

Who Was Bahá'u'lláh?

In examining the evidence for the One who has claimed to speak the Word of God, the most vital questions are these: Who was He? What was He like? How did He live? What happened to Him? Here are a few features of Bahá'u'lláh's life, adapted mostly from a book titled *Some Answered Questions*:

Bahá'u'lláh was born in 1817, in Persia, to a rich and noble family. He died in 1892, as a prisoner and exile in the Holy Land. As an infant, He astonished His parents by His uniqueness and distinctions. His father related that He would never cry or scream. "You don't know," he said, "what a potential He has, how intelligent He is! He is like a flame of fire, and in His tender years superior to young people."¹ Bahá'u'lláh's father was so infatuated with Him that he wrote a piece of poetry in his son's honor, inscribed it on a plaque, and hung it on the wall of a summer mansion in which Bahá'u'lláh lived. The content of the poetry shows that the father sensed the divine destiny of his Son:

When thou enterest the sacred
abode of the Beloved say:
"I am at thy command.
This is the home of love; enter with
reverence.

This is holy ground; remove thy
shoes when
thou enterest here."²

People were attracted by Bahá'u'lláh's many distinctions. He did not attend any school, yet astonished people by His wisdom and knowledge. Even His enemies testified to His greatness. Great thinkers flocked to His presence, asking their most difficult questions. They said, "This man is unique in all perfections."

He had an extraordinary power of attraction, which was felt by all. People always crowded around Him. Ministers and people of the Court would surround Him, and the children also were devoted to Him. When He was only thirteen or fourteen years old He became renowned for His learning. He would converse on any subject and solve any problem presented to Him. In large gatherings He would discuss matters with the 'Ulamá (religious leaders) and would explain intricate religious questions. All of them used to listen to Him with the greatest interest.³

He showed no interest in politics:

When Bahá'u'lláh was twenty-two years old, His father died, and the Government wished Him to succeed to His father's position in the Ministry, as was customary in Persia, but Bahá'u'lláh did not accept the offer. Then the Prime Minister said:

"Leave him to himself. Such a position is unworthy of him. He has some higher aim in view. I cannot understand him, but I am convinced that he is destined for some lofty career. His thoughts are not like ours. Let him alone."⁴

Bahá'u'lláh was known especially for His generosity and love for the poor:

He was most generous, giving abundantly to the poor. None who came to Him were turned away. The doors of His house were open to all. He always had many guests. This unbounded generosity was conducive to greater astonishment from the fact that He sought neither position nor prominence.⁵

One day Bahá'u'lláh sent 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest Son, to inspect the work of the shepherds who were taking care of His sheep. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a small child at the time, and the persecutions against Bahá'u'lláh and His family had not yet started. Bahá'u'lláh then had a good deal of land in the mountains and owned large herds of sheep. When the inspection was finished and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was ready to leave, the man who had accompanied Him said, "It is your father's custom to leave a gift for each shepherd." 'Abdu'l-Bahá became silent for a while, because He did not have anything to give them. The man, however, insisted that the shepherds were expecting something.

Then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had an idea that made Him very happy! He would give the shepherds the sheep they were taking care of! Bahá’u’lláh was very much pleased when He heard about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s generous thoughts towards the shepherds. He humorously remarked that everyone had better take good care of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá because someday He would give Himself away. Of course, this is exactly what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did for the rest of His life. He gave everything He had, each and every moment of His life, to humanity, to unite us and bring us true happiness.⁶

Bahá’u’lláh was also known for His courage to stand against the powerful who would abuse their power:

All classes of men marveled at His miraculous success in emerging unscathed from the most perilous encounters. Nothing short of Divine protection, they thought, could have ensured His safety on such occasions. Not once did Bahá’u’lláh, beset though He was by the gravest perils, submit to the arrogance, the greed and the treachery of those around Him. In His constant association, during those days, with the highest dignitaries of the realm, whether ecclesiastical or State officials, He was never content simply to accede to the views they expressed or the claims they advanced. He would, at their gatherings, fearlessly champion the cause of truth,

would assert the rights of the down-trodden, defending the weak and protecting the innocent.⁷

Bahá’u’lláh spent the early part of His life in the utmost joy and happiness. But because of His beliefs, He became a target of prejudice and persecution. Thousands of fanatical believers rose against Him. Religious leaders were terrified of losing their power. They said, “This man intends to destroy religion, law, the nation, and the empire.” (People made the same accusations against Jesus.) He faced His enemies with the utmost courage, showing no weakness or fear.

