Kings 25:8-21 in your Bible.
- a. What catches your attention in these verses?
 - b. How would you describe the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar?

7. The story of glory and degradation continues:

[The glory of Israel] lasted but a short time; the morality of the people declined, and conditions reached an extreme degree until the Roman general Titus took Jerusalem and razed it to its foundations. Pillage and conquest completed the desolation; Palestine became a waste and wilderness, and the Jews fled from the Holy Land of their ancestors. The cause of this disintegration and dispersion was the departure of Israel from the foundation of the law of God revealed by Moses—namely, the acquisition of divine virtues, morality, love, the

development of arts and sciences and the spirit of the oneness of humanity. (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 406)

- a. What caused the disintegration?
- b. What causes oneness and solidarity?
- c. In a spiritual sense, how are these stories relevant to you today?

REVIEW

- a. What are the twelve books of the Bible that follow the Torah?
- b. What kinds of stories are in these books?
- c. How is the cycle of glory and degradation demonstrated in the Books of History?

9. The Books of Poetic Writings

KEY POINTS

- Five books traditionally grouped as Poetic Writings follow the biblical Books of History.
- Many of the poetic writings of the Bible are quoted in classical and modern literature.
- The Bahá'í teachings point out some of the eternal spiritual truths hidden in the poetic writings.

You will need a Bible to complete the work in this section



1. Five books following the biblical Books of History are traditionally grouped as Poetic Writings.
 - a. Find the five Books of Poetic Writings in the table of contents of your Bible: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.
 - b. Read these brief excerpts, check the verses that are familiar to you, and circle those that you would like to research in the future.

Excerpts from the Books of Poetic Writings

____ **“The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.”** (Job 1:21, KJV)

____ **“The Lord is my shepherd.”** (Psalms 23:1, KJV)

____ **“Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”**
(Proverbs 16:18, KJV)

____ **“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.”** (Ecclesiastes 1:2, KJV)

____ **“The voice of my beloved! Behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.”** (Song of Solomon 2:8, KJV)

2. The Book of Job deals with the problem of suffering, particularly the suffering of the righteous. It is recognized as one of the greatest literary productions of all times and has been designated an epic-drama. Although its date and author are uncertain, many biblical scholars believe it to be the oldest composition in the Bible, possibly belonging to the patriarchal era. The Book is named after its chief character who is presented as a generous and God-fearing man whose faith is tested as his wealth is stolen, his home

destroyed and his children killed – all in one day. His faith is tested further as he loses his health and is “smote with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown” (Job 2:7).

- a. Read Job 1:13–22 in your Bible.
- b. How does Job respond to the death of his family?

3. There are several references to the story of Job in the Bahá’í Writings. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

“Reflect upon his holiness Job: What trials, calamities and perplexities did he not endure! But these tests were like unto the fire and his holiness Job was like unto pure gold. Assuredly gold is purified by being submitted to the fire and if it contains any alloy or imperfection, it will disappear. That is the reason why violent tests become the cause of the everlasting glory of the righteous and are conducive to the destruction and disappearance of the unrighteous.” (Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 654)

- a. Describe a spiritual truth contained in the epic-drama of Job.
- b. If the story of Job is fictional, why is it still an important work?

4. The Book of Psalms is a collection of one hundred and fifty sacred songs and poems written by many authors. It includes prayers for thanksgiving, praise and forgiveness. There are also psalms that portray the coming of the Messiah and the glory of the spiritual kingdom.

- a. Read Psalm 23, one of the many psalms attributed to the prophet King David:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. (Psalms 23:1–6, KJV)

- b. Name what you think may be some of the spiritual meanings of these

words in Psalm 23:

- Shepherd
- Green pastures
- Thy rod
- Thy staff

5. The Book of Proverbs is an ancient collection of proverbs (“mashal” in Hebrew); that is, common sense wisdom stated in a very short and to-the-point form.

- a. To get a sense of the Book of Proverbs, read Proverbs 17:1–6.
- b. Which of these proverbs do you think would be most useful to have memorized?

