



The Role and Importance of Books in Bahá'í Life

The working day of a devoted Bahá'í is strictly intertwined with books. As soon as she gets up, her first thought is for her Beloved, Whom she wants to thank for having guided her towards the light of His guidance through His own words:

My God, my Adored One, my King, my desire! What tongue can voice my thanks to Thee? I was heedless, Thou didst awaken me. I had turned back from Thee, Thou didst graciously aid me to turn towards Thee. I was as one dead, Thou didst quicken me with the water of life. I was withered, Thou didst revive me with the heavenly stream of Thine utterance which hath flowed forth from the Pen of the All-Merciful.¹

Moved by these sweet feelings, she is looking forward to performing her **first act of spirituality and devotion** of the day.

Reciting the verses of God

She will thus recite one of the verses revealed by Bahá'u'lláh according to the injunction of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide ... were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self- Subsisting.²

And whenever she reads one of those verses, she will feel like a plant exposing itself to the sun's light. When a devoted Bahá'í reads God's verses in the morning or evening, she often reads them beyond thought and reflection. She wants to listen to the words of her Beloved resounding in her ears, listen to them as if His tongue uttered them, and enjoy their beauty and healing power.

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¹ Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers. A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, The Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp.18-9.

² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), pp.73-4, para. 149

Why is a devoted Bahá'í so eager to perform this act of spirituality and devotion? Because that is the time when she finally meets her Beloved. She cannot meet Him in person here on earth, but she can meet Him spiritually through His Words. And since His words are in His Writings, books are an essential mediator between Him and His followers.

Daily prayer

Having performed this act “with joy and radiance” according to the injunction of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the time comes for performing the **second act of spirituality and devotion** of the day: daily prayer, according to Bahá'u'lláh's call:

Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect, yet the virtue of the grace vouchsafed unto him must needs sooner or, later exercise its influence upon his soul.³

Although the devoted Bahá'í knows many prayers by heart, the number of revealed prayers is such that no one can memorize all of them. Therefore, every Bahá'í has a Prayer Book. There is no object more dear for a Bahá'í than her prayer book. She has used it every day for many years; she has collected rose petals from the Holy Shrines, photographs of loved persons among its pages, sometimes adorned it with the red stamp of Bahjí, and confided her most intimate feelings and secrets to it.

Studying the Writings

After the daily prayer, the time of the “remembrance of” the Beloved, that “cleanseth all things from defilement,”⁴ the time comes for the **third act of spirituality and devotion** of the day: reading and studying the Writings, according to Bahá'u'lláh's invitation:

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 295, sec. CXXXVI, para. 2.

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 294, sec. CXXXVI, para. 2.

Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.⁵

It is the time for studying the Writings. This issue is so deep that we can now only brush its surface: a half-hour session is too short, and it is not the central theme of this meeting. However, it pertains to its central theme, “Promoting a Culture of Learning,” because there is neither study nor learning without books. For what reasons must a devoted Bahá’í study the Writings and teachings of the Faith?

A first reason is that one must assimilate the revealed Words beyond their intellectual meanings—that is, one must expose oneself to their power to transform and purify the hearts. How this transformation happens is, in part, a mysterious fact. In this regard, I want to remember a paper by William P. Collins, “Sacred Mythology and the Bahá’í Faith.”⁶ This paper deals with the mythological sceneries described in Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings and how these sceneries act upon the archetypes of our conscience, creating in each of us a new relation with the world of nature all around us. It is not an intellectual fact. It is something deeper that concerns our souls.

A second reason is to learn the fundamental ideas of the spiritual conception of the nature of reality taught by Bahá’u’lláh. Whence do we come? Where are we going? Who we are? Who created us? What is our relation with our Creator? Why do we have the capacity to know, love, will, and feel? All these questions are answered in the Writings: in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, that in the words of Shoghi Effendi occupies a position “of unsurpassed preeminence among the doctrinal . . . writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Dispensation,”⁷ in the *Seven Valleys*, in the *Four Valleys*, in *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, in specific passages in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, in *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, as well as in *Some Answered Questions*.

