Extended Series on

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah

As readers of Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah inevitably discover, many of the selections chosen were answers to specific questions. Hence, this extended series will focus on identifying questions and seeking for answers in the text.

Why would Baha'is continue to read and study Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah when many of the passages included have been republished in other more recent publications which contain multiple passages that are topically organized and supplemented with writings by 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi that could help us to achieve a deeper understanding of their content and their significance?

1. One way to read and study the Writings of the Manifestation of God is through correlation, by understanding the part by viewing the whole. "**Otherwise, in the eyes of them that are initiated into the mysteries of Divine wisdom, all their utterances are, in reality, but the expressions of one Truth. As most of the people have failed to appreciate those stations to which We have referred, they, therefore, feel perplexed and dismayed at the varying utterances pronounced by Manifestations that are essentially one and the same."** (XXII) **"Set before thine eyes God's unerring Balance and, as one standing in His Presence, weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life."** (GL CXIV) **"Say: O leaders of religion! Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring balance established amongst men. In this most perfect balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it."** (GL XCVIII) **"In mine hand I carry the testimony of God, your Lord and the Lord of your sires of old. Weigh it with the just Balance that ye possess, the Balance of the testimony of the Prophets and Messengers of God."** (GL CXXIX) **"Should differences arise amongst you over any matter, refer it to God while the Sun still shineth above the horizon of this Heaven and, when it hath set, refer ye to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him. This, verily, is sufficient unto the peoples of the world."** (Kitab-i-Aqdas #53)
2. The Writings of the Manifestation stand alone, and can be understood by those who are pure of heart. "**His purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward**

and perverse." (XXIX) **"The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit. This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding. Well is it with the sincere in heart for their share of the light of a mighty Day!"** (Kitab-i-Iqan)

3. The Writings of the Manifestation can be best perceived by seeing them through His eyes. **"He it is Who hath unveiled to your eyes the treasures of His knowledge, and caused you to ascend unto the heaven of certitude—the certitude of His resistless, His irrefutable, and most exalted Faith."** (LII) **"Cast the idle tales behind your backs and behold My Revelation through Mine eyes. Unto this have ye been exhorted in heavenly Books and Scriptures, in the Scrolls and Tablets."** (Tablets of Baha'u'llah revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas, #17)

Why do many readers of Gleanings feel that we are missing out on important information because we know so little about the individuals who were addressed in these passages?

1. We are attached to this world and consider ourselves and our fellow human beings to be of the greatest importance. **"O Bondslave of the World! Many a dawn hath the breeze of My loving-kindness wafted over thee and found thee upon the bed of heedlessness fast asleep. Bewailing then thy plight it returned whence it came." (PHW #30) "O Son of Earth! Wouldst thou have Me, seek none other than Me; and wouldst thou gaze upon My beauty, close thine eyes to the world and all that is therein; for My will and the will of another than Me, even as fire and water, cannot dwell together in one heart." (PHW #31) "O Befriended Stranger! The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power, quench it not with the contrary winds of self and passion. The healer of all thine ills is remembrance of Me, forget it not. Make My love thy treasure and cherish it even as thy very sight and life."** (PHW #32)
2. The Manifestations of God call upon us to detach ourselves from this world and from others and to attach ourselves to God. **"O servant of God! The robe of divine bestowal hath been sewn and readied. Take hold of it and attire thyself therewith. Renounce and forsake the people of the world. O wise one! Shouldst thou heed the counsel of thy Lord, thou wouldst be released from the bondage of His servants and behold thyself exalted above all men."** (The Tabernacle of Unity, #5.6) **"It is incumbent upon these servants to cleanse the heart, which is the wellspring of divine treasures, of every marking; turn away from imitation, which is following the traces of their forefathers; and shut the door of friendship and enmity upon all the people of the earth."** (Seven Valleys #8) **"Our purpose in revealing these convincing and weighty utterances is to impress upon the seeker that he should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all**

things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness." (Kitab-i-Iqan; GL CXXXV)

