Familiar 'Akka Voices

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Familiar 'Akká Voices 1

by Marzieh Gail

from

The Master in 'Akká
Myron Henry Phelps
Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1985

In Cairo, on March 8, 1903, Myron H. Phelps of the New York Bar finished the introduction to his
Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi, and signed it with his three initials.
Phelps had dedicated the work to Countess M. A. de S. Canavarro because it was she who attracted
his attention "to the real character and significance of the Beha'i Movement." (His then widely used but
erroneous spelling of Bahá'í was caused by the fact that Persian does not write the short vowels, and some
used to read the first "a" as "e.")
He went on to say that her "clear insight" was largely responsible for "such success as I may have
had in reaching a correct appreciation and understanding of the teachings of Abbas Effendi." He and the
Countess had "worked together over all parts of the book," and it should have been published over their
two names, "but since she does not wish this, I am obliged to content myself with stating the facts." He
also said, in the rather apologetic manner favored by authors of the day, that he was aware of the book's
"many deficiencies" and possibly "some errors" and asked his readers to
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send him corrections in care of his publishers, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London.
It so happened that the publisher, G. H. Putnam, was an old friend of the orientalist, Edward
Granville Browne—whom Phelps had met in Cairo, probably in the spring of

1903—and at Putnam's
request Browne supplied the book with an introduction of his own, dated at Cambridge, September 27,
1903.
Browne says he read the work "with equal pleasure and satisfaction." He says "the whole book is to
me full of familiar echoes of the voices to which I so eagerly listened when I visited Akká thirteen years

1 See scan of original at https://bahai-library.com/phelps_master_akka

ago, in the days when Bahá'u'lláh himself still dwelt amongst mankind." (p. vii)
Browne is, of course, mistaken when he says that the book is "a faithful and trustworthy exposition
of the views of Abbas Effendi, 'the Master of Akká', and his followers." When studying the text of a
proposed reprint sent in for evaluation by Kalimát Press, the Research Department of the Universal House
of Justice identified forty inaccuracies during its initial review. (All are noted here in footnotes and
references.) Phelps does not correctly present the Bahá'í Teachings, since, in the circumstances, exegesis
was beyond him.
"I do not," he writes, "for a moment conceive that I have arrived at a full understanding of the tenets
of the [Bahá'í] religion and the philosophy underlying it in all their scope and detail." He says the time
was far too short for his investigation—he was there in Akká for

one month, December 1902—and accurate renderings into a European language were not available, (p.
xli)
Indeed it would not be till the following year, 1904, that Laura Barney would begin to compile her
priceless and authoritative account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's table talks, Some Answered Questions. Laura, an
American heiress, was an intellectual; she had language skills, being bilingual in French and English; and
she studied Persian in the Holy Land. Furthermore she was helped in her task by the erudite French
scholar Hippolyte Dreyfus. Their work on this book drew Laura and Hippolyte together, their marriage
resulted, and as is the custom in some countries, the couple was known as the Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barneys.
(Thanks to a strange twist of fate, Laura, whose memory history will cherish, is passed over by many of

her contemporaries, while her sister Natalie appears in turn of the century memoirs and is the subject of several full-length biographies, including a recent one by Jean Chalon.)

In any case, Laura's book, Some Answered Questions, published in London, would not appear until 1908. Hippolyte brought out his French translation of the same talks, published in Paris by Leroux, and he called it Les Lecons de Saint-Jean-dAcre.

Laura says that Some Answered Questions is "in no way complete and exhaustive." The teachings, given her between 1904 and 1906, were, she tells us, deliberately simplified by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá "to correspond to my rudimentary knowledge," and they were not

presented in order. Here, the Master is "the teacher adapting Himself to His pupil." He said He had given her His "tired moments." Sometimes "days and even weeks would pass" before He had time to continue with the lessons: "But I could well be patient, for I had always before me the greater lesson —the lesson of His personal life."