A third reason is to learn the foundations of our behaviour, explained in books such as *The Hidden Words*, that in the words of Shoghi Effendi occupies a position “of unsurpassed preeminence among the . . . ethical writings of the Author of the Bahá’í

⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 136, sec. LXX, para 2.

⁶ William P. Collins, “Sacred Mythology and the Bahá’í Faith,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1990), pp.1-15.

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 140.

Dispensation,”⁸ the Tablet revealed by Bahá’u’lláh for one of His children, that begins with the words “Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity,”⁹ in “Words of Wisdom,”¹⁰ in Memorials of the Faithful, and several compilations, such as “Living the Life.”¹¹ And if one thinks of one’s behaviour in specific fields, one may turn to other compilations. For example, for family life, there are the following compilations: “Chaste and Holy Life,”¹² “Trustworthiness,”¹³ “Consultation,”¹⁴ “Family Life,”¹⁵ “Bahá’í Education,”¹⁶ “Preserving Marriages,”¹⁷ and, last but not least, “Women.”¹⁸ As to work, there are two compilations: “Excellence in all Things”¹⁹ and “Trustworthiness.”²⁰ All these books should be faithful companions of all devoted Bahá’ís, who must read and study them throughout their lives. All these readings performed in an attitude of prayer and devotion develop that which Abdu’l-Bahá calls “the Great Thirst”:

The first thing to do is to acquire a thirst for Spirituality, then Live the Life! Live the Life! Live the Life! The way to acquire this thirst is to meditate upon the future life. Study the Holy Words, read your Bible, read the Holy Books, especially study the Holy Utterances of Bahá’u’lláh; Prayer and Meditation, take much time for these two. Then will you know this Great Thirst, and then only can you begin to Live the Life!²¹

⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 140.

⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 284, sec. CXXX and, in a more complete version, in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 93.

¹⁰ “Words of Wisdom,” in Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978), pp.155-7.

¹¹ “Living the Life”, in *The Compilation of Compilations Prepared by the Universal House of Justice 1963-1990* (Maryborough, Victoria, Australia: Bahá’í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. 2, p. 1.

¹² “Chaste and Holy Life,” in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p. 45.

¹³ “Trustworthiness,” in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p. 327.

¹⁴ “Consultation,” in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p. 93.

¹⁵ “Family Life,” in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p.385.

¹⁶ “Bahá’í Education,” in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p.45.

¹⁷ “Preserving Marriages,” in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p.441.

¹⁸ “Women,” in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p. 355.

¹⁹ “Excellence in all Things,” in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p 367.

²⁰ “Trustworthiness,” in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p. 327.

²¹ Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in Anise Rideout, “An Experience with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” *Star of the West*, vol. 19, no. 3, p. 69. See “The Importance of Deepening Our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith,” in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, p.204, no. 425.

And thus, one will study more because one will want to know more to live better. Then, one will discover other reasons why one must study.

A fourth reason is to learn how to read the facts of history and chronicle, that is, to understand that history is not a succession of purely causal events but the development of a majestic divine Plan that begins in the station of creation and continues with no interruption, unifying the so-called natural history, sacred history and history without any adjective (that is, secular history as distinguished from sacred history, which for the Christian has ended with the advent of Christ). One will learn all this from books such as *The Secret of Divine Civilization* and many talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from the so-called letters of the World Order written by Shoghi Effendi, from the writings of the Universal House of Justice, such as the Peace message, the message to the world’s religious leaders, or writings commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, such as *Century of Light* or *One Common Faith*, or written under its guidance, such as *The Prosperity of Humankind* and *Who Is Writing the Future?*

A fifth reason is to learn how to relate to the followers of other religions in the spirit of the oneness of religion taught by the Bahá’í Faith. Significantly, the Master said in His first public talk in the West, in the City Temple of London, on 10 September 1911:

There is one God; mankind is one; the foundations of religion are one. Let us worship Him, and give praise for all His great Prophets and Messengers who have manifested His brightness and glory.²²

One will be assisted in this effort if one studies some Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablets, Master’s talks, the Universal House of Justice’s message *To the World’s Religious Leaders* and *One Common Faith*, as well as the Scripture of the other religions, not only the Koran and the Bible, quoted and explained by Bahá’u’lláh Himself in His Writings but also Zoroastrian, Hindu and Buddhist Scripture and books of comparative religion.