Bahá’u’lláh endured almost 40 years of imprisonment and exile, yet He never complained. No human being can imagine what He went through. Among His sufferings was imprisonment in an infamous dungeon in Tihrán, known as the Black Pit or Black Dungeon, where He was kept for four months. In that dungeon He endured and willingly submitted to every conceivable pain and anguish:

- **Total darkness:** The underground prison had neither lights nor windows.
- **A terrible stench:** About 150 of the worst criminals were thrown in that dark, deep, damp dungeon with no air circulation or sanitary facilities. The ground was covered with several inches of filthy mud and mire.

• **Hunger and thirst:** For the first three days and nights Bahá’u’lláh received neither food nor water.

• **Severe pain and lack of mobility:** Bahá’u’lláh’s feet were put in stocks, and on His neck was placed a chain so heavy that He could not hold Himself upright. (To hold the weight of the chain, Bahá’u’lláh had to press His hands against the ground covered with slime up to His wrists. Sometimes they put a support under His chain.) From the weight of the harsh metal, His neck became inflamed and injured.

• **Little if any sleep:** Under those horrible conditions Bahá’u’lláh could hardly sleep.

• **Lack of clothes:** His outer garments were stripped away on His way to the prison.

• **Illness:** Because of the unsanitary conditions and poison put in His food, Bahá’u’lláh suffered grave illness.

• **Homelessness:** All His property was confiscated.

• **Loneliness:** “During this time none of His friends were able to get access to Him.”⁸

• **Being surrounded by the worst criminals** who had little if any hope of survival or freedom.

• **Anxiety about His family:** Bahá’u’lláh’s family members, including His young children, were at the mercy of fanatical mobs,

filled with rage and incited to revenge. (His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was then 9 years old.)

- **Deep grief and concern for His devoted and distinguished disciples**, who were being hunted down, tortured, and killed by enraged mobs outside the prison.
- **Concern about the future**: From that prison Bahá'u'lláh was banished to strange lands. As a prophecy foretold (Matthew 25:41-46), He became a stranger (an exile). Never again did He see His homeland.
- **Deep sorrow** for people who were rejecting God's choicest blessings and bounties.

It was in this dungeon that Bahá'u'lláh expressed the first intimations of His Divine Mission:

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: "Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Erelong will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name..."⁹

Bahá'u'lláh stated again and again that He spoke only by God's command, and not of His own choosing:

God is my witness, O people! I was asleep on My couch, when lo, the

Breeze of God wafting over Me roused Me from My slumber. His quickening Spirit revived Me, and My tongue was unloosed to voice His call...Think ye, O people, that I hold within My grasp the control of God's ultimate Will and Purpose? Far be it from Me to advance such claim. To this I testify before God, the Almighty, the Exalted, the All-Knowing, the All Wise. Had the ultimate destiny of God's Faith been in Mine hands, I would have never consented, even though for one moment, to manifest Myself unto you, nor would I have allowed one word to fall from My lips. Of this God Himself is, verily, a witness.¹⁰

O king! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing...This is but a leaf which the winds of the will of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised, have stirred. Can it be still when the tempestuous winds are blowing? Nay, by Him Who is the Lord of all Names and Attributes!¹¹

Bahá'u'lláh's arrest and imprisonment in that dungeon give us only a glimpse of the sufferings He endured for nearly 40 years in three different countries. How could anyone survive the scourge of such unrelenting pressures? How much pain can a human being endure?