It is this personal life of the Master which Phelps has exceptionally well recorded in his book. For the rest, the interviews of Madame Canavarro with Khánum, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's sister, are of great interest for Khanum's memories of the tragic events she had herself lived through. Otherwise one might well be misdirected if one relied on this text for a study of the deeper teachings, and for this reason Kalimát Press has chosen to reprint only portions of the book. Phelps has certainly kept for posterity certain aspects of Abdu'l-Baha's daily practice, even certain gestures, which touch the heart, and mean all the more to Bahá’ís because the Master was appointed by His Father not only as Head and Interpreter of the Faith, but as the example for all believers (each as best he can) to follow.

The fact that Phelps was not a declared Bahá’í, although undoubtedly close and sympathetic to this religion, is probably an advantage to the non-Bahá’í reader. Here is an educated man, attracted to this Faith but not specifically an adherent, simply writing out the

best way he knew, what he had learned and witnessed. His book has the same status as all other "pilgrims'

reports," subjective accounts which returned pilgrims are welcome, even encouraged to share, but which necessarily cannot be regarded as authoritative if one wishes to go seriously into the Teachings. In a religion which has no clergy but which, unlike most other religions—except Islam—does possess its authoritative, original Texts, obviously one bases belief on these Texts rather than on the impressions of this or the other reporter. (Bahá'ís are directed by Bahá'u'lláh to "look into all things with a searching eye," [Tablets, p. 157]; they may well, throughout life, from their ongoing studies and contacts with other students of the Faith, alter or develop their own understanding of this or that teaching, but are always aware that their personal interpretation has no authority over anyone else. In trying to attract the attention of the world to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís inevitably return again and again to their authorized Texts.)

Religion in his time was, thought Myron Phelps, "almost throughout the world . . . stagnant and faith is dead." But there in the Holy Land he found "a demonstration that it is capable of revival. Such a spectacle as the ideal, Christlike life of Abbas Effendi has in it an immense probative and stimulating power. "As a result of reflections of this kind" he tells us, "came the impulse to prepare this book." And so for a month he witnessed, and spoke with

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ABDU'L-BAHA NEAR THE SHRINE OF THE BÁB with a group of Bahá'ís. Note Shoghi Effendi, far left, and Western Bahá'ís directly behind the Master.

by Marzieh Gail

family members and others who had long witnessed, the Master's way of being. Bahá'ís learn from childhood that only this kind of being can win them their goal — the spiritual conquest of the planet. The Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, has written that not by noble principles, not by the force of numbers, not even by staunch faith and great enthusiasm, can Bahá'ís vindicate "the supreme claim of the Abhá Revelation.

One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth ... the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh." (Bahá'í

Administration, p. 57)
There is no arguing with a life such as the Master led, and He lived under close scrutiny. During forty years of His time on earth, He was a prisoner, and watched. Always there were people about Him, disciples, guests, notables, inquirers. What He was drew them —not only the half-wild poor, living in their hovels and out on the desert, but leading individuals from East and West —to the narrow, sandy stretch along the Mediterranean where He passed most of His days. It was a fact which His enemies, especially those members of His Household who broke with Him, could never forgive. Why had Bahá'u'lláh singled Him out and called Him "the Master"? Why did strangers come to Him from unknown America and offer Him lifelong devotion? Why not to them instead? Why would a Per-

sian prince become His follower? Why would the learned take notes when He spoke?
One thinks back to the time of Bahá'u'lláh, who also attracted murderous hostility, though He was also "the object of a devotion and love," wrote E. G. Browne, "which kings might envy." One reads, for example, that although He came as a prisoner and exile, He was greeted with great homage the day He entered Constantinople. That day His hostile half brother, Mírzá Yahyá, running along "by his own choice, behind Bahá'u'lláh's carriage," was heard by the chronicler Nabil to tell his evil genius, Siyyid Muhammad: "Had I not chosen to hide myself, had I revealed my identity, the honor accorded Him (Bahá'u'lláh) on this day would have been mine too." (God Passes By, p. 155) Helpless rage at another's perfection can lead to murder of the innocent. Joseph, down the ages, is time and again thrown into the well.
Sidelights on how this book was written are found in the Khátirát-i Nuh Sálih of Dr. Yúnis Khán, his Nine Years of Memories of the days when he lived in the Holy Land.
He tells how, very gradually, a few Westerners who implored to come received permission, in spite of the Master's precarious situation, and appeared discreetly, singly or in small groups. Among the early ones were two Americans, Madame de Canavarro and her brother

