

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SECOND COMING

**Asked by the Bahá'ís of
Kampala, Uganda, Africa**

ANSWERS BY GEORGE TOWNSHEND

The accompanying text is a series of questions asked by Bahá'ís of Kampala, Uganda, Africa, with replies by George Townshend based chiefly on references from the Bible. We are indebted to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles for sharing this excellent material with the American Bahá'ís through the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

The statements and quotations are of particular interest to individuals of Jewish and Christian background, and will be very helpful in answering questions raised in public meetings, firesides and discussion groups.

Bible quotations are from the King James version.

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ANSWERS BY GEORGE TOWNSHEND TO
QUESTIONS ASKED BY BAHÁ'ÍS OF KAMPALA

1. QUESTION

Is there anything in the Bible to prove that religion must be in agreement with our reason?

ANSWER

Yes. Isaiah shows that God Himself wishes man to reason with Him. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord. . . ." (Isa. 1:18)

Peter, too, wrote ". . . be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you. . . ." (I Pet. 3:15)

Paul likewise wrote, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." (I Thess. 5:21) He acted accordingly himself when ". . . he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks." (Acts 18:4), and again when he ". . . three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures." (Acts 17:2)

Jesus Christ taught men to use reason to support faith when He said, "Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" (Matt. 6:30.)

(Also see Luke 12:27)

2. QUESTION

How can we be sure that the promises of Christ to return are not merely the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Churches?

ANSWER

Jesus said to His disciples, ". . . lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:20)

He also said to His disciples. ". . . I go away and come again unto you. . . ." (John 14:28)

These are two distinct promises. The first refers to His continuing presence through the Holy Spirit. The second to His departure and His return.

3. QUESTION

What are the signs of His coming and how are they fulfilled?

ANSWER

The signs of the Second Coming of Christ given in the Bible are many and various. Some of them seem to contradict others. All however are reconciled and fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith through the Coming of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

For example: It is promised that Christ will come with power and great glory, (Mark 13:26), that He shall be as the lightning shining across the heavens from the East to the West (Luke 17:24 and Matt. 24:27); and on the other hand that He shall come as "a thief in the night" (Luke 12:39 and I Thess. 5:2) and as a "snare," taking people "unawares. "

These signs are fulfilled today through the unique majesty and range of Bahá'u'lláh's Message, through His giving it to mankind while imprisoned, through its rapid extension around the globe, through its educative effect upon human minds impelling them towards an understanding of the oneness of mankind, through its breaking up the old material world order and creating a spiritual system throughout the globe instead, and in many other ways. He is the first of all the Revelators to claim that He represents the Glory of God Himself; others were entitled "Friend of God" (as Abraham), "Interlocutor with God" (as Moses), "Son of God" ("as Jesus Christ).

The light of His Revelation shone rapidly and brilliantly from the East of the Holy Land and Persia, even in the Báb's Era, and much more so from 1890 and after, till in recent years the Faith has been propagated from the West chiefly, and America has given shape to the Administrative system, revealed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. This fulfills Christ's prophecy about the enlightenment of the West.

At the same time the world at large, including its monarchs, its clergy and its philosophers, are utterly unconscious that Christ has returned, and are taken unawares, caught in a snare of prejudice and superstition because the spiritual darkness of their hearts and souls has blinded them so that they cannot understand or perceive the presence of their Lord among them.

Matthew 24 verses 30 and 31 add that He will come "in the clouds of heaven" and God "shall send His angels." Revelations 1 verse 7 foretells, "Behold he cometh with clouds. . . ." and I Thessalonians 4 verse 16, ". . . the Lord Himself shall

descend from heaven. . . . " Christ is here represented by the Sun: He is the Light of the world; the clouds represent anything that intervenes between the eye of man's understanding and the Manifestation of God. The body of the Revelator is "a cloud" because the people find it difficult to understand that a human being should be divine in His essence and endued with the qualities of the Godhead. The repeal by a High-Prophet of the customs, rites and laws of the former Dispensation, is also a cloud, being contrary to the ways and desires of men who do not wish to give up practices in which they and their forefathers have been trained for centuries. The heaven from which Christ will descend is not the visible heaven over our heads. The inner meaning of the word is rather loftiness and exaltation; that is, the heaven of the will of God, the heaven of the presence of God. "Angels" are true-hearted believers who, reinforced by the Spirit, have overcome mundane desires and become worthy to serve God's purposes.

The "tribulation" foretold in Matthew 24 verse 29, and elsewhere, as a sign preceding Christ's return means especially, Bahá'u'lláh states, "want of capacity to acquire spiritual knowledge and apprehend the Word of God." Christ will come in a period of irreligion and unbelief, when the very teachers of spiritual truth have lost the true understanding of spiritual things and are blind leaders of the blind. "What kind of oppression," He asks, "is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" (Book of Certitude, page 31)

The unbelief, the hatred, the hardness of heart, the injustice, the iniquity which prevail at the present time, with the strife, the wars, the load of insecurity and fear which burden all hearts - all these things are a fulfillment of the signs of Christ's Return. So too is the lessening of the prestige of the Churches and of the authority of the clergy.

