

The Treasure of God in the Holy Land

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Rising above the 'Akká terrain, the massive quadrangular prison tower where the Holy Family was imprisoned will be remembered by history as an imposing memorial to captivity and tyranny. Built as an impressively tall structure, its walls contained many windows on every side, like eyes watching the sea on the horizon, the adjacent military installations and the neighbouring city streets.

Life in 'Akká began before the sun greeted the earth with its light. The call to prayer, with its summoning strains, awakened the population both spiritually and physically. The chatter of busy women could be heard as they hung their washing over their high-topped balconies. The smell of traditional homemade recipes handed down from mother to daughter over generations could be discerned within even the most desolate of alleyways. If there was anything beautiful in 'Akká it was its sunrise, so brilliant and promising. It trumpeted not only the beginning of the new day but the thrust that life goes on regardless of any spatial or temporal limitation or difficulty.

There was also something strange and ghostly about the nights in 'Akká. Stars replaced people in a matter of hours, taking away the hustle and bustle from the streets and leaving the secluded city with an air of a spiritual vacuum. The ambitions and aspirations of the commoner were laid to rest until the next day. The waves of the sea, the absolute human silence and the hooting of the owls then began to haunt the prisoners, reminding them of the spell surrounding this magical and millenary place, 'one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, as well as one of the most fought-over'.¹ This was, after all, a legendary city, whose streets were trodden by personages such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, St Paul, Marco Polo and Maimonides, not to mention Napoleon, who stood so aggressively and yet powerlessly at its walls. The very barracks were built on the ruins of a Crusader citadel, adding mystery to this already cryptic site. This was the city whose nightly darkness could be as lugubrious as its spiritual obscurity. Although it was the land of promise, it was also the place of negation. Soon, momentous events were to unfold, one after the other.

The local inhabitants, oblivious of the spiritual supremacy of the newly-arrived Personage living in that solitary tower, carried out their daily domestic duties as usual. ‘Akká, with its high stoned walls, guarded this most precious Prophet, and yet its people were unaware that He was the One promised by the holy books of the past. On one hand, the walls of this much-prophesied prison city were calling out that the Promised One was amongst them; on the other, the locals, wrapt in their spiritual slumber, were unable to perceive that call which for centuries they had been longing to hear.

But for those living within the barracks, life that very first morning after the arrival of the exiles was different: They had woken up locked in a real prison in small rooms. Nonetheless, being with God’s Supreme Manifestation was for the exiles both a blessing and a confirmation. It was a blessing because they felt that divine guidance was with them, day by day, rich and ceaselessly, embracing their own lives. It was also a confirmation since the real Sun was with them, radiating life and grace while its celestial counterpart was imparting warm and light from above.

Whilst in the citadel, Mírzá Mihdí often used to attain the presence of Bahá’u’lláh in the afternoon, remaining until he completed his tasks. Afterwards, it was his custom to go up to the roof and spend the remaining time in prayer and meditation. On the roof one could breathe better quality air away from the pestilence and dampness of the lower reaches of the prison, and obtain a good view as well as listen to the sound of the waves washing the bay – a moment of spiritual peace and calm.

One hot afternoon Mírzá Mihdí was occupied with his devotions on the roof and afterwards went, as always, to Bahá’u’lláh’s chamber to fulfil his usual secretarial duties. Because he did not feel well, it was suggested that he return to the roof. Several other Bahá’í prisoners were also unwell. It seems that Bahá’u’lláh told Mírzá Mihdí, ‘I will not need you tonight.’²

Mírzá Mihdí went up the narrow stairs and began his devotions, walking to and fro across the roof. Absorbed in his meditations and invocations, raising and lowering his head, he knew the number of steps that should be taken to avoid falling through the unguarded skylight that provided light and ventilation to the floor ten metres below.