DR. YÚNIS KHAN AFRÚKHTIH Author of Khátirát-i Nuh Sálih (Nine Years of Memories).

in Buddhism, Myron Phelps. Fortunately by then, the town residence of Bahá'u'lláh had been vacated and
was in the Master's hands, so the two were accommodated there.
Madame de Canavarro had been an ardent Buddhist, was a teacher of that Faith, and had expended
large sums over many years to promote her beliefs. She had sacrificed her substance for the work, and
was widely known for it. She belonged to a leading family, was thoroughly conversant with the new
philosophy of the West, as well as with the Sufism of India, and she had had the Gospel of Buddha
translated into English and French. Now, by way of Buddhism, she had come to the Bahá'í Faith. She was
about forty-five or fifty, frail in health but joyous in spirit. Phelps, her co-religionist, accompanied her to
Akká. He had a great talent for literary work and was making a record of his experiences.
When the Countess arrived, she humbly kissed the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He showed her great
kindness, and she was received by the ladies of the Household in the andarún. The day following her
arrival, conversations at table with the Master began. Unlike recent visitors, Mr. Breakwell and the sons
of Mr. Dodge, she asked many questions and Phelps wrote down the answers. But the problem was this:
The two Buddhists differed as to their ideas and beliefs, and the book which was being compiled had to
be agreeable to both. For this reason the Master was put to great trouble clarifying questions for both of
them.

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"The lady asks a question," says Dr. Yúnis Khán in his account, "I translate it and then give her the
Master's reply. Mr. Phelps writes it all down very rapidly—but since the questioner and the writer have
opposing viewpoints it becomes exceedingly difficult to communicate the response to these two
conflicting minds, and the need to repeat it all places a burden on the Master. One brief section dealing
with Buddha or other Prophets presented no problems. But for the important section dealing with

reincarnation, Phelps insisted in setting forth his preferences and beliefs, or would slant the material in
such a way as to please the many believers in reincarnation who are in Europe — thus attracting readers
and sales—and this problem obtained throughout the writing of the book.
"On the second or third day at the luncheon table, when complex matters began to be introduced, a
fracas suddenly broke out and the occasion of it was this: A question which was obvious and basic in
Bahá'í philosophy seemed abstruse to the lady and accordingly it was repeated a number of times until at
last it was made clear. At this moment the lady turned on me, angrily attacked me and became so agitated
that she could not address the problem with calm. The Master repeatedly asked me, 'What is she saying?'
but the lady gave me no opportunity to grasp the subject and present it to the Master.
"After a considerable uproar, she seemed to be saying, 'You people of the East, why should you be in
the forefront of religion, in view of the fact that you are not

all that advanced, and why should we Westerners need to receive our ideas from you? Where did you
come from, that we should need you? In the first place you do not possess such attainments that you
should have the capacity to understand matters of this kind. When we have explained something to you
and imparted some line of thought, then we have to wait for your answer. If it weren't for us from the
West how would you grasp any of these things—and then as soon as you have grasped the matter, you
understand the answer first, and then I have to understand it from you. Worst of all, you learn the secrets
of Heaven and the divine truths directly from the Master (that is, you drink from the source), while we
hear it only from your tongue (that is, we drink stagnant water). Why must I concentrate my eyes and ears
on what comes out of your mouth, and sit waiting till I receive my answer?'
"As soon as I understood her comments I presented them to the Master. Yes, it is in such situations
that His dignified manner and His loving smiles can defeat a whole world. He gazed tenderly upon her
and said, 'Tell her that the influence of the secrets of Heaven is spiritual, and not of the body. Ear and
tongue are material tools. Unless the spirit be ready to receive the bounties of God, of what use are eye