4. QUESTION

Why is it that the general conceptions about the Day of Judgment are wrong? Are the terms, "return," "Heaven," "earth," "death," "life," "light," "darkness," "sun, moon and stars," etc. , to be interpreted symbolically? Could this be proven from the Bible in each case?

ANSWER

One reason why the general conceptions about the Day of Judgment are wrong is that "the end of the World" with which it is connected is a mistranslation; it should be "the end of the Age" or "the end of the Era." Another is that people do

not understand the truth of the succession of Revelators, or the succession of Dispensations. There is a Day of Judgment at the end of every Era when the people to whom the New Revelator comes are tried and tested and judged. The Jews were judged when Christ came to them and were condemned and cast out of the Kingdom. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman armies and the Jewish people scattered through the whole earth. The Day of Judgment at Christ's Return is similar in a general way but is on a much larger scale since all the peoples of the globe are concerned now and not one nation only.

Another reason is that the portents of the Day of Judgment are usually taken in a literal sense and they are meant as symbols. Scripture is full of symbols and is hard to understand, especially when it deals with the advent or return of the High Prophets. Jesus Himself taught of these mysteries in parables only; and a parable is a symbol. Only those who are humble and detached in spirit and in close communion with God and His Messengers can interpret Scripture rightly - not those who are merely erudite. Many teachings are given in a difficult way on purpose to test purity of spirit. For instance, Jesus said "let the dead bury their dead." (Matt. 8:22) Clearly, one physically dead man cannot bury another physically dead man; but Jesus revealed that a man may be physically alive and active and yet be spiritually dead through unbelief and lack of eternal life. His meaning was "let unbelievers bury unbelievers." Life and Death in the Gospel refer especially to the spiritual level of existence; and similarly in Paul's writings.

Jesus' miracles are chiefly spiritual cures; he heals men who are spiritually deaf or spiritually blind, and raises to eternal life those who are spiritually dead. He used to say at the end of a discourse "he that hath ears to hear let him hear," in which he refers to spiritual hearing, that is capacity to grasp spiritual meanings.

Christ said He was "the light of the world"; and the disciples were mirrors of this light. This light is spiritual knowledge, and "darkness" means absence of that knowledge, or a state of ignorance.

5. QUESTION

While based on the Bible, what is the Bahá'í conception of the Manner of His coming?

ANSWER

The Bahá'ís believe that the Return of Christ in the Báb and in Bahá'u'lláh is similar to the return of Elijah in John the Baptist, to which Jesus testified plainly in the Gospel. In Matthew 17 verse 12 Jesus said, ". . . Elias is come already, and

they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed." And verse 13, "Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist." John 1 verse 21 records, however, that when he was asked, "Art thou Elias?" John said, "I am not." The explanation of the contradiction is that John was speaking of the individuality and physical substance of Elijah. He was not the same as Elijah in that sense. Christ was speaking of the qualities, the character, the virtues of the two men, which were exactly the same in both. In a similar way we say "spring has returned," meaning that all that was found in last spring exists in this spring; or that the blossoms have come back referring to their perfume, color, delicacy and form which are the same as last year. When Bahá'ís affirm that Christ has returned in the Báb and in Bahá'u'lláh they mean that the essence of the perfections of Christ are to be found in the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh though the individualities are different.

6. QUESTION

How do you prove the year of His coming and the places associated?

ANSWER

As for the year of His Return, Christ said He did not know (Mark 13:32), but he foretold that the Gospel must first be preached in the whole world and then the end would come. Daniel, however, in an abstruse manner gave the very year of the Return when he said, ". . . Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed." (Dan. 8:13-14), and added, ". . . at the time of the end shall be the vision." (Dan. 8:17) We now live in "the time of the end" and the vision has been made clear by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.' In the text of the Holy Book, a day stands for a year. The number given by Daniel therefore represents two thousand three hundred years. These refer to the period of the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem by the Jews in the fifth century before Christ and particularly to the Decree of Artaxerxes issued in 457 B. C. , following which edict the Temple was rebuilt and its Holy of Holies desecrated by alien hands, causing the abomination of desolation to which Daniel and Christ allude. From the date of this decree to that of the birth of Christ is 456 years and from the birth of Christ to the manifestation of the Báb is 1844 years which, added together, make 2300 years.

Among the places associated with the second coming are:

- (i) Acca or Achor, Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Great Prison" referred to in Isaiah 65 verse 10 and Hosea 2 verse 15.

- (ii) Mount Carmel, where the Báb is buried and His Shrine erected and where the famous Gardens have made the desert "blossom as the rose." (Isa. 35:1-2).
- (iii) Zion. "Out of Zion has gone forth the Law of God," wrote Bahá'u'lláh (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 12) Zion is thus connected in Psalms 2:6; 48:2; 50:2; 87:2, 3, 5; 102:16; 110:2; Isaiah 1:27; 2:2, 3; 25:6, 7; Joel 2:1; 3:16; Obadiah 17, 21; Micah 4:2; Zechariah 2:10.

