

spread around the world, even touching the hearts of his jailers whose attitude towards this exiled stranger changed dramatically when they heard him speak.

Today it is possible to visit the house to which Baha'u'llah was released and where he died in 1892, aged seventy-four. It lies between the cities of Acre (modern day Akka) and Haifa where the body of The Bab is buried.

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THE END OF THE WORLD

Emma Geen

The Baha'i faith is the most recent of the main world religions. It arose in Islamic Persia and its roots are firmly within the Islamic tradition though it has now become a world religion in its own right. Its founder, Baha'u'llah, declared in 1863 that he was the new Prophet, in the line of prophets from Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. In the 1840s a teacher called The Bab, meaning the Gate, had predicted the coming of a new prophet and had been murdered. This claim, that Mohammed was not the last of the Prophets sent to reveal the Words of God and His Will, aroused massive opposition in Persia and brought persecution down upon the original followers of Baha'u'llah.

In response to his teachings the Persian authorities first of all imprisoned him and then sent him into exile. They sent him to a prison cell in the most remote, barren and backward part of the Ottoman Empire: the city of Akka in Palestine, the Holy Land for Jews and Christians. Here he continued to preach and to receive pilgrim visitors even while he was in jail. As this story tells, in the second half of the 19th century Akka was considered the back of beyond. Yet it was here that Baha'u'llah's message of world unity and peace began to

There are some that call Akka the end of the world. I've always called it home myself, but on the days when the sun is a molten core in the humid sky I can near understand why. It sure isn't pretty here, there's no arguing against that. The main city is a twisted honeycomb of streets and crumbling houses that loom like dour sentinels, all caked with enough mud and crap and damp to set the flies and fleas dancing for joy. Some even say that the air here is so foul that birds fall dead from the sky. People like to exaggerate, see. I've only ever seen one bird fall myself. Well two, but the second was so riddled with maggots that I'm surprised he'd gotten airborne in the first place. Yet whatever is said about Akka, you have to understand that a man's home is his home, whether it's perched on the world's brink or not.

The infamy of Akka is helped none by the fact that for many of the folk here it isn't home, what with our prison complex. This is the trade Akka supplies, see, we take out the empire's trash and lock them up under bolt and key. You name it we've got it, the worst murderers, arsonists, robbers, political dissidents, thugs that'd rather take your eye out than give you the time of day. To see all of them put

out of harm's way is almost satisfying if you like that sort of thing and, seeing guarding is in my blood, I guess it is for me. So the rare time when we get thrown a lot that don't really belong here I can smell them a mile off.

It was like that with that old fella and his group—Mirza Husayn-Ali Nuri, though that wasn't what his folks called him. We'd been told that they were enemies of the state so there was a large crowd gathered to jeer from the harbour. Yet after the eight hours crossing, getting off that ship, they looked less like enemies and more like mezze that had been left too long on the fire.

Over the coming weeks, my doubts were only to grow. We weren't allowed to talk with the prisoners but you don't need words to tell the mark of a man. Merely walk past the cells of some here and they'll launch at the bars, frothing with expletives that would turn most men crimson. And don't get me started on the shit-flingers. But that old religious man, he was the exact opposite. Pass his cell and at most he'd look up to give you a polite nod, then keep on writing. Throw him to the ground and he'd rise as dignified as if he'd just been in prayer. Later, when we'd stopped roughing him around so much he'd even smile and thank you when you brought him his meal. Whenever I saw that smile I'd get the strangest feeling that he belonged in some quiet house in the country, surrounded by his grandchildren, not locked up here in some damp cell.

His eldest son was another one like him. Abdu'l-Baha was what they called him and he was always looking after someone or other. A lot of people get sick in the prison, what with the dirt and heat, yet even when he was so taken with the fever that he could barely sit straight he'd still be



looking after his people. Acted more like a saint than a criminal, he did.

I wasn't the only one that thought there was something different about that lot. It wasn't long after they arrived when we started getting people turning up at the city gate proclaiming themselves pilgrims of all things. Stubborn ones at that. Most of the trash we get sent here are the sort people are glad to be rid of and if they do send anything after it's a well-aimed spit. So naturally, I was curious,

especially when I'd been turning one young man away for more than a month.

"So what is it about this old man?" I said as I tugged him up from his spot one day.

"*His name* is Baha'u'llah." He said as he wriggled from my grip, all flame in his eyes.

Baha'u'llah! Now, call me cynical, but it's hardly surprising that someone who goes around calling himself "Glory of God" got himself locked up. I'd long since stopped counting how many we've in our cells who claim to be some relation or other of God's; yet I'd never taken Mirza for a crazy like that. So instead of moving this boy along, I questioned him further.

He told me that the people we had locked up next to the barracks were Baha'is: a new religion that had sprung from that Bab figure who caused all that uproar a couple of decades back. The Baha'is, he said, believe that religious history shows itself through a series of divine messengers who start religions suited to the needs of their time, including Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, but hear this: the most recent was supposed to be none other than old Mirza!

The bit that really made me pause though was when he said that Mirza had been in exile for nearly twenty years. When I thought of how long that man had been pushed from place to place it filled me with a horrid feeling, like maggots squirming about my insides.

As I listened, you could see the hope spreading across this man's face. Sure I was intrigued, even a little touched, but it doesn't pay to let the other guards see you getting too friendly with the pilgrims and so as soon as I heard the

march of the approaching patrol, I hoofed this boy on his way. Besides, I knew he'd be straight back the next day.

Sometimes the pilgrims even brought food and drink for this "Baha'u'llah". We ate well in the barracks those nights. But even the best of breads tasted stale when I let my thoughts rove to that old man in his cell—the only bread the prisoners get is black and salty as a sailor's beard. So whenever this happened I got in the habit of taking the old man a bit. That way we got to talking. I wasn't the only guard he'd charmed by then and so the restrictions had been relaxed. Mostly we'd talk about what he'd been writing that day; he sent letters to fancy folk you wouldn't believe—the Pope, Alexander of Russia, Queen Victoria. I could only shake my head in awe but he'd just smile.

"Humankind is a unity," he'd always say. "The need of the present time is to establish global unity." And his eyes would be as clear and glorious as the morning sun.

Pretty soon, it didn't seem so crazy that those pilgrims travelled all this way just to catch a glimpse of him.

When I get to thinking of those conversations, I start wondering what would have happened if they'd gone on for longer. He had a way about him of turning men's hearts. But it was only a couple of months after that his youngest son fell through a skylight. Pierced right through his ribs. Not a quick or pleasant death by anyone's standards. Soon after, the Baha'is were moved into better accommodation. Last I heard, that old man was shackled up in some empty mansion outside the city. Good for him, I say.

Still, every time I pass his old cell I smile to see the spot by the window where he'd sit scribbling and I get to thinking—What if that old fella really is a prophet? What if these

Baha'is are the religion of the new age? For if Akka is the end of this world, then I suppose it's also got to be the beginning of the next.



PART THREE

FOLK

¹ In the interests of accessibility the diacritics have been dropped from certain names in this story. The traditional spelling of these names is as follows: Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'i, Bahá'u'lláh and Mirzá Husayn-'Alí Núrí.