and ear? These spiritual themes are making an impact on your heart, I am speaking with you by the power
of the Spirit, and you, with complete concentration and pure intent, and an illumined heart, are receiving
the divine effulgences.
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The essential is a true inner bond between us. God be praised that this firm, inward, spiritual tie is present.
Whatever you have understood thus far has reached you from the breaths of the Holy Spirit, and my
spiritual connection with you is immediate and direct. The tongue of the interpreter is but a material tool.'
"Following this the Master cited examples of the devotion and success of the disciples of Christ, and
said that in this wondrous age as well, souls who had neither physical sight nor hearing had attained to
faith and had guided others. In brief, the lady was now content and expressed her pleasure, and peace was
established between the two of us. She stayed over a month and important philosophical and mystical
problems were solved for her. Some of these were published by Mr. Phelps in his book, some the lady
kept in her heart.
"As for the book, the first section, telling of the impressions of Phelps and the things he witnessed, is
very sweet, sensitive and moving. The other section, describing the journeys of Bahá'u'lláh and the Holy
Household, the exile from Tehran to Baghdad, to Constantinople and Adrianople and Akká, is also very
accurate and well established. This section, which the lady heard from the Greatest Holy Leaf herself, the
translator being one of the Master's daughters, she wrote down and gave to Mr. Phelps. As to the other
part, however, many mistakes crept into it with regard to such matters as reincarnation. I translated half
the book three or four times, and it was brought to the Master's attention. Again, I either
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translated it into English or described the material to Mr. Phelps, and the Master corrected it.
Nevertheless, the main part as published was contrary to the Master's teachings. Madame de Canavarro
herself would understand His teachings, but Mr. Phelps would write as he pleased. Finally the two ended

their days here in good spirits and for a considerable time thereafter letters would come from Madame de
Canavarro telling of her services to the Cause."
No doubt this account by Dr. Yúnis Khán explains why, as stated by Phelps in his introduction, the
Countess did not wish the book to be published over their two joint names.

Through Madam Canavarro, Phelps was able to obtain, as it were, interviews in absentia with
Bahiyyih Khánum, "The Lady." This was '‘Abdu’l-Bahá's sister, two years younger than Himself, who
would in future, more than once, be in effect Regent of the Bahá’í World.
She, the Greatest Holy Leaf, spoke no English, but young women in the Household, notably Rúhá
Khánum and her sister Munawar, daughters of the Master, could serve as translators. The talks were not
written down as Khánum spoke, they were recorded only after the lapse of a few hours and shared with
Phelps in installments. He explains why he could not meet Khánum in person. It was because of the
restrictions of Islamic custom,

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which the Bahá’ís "carefully observe for the sake of peace and harmony."
The ladies, captives in that
Muslim country, wore the veil and except for close relatives did not meet with men. The present narrative
from Khánum is probably the longest and most valuable of any she has left us.
Here this graceful and patrician lady, fragile, her health forever impaired by exile and imprisonment,
tells the story of her Brother, whose sufferings and those of their parents she had shared from childhood.
She tells how it was for them in Tehran, during the days after an attempt was made on the life of the shah,
and how, until His innocence was proved, Bahá’u’lláh was chained underground with criminals in the
shah's Black Pit. How the family's house was pillaged, and in one day they passed from great wealth to
destitution, and her mother had to exchange the gold buttons on their clothing for food. How she, a little
girl then, spent days of terror alone with her small brother in their ruined house, listening to the cries of
mobs who were torturing and killing her fellow believers in the streets, expecting at every moment to hear
that Bahá’u’lláh was no more. Then came their exile to Baghdad, their extreme poverty at the beginning,

the plots of Bahá’u’lláh's half brother Mírzá Yahyá,
Bahá’u’lláh's two years absence in the wilderness,
His return and the growing prosperity of the Faith. How word was carried to the two Muslim rulers, the
shah and the sultan, of the spread of the Teachings, and brought on their exile to Constantinople. How
they were expelled from Constantinople

and exiled in summer clothes and with scanty food through cold so terrible that the upper reaches of the
Euphrates froze over for forty days — to five years of captivity in Adrianople. Then the final exile to the
fortress town of Akká. Khánum said that after landing in Akká, they had to walk through cursing, taunting
mobs to the army barracks where they were jailed. Most were ailing, and Bahá’u’lláh and herself perhaps
the sickest of all. As they entered the prison, the great door was bolted behind them, they were up to their
ankles in mud, and the smell of excrement was so strong that Khánum fainted away and there was no
place to lay her down. A man there was weaving a mat for the soldiers, and she was placed on this mat
and brought back to herself with water from a puddle on the floor, which the weaver was using for his
rushes. The prisoners came down with typhoid and dysentery, but were allowed no doctor or medicine.
There were seventy of them, and four died.
Then her younger brother Mihdi fell from the roof of the barracks through an unguarded skylight, to
his death. And throughout all the tragedies ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, whatever His own sufferings, served His Father
as manager of the family and their fellow captives, as well as cook, comforter and nurse.
Browne speaks in his introductory essay to Phelps's book of "the most remarkable triumph of the
Bahá’í religion ... the marvellous success achieved in recent