It was nearing nightfall and the sky was darkening, moonless, as the local people returned to their homes. Sunset on that day was at 7:12 p.m. The daily bustle abated and the lights of households were gradually lit. For the inhabitants of the city, who were unaware of the spiritual drama unfolding in their neighbouring prison, the tragic event that took place that evening meant nothing. And who could imagine that anything greater than the afflictions already suffered by the exiles would occur? The desolation of the prison, its miseries and loathsome environment, the exiles deprived of family ties and alienated from friends, the

indifference of the local population, the innumerable hardships, the manifest injustice and the complete isolation made it difficult for the exiles to think of anything more appalling.

But the decree of Providence should never be second guessed. 'It is for God to test His servants, and not for His servants to judge Him in accordance with their deficient standards,' the Báb said.³ From time immemorial we have known that God's ways should not be questioned. As the Blessed Beauty wrote:

I swear by My life! Nothing save that which profiteth them can befall My loved ones. To this testifieth the Pen of God, the Most Powerful, the All-Glorious, the Best Beloved.⁴

At twilight, as darkness began to fall over the horizon of the Mediterranean, Mírzá Mihdí was still observing his vigil on the prison roof. He was reciting the poignant passages of the Ode of the Dove, a mystical treatise of 127 verses, written when Bahá'u'lláh had retired to the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih, in which He speaks of His grief and suffering:

Noah's flood is but the measure of the tears I have shed, and Abraham's fire an ebullition of My soul. Jacob's grief is but a reflection of My sorrows, and Job's afflictions a fraction of my calamity.⁵

Mírzá Mihdí was captivated by the tone of deep distress in the words of his father. Without realizing it, being in a state of prayer, he stumbled, lost his balance and fell through the open skylight onto a wooden crate standing on the floor beneath. He fell into the area used as a living room, near the kitchen. No one was there at the time.

The sound of the impact and the groans of the Purest Branch immediately drew the attention of those who were nearby. They rushed to see what had happened. All were shocked and frightened by the scene; they barely believed what they saw. Why would God decree that such tragedy be added to their burdens? What was the wisdom hidden in this new misfortune?

We can picture in our minds what they saw. Mírzá Mihdí was bleeding profusely from his mouth. The wooden crate had shattered and splinters were embedded in his ribs and thigh to the extent that it was impossible to remove his clothes, which later had to be torn from him.

Navváb (Ásíyyih Khánúm), Mírzá Mihdí's mother, 'frail and weeping', also went to her son's side as he lay below the open skylight. Seeing her son soaked in blood, she was plunged into an agonizing anguish and fainted away.⁶ Mírzá Mihdí took her in his arms to console her.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself came to Mírzá Mihdí. Bahíyyih Khánúm relates:

The Blessed Perfection, hearing the commotion, opened the door of his room and looked out. When he saw his son he turned back and re-entered his room, saying: 'Mahdy [Mihdí] has gone!'⁷

Husayn-i-Áshchí, the cook to the Holy Family and an eyewitness, described those tragic moments:

The terrific loud sound of the impact made us all run to the scene of the tragedy where we beheld in astonishment what had happened as decreed by God, and were so shocked as to beat upon our heads. Then the Ancient Beauty came out of His room and asked what he had done which caused his fall. The Purest Branch said that he knew the whereabouts of the skylight and in the past had been careful not to come near it, but this time it was his fate to forget about it.⁸

Many years later Effie Baker, having been on pilgrimage, confirmed this account, writing to the Australian Bahá'ís that

Baha'u'llah and his [Mírzá Mihdí's] mother heard the noise and Baha'u'llah said 'That's my Mahdi, he has been sacrificed.' They went out and he was lying on the floor with his bones broken. They carried him to a room and put him on a couch.⁹

The 'blood-stained shirt worn by Bahá'u'lláh as He attended the dying Purest Branch' was given many years later to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'ís of Iraq by Shoghi Effendi.¹⁰

With great care, Mírzá Mihdí, still conscious, was taken to his room.¹¹ Everyone, desperate, gathered around his bed.

An Italian doctor was called but Mírzá Mihdí's injuries were so serious that he could not do much for him, nor was there a hospital in 'Akká. In the midst of his overwhelming pain, Mírzá Mihdí's nobility was clear to all, as he apologized to those who came to his bedside.

