

‘Abdu’l-Bahā ‘Abbās
Head of the Bahā’ī Faith



A Life in Social and Regional Context

Joshua Lincoln



Arabic calligraphic rendering of “Abdu’l-Bahā ‘Abbās”,
from the medallion on the gate of his house in Haifa.

Cover photo: Aerial view of the fortress of Acre, 1918.
The estate of Bahjī and its olive grove (top right), and the
Riḍwan garden (lower right) can be discerned. Courtesy
of the Staudinger Collection, Bavarian State Archives.

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With a foreword by Meir M. Bar-Asher

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To Sophie and Samuel

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Foreword

By Meir M. Bar-Asher

This monograph, published by the Chair for Bahā'ī Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is devoted to the figure of 'Abbās Effendi, son of the prophet-founder of the Bahā'ī religion, Bahā'u'llāh. Among the religion's followers, 'Abbās Effendi is known by his appellation 'Abdu'l-Bahā, "servant of Bahā'u'llāh", his father. This epithet was more precious to him than any of the other numerous titles he was given, and the one by which he wished to be called. 'Abdu'l-Bahā was one of the central figures of the Bahā'ī Faith and played an incalculable role in its transformation from the faith of a small community of believers to a universal religion whose tenets and principles were disseminated to all four corners of the earth. 'Abdu'l-Bahā was a man of exceptionally wide-ranging and perceptive thought, as well as an accomplished man of action. Woven together in this monograph by Joshua Lincoln are his colourful persona, his movements within the region of the Near East, and his extensive ties with personalities and institutions, as well as his religious, social and political ideas. The resulting volume makes a highly significant contribution to our knowledge of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's life and influence.

Through a close study of this central figure, one of the pillars of the founding generation, this work, which will also appear in Hebrew and Arabic translations, gives the reader important insights into the Bahā'ī religion. Summarizing key junctures in the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahā, it describes his role in fostering the

growth of the Bahā’ī Faith and dealing with adversaries, internal as well as external. For in addition to the persecution suffered by the Bahā’īs in Iran and later in the Ottoman Empire at large, there was also the threat of internal schism. Like his father before him, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā was confronted with a challenge to his legitimacy as leader of the Bahā’ī community. His younger half-brother, Mirza Muḥammad ‘Alī, refused to recognize him as Bahā’u’llāh’s spiritual heir, rejecting the assertion that this was their father’s wish.

The book describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s role as the definitive, authoritative interpreter of his father’s legacy and teachings. It also describes other important aspects of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s work: his tireless undertakings on behalf of the Bahā’ī community in Palestine, and his efforts to integrate its members in local agricultural activity, notably by establishing Bahā’ī settlements in the Galilee and Transjordan. The author also presents, clearly and concisely, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s set of guiding principles, which became the cornerstone of the Bahā’ī Faith: to promote education in different parts of the world, especially in underdeveloped regions; to call for equality between nations, religions and sexes, as highlighted in his philosophical and practical agenda; and, above all, to preach the need for world peace, which he did indefatigably. Some surprising facts emerge. For example, with his sharp understanding of the political processes taking place in the world far beyond Acre, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā – especially during visits to Europe in the years preceding World War I – sensed the winds of war gathering force. This only strengthened his belief in the necessity for peace as the only way to prevent the impending bloodshed; his message would carry across to the subsequent, even more devastating war, and to the many conflicts that scarred the twentieth century.

Following the family’s banishment from Iran on false accusations, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā spent most of his life in exile – along with his revered father and other family members – in different

cities in the Ottoman Empire: Baghdad, Edirne, Istanbul, and finally, in 1868, Acre. Even when the conditions of their confinement were eased, the family usually had only limited freedom of movement, being subjected to a form of house arrest such as that imposed on the Bahā'īs in Acre, on and off, over decades.