years by its missionaries in the United States of America. . . . Once again in the world's history has the
East vindicated her claim to teach religion to the West . . . " It was precisely when these words were being
written that Mírzá Abu'1-Fadl with Ali-Kuli Khan as his interpreter were reaching large and enthusiastic
audiences in America. Browne cites a number of reasons for the Christian

missionary's "almost complete
failure" in Muslim countries. He points out that "Western Christianity, save in the rarest cases, is more
Western than Christian, more racial than religious." Islam has nothing against racial intermarriage while
"many even of the most excellent and earnest Christian missionaries . . . whom Europe and America send
to Asia and Africa would be far less shocked at the idea of receiving on terms of intimacy in their house
or at their table a white-skinned atheist than a dark-skinned believer."
Another reason Browne gives for Bábí-Bahá'í success in gaining adherents is that these believers
accept
"the divine inspiration of the Qur'an" and the prophet-hood of Muhammad, and he describes the
insoluble problem confronting the Christian missionary: the Qur'an teaches the validity of the religions
gone before, therefore arguing the Muslims out of their Book converts them "not to Christianity but to
Scepticism or Atheism."
"What indeed," he asks, "could be more illogical . . . than to devote much time and labour to the
composition of controversial works which endeavour to prove,
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.A View of Haifa circa 1880
EDWARD G. BROWNE in Persian costume.

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in one and the same breath, first, that the Qur'an is a lying imposture, and, secondly, that it bears witness
to the truth of Christ's mission, as though any value attached to the testimony of one proved a liar!"
The Bábi or Bahá’í, however, "admits that Muhammad was the Prophet of God and that the Qur'an is
the Word of God, denies nothing but their finality, and does not discredit his own witness when he draws
from that source arguments to prove his faith." (pp. xix-xx)
Browne is obviously wrong when he says of our beliefs, "their doctrine ... is at most a new synthesis
of old ideas ..." Where in previous religions do we find sex equality, world language, universal education,
world federation, administration of (Bahá’í) affairs through prayer and consultation by elected
representatives of the "man in the street," and indeed the giving to that "ordinary" man and woman an
individual voice that can become effective nationally and even globally through the Bahá’í system? If,

however, Browne refers to the repetition by the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, and every other Manifestation of
God, of the same, essential truths at the core of all religions (which might be summed up in George
Herbert's "Love God and love your neighbor, work and pray"), here one can understand why, as Phelps
quotes Him, the Master says, "Every one receiving these instructions will think, 'How like my own
religion!' " (p. 128)
Telling of the impact which their belief exerts on the conduct of these believers, the "high ethical
standard inculcated" by the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, Browne re-

marks on the earnestness of followers of the new Faith, "while the great majority of Jews, Christians, and
Muhammadans are what they are simply by reason of the circumstances of their birth." He lists two
advantages which the Bahá’í religion enjoys over Christianity, Islam, "or any other of the older
world-religions" — thus inferentially already calling the Faith a world religion: first, "its freedom from . .
. lukewarm adherents . . . " and second, he thinks, that "towards other religions, especially Christianity,
they [the Bahá’ís] would . . . be more tolerant than are the Muhammadans . . . " He does not hesitate to
suggest that once in power, the believers as he knew them might not prove so tolerant toward native foes,
but says that once dominant in Persia "they would, I am convinced, prove infinitely more progressive, and
Persia as a country might not improbably gain enormously both in wealth and power by the change." (p.
xxiv)
He bases this on his own visit to Persia, described in his classic A Year Amongst the Persians, when
he spent twelve months (1887-88) in that country. A modern Bahá’í, reading this work, feels that Browne
was most of the time with believers who were just emerging from Islam, who in many cases had not had
the new teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, who indeed had much of the time been cut off from the imprisoned,
then the martyred Báb, and now, since 1852, from their Leader in exile — that Leader Who "recast,
expanded, and liberalized" the Bab's teachings and Whose own teachings were later "expounded,
reaffirmed and amplified" by