6. The Book of Ecclesiastes (also called “The Preacher”) is often described as a philosophical investigation of life.

- a. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–9 in your Bible.
- b. What do you find most valuable in these verses?

7. The book entitled the Song of Solomon is just what it describes – a song attributed to King Solomon. Although it appears to tell of a human love story, the Bahá’í Writings remind us to look for the spiritual meanings in the verses:

The divine Words are not to be taken according to their outer sense. They are symbolical and contain realities of spiritual meaning. For instance, in the book of Solomon's songs you will read about the bride and bridegroom. It is evident that the physical bride and bridegroom are not intended. Obviously, these are symbols conveying a hidden and inner significance . . . These are the mysteries of God. It is not the reading of the words that profits you; it is the understanding of their meanings. Therefore, pray God that you may be enabled to comprehend the mysteries of the divine Testaments. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 459)

- a. How can one profit from the looking for the spiritual meanings in the words of Scripture?
- b. Read Song of Solomon 2:10–14.
- c. What do you think are some of the spiritual meanings of the following words in those verses?
 - Winter
 - Rain

- Time of the singing of the birds

REVIEW

- a. What are the Books of Poetic Writings in the Bible?
- b. Which of these books is your favorite?
- c. What are some spiritual truths contained in these books?

10. THE BOOKS OF PROPHECY

KEY POINTS

- The final seventeen books of the Old Testament are traditionally grouped as the Books of Prophecy.
- The Baha'i Revelation contains interpretative guidance concerning some of the symbolism in biblical prophecy.
- The sun, moon, and star images in prophecy have many meanings that include the visible universe as well as symbolic references to the Manifestations of God, religious leaders, and religious laws.

You will need a Bible to complete the work in this section.



1. The final books of the Old Testament are the seventeen Books of Prophecy. Except for the Book of Lamentations, these books are named after the prophets to whom authorship is traditionally attributed.
 - a. Find the Books of Prophecy in the table of contents of your Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.
 - b. Read the following selection of verses from some of the Books of Prophecy. Check those that are familiar to you and circle those that you would like to read in the future.

Excerpts from the Books of Prophecy

____ **“And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”** (Isaiah 2:4, KJV)

____ **“I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”** (Jeremiah 31:33, KJV)

____ **“I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you...and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”** (Ezekiel 11:19–20, KJV)

____ **“And I will give . . . the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth.”** (Hosea 2:15, KJV)

____ **“The heavens shall tremble: the sun and the moon shall be dark, and the stars shall withdraw their shining.”** (Joel 2:10, KJV)

____ **“The Lord will roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the habitations of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel shall wither.”** (Amos 1:2, KJV)

____ **“In that day also he shall come even to thee from Assyria, and from the fortified cities, and from the fortress even to the river, and from sea to sea, and from mountain to mountain.”** (Micah 1:12, KJV)

____ **“The great day of the Lord is near, . . . a day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers.”** (Zephaniah 1:15–16, KJV)

____ **“And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts.”** (Haggai 2:7, KJV)

____ **“And the Lord shall be King over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and His Name one.”** (Zechariah 14:9, KJV)

3. Celestial images are often found in biblical prophecy. For the remainder of this section we will study a selection from the Kitáb-i-Íqán in which Bahá'u'lláh describes many of the meanings of the words “sun”, “moon”, and “stars” as used in prophecy. Bahá'u'lláh states:

And now, concerning His words – “The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give light, and the stars shall fall from heaven.” By the terms “sun” and “moon,” mentioned in the writings of the Prophets of God, is not meant solely the sun and moon of the visible universe. Nay rather, manifold are the meanings they have intended for these terms. In every instance they have attached to them a particular significance. Thus, by the “sun” in one sense is meant those Suns of Truth Who rise from the dayspring of ancient glory, and fill the world with a liberal effusion of grace from on high. These Suns of Truth are the universal Manifestations of God.... It is the warmth that these Luminaries of God generate, and the undying fires they kindle, which cause the light of the love of God to burn fiercely in the heart of humanity. It is through

the abundant grace of these Symbols of Detachment that the Spirit of life everlasting is breathed into the bodies of the dead.
(Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 33)