'In spite of much pain and agony,' a witness recounted, 'and being weak, he warmly greeted those who came to his bedside, showered an abundance of love and favours upon them and apologized to everyone, saying he was ashamed that while they were all sitting, he had to lie down in their presence.'¹²

So distressed was 'Abdu'l-Bahá that with His heart in His hand and His eyes filled with tears He entered the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, kneeled at His feet and implored Him to heal His young brother.

'O my Greatest Branch, leave him in the hands of his God' was Bahá'u'lláh's response.¹³

The historian Nabíl tells us that the grief-stricken Navváb also went to the Blessed Perfection, kneeled down and implored Him:

‘My Lord, I entreat Thee to accept from me this ransom.’ The Blessed Beauty conferred His bountiful favours upon her and advised her to be patient. Ásíyih Khánúm responded: ‘Whatever is Thy good-pleasure that indeed is my heart’s desire and my best beloved . . .’¹⁴

The Blessed Perfection went to Mírzá Mihdí’s room and for a long time they were alone. We do not know what they discussed – father and son took the content of their conversation to the next world of God. This was Mírzá Mihdí’s last private meeting on earth with the Manifestation of God, both enclosed in the solitude of the young man’s cell with the desperate believers congregating outside, crying and praying. If, owing to Mírzá Mihdí’s extreme injuries and agony, the encounter was wordless, what might Bahá’u’lláh with His divine powers have offered His son to ease his agony and his inevitable death? Did Bahá’u’lláh show him the wonders and marvels of the worlds of God? Was it the vision of the believers living in freedom? Was it perhaps a preview of the unified humankind to which Mírzá Mihdí’s life was dedicated? If words were spoken, were they words of consolation such that any father in similar circumstances would say to his child? We do know that the Supreme Manifestation of God had the power to bring people back to life (as we have seen in the story of Mírzá Ja‘far in chapter 7), and we also know when he was on his deathbed yet still conscious, Mírzá Mihdí was asked by Bahá’u’lláh if he wanted Him to save his life.

‘What do you desire?’ the Blessed Beauty asked him. ‘Do you wish to live, or do you prefer to die? Tell me what you most wish for.’

With great magnanimity the Purest Branch replied, ‘I don’t care to live. I have but one wish. I want the believers to be admitted to see their Lord. If you will promise me this, it is all I ask.’

Bahá’u’lláh accepted His son’s noble request and told him that it would be so.¹⁵

By respecting Mírzá Mihdí’s desire and therefore denying Himself the opportunity to save His son, Bahá’u’lláh must have been heartbroken. Yet the Manifestations of God see realities that ordinary beings cannot even imagine: ‘Were We to recount the mysteries of thine ascension,’ Bahá’u’lláh later wrote, ‘they that are asleep would waken, and all beings would be set ablaze with the fire of the remembrance of My Name, the Mighty, the Loving.’¹⁶

Following what must have been a horrible night for him and the Holy Family, the next day Mírzá Mihdí asked to meet the believers, whom he received with the utmost love and kindness. However, so serious were his injuries that death took him away that evening. The agony of the Purest Branch lasted for 22 hours. On Thursday, 23 June 1870, when he was 22 years old, Mírzá Mihdí passed away, ascending to the Supreme Concourse so suddenly and tragically.

It is impossible to describe the depth of the consternation that seized all at that moment of grief. Bahá’u’lláh, his dear father and Lord, greatly affected by the sudden and untimely loss, was heard lamenting, ‘O Mihdí! O Mihdí!’¹⁷

For Navváb, this was the fifth time she had lost a son during her lifetime, three in Iran, one in Baghdad and now Mírzá Mihdí in the military barracks. Undoubtedly this was an affliction and a test too great to bear for a mother and a believer. Heartbroken and inconsolable in her grief, she gained strength only when her husband told her that giving their son to the Cause of God so that the believers could visit their Lord was in itself a meritorious deed in the eyes of God. According to Bahíyyih Khánum:

The death of this youngest and favourite child – of a very gentle and sweet disposition – nearly broke his mother’s heart. We feared for her reason. When the Blessed Perfection was told of the condition of his wife, he went to her and said: ‘Your son has been taken by God that His people might be freed. His life was the ransom, and you should rejoice that you had a son so dear to give to the cause of God.’ When our mother heard these words she seemed to rally, – knelt, and kissed the Blessed Perfection’s hands, and thanked him for what he had said. After that she did not shed a tear.¹⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Master, who had been Mírzá Mihdí’s close companion in exile, was also heartsick amid the universal outpouring of tears and grief, as was Bahíyyih Khánum, Mírzá Mihdí’s beloved older sister. A sea of sadness engulfed everyone.

Bahíyyih Khánum said of those tragic moments:

So, after much patient suffering, my brother’s gentle spirit took its flight. As we could not leave the barracks, we could not bury our dead; nor had we the consolation of feeling that we could provide for him through others the grateful final tribute of a proper and fitting burial, as we had no means wherewith even to purchase a coffin. After some consideration and consultation among ourselves, finding that we had nothing to dispose of, and at a loss how to proceed, we told our Lord of the sad situation. He replied that there was a rug in his room which we could sell. At first we demurred, for in taking his rug we took the only comfort he had; but he insisted and we sold it. A coffin was then procured, and the remains of my deceased brother placed in it. It was carried out by our jailors, and we did not even know whither it was taken.¹⁹

An eyewitness recalled the funeral preparations:

. . . Shaykh Maḥmúd begged the Master to allow him to have the honour of washing the body and not to let anyone from the city of ‘Akká perform this service. The Master gave permission. A tent was pitched in the middle of the barracks. We placed his blessed body upon a table in the middle of the tent and Shaykh Maḥmúd began the task of washing it. The loved ones of God were wailing and lamenting with tearful eyes and, like unto moths, were circling around that candle which the hands of God had lighted. I brought water in and was involved in washing the body. The Master was pacing up and down outside the tent. His face betrayed signs of deep sorrow . . .

The body after being washed and shrouded was placed inside a new casket. At this moment the cry of weeping and mourning and sore lamentation rose up to the heavens. The casket was carried high on the shoulders of men out of the barracks with utmost serenity and majesty.²⁰

Baharieh Rouhani Ma‘ani tells us that

The body of the Purest Branch was washed in the barracks before the eyes of Bahá’u’lláh. The traditional restrictions on women probably compelled Ásíyih Khánúm to remain in the upper floor of the barracks, where the family lived, and mourn the loss of her beloved son away from where his body was being washed.²¹

The believers were not allowed to accompany the coffin to its resting place and it was reported that the location of the burial was unknown to them for two years.²² It has been stated that the notables of ‘Akká accompanied the funeral procession.²³ The believers, however, could only see a small procession carrying their fellow exile, the ‘pious and holy youth’,²⁴ as Mírzá Mihdí was described by Shoghi Effendi, taken through the land gate, through which he had never before passed. His body was interred in the Nabí Šáliḥ (Prophet Šáliḥ) cemetery outside the fortress.

As the guards returned to the prison, a strong earth tremor occurred across a large radius. Felt as far away as Nazareth, the tremor lasted three minutes, frightening local inhabitants. Bahá’u’lláh confirms this in a tribute to His martyred son:

When thou wast laid to rest in the earth, the earth itself trembled in its longing to meet thee. Thus hath it been decreed, and yet the people perceive not . . .²⁵

Soon after Mírzá Mihdí’s sacrifice conditions in the prison were relaxed. In November 1870, in the middle of autumn, little more than four months after the tragedy, his wish was fulfilled, giving God’s answer to his yearning request. It was just as Bahá’u’lláh had prophesied in these words addressed to His martyred son: ‘Thou art, verily, the trust of God and His treasure in this land. Erelong will God reveal through thee that which He hath desired.’²⁶