When the constraints on 'Abdu'l-Bahā were finally lifted in 1908, the world's wider horizons opened. It was the beginning of a new and momentous era in his life. 'Abdu'l-Bahā embarked on a series of journeys, traveling first to Egypt in 1910 for a year of recuperation and renewal after the decades of exile and adversity. During his stay in Egypt he met politicians, government officials, leading intellectuals, and writers. A year later, in 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahā undertook a major journey through Europe, with visits to France, Switzerland, and England. There followed another stay in Egypt, then a second journey to the West, this time moving beyond France and England to include Scotland, Austria, and Hungary, the United States and Canada. With his considerable charm and charisma, 'Abdu'l-Bahā made an impression on the diverse audiences to whom he expounded his ideas, gaining new adherents to the Bahā'ī religion, and establishing several new congregations.

The author begins his account of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's eventful life with a vivid evocation of its end-point. The scene of his funeral in 1921 is both striking and instructive, revealing the role he played in the lives of others and the impact he had on them. The funeral was attended by representatives of all the country's religious communities, including heads of the Muslim community and of the various Christian denominations, some originally from Beirut or Damascus. Prominent among those present was the first British High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, as well as the governor of Jerusalem, Sir Ronald Storrs, the governor of Phoenicia, Sir Stewart Symes and many others.

The eulogies delivered on the occasion by community leaders evoke a multifaceted personality, someone who spoke to the hearts of many, whatever their background; excerpts from some of them are included in the book, enabling the reader to sense the atmosphere of the event and appreciate the warm esteem in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahā was held. He emerges as a leader deeply rooted in several cultures, not just that of the environment in which he grew up, namely Iran in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but also the Arabic and Turkish cultures to which he was introduced by his tumultuous life circumstances. As evinced by the various writings he left us, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā was deeply conversant with the religious culture and literature of Iran, while his command of Arabic and Turkish, along with Persian, his mother tongue, gave him access to the cultural worlds of most of the countries in the Near East.

In describing ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s extensive interactions with important figures from different religions and social groups, Joshua Lincoln adopts a two-fold perspective: on the one hand, the voice, worldview, and sensitivity of a Bahā’ī who identifies deeply with his subject; and on the other, an attentive, balanced, and critical reading of Bahā’ī sources and the extensive research literature. The work is enriched by the author’s unusual combination of qualifications: an academic background in international relations and regional studies; a thorough understanding of the historical and social dynamics of the Near East in the period in question; and the unique perspective of having served for six years (2013-2019) as the Secretary General of the Bahā’ī International Community.

As the author explains in his introduction, it was the familiar sight of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s historical residence and garden, across the street from his own Haifa office at 10 Haparsim Street – one of the administrative centres of the Bahā’ī community in Israel – that first triggered his reflections on ‘Abdu’l-Bahā. These began with the celebrated stories he had heard as a child, and would

mature into a research project that centred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s life, oeuvre and social relations in the late Ottoman context, finally taking the form of the present monograph.

While much has been written about ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, this book is unusual in that it complements the existing literature, which tends to focus on the brief period of his travels to the West in 1911-1912, with a study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā in the Near East, his home for a half-century, and the rapports and patterns of activity that characterized his life there. It also begins to fill other lacunae. First, many of the books on ‘Abdu’l-Bahā to date take the form of traveller narratives written by visitors to Acre, or accounts of meetings with ‘Abdu’l-Bahā during his 1911-1912 travels, and thus they often adopt a Western perspective; this study, however, underlines the regional perspective. Second, rather than chronicling ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s role within the Bahā’ī community, the monograph is emphatically outward-looking, focusing on his social relations, writings, and works. Third, by recounting the experience of the Bahā’ī community, it weaves another fascinating narrative into the rich texture of life in the region in late Ottoman and early British times. For any student or scholar of the period, and anyone interested in the complex religious history of this land, there is much to be discovered in these pages.

One of the main objectives of the Chair for Bahā’ī Studies at the Hebrew University is to create an up-to-date scholarly resource, especially in Hebrew and Arabic, to reflect in-depth research on the Bahā’ī Faith, and offer it to seekers of knowledge on the subject. This initiative began with the activity of my colleague Prof. Moshe Sharon, who founded the Chair and directed it for more than twenty years. It was in this framework that Prof. Sharon published his important Hebrew translation of *al-Kitāb al-Aqdas*, *The Bahā’ī Faith and its Holy Writ: The Most Holy Book*, as well as a bilingual Hebrew-Arabic edition of *The Hidden Words*, a short but significant work by Bahā’u’llāh. The

publication of Joshua Lincoln’s present volume is the first step in reigniting that initiative. It is my hope that other publications will soon follow.