- a. How many meanings are there for “sun” and “moon?”
 - b. Who are the Suns of Truth and how are They like the sun of the visible universe?
4. The terms “sun,” “moon,” and “stars” have additional meanings. Bahá'u'lláh explains:

“In another sense, by these terms is intended the divines of the former Dispensation, who live in the days of the subsequent Revelations, and who hold the reins of religion in their grasp. If these divines be illumined by the light of the latter Revelation they will be acceptable unto God, and will shine with a light everlasting. Otherwise, they will be declared as darkened, even though to outward seeming they be leaders of men.” (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 36)

- a. How are the divines (religious leaders) like the stars?
 - b. When will the divines be declared as darkened?
 - c. When will the divines be acceptable to God?
4. **“In another sense, by the terms ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ are meant such laws and teachings as have been established and proclaimed in every Dispensation, such as the laws of prayer and fasting”** (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 38). Bahá'u'lláh explains further that:

In all Dispensations the law of prayer hath constituted a fundamental element of the Revelation of all the Prophets of God – a law the form and the manner of which hath been adapted to the varying requirements of every age. Inasmuch as every subsequent Revelation hath abolished the manners, habits, and teachings that have been clearly, specifically, and firmly established by the former Dispensation, these have accordingly been symbolically expressed in terms of “sun” and “moon.” (Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 39)

- a. How is prayer and fasting like the sun and moon?
- b. What is an example of how the laws of prayer and fasting have changed from one dispensation to the next?
- c. Why do you think the laws of prayer and fasting change over time?

6. In conclusion, Bahá'u'lláh states that:

“Hence, it is clear and manifest that by the words “the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven” is intended the waywardness of the divines, and the annulment of laws firmly established by divine Revelation, all of which, in symbolic language, have been foreshadowed by the Manifestation of God.” (Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 41)

- a. When is a religious leader like a fallen star?
- b. How is the annulment of the previous laws of prayer and fasting like a darkened sun and moon?

REVIEW

- a. What are the biblical Books of Prophecy?
- b. What do the Bahá'í Writings state are the meanings of the various celestial images found in biblical prophecy?

11. FOUR GOSPELS AND ONE SEQUEL

KEY POINTS

- The first books of the New Testament are the four Gospels and the Book of Acts.
- There are many miracle stories in the Gospels and the Book of Acts.
- Miracle stories are often symbolic of the eternal spiritual healing effected by Christ's Revelation.
- The Bahá'í teachings present authoritative interpretations of the symbolism in many miracle stories.

You will need a Bible to complete the work in this section.



1. After about a 400-year interval from the time of the last book of the Old Testament, the New Testament begins. The first four books of the New Testament are called Gospels. They are accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and are named after the disciples to whom they are traditionally credited. The fifth book, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (typically shortened to "Acts") is widely considered a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. It describes how the disciples of Christ carried on His ministry in their travel teaching and serves as a historical link between the life of Jesus as described in the Gospels and the proclamation of the disciples in the Epistles.
 - a. Find the Gospels and the Book of Acts in the table of contents in your Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts of the Apostles.
 - b. Listed below are several quotes from the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Check the quotations that are familiar to you and circle those that you would like to research in the future.

Quotations from the Gospels and the Book of Acts

____ **"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."** (Matthew 33:17, KJV)

____ **"Get thee behind me, Satan."** (Luke 4:8, KJV)

____ **"Take, eat: this is my body."** (Mark 14:22, KJV)

____ **"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."** (Mark 12:17, KJV)

____ **"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."** (John 16:12, KJV)

_____ **“Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.”** (Matt 6:74, KJV)

_____ **“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”** (Luke 22:34, KJV)

_____ **“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”** (Acts 9:3, KJV)

_____ **“Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?”**
(Acts 7:52, KJV)

3. There are many Gospel stories that recount miracles performed by Christ and the Apostles. For two examples, find and read the following verses in your Bible.

- a. Matthew 20:30–34. What is the miracle?
- b. Mark 11:2–5. What is the miracle?