Mírzá Mihdí had sacrificed his life for the happiness of the Bahá’ís and so that believers would have access to the presence of Bahá’u’lláh. A tense international situation with Russia caused the Turkish government to reorganize its army, making it necessary to once again use the ‘Akká barracks as an army facility. Thus just a few weeks after Mírzá Mihdí’s martyrdom the barracks were flooded by military personnel and their equipment. According to David Ruhe:

Bahá’u’lláh protested at the crowding and problems produced by the soldiers; hence, early in November 1870, the governor allowed the Great Prisoner and His followers to leave the barracks to live in the city under house confinement and surveillance.²⁷

Bahíyyih Khánúm recalls that

Some time after the death of his son, the Blessed Perfection (who, as I have said, usually never attended to affairs, these being all left to my brother) expressed a wish to have an interview with the Governor.

Meanwhile my brother's dying prayer, that the believers might be permitted to visit their Lord, having been overheard by a soldier who was present at the time and by him repeated to the officer in charge, had come to the ears of the Governor. Very possibly it had touched him and now influenced him to accede to the Blessed Perfection's request for an interview; at all events the request was granted, and the Blessed Perfection met the Governor in council with his officers. He then addressed them on the subject of his separation from his followers and of their great sorrow and distress occasioned by it, reminding them of his deceased son's dying petition, and speaking with such eloquence and power that the Governor was moved to grant his appeal.

We were, in consequence, removed from the barracks and given a comfortable house with three rooms and a court. Our people, and also our family, were permitted to go at large in the city, and whoever wished could visit us; but my father was required to remain within the house.²⁸

Whatever the details, the prison doors were opened after the passing of the Purest Branch and the pilgrims were given more access to the Manifestation of God. All the exiles eventually left the prison barracks with the loving memory of the four who did not: Muḥammad-Ismá'íl, Muḥammad-Báqír, Abu'l-Qásim and Mírzá Mihdí.

With this glorious liberation, the Bahá'ís and pilgrims were finally able to reach the presence of the Manifestation of God as He proclaimed:

Verily I say, this is the Day in which mankind can behold the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised One.²⁹

Notes and References

1. Balyuzi, *King of Glory*, p. 271.
2. Quoted in a letter of Effie Baker addressed to the Bahá'ís of Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Tasmania and Sydney, 29 March 1925. See also Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, p. 205.
3. Quoted in Nabíl, *Dawn-Breakers*, p. 61.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 82.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 118.
6. Recounted in Ishráq-i-Khávári, *Hadrat-i-Ghusnu'lláhu'l-Athar*, pp. 9–14, quoted in Ma'ani, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, p. 110.
7. Phelps, *Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi*, pp. 66–7.
8. Quoted in Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, p. 206.
9. Letter of Effie Baker addressed to the Bahá'ís of Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Tasmania and Sydney, 29 March 1925.

10. McLean, 'Divine Simplicity: Remembering the last Hand of the Cause of God 'Ali-Muhammad Varqá'. http://bahai-library.com/mclean_divine_simplicity
11. One source relates that he was found lying unconscious but recovered awareness later on. See Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*.
12. *ibid.* pp. 206–7.
13. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, p. 207.
14. Recounted in Ishráq-i-Khávári, *Hadrat-i-Ghusnu'lláhu'l- Athar*, pp. 9–14, quoted in Ma'ani, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, p. 110.
15. Phelps, *Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi*, p. 67.
16. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, p. 34.
17. Quoted in Balyuzi, *King of Glory*, p. 311.
18. Quoted in Phelps, *Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi*, p. 68.
19. *ibid.* pp. 67–8.
20. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, p. 209.
21. Ma'ani, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, pp. 110–11.
22. Account of 'Zea Khanom' from the notes of Ethel Rosenberg, February and March 1901, in 'Life in the Most Great Prison', *Star of the West*, vol. 8, no. 13, p. 172.
23. See Balyuzi, *King of Glory*, p. 313.
24. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, p. 31.
25. Quoted in *ibid.* p. 34.
26. *ibid.*
27. Ruhe, *Door of Hope*, p. 33.
28. Quoted in Phelps, *Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi*, pp. 69–70.
29. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 10.