

The Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh

Account

Poetic Introduction

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O Thou the King of creation and the Ruler of this world and the world to come! Both in Thy presence and in Thy absence Thou hast been the cause of the tranquillity of the hearts of men and the advancement of the nations. From the moment Thou didst mount Thy throne until Thy ascension to the Realms of Eternity, Thou wert at all times, at day and at night, each month and each year, the cause of the exaltation of mankind. No needy suppliant who had set his heart toward Thee was turned back from the door of Thy generosity without vouchsafing unto him supreme felicity and goodly gifts, and no sorrowful destitute was sent out of Thy All-glorious presence except that Thou didst bestow upon him blissful joy and ample hope. [Nabil, edited.]



Introduction

Following an evening of prayer and reflection, Bahá'ís the world over commemorate the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh in the early morning hours of the 29th May, reciting the 'Tablet of Visitation' at 3 am GMT (this is 4 am in the United Kingdom).

Since time immemorial, every age has witnessed a great soul arise into the world clothed in the unconquerable power of the Spirit, and standing against all the customs and collective corruption of the day, has wholly transformed mankind's heart and mind, and steered humanity onto a new path of truth. Though these great souls are invested with the supreme sovereignty of the Spirit, they accept the mortal frailties of life, and submit themselves to the suffering of the human world. Some endure spectacular martyrdom, demonstrating in their death, their mastery of the day; whilst others, demonstrating a long life of living martyrdom and perfection of the spirit, stand unconquerable, and surrender their body to the natural dissolution of the elements, so that their spirit may, unbound from the chains of this world, soar up beyond the limitless heights of the eternal. Such was the case with Bahá'u'lláh Who, on 29 May 1892, after a lifetime of outpouring spiritual energy and transformation into this earthly world, ascended into the uncountable worlds of the spirit.

Few detailed accounts have come down to us of these final days, and these have been used to tell the story which now follows...

Akka Period

'Akka

After a life of exile from one city to the next, Bahá'u'lláh was finally abandoned to the walls of Akka¹, a prison city of Galilee in Israel, where the worst criminals were sent from all parts of the empire to end their days. So great was the stench and disease, it was said that if a bird flew over the city, it would die and fall to the ground.

The journey to Akka as prisoners was a terrible one. Bahá'u'lláh and His companions, family and children, all arrived extremely sick. Wading from the boats to the seashore, hordes of people gathered to fling scorn and insult into their faces, exclaiming that they were to be chained in dungeons or thrown into the sea.

They were led through the streets in a sea of remorseless mockery and contempt, and thrown into a stinking room, ankle-deep in mud, overpowering them with the vilest of odours. There was little water or food, and so foul, it was impossible to swallow.

So many were crowded together and the summer months so hot, almost everyone became dangerously ill. No doctor was allowed; no one knew where they were; no letters could come or go; all entry to the city was forbidden.

This situation continued for two years. Everyone gave the best of whatever they had, to Bahá'u'lláh. He always received this kindly, and returned it to them again, choosing to live just as they were living, and to sleep upon the infested floor.

One night, the Purest Branch was walking free from these conditions on the prison roof. He was engaged

¹ Acre, Israel

in meditation, and fell without looking through the small skylight to the stone floor below. As he lay there, Bahá'u'lláh offered him the choice between life and death. In his beautiful nature, he asked to be a sacrifice that would enable people to visit Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh permitted this, and in a short while, the prisoners were moved out to a more pleasant residence, to roam the city at large, and be visited; with Bahá'u'lláh to remain indoors.

The alchemy of Bahá'u'lláh's presence and the sacrificial love of Abdu'l-Bahá, everywhere transformed pitiless enemies into devoted friends. In due course, although no edict had set Him free, Bahá'u'lláh was moved to better accomodation and permitted the freedom of the city and its surroundings.

At the time of Bahá'u'lláh's ascension from this world, He was living at Bahji. His relatives were living very close by in 'Akka, and the entire city held both Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá in their hearts with incomparable honour.