4. The Bahá'í Writings explain the spiritual significance of miracle stories in the Gospels. First, consider the scriptural meaning of the words “alive” and “dead” by studying these two brief quotations from the Bahá'í Writings and from the Gospel of Luke:

“Observe: those who in appearance were physically alive, Christ considered dead; for life is the eternal life. . . .” (Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 101).

“And he [Jesus] said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God”
(Luke 9:59–60, KJV).

- a. How can someone be physically alive but spiritually dead?
- b. In a spiritual sense, how can the “dead bury their dead”?
- c. According to these quotations, what is life?

5. The Bahá'í Writings instruct to look to the spiritual meanings of the miracle stories in the Bible. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that:

“Wherever in the Holy Books they speak of raising the dead, the meaning is that the dead were blessed by eternal life; where it is said that the blind received sight, the signification is that he obtained the true perception; where it is said a deaf

man received hearing, the meaning is that he acquired spiritual and heavenly hearing. This is ascertained from the text of the Gospel where Christ said: “These are like those of whom Isaiah said, They have eyes and see not, they have ears and hear not; and I healed them.” (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 101; Matt 13:14 and John 12:40–41 cited)

- a. Read Matthew 13:3–18. In Matthew 13:3–18, what do you think Christ means by “see” and “hear”?
- b. What is meant in the Bible by a blind person receiving sight?

6. The spiritual significance of miracles in no way limits the power of the Manifestation of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that:

The meaning is not that the Manifestations are unable to perform miracles, for They have all power. But for Them inner sight, spiritual healing and eternal life are the valuable and important things. Consequently, whenever it is recorded in the Holy Books that such a one was blind and recovered his sight, the meaning is that he was inwardly blind, and that he obtained spiritual vision, or that he was ignorant and became wise, or that he was negligent and became heedful, or that he was worldly and became heavenly. (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 102)

- a. Why is it possible for the Manifestations of God to perform miracles?
- b. Why is spiritual vision comparatively more important than physical vision?

7. The miracle of spiritual transformation is eternal:

The outward miracles have no importance for the people of Reality. If a blind man receives sight, for example, he will finally again become sightless, for he will die and be deprived of all his senses and powers. Therefore, causing the blind man to see is comparatively of little importance, for this faculty of sight will at last disappear. If the body of a dead person be resuscitated, of what use is it since the body will die again? But it is important to give perception and eternal life – that is, the spiritual and divine life. For this physical life is not immortal, and its existence is equivalent to nonexistence. So it is that Christ said to one of His disciples: “Let the dead bury their dead;” for “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 101, Matt. 8:22; John 3:6 cited)

- a. Why do outward miracles have no importance?
 - b. Why is it important to “give perception and eternal life”?
 - c. Who do you think are “the people of Reality”?
8. Using what you have learned from the Bahá’í Writings on the meaning of miracles, describe what you think might be the spiritual meaning of these miracles found in these verses:
- a. Matthew 20:30–34
 - b. Mark 11:2–5
9. The Manifestation of God is, in and of Himself, an absolute miracle. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

But in the day of the Manifestation the people with insight see that all the conditions of the Manifestation are miracles, for They are superior to all others, and this alone is an absolute miracle. Recollect that Christ, solitary and alone, without a helper or protector, without armies and legions, and under the greatest oppression, uplifted the standard of God before all the people of the world, and withstood them, and finally conquered all, although outwardly He was crucified. Now this is a veritable miracle which can never be denied. There is no need of any other proof of the truth of Christ. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 100)

- a. What is the proof of the truth of Christ?
- b. In what way do you think the Manifestation of God is superior to all human beings?

REVIEW

- a. What are the Gospels?
- b. What is the Book of Acts?
- c. What is the Bahá’í perspective on miracle stories in the Bible?