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His appointed Interpreter, the Master. (God Passes By, p. xvii)

Browne, the scholar, writes of Phelps inferentially de haut en bas, as almost a passerby. Once finished with the compliments normal in an introduction, we learn that Phelps did not know the languages (as did Browne), that Phelps had not spent a long time with the believers (as had Browne), that Phelps did not know the Persian classics (as did Browne), and Phelps "goes, perhaps, rather too far ... "

Harking back, however, to the dawn of the Faith, Browne was caught up in unscholarly fervor, and could not help ending his remarks with the martyr's song, sung in 1852 by Sulaymán Khán, the one with lighted candles burning in his wounds as, through jeering mobs, he walked and danced to his death:

In this hand the wine-cup, in this the Loved One's tress,
So would I dance across the market place. *

MYRON PHELPS begins his own personal introduction to this book by stating of the Bahá'í Faith:

"We are here in the presence of a great force, destined to have a far-reaching influence upon the thoughts and lives of men." (p. xxvii)

"Fascinating indeed," he continues, "are those mysterious and mighty movements which . . . with a certain rhythmic sequence and regularity, have from

•Retranslated by M.G.-ED.

the earliest days swept over the earth . . . changing individual habits and social customs . . . moulding the lives of vast masses of mankind. A Confucius, a Zoroaster, a Buddha, a Christ, a Mahomet, is born as other men, lives the ordinary span of human life, and dies as others, but by his brief presence the face of the world is changed."

Over eighty years ago, Phelps referred to the Bahá'í religion as "a religious faith which gives promise of becoming, at no very distant time, one of the recognised great religions of the world." His appreciation, so early in the century when the general public knew little of the Bahá'í teachings, does him much credit. Many eminences, leaders in their various fields, did indeed pay it their tributes — this is a matter of record —but even now when our Faith is established worldwide, it

takes a special type of mind
to objectively consider the stupendous claim of Bahá’u’lláh, that He is
the Promised One of all religions. ,
Browne tells how he himself was excoriated for his interest. He had been
"irresistibly attracted" to
the Báb by Count de Gobineau's landmark study, Les Religions et les
Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrále.
He traveled to Persia, and later had four interviews with Bahá’u’lláh as
His guest in the mansion of Bahji,
April 15-20, 1890. It was during this visit that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá handed
Browne the manuscript of His
(anonymously written) A Traveller's Narrative. Browne translated it and was
savagely attacked for his
pains, in the Oxford Magazine, May 25, 1892.
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In his introduction to Phelps's book, ten years after the event, Browne quotes
portions of this attack,
which ended with the statement that his article prefacing the translation
displayed "a personal attitude
almost inconceivable in a rational European . . . " The critic also avers that
"speaking candidly as a
layman," he considers "the history of a recent sect which has affected the
least important part of the
Moslem world (nor that part very deeply) and is founded on a personal claim
which will not bear
investigation for a moment" is "quite unworthy of the learning and labour which
the author has brought to
bear upon it." And adds that "the prominence given to the 'Báb' in this book
is an absurd violation of
historical perspective; and the translation of the Traveller's Narrative a
waste of the powers and
opportunities of a Persian scholar." (p. xiiin)
The attention of Phelps was drawn to Akká because he saw in the Báb and
Bahá’u’lláh and the
unnumbered Persian martyrs, successors to the age-old glory that had always
recurred in the past. He
wished to observe the third figure, still living, of a remarkable triumvirate,
two of them Messengers from
God, the third now invested with the headship of the Faith. What impressed him
much was the fact that
Bahá’ís recognize other faiths "as equally divine in origin" with their
own. And again, that the Bahá’í
Faith has "a vital and effective power to mould life."
These things were a revelation to him, Phelps says. He saw in what he had
witnessed there in Akká
"the potentiality of immense good to other nations of the

world by impelling a recognition of the real strength and greatness of the spirit of true religion, under whatever external form it may appear. Out of such reflections "came the impulse to prepare this book." (p. xlii)