A sixth reason is to discover the teachings that may more specifically assist our contemporaries in solving the problems of the world. One will be assisted in this effort by the secondary literature that has begun to slowly develop in the last twenty years after the Universal House of Justice started to encourage Bahá’í studies. However, this development is still insufficient. The Bahá’ís must read more so that the Publishing Trusts

²² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* (London, United Kingdom: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 19.

worldwide may publish more books without taxing the national funds, which must cover so many other important expenses.

A seventh reason is to teach because if one does not know the Faith and its teaching, one cannot teach effectively, whereas Shoghi Effendi requested us to “make . . . [teaching] the dominating passion of our life.”²³

An eighth reason is to administrate the Cause properly. Whoever wants to be a good administrator must know many details that one will find in books, such as *Lights of Guidance*,²⁴ a book that no administrator can ignore.

Living the Life

And thus, a devoted Bahá'í has many things to do and books to read. It is better for her to wake up early in the morning because her working day will always be very long.

Usually, people read newspapers in the morning. It is a first opportunity to test one's knowledge of the Faith, to see whether we can understand the “signs of the times,” to discover where the world is going, and to find the best opportunities to teach the Faith.

Then the time comes to go to work. And there, one will find many opportunities to practice the norms of behaviour one has learnt from the books and apply the teachings in one's specific work. Sometimes problems may arise, and a solution may be found while reading the Writings in the evening or the following day.

Back at home in the evening, family life will offer other opportunities to practice what one has learnt, or a new problem may arise, whose solution one may look for in the Writings.

Bahá'í meetings are usually held in the evening because daytime is necessarily devoted to work. Those meetings will provide other opportunities to practice the knowledge acquired from the Writings and other problems to face and solve in the light of the Writings.

²³ Shoghi Effendi, letter 24 November 1924, to the American Bahá'ís, in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 69.

²⁴ *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. Compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 3d rev. ed. 1994).

The last acts of spirituality and devotion of the day

The time will finally arrive to withdraw to one's room and rest, a final opportunity to perform the concluding acts of spirituality and devotion of the day, reading the Writings and praying once more.

And when finally a devoted Bahá'í will lay down in her bed, she will perform the final **act of spirituality and devotion** of the day: examining her conscience according to the injunction of Bahá'u'lláh:

Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.²⁵

The devoted Bahá'í will thus give way to sleep after a final invocation that He has thus formulated for His lovers:

I beseech Thee, by the potency of Thy will and the compelling power of Thy purpose, to make of what Thou didst reveal unto me in my sleep the surest foundation for the mansions of Thy love that are within the hearts of Thy loved ones, and the best instrument for the revelation of the tokens of Thy grace and Thy loving-kindness.²⁶



Books are thus essential in the life of each devoted Bahá'í. The Bahá'í Publishing Trusts accomplish a vital task for the Bahá'í life. Therefore, the people who work for them deserve our gratitude and prayers that they may achieve excellence and success in their enterprises. This is my wish for the Bahá'í Publishing Trust, India, whose Jubilee we are celebrating, and I formulate it through the words written by the Master to the secretary of a Spiritual Assembly in the United States:

I do supplicate God to confirm that spiritual assembly, that gathering of commemoration, to that whereby the merciful faces brighten, and I beseech Him to assist them

²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi with the assistance of some English friends (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), from the Arabic, no. 31.

²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 117-8.

to that whereby man ascends the highest and noblest station of excellence and the loftiest apex of honour. . .²⁷

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²⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*. Translated by Edward G. Browne (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1909, 1930), vol. 1, p. 81.