I would like to extend heartfelt thanks to Joshua Lincoln and the many colleagues who helped him work on this book, all of whom he acknowledges in his preface.

Preface

As often happens, I came to this book by a personal path. For six years my office at no. 10 Haparsim Street in Haifa looked out directly on the beautifully preserved house of ‘Abbās Effendi – as he was known locally – at no. 7. From my desk I could see the house at all hours, and as I walked that street, many of the stories I had learned as a Bahā’ī child about ‘Abdu’l-Bahā – as he is known to Bahā’īs – came back to me. From there, my own engagements as secretary-general of the Bahā’ī International Community (2013-2019) took me to many of the places in which ‘Abbās Effendi had lived and circulated in Ottoman Palestine, today’s northern Israel, from Acre, Mazra‘ih, Tiberias and the Druze villages of the Galilee, to the east bank of the Jordan River.

‘Abbās Effendi, I discovered, was everywhere. In a meeting one day in the Western Galilee foothills with Sheikh Muwaffaq Tarif, the national head of the Druze community in Israel, he told me a family story which centred on advice given by ‘Abbās Effendi to his great-grandfather, Sheikh Muḥammad Tarif, when the latter was summoned by Sultan ‘Abdulhamid to Istanbul in the years preceding World War I. I heard similar stories from Sheikh Samir ‘Assi, the Imam of the al-Jazzār Mosque in Acre. At a dinner hosted by the Christian Arab Association of Haifa, I found myself discussing ‘Abbās Effendi with the grandson of one of the Arab masons who had worked for him on Mount Carmel. Along the way I encountered traces of his ties to Beirut or Alexandria or Cairo. In Amman, stories emerged relating to an agricultural venture of his at ‘Adasiyye, at the confluence of

the Jordan and Yarmouk Rivers, on the east side of the Jordan Valley. And as far away as Baku, Azerbaijan, I came upon tales of his guidance to that community in pre-Soviet times.

My own academic training in international relations, as well as my studies of the region and its history, made me increasingly curious about the Levantine context – regional, historical and social – of ‘Abbās Effendi’s life. In time I came to the conclusion that the general understanding of this subject was still quite fragmented.

Indeed, Western Bahā’is tend to rely overwhelmingly on English-language accounts of his 1911-1912 visits to Europe and North America, or on even more narrowly drawn portraits by Western pilgrims who ventured by sea to Acre and spent brief periods of time there before and after World War I; Eastern Bahā’is similarly rely on a number of traveller accounts in Persian. These descriptions focus mainly on ‘Abbās Effendi as the sole actor, or on his interactions with the small Bahā’i community in Acre; they are less concerned with the details and significance of his social encounters, his engagements, and the wider social background. While ‘Abdu’l-Bahā himself had a deep understanding of his Arab milieu, most of the Bahā’is who recorded their impressions of him had no such knowledge, though there were a few notable exceptions. Moreover, despite being keenly aware of his presence in their midst, his many Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Druze neighbours in Ottoman Palestine, often with their own family stories, had and still have little idea of his overall life and teachings, and even less of the breadth and reach of his influence. In the Middle East more generally and the Persian Gulf region, the situation is not much different.

At the same time, broader historical accounts of the period often dwell on dominant narratives and lack the perspective of minority communities. Almost all the research and scholarship on ‘Abdu’l-Bahā over the last fifty years has been conducted

by Bahā'īs and published by Bahā'ī presses, primarily for a Bahā'ī audience. One notable exception, it appears, is Oliver Scharbrodt's *Islam and the Bahā'ī Faith – A comparative study of Muḥammad 'Abduh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā 'Abbās*. Surprisingly then, the region has yet to fully claim 'Abdu'l-Bahā 'Abbās for itself, and to accord him a proper place in its overall historiography.

