

**A**  
**Modern Pilgrimage**  
**to**  
**Palestine**

**L. B. Pemberton**

*With illustrations from photographs by the author*



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## XII

### *Interviews With Abdul Baha*

Before going further it might be well to explain that the three outstanding figures in the Bahai world are Ali Muhammad, known as the Bab (meaning the Door or Gate); Huseyn Ali of Nur, afterwards called Baha Ullah (pronounced Buh-hah Oo-lah, accented on the second and fourth syllables and meaning the "Glory of God"), and Abdul Baha (pronounced Ahb-dool Buh-hah, accented on the first and last syllables, and meaning literally "Slave or Servant of the Glory"). The latter is the son of Baha Ullah, and is the present head of the movement.

Among the Bahais these three personages are regarded respectively as the Messenger, the Manifestation and the Expounder of the cause. Of these, the first was martyred in 1850 at the age of thirty, in the public square at Tabriz; the second, Beha Ullah, after being persecuted and imprisoned for nearly forty years, finally departed this life in May, 1892, at Behje, near Acca, where he is buried. Before his death he appointed his son, Abdul Baha to be the "Center of the Covenant," and authorized Expounder of his writings. The only claim that Abdul Baha makes for himself is that he is a great educator, and the Servant of God in this Revelation.

Sir Abdul Baha Abbas (as he was recently knighted by the English government), was born in Teheran,

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Persia, May 23, 1844, and is consequently in the seventy-eighth year of his age. He is a genial, kindly man of medium size, somewhat stooped, with long, snow-white hair and beard. His face is browned and seamed with many lines that at first would seem to indicate a man of more advanced age; but in his movements he is active and alert, while his majestic bearing gives one the impression that he is a person of prominence and power. You are immediately attracted by his large grey eyes that have a kindly, but searching look, and seem to take in everything at a glance. His mental and physical faculties are in full vigor. He wears a long, brown robe of silk and camel's wool, with wide, flowing sleeves, and his massive head is crowned with a pure white turban. In speech he is ready and apt; his expressions concise and exact, and his genial talks lead up to a point and convey a lesson, which his hearers cannot fail to grasp.

During the early stages of our trip I had entertained vague hopes that I might see this important person (as I had not yet received permission to visit him), and often wondered if I would really meet him. You can imagine my surprise when I was invited to daily interviews with him during our short stay in Tiberias, and the honor I felt in being accorded a private interview of three-quarters of an hour's duration.

When ushered into his presence, you are greeted with a kindly smile and "How are you?"—in English, strongly accented on the second word. If you reply, "Very well!" he laughingly repeats it in Persian, which is very like the English expression, and invites you to be seated;

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## *Interviews With Abdul Bahai*

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after which he usually inquires of each one, "Are you well and happy?" Then, after a few preliminary remarks, he begins his talk, which lasts from twenty to thirty minutes. You listen, or answer the questions directed to you, until he has finished, when he rises, shakes hands all around, and ends the interview. As he speaks very little English, his talks are in Persian, and translated by his secretary, Azizullah, who has a ready command of English as well as Persian, Arabic and other languages.

In the first interview, which was given in his room in the tower of the hotel at Tiberias, he commented on the beauty of the scenery of Palestine, and related how the Lord told Abraham that it was the finest in the world and if there was anything better He would have given it to him. He then likened it to California, its climate, the contour of the hills, its flowers and foliage being much the same, and in this respect he called California "the Holy Land of America." He concluded his talk with the story of the man who wanted to become a Bahai.

Some years ago, he said, he was traveling through Persia, in company with several others, one of whom was a merchant known to him as a man of rather questionable reputation. The caravan stopped at a certain town, and numbers of the people flocked out to meet Abdul Baha. From there they proceeded to another town, where more people came out to meet him; then to another town, where the same thing was repeated. After this had occurred a number of times, and everywhere crowds of people had invariably rushed out to