7. QUESTION

What are the characteristics of the New Era according to the Bible?

ANSWER

(a) Justice, government and law for all nations

"Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." (Isa. 9:7)

"For the kingdom is the Lord's: and He is the governor among the nations." (Ps. 22:28)

"Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." (Ps. 85:10)

(See also: II Samuel 7:12-16; I Chronicles 16:33; Psalms 50:6; 72:1-19; 82:8; Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:6; 32:1-3; 43:9; Jeremiah 31:33; 33:15; Obadiah 21)

(b) Peace

"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." (Isa. 11:9)

(See also: Isaiah 11:6-8; 65:17-25; Ezekiel 34:25; Hosea 2:18; Haggai 2:9; Zechariah 14:11)

(c) World Unity

"And He shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Mic. 4:3)

(See also: Daniel 2:44, Micah 4:2)

(d) World brotherhood

"In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree." (Zech. 3:10)

(e) One Faith

"And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and His name one." (Zech. 14:9)

(See also: Isaiah 52:6; 56:7; 66:23)

(f) Spiritual quickening

"And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: that they may walk in my statutes and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezek. 11:19, 20)

(See also Joel 2:28, 29)

(g) Universal language

"For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent." (Zeph. 3:9)

(See also: Zechariah 14:9)

(h) One name for the faithful

"And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name." (Isa. 62:2)

(i) Democracy

"And their nobles shall be of themselves, and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them; and I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach unto

me: for who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me? saith the Lord."
(Jer. 30:21)

(j) Science

"The chariots shall rage in the streets, they shall jostle one against another in the broad ways: they shall seem like torches. they shall run like the lightnings." (Nah. 2:4)

(See also: Daniel 12:4; Nahum 2:3; Habakkuk 2:14)

(k) Health

"There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed. " (Isa. 65:20)

(See also: Isaiah 65:19; Malachi 4:2)

(l) Security, plenty

"They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord and their offspring with them." (Isa. 65:23)

(See also: Isaiah 4:2; 30:23; 65:21, 22; Ezekiel 34:23-31; Joel 3:18)

(m) Teachers visible

"And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers." (Isa. 30:20)

(n) Eyes and ears

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." (Isa. 35:5)

(See also: Isaiah 29:18)

(o) Passing of idols

"For in that day every man shall cast away his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which your own hands have made unto you for a sin." (Isa. 31:7)

(See also: Zechariah 13:2)

8. QUESTION

Since false prophets, false Christs, and the Anti-Christ are to appear before the coming of the Second Advent, who were these?

ANSWER

"False Christs and false prophets" refers both to those who, as open opponents, preach atheism, agnosticism, materialism and the like, repudiating Christ's Revelation; or more especially to those who misinterpret and misrepresent Christ's meaning, and though themselves within the Christian fold are as tares among the wheat, as wolves in sheep's clothing, creating disruption, schisms and factions. Both these classes have been numerous in recent times. The spirit of sectarianism is predominantly a false Christ.

Antichrist (I John 2:22 and II John 7) is not any particular personage in history but a spirit of opposition and of rivalry towards Christ. John applied it to teachers who had gone out of the Church. 'Abdu'l-Bahá applied it to a Christian nation which was waging an aggressive war. (Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 4)

9. QUESTION

What and how is Bahá'í baptism?

ANSWER

There is no rite of baptism in the Bahá'í Faith. The only baptism recognized is that which is symbolized by the baptism of water and fire revealed in the Gospels. "Water symbolizes the water of life which is knowledge, and fire is the fire of the love of God; therefore man must be baptised with the water of life, the Holy Spirit and the fire of the love of the kingdom" as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says. (Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 142)

10. QUESTION

Must we change our religion to become Bahá'ís?

ANSWER

As all religions are fundamentally one and the same, the Teachings recommend that a man should seek to purify the Faith in which he was brought up of all man-made additions and interpretations until he reaches the original teaching of its Divine Founder. When he has done this he will find that all sectarian differences between the various branches or communions of his Faith have disappeared and that his religion in its purified form is at heart in agreement with the essence of all the other world revelations; and that they come from the same God.

11. QUESTION

What is the Bahá'í conception of the Trinity?

ANSWER

The mystery of the Trinity is explained in the Bahá'í Scriptures by the symbol of the sun shining down from high heaven on to a perfect mirror on the earth. The sun represents the Essence of the Godhead, its rays represent the Holy Spirit, the mirror the Essence of Christ. As the mirror reflects the full disc of the sun in its splendor, so does Christ reflect the qualities and perfections of Almighty God. A slightly different figure is used in Some Answered Questions by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He likens the Most High God to the Sun, and Christ and the Holy Spirit to two mirrors. If then, He says, we say we have seen the sun in two mirrors . . . that is to say, that we have seen three Suns, one in heaven and the two others on the earth, we speak truly. And if we say that there is one Sun, and that it is pure singleness, and has no partner and equal, we again speak truly." (Some Answered Questions, p. 130)