In its methodology, the present book is a work of works. It seeks to integrate and correlate what is known about the life, activities and writings of 'Abbās Effendi, with particular emphasis on historical context and social relations within a Levantine regional framework. Where relevant, it initially consults *Abdul-Bahā: Centre of the Covenant of Bahā'u'llāh* by the eminent Iranian Bahā'ī scholar Hasan Balyuzi, published in English in 1971, fifty years after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahā. In this work, the tone and substance of which are suited primarily to a Bahā'ī audience, Balyuzi draws extensively on several earlier Persian-language biographies that were written during or shortly after 'Abdu'l-Bahā's lifetime. Although Balyuzi's book incorporates a wider range of sources than these earlier biographies, less than a tenth of its contents relate to the first half of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's life, before the death of Bahā'u'llāh in 1892, while almost half is devoted to 'Abdu'l-Bahā's three years of travels (1911-1913).

The past fifty years, however, have seen a substantial addition of new historical material and fresh research on aspects of the life and teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahā. I am indebted to several scholars engaged in this deeper exploration, such as Necati Alkan, on relations with Ottoman and Turkish figures; Robert Stockman, on his travels to America; Soli Shahvar, on the Bahā'ī schools of Iran; or Hoda Mahmoudi and Janet Khan, on 'Abdu'l-Bahā's "Tablets to the Hague." This book also makes use of a larger set of first-person accounts from both inside and outside the Bahā'ī community – by his sister Bāhīyyih, for example, and by Shakīb Arslān, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rahel Yanait Ben-Zvi, Hillel Yaffe – all of whom lived, travelled, interacted or corresponded

with ‘Abdu’l-Bahā ‘Abbās in the region. Some of these have only recently come to light. Finally, this work benefits from a range of wider, related historical, political and social secondary studies that postdate Balyuzi, such as David Fromkin’s *A Peace to End All Peace*, on the fall of the Ottoman Empire, “The 1915 Locust Attack” by Zachary Foster, and Moshe Naor’s “The Sephardi and Oriental Jews of Haifa”. Such works deepen our understanding of the times, the politics, the vicissitudes of war, disease and famine, as well as the personalities and the social dimension. I have included a chapter on the western travels of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā since these form an integral part of his life and sometimes relate directly to the Levant (for example, in connection with Gibran Khalil Gibran); they may also be of interest to a Middle Eastern audience unfamiliar with some of the social issues of the day (race relations, the rights of women) that he espoused publicly.

I am indebted to Prof. Meir Bar-Asher, the incumbent of the Chair of Bahā’ī Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, for seeing the value of this project and shepherding it to publication. For their counsel and supporting efforts in the writing process, I wish to thank Elham Afnan, Nesreen Badi Akhtarkhavi, Tiffani Betts Razavi, Jennie Feldman, Omid Ghaemmaghami, Holly Hanson, Wendy Heller, Eitan Ishai, Albert Lincoln, Hoda Mahmoudi, Moojan Momen, Ayman Rouhani, David Rutstein, Soli Shahvar, Heather Simpson, Sepher Tabrizi, Robert Weinberg and Christopher White. I also want to acknowledge a debt of intellectual gratitude to the late Prof. Suheil Bushrui of the American University of Beirut and later the University of Maryland, born in Nazareth and educated in the region. He quite deliberately, some three decades ago, piqued my curiosity about ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s relationship with the Arab world and I was lucky to be able to interview him on the subject shortly before his passing in 2015.

In writing this text, it quickly became apparent that I could not do justice to the full breadth of approaches that I believe

should now stand as our shared goal in the study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s oeuvre. A century on, it is important to look at ‘Abdu’l-Bahā through a richer range of lenses, to acknowledge and explore a broader set of perspectives, and to begin to compare and connect them in a form of analysis that is ultimately both intersectional and integrative. Individuals and demographic groups heard and perceived him differently and *felt* that he communicated with them in different ways. A broader number of vantage points and a fuller contextualization of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā in time and place, even if it presents a more complex narrative, will help us better distinguish the universal from the specific, the abstract from the applied, and in time release us from overly simplistic notions of who he was and what he did.

This text is offered as a contribution to a growing body of scholarship and discourse on themes that occupied the life and work of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā. Future historians will certainly improve upon it. While their discoveries and insights are eagerly anticipated, both the interpretations and limitations of this work remain mine alone.

Joshua Lincoln

August 2023