Closing Days of Bahá'u'lláh's Life

Intimates Departure - 9 Months Prior

Inevitably, the time arrived when Bahá'u'lláh began to express His desire to ascend from this world of care.

For nine months, without speaking plainly of this matter, He hinted to the friends who attained His presence, that His earthly life was approaching its end. During these nine months, Bahá'u'lláh began very clearly to arrange affairs with urgency.

On one day, Abdu'l-Bahá was engaging Himself with collecting together Bahá'u'lláh's papers that were spread over the sofa in His writing chamber; Bahá'u'lláh turned to Abdu'l-Bahá, and said it was of no use gathering them - for He must leave them, and flee away.

Fever - Sat 7 May

On Saturday, 7 May 1892, the government began rounding up the farmers and poor people of the region, keeping them as conscripts against their will. They put a thousand of them into uniform and gave them military training, intending after a few days to dispatch them out to faraway lands. The tents of these oppressed people were near to the grounds of Bahji, and the weeping and lamenting, and the cries of their families, were heard day and night.

On the evening of that great day of oppression, a fever came upon Bahá'u'lláh; it was slight, and He did not call any attention to it.

Number of Friends - Sun 8 May [Day 1]

In the morning, a number of the friends reached His presence. The afternoon drew on, and the fever began to intensify, until in the evening, only one companion, with an urgent matter, was admitted to His presence.

Generally

Bahá'u'lláh sent out a servant to Abdu'l-Bahá in Akka, who took horses, and a Tablet carrying news of the fever. Following Bahá'u'lláh's wishes, Abdu'l-Bahá and his sister Bahiyih Khanum rode off immediately for Bahji. Abdu'l-Bahá stayed in a room across and to the west of Bahá'u'lláh's room, whilst the children remained at home in Akka with their mother, full of anxiety.

Two doctors were sent out to Bahá'u'lláh, and each day news of Bahá'u'lláh's continuing fever, which had a similar quality to malaria, was brought to the household and the children.

One Friend - Mon 9 May [Day 2]

On the next day, just one of the friends had the honour of an audience with Bahá'u'lláh,

Nabil - Tue 10 May [Day 3]

and on the third day at noon, He summoned Nabil to His presence alone. Bahá'u'lláh spoke to him for about half an hour. Sometimes He was seated, and sometimes He strode up and down the room, imparting wisdom through His beautiful words of the Spirit.

Admission in Groups

In the afternoon of that same day, a well-known believer arrived from Egypt. Bahá'u'lláh welcomed him into His presence along with some others, and until sunset, a number of friends came in groups into His presence.

Presence Closed; Gloom - Wed 11 May [Day 4]

On the fourth day, no one was able to come to Bahá'u'lláh's presence, and gloom and sorrow descended upon all the hearts of His forlorn lovers.

No One - 12-15 May [Days 5-8]

This way, the situation remained for a few days.

Family Arrive - 13 May [Day 6]

It was about the sixth day, when the family and children living in Akka travelled over to Bahji. Seeing the illness was serious, they were extremely distressed.

Patience Required; Grief - Mon 16 May [Day 9]

On the ninth day, Abdu'l-Bahá left the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. He went to the Pilgrim House, and shared Bahá'u'lláh's greetings with everyone there, and Bahá'u'lláh's desire that the friends remain patient and steadfast; and that they should arise, unperturbed, and spread the Call of God, knowing He shall be present with them, and will remember and care for them always. Abdu'l-Bahá's tone made it clear that Bahá'u'lláh's ascension from this world was fast approaching. These words pierced their hearts with such grief that they cried out and were thrown into such turmoil and dismay that they were close to passing away.

At dawn on the tenth day, Abdu'l-Bahá came again to the Pilgrim House. He was happy and smiling, and awaking the friends one by one, he called them to rise and drink their morning tea with joy, for Bahá'u'lláh was presently in perfect health, and the signs of great favour were apparent in His face. The friends were overwhelmed with joy to hear this news.