Inevitably, students of the Bahá'í Faith will be impatient to add explanatory material to what they find here. There is Browne's note, for example, on page 42, quoting Mírzá Yahyá, the murderous half brother of Bahá'u'lláh, to the effect that in Adrianople Bahá'u'lláh attempted to poison him, not the reverse, as was the case — the brother giving Him poison which inflicted on Bahá'u'lláh a month-long illness and left Him with a tremor in His hand for the rest of His life. Again in Adrianople, as an estranged wife of the sanguinary Mírzá Yahyá revealed, he poisoned the Holy Family's well. It was also in that city that he tried to induce Salmání, the devoted barber of Bahá'u'lláh, who describes in My Memories of Bahá'u'lláh the plot to assassinate the Messenger of God in His bath. Discussing Browne's statement in the latter's notes on A Traveller's Narrative (p. 371 ff.), where Browne lists accusations by the half brother and states — with the same jingoism that Browne criticizes in the Christian missionaries — that after all, "the removal of persons inimical to a religious movement by . . . religious assassination is a thing far less repugnant to the Eastern than to the Western mind." Phelps challenges the implication: "A transparent fabrication," he says of

the charges, "incredible to anyone familiar with the character and teachings of the Beha'is." "I must protest most energetically against Professor Browne's suggestion that any traits of Oriental character shared by the leaders of Beha'ism be assumed as possibly closing their eyes to the iniquity of such proceedings in support of their cause . . . I wish to place on record the fact that my own acquaintance with the Beha'is and the spirit which animates them makes it inconceivable to me that such utter perversion of moral sense, however possible it may generally be to the Oriental type of character, about which I here express no opinion, could under any circumstances characterise their policy as

a body or the policy of
their leaders." (pp. 42, 43n)
A caveat should be added to Phelps's reporting of the Master's words on hunting, reproduced here,
and how He did not care for this sport: hunting in moderation is not forbidden to Bahá’ís, as one learns
from the Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh's Book of Laws.
Two historic selections from Browne, which Phelps includes, are the word-portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
as Browne saw Him in 1890, when the Master was forty-six, and the now world-famous, first interview
that the orientalist was privileged to have with Bahá’u’lláh during that same visit.
The historian Hasan Balyuzi, in his in-depth study, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of
Bahá’u’lláh,

quotes extensively from the present work, and tells how Phelps describes his visit to Akká as one of the
most memorable months of his life, "for not only was I able to gain a satisfactory general view of this
religion, but I made the acquaintance of Abbas Effendi, who is easily the most remarkable man whom it
has ever been my fortune to meet." (p. 97)
In their review of The Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi, Kazem and Firuz Kazemzadeh pointed
out that even then, fifty years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's passing, there was no adequate biography of the
Master (this was before Mr. Balyuzi's book was available, 1971). Necessary documents were not at hand,
sources were in archives on at least three continents, language barriers including Persian and Arabic
narrowed the number of researchers. At that time the authors listed only five biographers: Phelps, H. C.
Ives, M. Zarqání, Dr. H. Mu'ayyad, and Dr. Yúnis Khán Afrúkhtih. The present book by Phelps was "the
first attempt to write a full-length study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in English."
Phelps did not have the necessary historical background — this was long before the Guardian's
translation of Nabíl's chronicle, The Dawn-Breakers, and the writing of his own master work, God Passes
By. These reviewers feel that the pages of narrative from the Greatest Holy Leaf are the "marrow" of this
book, but state that as a guide to Bahá’í beliefs Phelps cannot be relied on. They explain that the Bahá’í

Faith "does not synthesize" but "unifies and fulfills the great religions of the past," and that "the very basis on which ... its

acceptance of other religions rests — the concepts of progressive revelation and of the relativity of religious truth — is strikingly novel." (World Order Magazine, Fall, 1971)

Today in the United States there is a new class of human beings who go by the name of Street People. They used to be confined to certain parts of the city, like the Bowery in New York, and Third and Howard Streets in San Francisco, but today they are increasingly mixed in with the rest. They lie along walls of buildings, among the passersby, sit over gratings for warmth, crouch in doorways. At meal times, unless too far gone, they line up where they know there will be food. Some are young enough, not badly dressed, and these may ask for money. But others are layered and encrusted with poverty going back many years, their hair coarse, sores on their lips, oblivious, asking nothing, muttering to themselves, carrying all their worldly goods in a soiled bag—as cut off from the passersby, as if they were a thousand miles away.