Why would God allow the One He loved the most to go through so much suffering? Did not Jesus endure similar ordeals? Bahá'u'lláh refers repeatedly to His afflictions:

Worldly friends, seeking their own good, appear to love one the other, whereas the true Friend [Bahá'u'lláh] hath loved and doth love you for your own sakes; indeed He hath suffered for your guidance countless afflictions. Be not disloyal to such a Friend, nay rather hasten unto Him...Open your ears that ye may hearken unto the word of God, the help in peril, the self-existent.¹²

The religious leaders feared Bahá'u'lláh's influence, so they had Him exiled to another land. They thought in a strange land His influence would die out. But His charm captivated many more disciples. They exiled Him again and again. The results were the same. Finally, they sent Him to the worst place they could find: a prison for murderers and thieves, located in a remote city ('Akká) with a dreadful climate and foul water, a city described as "the metropolis of the owl." The sufferings Bahá'u'lláh endured in 'Akká surpassed even those He experienced in the Black Dungeon.

Bahá'u'lláh was placed in a barren, filthy room, while His followers were crowded into another, the floor of which was covered with mud. Ten soldiers were posted to stand guard over them. To add further to

their misery, the exiles, parched from a long day in the hot sun, soon found that the only water available to them was unfit for consumption. Mothers were unable to feed their babies, and infants cried for hours. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appealed repeatedly to the guards and the governor for mercy, but to no avail. The next morning the exiles were given their first daily ration of water and three inedible loaves of salty, coarse, black bread, which they were later allowed to exchange in the market for two loaves of better quality.

Under these conditions, all but ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and one other fell ill. Within a matter of days three men died. The officials denied the prisoners permission to leave the citadel to bury them, and the guards demanded payment before removing the bodies. Bahá’u’lláh ordered that His prayer rug, the only item of any value that He possessed, be sold to cover the cost of the burial. The guards pocketed the money and buried the men in the clothes in which they died, without coffins and without washing or wrapping the bodies in shrouds.

Three days after the exiles’ arrival, the Sultán’s edict was read aloud in the mosque. It sentenced Bahá’u’lláh, His family, and His companions to life imprisonment and expressly forbade the exiles to associate with

one another or with local inhabitants. Harsh, indeed, were the terms and conditions that Bahá’u’lláh faced upon His internment in the “afflictive prison” of ‘Akká—an internment that marked the culmination of His sufferings.¹³

During Bahá’u’lláh’s imprisonment in ‘Akká, His young son, “Mírzá Mihdí was pacing the roof, wrapped in devotions, when he fell through a skylight. Mortally wounded, his dying wish to his Father was that his life might be a ransom for those who were prevented from attaining Bahá’u’lláh’s presence.”¹⁴ In a prayer, Bahá’u’lláh speaks of the sacrifice of His son:

I have, O my Lord, offered up that which Thou hast given Me, that Thy servants may be quickened, and all that dwell on earth be united.¹⁵

Here Bahá’u’lláh explains why He accepted so much pain and suffering:

The Ancient Beauty [Bahá’u’lláh] hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness. This is of the mercy of your Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful. We have accepted to be abased, O believers in the Unity of

God, that ye may be exalted, and have suffered manifold afflictions, that ye might prosper and flourish. He Who hath come to build anew the whole world, behold, how they ...have forced Him to dwell within the most desolate of cities!¹⁶

In spite of this severe repression, Bahá’u’lláh’s influence continued to spread, His glory became more evident. From behind prison walls, He triumphed over all His enemies.

For if this idea...is of human origin, it will collapse; but if it is from God, you will never be able to put them [the believers] down, and you risk finding yourself at war with God. Acts 5:38-39

When Bahá’u’lláh was exiled to the Holy Land, those aware of biblical prophecies suddenly realized what had happened: Bahá’u’lláh’s enemies had, unknowingly, become the very instruments for the fulfillment of prophecies about Him. For the Bible predicts repeatedly that the Redeemer of the Last Days will come to the Holy Land. Those who had wished to destroy Him became the means of His triumph. (For a list of these prophecies and many others, see *Lord of Lords*, and *King of Kings*.)