That very same morning, wholly unexpected, a royal telegram arrived, ordering the release of all the conscripts. This news was rapturously received by all the people in the land, and lifted their hearts with delight. Abdu'l-Bahá distributed food amongst the conscripts, the poor, the prisoners and the orphans. The people of 'Akka and further afield in Syria, low and high alike, were wholeheartedly offering their thanks to Bahá'u'lláh for such a loving favour and grace. No one in Syria could remember experiencing a day of such heavenly release as upon that day, and they rejoiced with each other in a day of festival.

Abdu'l-Bahá Visits Every Bahá'í In Akka

Abdu'l-Bahá journeyed into Akka and visited every Bahá'í household, conveying to every man and woman, the loving greetings from Bahá'u'lláh.

Audience - Sun 22 May [Day 15]

On the fifteenth afternoon, at the hour of sunset, just as the day broke when the Báb many years before had opened His Call to the world², a servant came down from upstairs and suddenly summoned to Bahá'u'lláh's room everyone present - the friends from Akka, several persian pilgrims, and resident Bahá'ís - numbering about nine people. Weeping and grief-stricken, they seized the opportunity and hastened to Bahá'u'lláh's presence.

Arrangements and Address

Bahá'u'lláh's bed was in the middle of the room, His mattress and quilt covered with white sheets. He lay in His bed propped up on two or three pillows, whilst two of His sons were seated, fanning Him from each side. His body was extremely frail, and He leaned against Abdu'l-Bahá. His voice was weak, yet He spoke clearly.

Words of Departure; Tears of Sacrifice

He spoke of His health, revealing gentle and loving words of separation and departure.

Some were circling around and around His bed, weeping and praying, and beseeching Bahá'u'lláh to permit them to sacrifice their lives in His place, even if it would extend His life only a little while.

Words of Encouragement

Bahá'u'lláh spoke loving words of peace and calm to everyone; He addressed them all, saying how well-pleased He was with them, coming every morning and evening, and their many services and tireless labours.

He prayed that their actions would be examples worthy of the name Bahá'í, letting their characters speak out to the world; and that they would ever be true and steadfast followers of the Light of God's Law. He prayed that God would assist them to remain united and aid them to raise up the Cause of the Lord.

Kitab-i-Aqdas

Bahá'u'lláh spoke as a reminder to those around Him, these words from the Kitab-i-Aqdas:

Say: Let not your hearts be perturbed, O people, when the glory of My Presence is withdrawn, and the ocean of My utterance is stilled. In My presence amongst you there is a wisdom, and in My absence there is yet another, inscrutable to all but God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing. Verily, We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our favoured angels.

Be not dismayed, O peoples of the world, when the day-star of My beauty is set, and the heaven of My tabernacle is concealed from your eyes. Arise to further My Cause, and to exalt My Word amongst men. We are with you at all times, and shall strengthen you through the power of truth. We are truly almighty. Whoso hath recognized Me will arise and serve Me with such determination that the powers of earth and heaven shall be unable to defeat his purpose.

Unity

As Bahá'u'lláh recited these verses to everyone, it became clear that He was soon to ascend from the world. Bahá'u'lláh then spoke of the importance of unity, love, and friendship, and urged everyone to avoid disunity, discord and schism. He vehemently counselled the friends to abstain from dissension and strife. Although His body was feeble, He voiced this with immense power, distinctly measuring out the words emphatically as He commanded them: to shun disharmony; to strive that no discord should arise amongst the friends; and to avoid contention.

Tears

The effect of these words and clear verses from His mouth on the friends was intense.

Tears flowed from one as He was overcome with feelings of grief and sorrow. Bahá'u'lláh bade him come close to Him, and using a handkerchief which was in His hand, Bahá'u'lláh wiped the tears from his cheeks. As He did so, the words of Isaiah, 'and the

² In the solar calendar of the Báb; the Holy Day was in this period celebrated in the lunar calendar of the times.

Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces,'³ involuntarily came to mind.

Another was utterly distraught, and could endure no more; his heart broke. With tears in his eyes, he cried out: 'Yá Bahá! Yá Bahá!' expressing his grief. He broke down.

Dismissal

The time came for everyone to depart. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was standing. He directed everyone to circumambulate the bed. The friends prostrated at Bahá'u'lláh's feet and walked simply around His bed. He said to them, "Fi amanu'llah - go in God's care," and they left the room in utmost sorrow, burning with separation. No words can describe the sadness and grief that encompassed their souls that day, some becoming quite ill with their grief. This was their last audience with Him.

Lambs

It is a Persian custom to sacrifice a lamb to lengthen the life of a loved one. Two lambs were brought into Bahá'u'lláh's room, and as Abdu'l-Bahá went into 'Akka to arrange various matters, to visit the friends, and convey the news of Bahá'u'lláh's better health, He superintended the distribution of the two lambs amongst the poor prisoners of 'Akka. In the evening, He returned again to Bahji.

Bahá'u'lláh Calls Family; Mentions the Master's Station

Bahá'u'lláh called all the ladies and children to Him. He described how He had left directions for their future guidance in His Will, and that Abdu'l-Bahá would arrange everything for the family, the friends, and for the Cause of God.

He said how the loving devotion of 'Andalib had touched Him very much, and the love of them all. He wished for everyone that they might always be true and faithful in service.

Gathering Writings

Amidst these days of ill health, Bahá'u'lláh one day summoned one of his sons to His Presence and gave him the keys for the cases in His room. According to Bahá'u'lláh's command, His son arranged for the locks to be renewed and affixed in their places.

Bahá'u'lláh summoned Abdul-Bahá to gather together all His writings. Tears descended from Abdul-Bahá like rain, his body trembling and his heart aching as he obeyed the command. He gathered together the important manuscripts, and placed them all in the two large cases given him by Bahá'u'lláh for safeguarding the writings in His absence.

Go Forth!

Before His ascension, Bahá'u'lláh directed Abdu'l-Bahá to go forward, and sound the solemn call of renewal throughout every land of the world; and that

he must observe all his sons and grandsons, whatever their age, for whomsoever God would show to follow him.

Bahá'u'lláh Furious

A few days before His ascension, Bahá'u'lláh called one of His companions to His room, for an audience. Bahá'u'lláh kept pacing, back and forth. The companion could see how angry He was, but Bahá'u'lláh was too upset to speak, and finally gestured for him to depart again. Although Bahá'u'lláh did not indicate why He was so upset, such an outrage arose immediately after His ascension, that it became entirely clear what He foresaw.

Ascension - Sun 29 May 1892, 8 hrs after sunset [Day 21]

On the night of the twenty-first day of the fever, 29 May 1892, eight hours after sunset⁴, aged 75, whilst there was no sign of any fever, Bahá'u'lláh ascended to the celestial worlds of the Spirit.



After the Ascension

News Broadcast and Spreads

Immediately, a horseman galloped into 'Akka, carrying the news to the legal advisor. Following the custom for the passing of an exceptionally honoured and learned holy man, there rang out across the land, from the seven minarets of the mosque:- "God is great. He giveth life! He taketh it again! He dies not, but lives for evermore!"

The word quickly spread throughout the land, and was proclaimed from the minarets of every mosque.

Sun of Baha has Set - News Broadcast to Sultan

'Abdu'l-Bahá telegraphed news of Bahá'u'lláh's ascension to a jubilant Sultan. The telegram began with the words, "The Sun of Baha has set." It advised the monarch that they intended to lay Bahá'u'lláh's sacred remains to rest within the precincts of Bahji, and this was permitted.

