

The Babs and their Prophet¹

Haifa, Nov. 7.—The Nahr N’aman,² called by the ancients the river Belus, rises in a large marsh at the base of a mound in the plain of Acre called the Tell Kurdany,³ and, after a short course of four miles, fed by the swampy ground through which it passes, it attains considerable dimensions. Before falling into the sea it winds through an extensive date grove, and then, twisting its way between banks of fine sand, falls into the ocean scarcely two miles from the walls of Acre. Pliny tells us that glass was first made by the ancients from the sands of this river, and the numerous specimens of old glass which I found in grubbing bear testimony to the extensive usage of this material in the neighbourhood. The beach at its mouth was also celebrated as a locality where the shells which yielded the Tyrian purple were to be found in great abundance, and I have succeeded in extracting the dye from some of those I have collected here. It was also renowned for a colossal statue of Memnon, which, according to Pliny, was upon its banks, but the site of this has not been accurately identified. The only point of attraction now upon its waters is a garden belonging to an eminent Persian, whose residence at Acre is invested with such peculiar interest that I made an expedition to his pleasure-ground on the chance of discovering something more in regard to him than it was possible to do at Haifa.

Turning sharply to the right before reaching Acre, and passing beneath the mound upon which Napoleon planted his batteries in 1799, we enter a grove of date-trees by a road bordered with high cactus hedges, and finally reach a causeway which traverses a small lake formed by the waters of the Belus, and which, crossing one arm of the river,⁴ lands us upon an island which it encircles. This island, which is

¹ Laurence Oliphant, *Haifa or Life in Modern Palestine*, chapter 21, 1887. Online at https://bahai-library.com/oliphant_haifa_modern_palestine

² The Na’mayn Garden (32.915208, 35.090687), is a ‘verdant knoll’ less than a kilometre east of the walls of ‘Akká, around which the Na’mayn Stream (Tayyár Na’mayn) used to flow. The stream used to flow a short distance south to Nahr Na’mayn. The river was once known as the Belus or Belos River of Phoenicia.

³ The source of the river is said to be Tel Afiq (32.846499, 35.111614; the biblical town of Aphik, also known as Tel Kufrdani or Kurdani).

⁴ The Na’mayn Stream.

about two hundred yards long by scarcely a hundred wide, is all laid out in flower-beds and planted with ornamental shrubs and with fruit-trees. Coming upon it suddenly it is like a scene in fairy land. In the centre is a plashing [OE for splashing] fountain from which the water is conveyed to all parts of the garden. The flower-beds are all bordered with neat edges of stone-work, and are sunk below the irrigating channels. Over a marble bed the waters from the fountain come rippling down in a broad stream to a bower of bliss, where two immense and venerable mulberry-trees cast an impenetrable shade over a platform with seats along the entire length of one side, protected by a balustrade projecting over the waters of the Belus,¹ which here runs in a clear stream, fourteen or fifteen feet wide and two or three deep, over a pebbly bottom, where fish of considerable size, and evidently preserved, are darting fearlessly about, or coming up to the steps to be fed. The stream is fringed with weeping willows, and the spot, with its wealth of water, its thick shade, and air fragrant with jasmine and orange blossoms, forms an ideal retreat from the heats of summer. The sights and sounds are all suggestive of langour and *dolce far niente*,² of that peculiar condition known to Orientals as kief,³ when the senses are lulled by the sounds of murmuring water, the odours of fragrant plants, the flickering shadows of foliage, or the gorgeous tints of flowers and the fumes of the narghileh.⁴

The gardener, a sedate Persian in a tall cap, who kept the place in scrupulous order, gave us a dignified welcome. His master, he said, would not come till the afternoon, and if we disappeared before his arrival we were welcome to spread our luncheon on his table under the mulberry-trees, and sit round it on his chairs; nay, further, he even extended his hospitality to providing us with hot water.

Thus it was that we took possession of Abbas Effendi's garden before I had the honour of making that gentleman's acquaintance, an act of no little audacity, when I inform you that he claims to be the eldest son of the last incarnation of the Deity. As his father is alive and resident at Acre—if one may venture to talk of such a being as resident anywhere—my anxiety to see the son was only ex-

¹ The side stream that flows into the river.

² Italian for "sweet idly waiting".

³ From Arabic *kayf* ("pleasure, delight").