12. THE EPISTLES

KEY POINTS

- Twenty-one Epistles follow the Gospels in the New Testament.
- One of the new teachings brought by the Revelation of Christ that is found in the Epistles is the immortal life of the spirit.
- The Baha'i Writings offer interpretive guidance for the Epistle verse: **“For as in Adam all die even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22)**

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1. After the Gospels and the Book of Acts, the next twenty-one books of the New Testament are the Epistles. The Epistles are letters or essays written by certain disciples of Christ to communities and individuals in the early Jesus-movement. The first fourteen Epistles are often termed the “Pauline Epistles” because authorship is traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul. The Pauline letters are named for the communities to whom they are addressed, such as the Romans, and for the individuals to whom they are addressed, such as Timothy.
 - a. Find the Pauline Epistles in your Bible’s table of contents: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews.
 2. The last seven Epistles are commonly called the “General Epistles” and are named for individuals to whom authorship is attributed.
 - a. Find the General Epistles in your Bible’s table of contents: James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.
 3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that: **“From the days of Adam until the days of Christ, They spoke little of eternal life and the heavenly universal perfections”** (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 124). The Epistles contain many verses that exalt the eternal life of the spirit over physical life.
 - a. Read these excerpts from the Epistles. Check the Scripture that you feel is the strongest statement about the exaltation of the life of the spirit over the life of the body.

_____ **“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the**

Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Galatians 5:16-17, KJV).

_____ **“God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.”**
(2 Thessalonians 2:13, KJV)

_____ **“For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.”** (1 Timothy 4:8, KJV)

_____ **“For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”** (Galatians 6:8, KJV)

_____ **“And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”** (1 John 2:17, KJV)

_____ **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** (Philippians 1:21 KJV)

_____ **“So also is the resurrection of the dead. . . . It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.”** (1 Corinthians 15:42, 44, KJV)

b. Choose one of the above verses, find it in your Bible, and read it in the context of the entire chapter. What did you learn?

3. The First Epistle to the Corinthians states, **“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive”** (1 Corinthians 15:22, KJV). When ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was asked about the meaning of this verse, He said that it addressed important truths about the physical and spiritual nature of mankind. For the remainder of this section we will examine a selection from ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s elucidation of this verse. He explains:

“Know that there are two natures in man: the physical nature and the spiritual nature. The physical nature is inherited from Adam, and the spiritual nature is inherited from the Reality of the Word of God, which is the spirituality of Christ. The physical nature is born of Adam, but the spiritual nature is born from the bounty of the Holy Spirit. The first is the source of all imperfection; the second is the source of all perfection.” (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 118)

- a. Where do our spiritual and physical natures come from?
- b. What is the source of human perfection?
- c. What is the source of human imperfection?
- d. Is one nature more important than the other?

4. Spiritual education is required to overcome the physical nature:

This physical world of man is subject to the power of the lusts, and sin is the consequence of this power of the lusts, for it is not subject to the laws of justice and holiness.... It is, therefore, certain that sins such as anger, jealousy, dispute, covetousness, avarice, ignorance, prejudice, hatred, pride and tyranny exist in the physical world. All these brutal qualities exist in the nature of man. A man who has not had a spiritual education is a brute. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 119)

- a. What is the physical world of man subject to?
- b. Where does sin come from?

5. Spiritual education is required to connect with the divine perfections:

The Christ sacrificed Himself so that men might be freed from the imperfections of the physical nature and might become possessed of the virtues of the spiritual nature. This spiritual nature, which came into existence through the bounty of the Divine Reality, is the union of all perfections and appears through the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is the divine perfections; it is light, spirituality, guidance, exaltation, high aspiration, justice, love, grace, kindness to all, philanthropy, the essence of life. It is the reflection of the splendor of the Sun of Reality. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118)

- a. Why did Christ sacrifice Himself?
- b. How do the divine perfections compare to the power of the lusts?
- c. How can the spiritual perfections help human beings in this life and the next?

6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the Christ is the spiritual father of humanity:

The Christ is the central point of the Holy Spirit: He is born of the Holy Spirit; He is raised up by the Holy Spirit; He is the descendant of the Holy Spirit – that is to say, that the Reality of Christ does not descend from Adam; no, it is born of the Holy

Spirit. Therefore, this verse in Corinthians, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive," means, according to this terminology, that Adam is the father of man – that is to say, He is the cause of the physical life of mankind; His was the physical fatherhood. He is a living soul, but He is not the giver of spiritual life, whereas Christ is the cause of the spiritual life of man, and with regard to the spirit, His was the spiritual fatherhood. (*Some Answered Questions* p. 119)

- a. Name at least four ways that the Christ relates to the Holy Spirit.
- b. How is physical fatherhood different from spiritual fatherhood?
- c. What did Christ cause in humanity?