Surroundings

An ocean of grief and sorrow swept across Bahá'u'lláh's countless friends and companions. The Persians lamented fate's unchangeable decree, whilst the native Arabs cried out, "O God, O God!" Confusion spread everywhere. A large crowd descended from 'Akka and the neighbouring villages, and gathered at Bahji to show their respect and unite in mourning, thronging the surrounding fields, weeping, beating upon their heads, and crying aloud with grief.

Washing the Body; Writings Taken to Another Room

Abdu'l-Bahá spoke compassionately to the friends, and lovingly urged their hearts onwards in the Cause of God.

Following the custom, water was brought in to wash the sacred remains. As Abdu'l-Bahá and the

³ Isaiah 25:8

⁴ 29 May 1892, commemorated at 3 am GMT (4 am United Kingdom).

companions were just preparing to do so, Abdu'l-Bahá's half-brother indicated that much water would be spilled in the room, making the cases of Writings damp, so he had them carried away to his brother's room, and then shortly after they were carried out the window, along the gallery, and set down in his own place.

Laid to Rest at Sunset

Bahá'u'lláh was laid to rest in His son-in-law's residence, in the northernmost room adjacent to the mansion. His interment took place shortly after sunset, on the very day of His ascension.

The entire population of 'Akká, Muslim and Christian of every social class and position, secular and religious, poor and rich, orphans and oppressed, gathered there in a heartfelt expression of faithfulness, to honour the One beloved of all. Songs were sung in His praise, and poems chanted; laments and prayers were chanted by the Shaykhs, who brought in lambs, rice, sugar and sale to distribute to the poor, that they should pray for the departed soul. Many deeply-moving funeral orations were spoken, describing Bahá'u'lláh's wonderful life of self-sacrifice.

Week of Mourning

For at least a week after that incomparable calamity, great numbers of mourners remained to grieve with the bereaved family. Many camped under the surrounding trees, and the family generously and at great effort provided the food and hospitality for about five hundred people. Abdu'l-Bahá made all the arrangements and superintended every detail, and He provided money for the poor.

At every dawn, the Call to Prayer and some of the prayers of Bahá'u'lláh were chanted from the balcony of Bahji, in the beautiful voice of one of the Arabian Bahá'ís. As this call sounded summoning all the hearts, Abdu'l-Bahá would arise, and everyone would follow Him to the Shrine, where He chanted the funeral prayer and the Tablet of Visitation, which He had asked to be arranged from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings⁵.

Tributes from Afar - Day 2

Telegrams of condolence, passionate poetry, and glowing expressions of devotion began pouring in from afar in Arabic and Turkish to Abdu'l-Bahá, as Muslim and Christian poets, men of learning, clergy and officials sent Him words and verses praising Bahá'u'lláh's virtues and lamenting their immense loss, mingling their homage with praises of Abdu'l-Bahá Himself.

Nabil's Death

An ocean of grief and unbounded devotion poured out from the hearts of Bahá'u'lláh's followers, and they determined to carry high the banner of the Cause into all the lands.

Abdu'l-Bahá's sister Bahiyyih Khanum grew over a considerable period so thin and feeble from the anguish of her mourning, she was close to disintegration, her only and dearest wish, to drain her cup, and wing her way to the realms of glory.

Nabil could not endure the world without Bahá'u'lláh. For three months, he was inconsolable. At last he wrote a beautiful poem, telling all that was in his heart, and gave it to a companion to give to Abdu'l-Bahá. The companion forgot to give it straight away, and all that night the family heard someone walking about the Holy Tomb and chanting prayers. The next morning, he went to the sea, and leaving his clothes on shore, drowned himself. No one knew of it, and they searched for him all over the mountains and around. Then his clothing was found, and in four days his body was washed up and it was identified. When the poem was read by Abdu'l-Bahá, it was learned how he had decided he could stay on earth no longer, he so loved and yearned for Bahá'u'lláh.

Will Read; Jealousy (Day 9)

Two years before His ascension, Bahá'u'lláh had written a Will⁶, bequeathing all His spiritual treasures, summoning mankind to love and unity, and to the Cause. He wrote and signed the Will in His own hand; it remained locked in a box, and during Bahá'u'lláh's final days, He entrusted it to Abdu'l-Bahá.