⁴ Persian water pipe (*nārjil*).

ceeded by my curiosity to investigate the father. But this, as I shall presently explain, seems a hope that is not likely to be realized. Meantime I shall proceed to give you, so far as I have been able to learn, an account of who Abbas Effendi's father is, and all that I know about him, premising always that I only do so subject to any modification which further investigation may suggest.

It is now forty-eight years since a young man of three-and-twenty appeared at the shrine of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, who was made a martyr at Kerbela. He was said to have been born at Shiraz, the son of a merchant there, and his name was Ali Mohammed. It is supposed that he derived his religious opinions from a certain Indian Mussulman, called Achsai,¹ who instituted a system of reform, and made many disciples. Whether this is so or not, the young Persian soon acquired a pre-eminent reputation for sanctity, and the boldness and enthusiasm of his preaching and the revolutionary sentiments he uttered attracted many to his teaching. So far as I have been able to judge, he preached a pure morality of the loftiest character, denouncing the abuses of existing Islam as Christ did the Judaism of his day, and fearlessly incurring the hostility of Persian Phariseism. A member himself of the Shiite sect of Moslems, he sought to reform it, as being the state religion of Persia, and finally went so far as to proclaim himself at Kufa the bab, or door, through which alone man could approach God. At the same time he announced that he was the Mahdi, or last Imaum, who was descended from Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, and whom the Shiites believe to have been an incarnation of the Deity. Mahdi is supposed by all Persian Moslems not to have died, but to be awaiting in concealment the coming of the last day.

As may be imagined, the sudden appearance after so many centuries of a reformer who claimed to be none other than the long—expected divine manifestation, created no little consternation throughout Persia, more especially as, according to tradition, the time had arrived when such a manifestation was to be looked for, and men's minds were prepared for the event. The Persian enthusiast, as soon as his preaching became popular and his pretensions vast,

¹ Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í.

roused the most violent hostility, and he was executed at Tabriz in 1849, after a brief career of fourteen years, at the early age of thirty-seven. The tragic circumstances attending his death enhanced his glory, for he was repeatedly offered his life if he would consent to abate his claims, or even leave the country. He preferred, however, a martyr's crown, and was executed in the presence of a vast multitude, leaving behind him a numerous and fanatic sect, who have since then been known as the Babs, and whose belief in the founder subsequent persecutions on the part of the government have only served to confirm.

The Bab before his execution gave it to be understood that though he was apparently about to die, he, or rather the divine incarnation of which he was the subject, would shortly reappear in the person of his successor, whom, I believe, he named secretly. I do not exactly know when the present claimant first made known his pretensions to be that successor, but, at all events, he was universally acknowledged by the Bab sect, now numbering some hundreds of thousands, and became so formidable a personage, being a man of high lineage—indeed, it is whispered that he is a relative of the Shah himself—that he was made prisoner by the government and sent into exile. The Sultan of Turkey [Ottoman Empire] kindly undertook to provide for his incarceration, and for some years he was a state prisoner at Adrianople. Finally he was transported from that place to Acre, on giving his parole to remain quietly there and not return to Persia, and here he has been living ever since, an object of adoration to his countrymen, who flock hither to visit him, who load him with gifts, and over two hundred of whom remain here as a sort of permanent body-guard.

He is visible only to women or men of the poorest class, and obstinately refuses to let his face be seen by any man above the rank of a fellah or peasant. Indeed, his own disciples who visit him are only allowed a glimpse of his august back, and in retiring from that they have to back out with their faces towards it. I have seen a lady who has been honoured with an interview, during which he said nothing beyond giving her his blessing, and after about three minutes motioned to her to retire. She describes

him as a man of probably about seventy years of age, but much younger-looking, as he dyes both his hair and his beard black, but of a very mild and benevolent cast of countenance. He lives at a villa in the plain, about two miles beyond Acre, which he has rented from a Syrian gentleman of my acquaintance, who tells me that once or twice he has seen him walking in his garden, but that he always turns away so that his face shall not be seen. Indeed, the most profound secrecy is maintained in regard to him and the religious tenets of his sect.

Not long ago, however, public curiosity was gratified, for one of his Persian followers stabbed another for having been unworthy of some religious trust, and the great man himself was summoned as a witness.

“Will you tell the court who and what you are?” was the first question put.

“I will begin,” he replied, “by telling you who I am not. I am not a camel driver”—this was an allusion to the Prophet Mohammed—“nor am I the son of a carpenter”—this in allusion to Christ. “This is as much as I can tell you to-day. If you will now let me retire, I will tell you tomorrow who I am.”