REVIEW

- a. What are the Epistles?
- b. Who were the Epistles written to?
- c. What is one of the major teachings found in the Epistles?

13. THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN

KEY POINTS

- The Book of Revelation is the last book of the New Testament.
- The Book of Revelation is full of symbolic imagery.
- The Baha'i teachings offer interpretive guidance for some of the verses in the Book of Revelation.



1. Tradition states that the Book of Revelation was written from the island of Patmos where the author had been exiled by the Roman government. While there he received a vision, or revelation, of **“what must soon take place”** (Revelation 1:1, KJV) and the eventual coming of **“a new heaven and a new earth”** (Revelation 21:1, KJV).
 - a. To get a sense of the last book of the New Testament, read Revelation 21:1–3 in your Bible.
 - b. What catches your attention in these verses?
2. The Book of Revelation is commonly thought to be the most difficult book of the Bible to understand because of its rich symbolism. In *Some Answered Questions*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains some of the symbolism of John’s vision. For example, the following passage describes something of the meaning of the **“reed”** and the **“rod”** mentioned in Revelation 11:1:

In the beginning of the eleventh chapter of the Revelation of St. John it is said: “And there was given me a reed like unto a rod:..” [11:1].

. . . This reed is a Perfect Man Who is likened to a reed, and the manner of its likeness is this: when the interior of a reed is empty and free from all matter, it will produce beautiful melodies; and as the sound and melodies do not come from the reed, but from the flute player who blows upon it, so the sanctified heart of that blessed Being is free and emptied from all save God, pure and exempt from the attachments of all human conditions, and is the companion of the Divine Spirit. Whatever He utters is not from Himself, but from the real flute player, and it is a divine inspiration. That is why He is likened to a reed; and that reed is like a rod – that is to say, it is the helper of every impotent one, and the support of human beings. It is the rod of the Divine Shepherd by which He guards His flock and leads them about the pastures of the Kingdom. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 45)

- a. How is the Perfect Man like a reed?
 - b. In the symbolism of the reed, who is the flute player?
 - c. How is the Divine Shepherd like a rod?
 - d. What surprises you in the above explanation?
3. The following passage explains something of the symbolism in Revelation 21:1–3:

We have before explained that what is most frequently meant by the Holy City, the Jerusalem of God, which is mentioned in the Holy Book, is the Law of God. It is compared sometimes to a bride, and sometimes to Jerusalem, and again to the new heaven and earth. So in chapter twenty one, verses one, two and three of the Revelation of St. John, it is said: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 67)

- a. What are symbolic meanings of the “Holy City” and the “Jerusalem of God”?
- b. What is the meaning of “the bride” and the “new heaven and earth”?

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the symbolism of the first heaven and earth:

Notice how clear and evident it is that the first heaven and earth signify the former Law. For it is said that the first heaven and earth have passed away and there is no more sea – that is to say, that the earth is the place of judgment, and on this earth of judgment there is no sea, meaning that the teachings and the Law of God will entirely spread over the earth, and all men will enter the Cause of God, and the earth will be completely inhabited by believers; therefore, there will be no more sea, for the dwelling place and abode of man is the dry land. In other words, at that epoch the field of that Law will become the pleasure-ground of man. Such earth is solid; the feet do not slip upon it. (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 67)

- a. In the Book of Revelation, what does the first heaven and earth signify?
- b. What does the dry land symbolize?

- c. What does the sea symbolize?
- d. What are some characteristics of the new heaven and earth?

