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## ‘Akká, the Most Great Prison

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In biblical times there was a seaside city known by the Greeks and Romans as Ptolemais and by the ancient Egyptians as ‘Akká. Over the centuries the city had been known by different names. In Old Testament times it was known as Accho<sup>1</sup> and Achor,<sup>2</sup> while it was renamed St Jean d’Acre (Acre) by the crusaders. The Muslims restored the name ‘Akká.

Scholars reckon ‘Akká to have existed for four thousand years. Muhammad is reported to have emphasized the spiritual station of the city: ‘Blessed the man that hath visited ‘Akká, and blessed he that hath visited the visitor of ‘Akká.’<sup>3</sup>

‘Akká is located in the Holy Land, now the state of Israel, in the vicinity of Mount Carmel, on the shores of one of the most beautiful bays of the Mediterranean Sea, some 175 kilometres north of Jerusalem. ‘Akká was the scene of cruel clashes between Muslims and Christians during the Crusades, with the victorious Crusaders establishing it as the capital of the kingdom of Jerusalem. Napoleon and his powerful army laid siege to ‘Akká but were incapable of taking the city after two months, leaving on its walls impressions of cannon balls and contemptuously calling it a ‘grain of sand’ for standing in the way of his military ambitions.<sup>4</sup> ‘Akká was also referred to as the ‘Turkish Bastille’.<sup>5</sup>

The tongues of the prophets of Israel had acclaimed the city, conferring upon it a special position in the course of human history. Indeed, ‘Akká had been alluded to as the ‘fortified’ or ‘strong’ city,<sup>6</sup> a ‘door of hope’,<sup>7</sup> and where the ‘Lord of Hosts’, the ‘King of Glory’, would appear.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty-eight centuries ago, Hosea said:

There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will respond as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

David, the Psalmist, had also sung of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh to the 'Akká gates, 'Blessed be the Lord, for he hath shewn his wonderful mercy to me in a fortified city,'<sup>10</sup> asking, 'Who will lead me to the fortified city?'<sup>11</sup> He further proclaims:

Lift up your heads, you gates;  
be lifted up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory?

The Lord strong and mighty,  
the Lord mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, you gates;  
lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory?

The Lord Almighty – he is the King of glory.<sup>12</sup>

In turn, Ezekiel, one of the greatest and most prolific visionaries of the Jewish people, spoke of his wonderful mystical experiences:

Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory . . . The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east.<sup>13</sup>

Amos also announced the coming of Bahá'u'lláh to the Holy Land:

The Lord will roar from Jerusalem; he will send his voice from Jerusalem. The pastures of the shepherds will become dry, and even the top of Mount Carmel will dry up.<sup>14</sup>

Over the years, this very blessed city experienced several roles, being a town of merchants, the last Crusaders' stronghold, a fortress and later a prison-city at the time of the Ottoman Empire, when Bahá'u'lláh came 'through the gate facing the east' 'like the roar of rushing waters'.

It is with the arrival of Bahá'u'lláh, the Blessed Perfection, to those shores in 1868, that all these prophecies found a happy consummation, when finally He proclaimed that He Himself, the Lord of Hosts, the King of Glory, had appeared in the Holy Land. As God promised to humanity, '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.'<sup>15</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh manifested His Cause in the Holy Land, the last destination of His successive exiles, following an edict from the Sultan of Turkey confining Him as well as the Holy Family to life imprisonment.

It was plainly evident, especially to the bereaved and remote Bahá'í community in Iran, the old Persia, that the enemies of the Faith had allied as never before to precipitate this severe blow. But above all else, it was clear that the Will and the Divine Plan were acting, and with the coming of the Supreme Manifestation of God to these sacred lands, all the prophecies were fulfilled.

The greatness of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh then shone with maximum light while the peoples of the earth began to realize and wake up to this mighty Call. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

When Bahá'u'lláh came to this prison in the Holy Land, the wise men realized that the glad tidings which God gave through the tongue of the Prophets two or three thousand years before were again manifested, and that God was faithful to His promise; for to some of the Prophets He had revealed and given the good news that 'the Lord of Hosts should be manifested in the Holy Land'. All these promises were fulfilled; and it is difficult to understand how Bahá'u'lláh could have been obliged to leave Persia, and to pitch His tent in this Holy Land, but for the persecution of His enemies, His banishment and exile. His enemies intended that His imprisonment should completely destroy and annihilate the blessed Cause, but this prison was in reality of the greatest assistance and became the means of its development. The divine renown of Bahá'u'lláh reached the East and the West, and the rays of the Sun of Truth illuminated all the world. Praise be to God! though He was a prisoner, His tent was raised on Mount Carmel, and He moved abroad with the greatest majesty. Every person, friend or stranger, who came into His presence used to say, 'This is a prince, not a captive.'<sup>16</sup>

The significance of the historic occasion, however, offered as the principle of light and shadow, exemplifies a marked contrast to the degradation of the character of the majority of the population, reflected in the customs and mentality of its authorities and the populace. Bahá'u'lláh described 'Akká's inhabitants as a 'generation of vipers'.<sup>17</sup>

In a way, the abject condition of these people was neither worse nor better than the material reality of the prison-city. The Sultan of Turkey, allied with the Shah of Iran, could not have found a more detestable place within his vast domain to imprison the Manifestation of God in order to extinguish the source of that Divine Light. The Blessed Perfection characterized 'Akká as 'the most desolate of the cities of the world, the most unsightly of them in appearance, the most detestable in climate, and the foulest in water. It is as though it were the metropolis of the owl.'<sup>18</sup>

A saying that was widely known stated that if a bird flew over the city, it would die from the pestilence. 'Akká housed the cruellest criminals, irremediable thieves, political prisoners and anybody else that the Sultan wanted to eliminate. The prison-city was framed within the irregular perimeter of a chain of walls washed on two sides by the sewage and the contaminated waters that waves swept inland to add more misery to the landscape.