Abdu'l-Bahá sent to 'Akka for this box, and on the morning of the ninth day, nine witnesses were chosen from amongst His family and friends. In their presence, Bahá'u'lláh's Will was unsealed, and read aloud by one of the companions, and in the afternoon, another read the Will in the Shrine, in the presence of Abdu'l-Bahá and a large number of friends, His sons, some of the Bab's kinsmen, pilgrims and resident Bahá'ís.

Abdu'l-Bahá then went to see the ladies of the household. They called together the servants, and when everyone was assembled, at Abdu'l-Bahá's request the Will was read to them.

The guidance and protection of the Spirit had now fallen upon Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son, and the Will proclaimed plainly that all should turn to Him. The friends rejoiced; such a sublime station could have come as no surprise with His lifelong sacrifice of body and soul, and the soul-transforming signs of spirituality evident within him.

But jealousy arose like a fire in some of the family members, seeking to seize for themselves an influence, inheritance and leadership in the Faith. This had been building up over some time, as they witnessed Abdu'l-Bahá's natural gifts and ever-growing prestige, and it now burst into the light. In their pursuit of personal gain, no means was too low or shameful

⁵ <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/c/BP/bp-176.html>

⁶ <http://www.bahai-library.org/writings/bahauallah/tb/13.html>

for them to carry out, and for many years they caused severe crises and hardships to bruise and buffet the Faith.⁷

Abdu'l-Bahá, with patient and loving endurance, strength of mind, and divine assistance, brought every strategy to nothing, and set forth in establishing and nurturing the Faith far and wide.

Cholera in Akka

Whilst the mourners were still at Bahji, a serious outbreak of cholera swept into the town of 'Akka. It was the custom that the family should remain in the house of the departed for forty days. Some made haste and departed, whilst others remained in spite of the raging cholera. Abdu'l-Bahá and the family returned to their house in 'Akka, trusting in the protection of God. People died in great numbers, and the children were very frightened and appalled by so many dead bodies carried out for burial. Everybody fled in fear and terror, and they were almost the only family left in Akka.

Master Back to Akka, Sad

Abdu'l-Bahá went back to Bahá'u'lláh's shrine at Bahji, and returned again to Akka very sad. He alone carried out all the work in that difficult time.

News Broadcast (After 9 Days)

He wrote a Tablet⁸ telling the news of Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, urging the Bahá'ís to arise, strong and resolute, to spread the Call of God. He directed this to be copied and sent to all the friends in Persia.

Letters from Abdu'l-Bahá soon began pouring vigorously into every village, town, and country like drops of rain in spring, cheering the friends with His life-giving words. Whoever received a Tablet would make many copies, and send them as precious gifts to friends throughout the length and breadth of the East.

Abdu'l-Bahá's Mission

The ascension of Bahá'u'lláh drew to a close a period unparalleled in the history of world religion.

For thirty long years, 'Abdu'l-Bahá rested neither night nor day. Single and alone, a prisoner and victim of tyranny, He arose to reform the human world. He watered the tree of the Faith, sheltering it from every whirlwind and lightning bolt. After His release from imprisonment, He journeyed throughout the world with the life-giving Call of the Spirit, until His own wondrous spirit passed also into the light of the all-highest realm.

Further Reading:

Memories of Nine Years in Akka, Youness Afroukhteh, ISBN 978-0-85398-477-1

⁷ My sorrow is not for Myself, but for Him Who shall come after Me, in the shadow of My Cause, with manifest and undoubted sovereignty, inasmuch as they will not welcome His appearance, will repudiate His signs, will dispute His sovereignty, will contend with Him, and will betray His Cause. (Bahá'u'lláh)

⁸ <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/SAB/sab-6.html>

The Master in Akka, Myron Phelps, ISBN 0-87743-254-6

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