5. 'Abdul-Bahá explains:

It is evident that the New Jerusalem which descends from heaven is not a city of stone, mortar, bricks, earth and wood. It is the Law of God which descends from heaven and is called new, for it is clear that the Jerusalem which is of stone and earth does not descend from heaven, and that it is not renewed; but that which is renewed is the Law of God. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 67)

- a. What is the New Jerusalem?
- b. When is the Law of God renewed?

6. Using what you have learned from the Baha'i Writings in the above exercises, read Revelation 21:1-3 below and describe something of the symbolism in these passages:

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Revelation 21:1-3, KJV)

REVIEW

- a. What is contained in the Book of Revelation?
- b. What do the Baha'i Writings state is the meaning of the “New Jerusalem” mentioned in the Book of Revelation?

APPENDIX

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The following brief introduction to the Bahá'í Faith is excerpted from *The Bahá'ís: A Profile of the Bahá'í Faith and its Worldwide Community*, a publication of the Bahá'í International Community.

Founded a century and a half ago, the Bahá'í Faith is today among the fastest-growing of the world's religions. With more than five million followers, who reside in virtually every nation on earth, it is the second-most widespread faith, surpassing every religion but Christianity in its geographic reach. Bahá'ís reside in more than 100,000 localities around the world, an expansion that reflects their dedication to the ideal of world citizenship.

The Bahá'í Faith's global scope is mirrored in the composition of its membership. Representing a cross section of humanity, Bahá'ís come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession, and social or economic class. More than 2,100 different ethnic and tribal groups are represented.

Since it also forms a single community, free of schism or factions, the Bahá'í Faith comprises what is very likely the most diverse and widespread organized body of people on earth.

The Faith's Founder was Bahá'u'lláh, a Persian nobleman from Tehran Who, in the mid-nineteenth century, left a life of princely comfort and security and, in the face of intense persecution and deprivation, brought to humanity a stirring new message of peace and unity.

Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be nothing less than a new and independent Messenger from God. His life, work, and influence parallel that of Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad. Bahá'ís view Bahá'u'lláh as the most recent in this succession of divine Messengers.

The essential message of Bahá'u'lláh is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, that there is only one human race, and that all the world's religions represent stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity. In this day, Bahá'u'lláh said, humanity has collectively come of age. As foretold in all of the world's Scriptures, the time has arrived for the uniting of all peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society. "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens," He wrote.

The youngest of the world's independent religions, the Faith founded by Bahá'u'lláh stands out from other religions in a number of ways. It has a unique system of global administration, with freely elected governing councils in nearly 10,000 localities.

It takes a distinctive approach to contemporary social problems. The Faith's Scriptures and the multifarious activities of its membership address virtually every important trend in the world today, from new thinking about cultural diversity and environmental conservation to the decentralization of decision making; from a renewed commitment to family life and moral values to the call for

social and economic justice in a world that is rapidly becoming a global neighborhood.

The Faith's most distinctive accomplishment by far, however, is its unity. Unlike every other religion—not to mention most social and political movements—the Bahá'í community has successfully resisted the perennial impulse to divide into sects and subgroups. It has maintained its unity despite a history as turbulent as that of any religion of antiquity.

In the years since Bahá'u'lláh lived, the process of global unification for which He called has become well advanced. Through historical processes, the traditional barriers of race, class, creed, and nation have steadily broken down. The forces at work, Bahá'u'lláh predicted, will eventually give birth to a universal civilization. The principal challenge facing the peoples of the earth is to accept the fact of their oneness and assist in the creation of this new world.

For a global society to flourish, Bahá'u'lláh said, it must be based on certain fundamental principles. They include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; full equality between the sexes; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between nature and technology; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity. Bahá'ís around the world express their commitment to these principles chiefly through individual and community transformation, including the large number of small-scale, grassroots-based social and economic development projects that Bahá'í communities have launched in recent years.

In building a unified network of local, national, and international governing councils, Bahá'u'lláh's followers have created a far-flung and diverse worldwide community—marked by a distinctive pattern of life and activity—which offers an encouraging model of cooperation, harmony, and social action. In a world so divided in its loyalties, this is in itself a singular achievement.

For more information about the Bahá'í Faith visit www.bahai.org.
In the United States call 1-800-22-UNITE.

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