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, has commented about 'Akká's environment:

It was girt about by a double system of ramparts; was inhabited by a people whom Bahá'u'lláh stigmatized as 'the generation of vipers'; was devoid of any source of water within its gates; was flea-infested, damp and honeycombed with gloomy, filthy and tortuous lanes.<sup>19</sup>

The land gate was closed at night. It was called 'the dogs' door'<sup>20</sup> because after hours people had to pass through a narrow hole to enter or exit the city. To one side, facing the sea, stands the massive building known as the citadel, also called the barracks. It had been built during the 1790s on Crusader foundations as part of the Ottoman's defensive formation of 'Akká and housed army troops. In the 19th century it was converted into a gaol. The citadel looks like a small medieval castle standing adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea.

The entrance was through a spacious courtyard with a pool from which flea-infested and dirty water was drawn. On one side of the courtyard stood the prison block consisting of two floors. A narrow external staircase still leads to the roof, a place where better air could be breathed and one could view a beautiful landscape comprising the sea, the plains and the mountains.

Coming from Adrianople where He had lived in exile for five years, which has been preceded by a four-month sojourn in Constantinople and, before that, ten years' exile in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh arrived at the Most Great Prison by boat, crossing from Haifa to 'Akká's sea gate on 31 August 1868. Upon His arrival a crowd gathered at the port to see the 'God of the Persians', as they called Him, hurling invectives and the most cruel scorn. The group of 67 men, women and children were immediately taken inside the citadel and imprisoned in the barracks from the first night. Some days later the people rushed to the main mosque to hear the royal edict that ordered His strict detention and outlined the details of the rigour.

Within the walls of this stronghold the pain and suffering of the Holy Family reached its most intense agony, which lasted two years, two months and five days living in three small rooms. According to Bahíyyih Khánúm, Bahá'u'lláh's daughter, she only left the building three times, and for only one hour, during the whole imprisonment.

Following Mírzá Mihdí's passing in June 1870, the exiles were moved to accommodate troops which required use of the barracks. The Blessed Beauty was required to live in a rented house outside the barracks. He lived in three houses before moving to the House of 'Abbúd within the prison-city, always as a prisoner.

Gradually, the conditions were relaxed owing to the growing public recognition of the good character of the exiles and the edict of the Sultan became virtually redundant. The character of the innocent group of exiles began to be appreciated by the local authorities, several of whom admired Bahá'u'lláh's special personality and stature, to the extent that the admiration of some, initially very hostile, was expressed in the assertion that such special people had

never before been seen in ‘Akká. They even speculated that the steady and positive transformation in ‘Akká’s climate was due to the presence of His Holiness Bahá’u’lláh.

The exiles were allowed to roam freely around the prison-city without escort. Bahá’u’lláh’s confinement within the prison walls of ‘Akká lasted nearly nine years, during which He ‘had not set foot beyond the city walls, and Whose sole exercise had been to pace, in monotonous repetition, the floor of His bed-chamber’.<sup>21</sup>

Historical events took place in the Most Great Prison such as the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Book of Laws; the addressing of epistles to the various kings and leaders of the world; as well as the formulation of a vast number of teachings for humanity. The Blessed Beauty said to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on His arrival in ‘Akká, that henceforth He would dedicate all His time to formulating His teachings for the human race and meeting with His disciples while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s duty would be to deal with the outside world and the affairs of the Cause.<sup>22</sup>

‘Know thou,’ Bahá’u’lláh wrote, ‘that upon Our arrival at this Spot, We chose to designate it as the “Most Great Prison”. Though previously subjected in another land (Tíhrán) to chains and fetters, We yet refused to call it by that name. Say: Ponder thereon, O ye endued with understanding!’<sup>23</sup>

#### Notes and References

1. Judges 1:31 KJV.
2. Hosea 2:15; Isaiah 65:10; Joshua 7:24, 26; 15:7 KJV.
3. Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 179.
4. Bonaparte, *Selection from the letters and despatches*, p. 252. 5. Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams*, p. 170.
6. Psalms 60:9; 108:10 KJV.
7. Hosea 2:15 KJV.
8. Psalms 24:7–10 KJV.
9. Hosea 2:15 NIV.
10. Psalms 31:21 Douay-Rheims Bible.
11. Psalms 60:9; 108:10 NIV.
12. Psalms 24:7–10 NIV.
13. Ezekiel 43:1–2, 4 NIV.
14. Amos 1:2 NCV.
15. Micah 7:12 KJV.
16. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 32.
17. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 345.
18. Bahá’u’lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 186. 19. *ibid.* pp. 185–6.
20. Handal, *El Concurso en Lo Alto*.
21. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 193. 22. See Blomfield, *Chosen Highway*, p. 64. 23. *ibid.* p. 185.