3. What is most important about the Word revealed by the Manifestations of God is its capacity to transform all souls, that they may follow the Will of God, and not the individuals to whom it was originally revealed. **"That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith. This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician. This, verily, is the truth, and all else naught but error."** (GL CXX) **"Say: If the laws and regulations to which ye cleave be of your own making, We will, in no wise, follow them. Thus have I been instructed by Him Who is the All-Wise, the All-Informed. Such hath been My way in the past, and such will it remain in the future, through the power of God and His might. This, indeed, is the true and right way. If they be ordained by God, bring forth, then, your proofs, if ye be of them that speak the truth…Say: It behooveth you, O Ministers of State, to keep the precepts of God, and to forsake your own laws and regulations, and to be of them who are guided aright. Better is this for you than all ye possess, did ye but know it. If ye transgress the commandment of God, not one jot or one tittle of all your works shall be acceptable in His sight. Ye shall, erelong, discover the consequences of that which ye shall have done in this vain life, and shall be repaid for them. This, verily, is the truth, the undoubted truth."** (GL LXV)

Why is it incumbent upon those believers who are able to read the Writings in the original Arabic and Persian languages and not to rely exclusively upon translations into other languages?

1. "A befitting rendering of Baha'u'llah's matchless utterance" is "unattainable". **"This is one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation. The hope is that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal – a befitting rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's matchless utterance."**
2. The consequences of trusting translations, particularly of oral statements over the text of the Writings in the original languages. **"I am at a loss to explain that strange mentality that inclines to uphold as the sole criterion of the truth of the Bahá'í Teachings what is admittedly only an obscure and unauthenticated translation of an oral statement made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in defiance and total disregard of the available text of all of His universally recognized writings. I truly deplore the unfortunate distortions that have resulted in days past from the incapacity of the interpreter to grasp the meaning of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and from his incompetence to render adequately such truths as have been revealed to him by the Master's statements. Much of the confusion that has obscured the understanding of the believers should be attributed to this**

double error involved in the inexact rendering of an only partially understood statement. Not infrequently has the interpreter even failed to convey the exact purport of the inquirer's specific questions, and, by his deficiency of understanding and expression in conveying the answer of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has been responsible for reports wholly at variance with the true spirit and purpose of the Cause. It was chiefly in view of the misleading nature of the reports of the informal conversations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with visiting pilgrims, that I have insistently urged the believers of the West to regard such statements as merely personal impressions of the sayings of their Master, and to quote and consider as authentic only such translations as are based upon the authenticated text of His recorded utterances in the original tongue." (Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Baha'u'llah)

3. Only the original text of whatever has been written by the Central Figures of the Faith and the Guardian can be regarded as of immaculate authority. **"Nothing can be considered scripture for which we do not have an original text. A verbatim record in Persian of His talks would of course be more reliable than one in English, because He was not always accurately interpreted."** (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 24 October 1947 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, published in Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'í Community of the British Isles (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 208.

Why would we study Gleanings more systematically and over a longer period of time than we have in this seventeen week course?

1. We need to understand every word Baha'u'llah has uttered and reading around 20 pages a week did not enable us to do so. **"Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will, His wondrous and inflexible Purpose."** (GL LXXIV)
2. We need to contemplate the words of Baha'u'llah in order to discover their meanings and this cannot be rushed. **"Contemplate with thine inward eye the chain of successive Revelations that hath linked the Manifestation of Adam with that of the Báb."** (GL XXXI) **"Ponder this in thine heart, that the truth may be revealed unto thee, and be thou steadfast in His path."** (GL XXXII) **"Ponder this in thine heart, that thou mayest comprehend its meaning. Say: Praise be to God, the Lord of all worlds."** (GL XVIII) **"Furthermore, consider the signs of the revelation of God in their relation one to another."** (GL XCIII) **"Reflect awhile, and consider how they who are the loved ones of God must conduct themselves, and to what heights they must soar."** (GL CXV)

"Meditate on that which We have, through the power of truth, revealed unto thee, and be thou of them that comprehend its meaning." (GL XXVIII)