To the equivalent of these Street People ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a refuge and asylum, these that He nursed and fed. Except that the American ones have some access to government subsidies and charitable institutions, and live in relatively clean cities, while those children of His across the world often enough had no one but Him between them and death.

As Phelps tells it they were, many of them, blind,

were skin and bones, old, on crutches, of all the races thereabouts. Abdu’l-Bahá would stand at a narrow angle of the street and call them to Him and greet them as friends. And to each He would say, "Welcome! Welcome! Well done! Well done!" They pushed about Him, grasped at Him, some even scratching and wounding His hands. There were five or six hundred poor in Akká, and when winter came, the Master saw to it that each had a warm coat.

All this, while He Himself was poor and did not even belong to this country, His place of

imprisonment and exile. Since 1892, He had been left in full charge of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith. When funds
came in, He denied Himself, distributing all for the spread of the Cause, for the destitute, for the
Household and their continual guests who flocked to Him even in the prison town, for the education of the
young. (He financed the medical training in Beirut of both Yúnis Khán and H. Mu'ayyad.) When Ali-Kuli
Khan served by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's side virtually night and day for thirteen months as His amanuensis, the
Master would give him exactly enough money for his needs—Khan never had to ask. Gifts of flowers,
fruit, sweets, garments, were distributed, as were valuables such as jewels, unless these were necessary for
the Faith. For example, when Elsa (Laura) Barney offered jewels to the Master, He gave them to Lua and
Edward Getsinger in 1901 to pay for their journey back to the United States. Obviously, the Master did all
this by putting everyone else first.

holding a Tablet

FAMILIAR AKKÁ VOICES

Phelps's book starts out with a typical scene, showing 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the midst of the crowding
poor. Four years later, my mother, a young American woman, bride of Ali-Kuli Khan, witnessed much
the same scene when she came on pilgrimage to Akká in 1906. The Master had directed her to wear the
Persian veil in public, since times were dangerous, the Household was continually spied upon, and her
husband was a Persian. Florence Khánum never really learned how to wear the chádur, but did her best.

One day, wandering a little away from the Master's house and lost in her chádur, Florence found herself
one with the crowd. That day, so it happened, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had appointed an attendant, Bashir, to give
out the silver coins. Florence, struggling in vain to reach Bashir's protection and smothering in her
costume, did not dare cry out or put aside her veil and reveal her American face. Terrified, pushing ahead,
she was mistaken for a beggar woman trying to shove away the rest. Luckily, the believers who were
assisting the harried Bashir realized who she was and, not without smiles, led her to safety.

Having been part of the beggar mob herself, Florence left a more horrified

report than the genteel
one of Myron Phelps. To her, New England-bred, these people were only half humans, with their wild
staring eyes and soiled rags, their jutting bones, their injuries, their leprosy. To her they were hateful, like
sick, ill-kept beasts.
To many, the poor still are. But not to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.
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ABDU'L-BAHA with some believers
Taken in Haifa on March 3, 1921, on which day the Master started with Cummingham for Tiberias.

FAMILIAR AKKÁ VOICES
He went about His prison life, living the words of Bahá’u’lláh: "Know ye that the poor are the trust
of God in your midst. . . betray not His trust." (Gleanings, p. 251) "If ye meet the abased or the
down-trodden, turn not away disdainfully from them . . . Flee not from the face of the poor that lieth in the
dust, nay rather befriend him." (Ibid., p. 314) "Vaunt not thyself over the poor ..." (Hidden Words, Arabic,
25)
And when Abdu’l-Bahá left the world in 1921, these and their descendants wailed that their Father
was gone.
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A VIEW OF LAKE GENNESARET, circa 1925
— Familiar 'Akka Voices (Used by permission of the curator)