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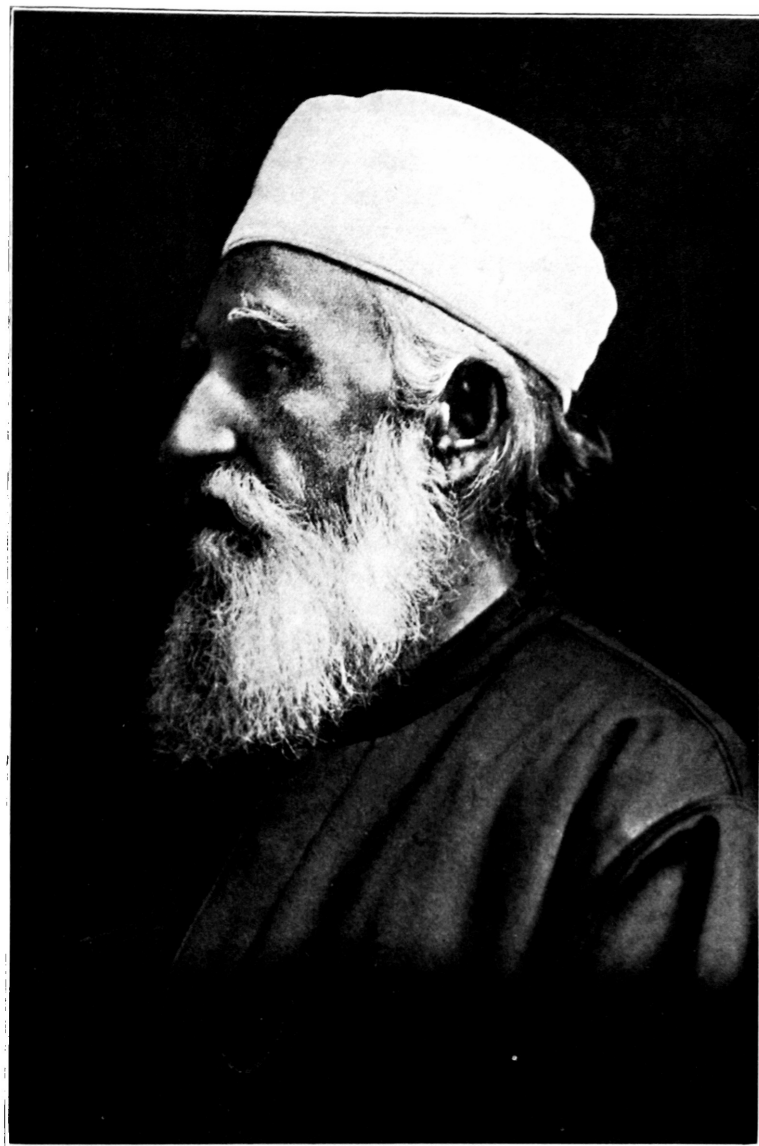
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meet him, the merchant called him aside and told him he wished to become a Bahai. On being asked why, he said, "You are a Bahai, and wherever you go great crowds of people flock out to meet you, while no one comes to meet me; so I wish to become a Bahai." Asked if that was the real reason, he replied, "I also think it will help my business, as I will have all these people come to meet me." Then Abdul Baha told him, "Do not become a Bahai. It is better for you to remain as you are."

The moral to this little story was too obvious to need any explanation.

The next day Abdul Baha spoke of the essential and non-essential things of life and illustrated his remarks with the story of the young Arab woman who preferred not to live in the city. It seems that a wealthy man who was traveling through the desert happened to meet a young Arab woman, and being struck with her youth and beauty, begged her to accompany him to the city, offering her many inducements to do so. Among other things, he offered to adorn her person with silk and costly raiment, promising that she should have the daintiest and most expensive morsels to eat; a beautiful palace to live in, and servants to wait upon her. After he had exhausted his glowing arguments, the young Arab woman laughed at him and said, "Why should I be a prisoner, and shut myself up in your expensive walls? Why should I worry with your silks and fine raiment? Here I am happy and have all that I need. The whole blue sky is above me, and I have the pure





ABDU'L. BAHÁ

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air to breathe. Why should I give up my freedom?"