3. We need to immerse ourselves in the Word of God, not simply wet our feet or wade in the shallows. **"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."** (GL LXX) **"Cast away, in My name that transcendeth all other names, the things ye possess, and immerse yourselves in this Ocean in whose depths lay hidden the pearls of wisdom and of utterance, an ocean that surgeth in My name, the All-Merciful."** (GL XIV)
4. We need not only to read but to recite the Word of God in order to derive the maximum spiritual benefit from it. **"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. Thus have the mysteries of the Revelation of God been decreed by virtue of the Will of Him Who is the Source of power and wisdom."** (GL CXXXVI) **"Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all."** (Kitab-i-Aqdas #149) **"Teach your children the verses revealed from the heaven of majesty and power, so that, in most melodious tones, they may recite the Tablets of the All-Merciful in the alcoves within the Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. Whoever hath been transported by the rapture born of adoration for My Name, the Most Compassionate, will recite the verses of God in such wise as to captivate the hearts of those yet wrapped in slumber."** (Kitab-i-Aqdas #150)
5. There is no clergy in the Baha'i Dispensation, and therefore no group of people who can study the Word on our behalf. This is a universal obligation incumbent upon every person, for we are called to the independent investigation of truth. **"The pious deeds of the monks and priests among the followers of the Spirit—upon Him be the peace of God—are remembered in His presence. In this Day, however, let them give up the life of seclusion and direct their steps towards the open world and busy themselves with that which will profit themselves and others."** (Bisharat #8) **"Living in seclusion or practicing asceticism is not acceptable in the presence of God."** (Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih #10) **"This is not the day whereon the high priests can command and exercise their authority. In your Book it is stated that the high priests will, on that day, lead men far astray, and will prevent them from drawing nigh unto Him. He indeed is a high priest who hath seen the light and hastened unto the way leading to the Beloved. Such a**

man is a benevolent priest and a source of illumination to the whole world. O servant of God! Any priest who leadeth thee away from this Fire, which is the reality of the Light and the mystery of divine Revelation, is indeed thine enemy. " (Tabernacle of Unity #5) **"Arise, O people, and, by the power of God's might, resolve to gain the victory over your own selves, that haply the whole earth may be freed and sanctified from its servitude to the gods of its idle fancies—gods that have inflicted such loss upon, and are responsible for the misery of, their wretched worshipers. These idols form the obstacle that impedeth man in his efforts to advance in the path of perfection."** (GL XLIII) **"All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth."** (GL LXXVII)

Why, in contrast with the emphasis on the unique teachings of Baha'u'llah that we have become accustomed to finding in the talks of 'Abdu'l-Baha, do we find so many instructions in Gleanings that are familiar to us, that we have encountered in other religions?

1. The manner in which the Baha'i teachings were originally disseminated in the English language, in North America and the United Kingdom, was in the form of talks, first those of Ibrahim George Kheiralla (1894+), then those of Mírzá Asadu'lláh-i-Isfahání, Haji 'Abdu'l-Karim-i-Tihrani and Hájí Hasan-i-Khurasani (1900+), Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani and 'Ali Quli Khan (1901+), and a decade later in the public and private addresses of 'Abdu'l-Baha in the course of His travels in the West (1911-1913). The topics that were prioritized were often those which were considered most relevant to the audiences of the time and which dwelled upon the unique and original teachings of Baha'u'llah and upon the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Bible by the Bab and Baha'u'llah. It is these talks that achieved a wide circulation among the Baha'is and were read by them and by those who were attracted to the Faith of Baha'u'llah. While many of the Tablets of Baha'u'llah which were then considered to be among His most important works were translated and published by Anton Haddad (1900+) and 'Ali Quli Khan (1902+), and available to the Western Baha'is, they were apparently not used extensively in the teaching work. The same was the case for the three volumes of Tablets by 'Abdu'l-Baha that were translated and published (volume I in 1909 and volumes II and III in 1919). It should be noted that while the talks of Kheiralla resulted in the conversion of about 2000 Americans to the Faith by 1901, and by 1906 had declined to 1280. By the time that 'Abdu'l-Baha visited North America, in 1912, it is estimated that only 50 to 100 identified themselves as Baha'is. There appears to have been an influx of new believers during and after this visit, as one scholar has estimated that there were around 3000 Baha'is in 1916. However, they had declined to around 1500 by 1926, five years after 'Abdu'l-Baha's passing. Hence, while there were fluctuations, there does not seem to have been a significant increase in the numbers of Baha'is in North America until some time during the ministry of the Guardian

(1921-1957). According to census records, there were 2,584 Baha'is in 1936 and 4,800 in 1944. If these numbers are accurate, the Baha'i community did not exceed the number reported in 1901 until 1936, and then only by a small margin. Why?