While under arrest in 1868, Bahá’u’lláh addressed the kings and rulers of the earth, asking them to act with justice and to work for peace. With one exception, they ignored His call. He predicted their downfall and His own triumph.

Among these sovereigns was Napoleon III. Bahá'u'lláh asked him to investigate why He was in prison. The sovereign did not respond. Bahá'u'lláh sent a second letter, predicting his downfall. Soon thereafter, in 1870, war between Germany and France broke out. Everything seemed to be in Napoleon's favor, yet he was defeated, dishonored, and debased. Other sovereigns addressed by Bahá'u'lláh encountered similar fates. Every prediction that Bahá'u'lláh made came true. These are discussed in a book titled *The Prisoner and the King*, by William Sears.

Bahá'u'lláh's greatness touched even those who did not follow Him. They wrote about His knowledge, His kindness, and His patience. They flocked to His presence and marveled at His wondrous works.

How often would one of His bitter enemies say to himself, "When I see Him, I will argue with Him and defeat Him in this way..." But when faced with Bahá'u'lláh, he would find himself speechless, unable to utter a word.

Bahá'u'lláh declared His willingness to be tested. No other Messenger has ever consented to prove Himself by miracles. To leave them with no excuse, Bahá'u'lláh said that He was willing to perform any miracle that the religious leaders asked. The only condition He set was that, after the miracle was performed, they would acknowledge the validity of His claim. The religious leaders declined to accept

the condition. (God has always been against proving Himself by miracles, see Matt. 7:4. We cannot be sure why Bahá'u'lláh accepted this request. Perhaps one reason was that He knew it would be rejected.)

Bahá'u'lláh showed His dependence on the divine and detachment from worldly desires by associating with the poor and the humble and avoiding the powerful and the pompous.¹⁷ A curious prince wanted to meet Bahá'u'lláh. But to be seen with Him meant danger. He sent a message asking to meet with Him secretly. In response, Bahá'u'lláh sent him a piece of poetry to this effect: "Unless you have a desire to sacrifice your life, don't come here. This is the way if you wish to meet Bahá. If you are unprepared for this journey, don't come, and don't bring trouble." The prince could not take the chance and declined.

For nearly 50 years Bahá'u'lláh faced bitter enemies who killed thousands of His followers yet failed to destroy Him. Repeatedly they planned and plotted against Him, but to no avail.

Are these marks of distinction not similar to those found in the life of Jesus?

We must be just and acknowledge what an Educator this Glorious Being was, what marvelous signs were manifested by Him, and what power and might have been realized in the world through Him.¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Accept the evidence of my deeds.
Christ (John 10:38)

My deeds done in my Father's name are my credentials.

Christ (John 10:25)

1. *The Beloved of the World* (translated from Persian), p. 184.
2. Ruhe David S. *Robe of Light*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1994, p. 21.
3. Marks, Geoffrey W. *Call to Remembrance*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992, p. 8.
4. Marks, Geoffrey W. *Call to Remembrance*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992, p. 11.
5. Marks, Geoffrey W. *Call to Remembrance*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992, pp. 11-12.
6. *Teacher Training Manual for Children's Classes, Age 6*, Columbia: Ruhi Institute, 1992, Section 3, pp. 7-8.
7. Marks, Geoffrey W. *Call to Remembrance*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992, pp. 14-15.
8. *Paris Talks*, p. 76.
9. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 21.
10. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 90-91.
11. *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 57.
12. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Persian), no. 52.
13. Marks, Geoffrey W. *Call to Remembrance*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992, pp. 166-167.
14. Momen, Wendi (ed.). *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1989, p. 155.
15. Momen, Wendi (ed.). *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1989, p. 155.
16. Marks, Geoffrey W. *Call to Remembrance*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992, p. 169.

17. *Paris Talks*, p. 79.

18. *Some Answered Questions*, 1981 ed., p. 35.



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