Early one morning I visited Magdala, and returning at about eleven o'clock I noticed that Abdul Baha was seated alone in the parlor of the hotel. As I passed, he came to the door and beckoned me to enter. While he was saying, "Come in!" his gestures indicated the opposite direction; but as I had been informed beforehand of this lack of co-ordination in his signals, I entered. After the usual salutations, he called in his secretary and said, "You have been to Magdala! How did you like it? If you had expressed the desire, I would have placed my carriage at your disposal." He marveled that I had walked so far; but I explained that on the steamer we had made it a practice to walk twenty miles each day, in order to keep in good condition. He took a handful of shells which I had just picked up on the beach near Magdala, and commented on their beauty and then inquired if I would like to hear the history of Mary Magdalene. On being assured that I would, especially from him, he proceeded to relate the history, which in substance is as follows:

Magdala, the little village I had just visited, was the birthplace of Mary, known as the Magdalene. She was a beautiful girl in the habit of coming often to Tiberias, where at that time many Roman soldiers were located. Here she attracted the attention of a young Roman officer, with whom she later lived on terms of intimacy. In the course of time, this officer was transferred to Rome, and was advanced to a position of trust in the affairs of the Roman Empire—being well liked and en-

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joying the favor of the Emperor. After his departure from Tiberias, the well-known events occurred that changed the life of Mary. She forsook her former life, embraced the faith and became an ardent Christian.

In those days, immediately following the crucifixion, the Jews were being severely persecuted by the Romans, and Mary was chosen to go to Rome and intercede for them. On her arrival at Rome, one of the first persons she met was the young officer who had been her lover in Tiberias, and who was overjoyed at seeing her—thinking that her great love for him had induced her to make the long journey. He lost no time in inviting her to come with him; but she refused, saying that she was not the same woman he had known at Tiberias. He then inquired why she had come to Rome if not to see him? To which she replied, "To see the Roman Emperor!" This somewhat astounded the young officer, who thought she was making sport with him. Finally she convinced him of her sincerity by telling him all that had happened in the Holy Land since his departure, how she had repented of her former life and become a Christian. The young man was so touched by her recital that he offered to secure an interview for her with the Emperor. This, on account of his high position, he was able to do, and in a few days she entered the presence of the Emperor, who met her kindly and inquired what he could do for her. To which she replied, "For myself, I want nothing." Somewhat perplexed, he asked why she had sought an interview with him, and she answered, "I have come to ask you in the

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name of the Christians to stop the persecutions of the Jews in Palestine." The Emperor exclaimed, "I have been doing this as a favor to the Christians—to punish the Jews for crucifying your Christ!" But Mary assured him that the Christians did not want this; that their religion was based on love—not revenge.

This idea was so new to the Emperor that he asked her to explain to him more about this strange new creed, and in the end agreed to comply with her request. At the close of the interview, the Emperor ordered her to be well cared for, and showed her many honors during her stay in Rome.

"This," said Abdul Baha, in closing, "shows the power of the Spirit. Here was a poor and ignorant woman, who in her youth had been a girl of the street and respected by no one, but whose life had been transformed and illumined by the Spirit. From a lowly station she had been elevated by the power of the Spirit, until she was received and honored by an Emperor. Other things pass away, but the power of the Spirit is sure and eternal!"

His talk the following day was on the folly of devoting one's life simply to the accumulation of money. As an illustration he cited an incident that occurred during his visit to New York City in 1912:

A noted banker had been making a collection of rare Persian and Oriental manuscripts and invited Abdul Baha to come at a certain hour and give him an opinion as to whether or not they were genuine. At the appointed time he was conducted to the banker's library

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and soon after his arrival was informed by a messenger that his host was detained, but would arrive presently. After some time, a second messenger arrived, expressing his regrets that an urgent business meeting had prevented the banker from arriving on time, but that he would come very soon. Then Abdul Baha said that he was sorry he could not remain longer, as he, too, was a busy man.

"Thus," he said, "a man who is spending his time trying to amass great riches, is not a free man, but is a slave to his wealth. After all, if wealth was the principal thing, then Christ would have devoted His life to money-getting, as He had a brain undoubtedly equal to the task; but He realized that other things are of more consequence, and that the things of the Spirit are the only ones that are eternal."

In our final interview the next morning, he spoke of the pleasure our visit had given him. He wished us success in our work and promised to pray for us in the silent hours of the night. He urged us to go forth with renewed courage, and a determination to live a life of service; to be kind to everyone regardless of color, race or condition; to be "a cause of healing for every sick one, a comforter for every sorrowful one, a pleasant water for every thirsty one, a heavenly table for every hungry one, and a herald to everyone who yearns for the Kingdom of God."