2. Many of the teachings in Gleanings are first found in the Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah, the earliest translated volume of His Writings, and the most widely read in translation. Hence, these ideas, which they possess in common with other religions, were accessible to the Baha'is, but were not cited in their attempts to disseminate the Baha'i teachings.
3. The Guardian intended that Gleanings be relied upon by the Western Baha'is as an unimpeachable source of authentic Baha'i doctrine, indispensable to the Baha'i teacher, but not heretofore utilized in the teaching work. It was made available after his translation of the Hidden Words (1925), the Kitab-i-Iqan (1931) and The Dawn-Breakers (1932), perhaps in response to the continued practice of the Western Baha'is to teach the Faith based upon selected principles and fulfillments of prophecies they discovered in the talks of 'Abdu'l-Baha and which they considered to be appealing to their fellow Anglophones. The Baha'is living at that time had become converts to the Faith as a result of those principles and prophecies fulfilled and so they naturally would have regarded them as suitable for the conversion of subsequent generations. However, the Guardian clearly intended for them to become intimately informed of the authentic teachings of Baha'u'llah to be found in His Writings and to consider the talks of 'Abdu'l-Baha as guides on effective elocution rather than content. Many years later, the Universal House of Justice pointed out that most of these principles, as they were understood at the time, had already been put into practice and hence that it was the "deeper" teachings of the Faith that needed to be studied and shared in firesides and proclamations.
4. In some of His talks in the West, 'Abdu'l-Baha referred to there being two kinds of teachings of the Manifestations – those that are essential and perennial, reiterated by all of the Manifestations and present in the scriptures associated with them, and those that are secondary and temporary, which were changed from dispensation to dispensation to properly guide the people who had evolved. However, this was not a theme that He discussed often or in public. Nevertheless, the preface to the Hidden Words plainly states that it is a restatement of the perennial teachings of the prophets, and there are many references to these eternal teachings in other Tablets authored by Baha'u'llah which were translated and published early on. 'Abdu'l-Baha's talks in churches and Theosophical gatherings often related to these essential teachings of religion, and because they were perceived as close or even identical to Christian and Theosophical teachings, they were welcomed. Not surprisingly, those who were already committed to a distinct religious identity, while perhaps sympathetic to the similarities between the teachings they considered to be truthful were not inclined to believe that acknowledging similarities called for further investigation, and without further investigation there were very few conversions.

5. If the teachings of Baha'u'llah that were collected and translated by the Guardian in 1935 were required reading for Baha'i teachers at that time, what is their standing nearly a century later? First it should be noted that given the very few evidences of Gleanings being utilized by the Baha'is in 1935 and thereafter, that these marching orders given to the Baha'is seem to have been largely ignored. If they had been heeded, perhaps conversions to the Faith would have rapidly expanded in the West, and throughout the world to which the Western Baha'is travel-taught and pioneered. Inasmuch as the perennial teachings of religion are found throughout Gleanings, and many of the dispensational teachings of religion that are also found in that book are closely aligned with previous dispensations, that is to the Abrahamic traditions, of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this volume may be as indispensable reading for Baha'i teachers in the present and future as it was in the past.

   However, as the Guardian did not intend for his translations, in Gleanings or other volumes, to be regarded as the only authoritative presentation of or final word on the teachings of Baha'u'llah, as a Baha'i catechism, creed, doxology or shahada, Gleanings can alternatively regarded as one of the foundations for the pedagogical literature of the Faith, and as a prototype upon which other collections of authenticated texts can be assembled. The recent publication of a volume entitled Baha'i Sacred Writings is a case in point, as it includes many of the selections in Gleanings along with companion texts. Other volumes, including those called compilations, have already been published, and no doubt many subsequent publications will provide materials indispensable for the focused study of particular teachings. However, one of the unique characteristics of Gleanings is that such a broad range of teachings is found in one volume. In that regard it is similar in format to Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, which is also a compilation of passages from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, but selected by Baha'u'llah and on even a greater number of themes than Gleanings.