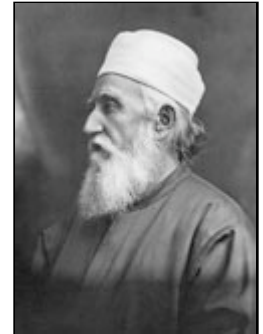


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Abdul-Baha

Abdul-Baha was appointed by his father, Baha'u'llah, to be his successor as head of the Baha'i faith. He was named as the Center of the Covenant between Baha'u'llah and his followers, the perfect exemplar of the Baha'i teachings, and the authorized interpreter of the Baha'i scriptures. He carried out these functions from the death of his father in 1892 until his own death in 1921.



Abdul-Baha was named Abbas Effendi at his birth in Tehran on May 23, 1844. He grew up during the turbulent years of the Babi upheavals in Iran, in which his father was much involved. In 1852, the whole family was exiled to Baghdad, Iraq, then to Istanbul and Edirne in Turkey, and finally to Akka (now in Israel). As he grew up, Abdul-Baha increasingly assumed responsibility for organizing the household, for supervising and vetting the stream of visitors and pilgrims who came to see his father, and for managing all contacts between the small community of exiles and government officials, thus leaving his father as free as possible to concentrate on dictating the words that would form the Baha'i scriptures. Even as a young man, he came to prominence because of his character, his grasp of mysticism and philosophy, and his ability to attract and inspire those whom he met. In later years, Professor E.G. Browne of Cambridge University described Abdul-Baha in this manner: "Seldom have I seen one whose appearance impressed me more. . . . One more eloquent of speech, more ready of argumentation, more apt of illustration, more intimately acquainted with the sacred books of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muhammadans, could, I should think, scarcely be found."

When Abdul-Baha took over the leadership of the Baha'i faith in 1892, it was still a movement confined to the Middle East and India that consisted almost exclusively of Iranians. During his ministry, he expanded the reach of the religion to North and South America, Europe, East Asia, and Australasia. Through his two visits to Europe and North America (in 1911 and 1912–1913), he strengthened these nascent communities, spoke at numerous prestigious venues, and met many prominent persons, including religious leaders, philosophers, and statesmen. The newspapers of the time frequently referred to him as "the Persian prophet." Wherever there was a sufficiently large Baha'i community, he initiated the establishment of Baha'i administrative institutions.

The writings of Abdul-Baha and the texts of the talks he gave during his journeys to the West have an important place in Baha'i literature. He kept up a voluminous correspondence with people, both Baha'is and others, from all parts of the world and wrote on philosophical, mystical, historical, social, and political themes. Still, Abdul-Baha suffered greatly during his life. It was not until he was 64 years old, in 1908, that the restrictions he had been under since going into exile in 1852 were finally lifted. On several occasions, his life was in great danger. He died in Haifa in modern-day Israel on November 28, 1921, and is buried in the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel in Haifa.

All accounts agree that Abdul-Baha had a charismatic personal presence that radiated a serene, majestic, and authoritative air. He was always very kind in his personal dealings and generous to the point that his own family

members complained that they were left with nothing. He had a keen sense of humor and frequently used amusing anecdotes to make his point understood. His personal life was very simple and the furnishings of his rooms spartan. He ate and slept little and spent some hours every day in prayer and meditation. He was greatly venerated by the Baha'is and sometimes restrained them from making exaggerated claims about him. He always insisted that his highest station and greatest honor was to be Abdul-Baha ("the servant of Baha'u'llah").

Moojan Momen

Further Reading

'Abdu'l-Baha. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978; Balyuzi, Hasan M. *'Abdu'l-Baha: The Centre of the Covenant of Baha'u'llah*. 2d ed. Oxford: George Ronald, 1987.

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