Upon this promise he was let go; but the morrow never came. With an enormous bribe he had in the interval purchased an exemption from all further attendance at court.

That his wealth is fabulous may be gathered from the fact that not long since a Persian emir or prince, possessing large estates, came and offered them all, if in return he would only allow him to fill his water-jars. The offer was considered worthy of acceptance, and the emir is at this moment a gardener in the grounds which I saw over the wall of my friend’s villa. This is only one instance of the devotion with which he is regarded, and of the honours which are paid to him: indeed, when we remember that he is believed to possess the attributes of Deity, this is not to be wondered at. Meantime his disciples are patiently waiting for his turn to come, which will be on the last day, when his divine character will be recognized by unbelievers.

Corrigendum by Brent Poirier

Oliphant states that he wants to report what he has heard about Bahá’u’lláh:

“... I shall proceed to give you, so far as I have been able to

learn, an account of who Abbas Effendi's father is, and all that I know about him, premising always that I only do so subject to any modification which further investigation may suggest."

Inasmuch as Lawence Oliphant himself acknowledges that his report may require revision, I wanted to make an observation regarding Oliphant's description of Bahá'u'lláh's seating arrangements while people visited Him:

"He is visible only to women or men of the poorest class, and obstinately refuses to let his face be seen by any man above the rank of a fellah or peasant. Indeed, his own disciples who visit him are only allowed a glimpse of his august back"

This is not reported in any English-language translations of the many pilgrim accounts, nor of the reports from non-Bahá'ís which have come to us.

Oliphant mentions the seating arrangement in the Garden of Ridván: "Over a marble bed the waters from the fountain come rippling down in a broad stream to a bower of bliss, where two immense and venerable mulberry-trees cast an impenetrable shade over a platform with seats along the entire length of one side" This is faithfully reflected in the seats in the garden today—benches in a rectangular arrangement around the mulberry trees. The spot where Bahá'u'lláh used to sit is marked today, and preserved from others sitting in it, by a row of pots placed immediately before it. It would have been impossible for Bahá'u'lláh to turn His back to His guests while seated on this bench. The spot where He sat has an arm-rest, and there is only one posture possible for the human frame on this seat.

I would also point out that in Professor Edward Granville Browne's description of his first dramatic interview with Bahá'u'lláh—a non-Bahá'í Cambridge professor of a standing considerably "above the rank of a fellah or peasant"—he specifies how Bahá'u'lláh was seated in His room in the Mansion of Bahjí. Browne obviously had no problem seeing Bahá'u'lláh's face:

"... I found myself in a large apartment along the upper end of which ran a low divan, while on the side opposite to the door were placed two or three chairs. Though I dimly suspected whither I was going and whom I was to behold (for no distinct

intimation had been given to me) a second or two elapsed ere, with a throb of wonder and awe, I became definitely conscious that the room was not untenanted. In the corner where the divan met the wall sat a wondrous and venerable figure, crowned with a felt head-dress of the kind called taj by dervishes (but of unusual height and make), round the base of which was wound a small white turban. The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow; while the deep lines on the forehead and face implied an age which the jet-black hair and beard flowing down in indistinguishable luxuriance almost to the waist seemed to belie"¹

This divan is today preserved in the manner which Bahá'u'lláh was accustomed to keep it, with a táj of His marking the spot where He sat, in His room in the Mansion of Bahjí. There is thus a physical restraint similar to the seating arrangements in the Garden of Ridván: Bahá'u'lláh could not turn His back to His audience while seated on his favorite spot on the divan.

It is recorded in Bahá'í histories that toward the latter part of His life, Bahá'u'lláh did not often grant interviews, other than to Bahá'í pilgrims. This is mentioned, for example, by H. M. Balyuzi² and also in an enlightening narrative from one of Bahá'u'lláh's granddaughters.³

Shoghi Effendi records that although Bahá'u'lláh rarely granted interviews, He received as visitors a European general and the governor of 'Akká, and that they remained kneeling outside the door to His room.⁴ At this stage in His life, Bahá'u'lláh preferred to spend His days revealing Tablets and inspiring His followers. Contacts with officials, service to the poor, and responses to inquirers, were generally handled by 'Abdu'l-Bahá on Bahá'u'lláh's behalf.⁵

¹ H. M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh the King of Glory*. George Ronald, Oxford, p. 372.

² idem, p. 192.

³ Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, p. 99.

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 192.

⁵ Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, p. 99.