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Article: *Reconstructing Ridván*

## Reconstructing Ridván

*The twelve day period commemorating Bahá'u'lláh's announcement of His claim to prophethood and His departure from Baghdad in 1863, observed from sunset April 20 to sunset, May 2. The first, ninth and twelfth days of Ridván are major Bahá'í holy days on which work should be suspended. Bahá'í elections for Local and national Spiritual Assemblies are normally held during Ridván. The name, Ridván, derives from the Najibiyyih Garden in Baghdad where Bahá'u'lláh stayed during this period and to which he gave the name Ridván (Paradise).*

THE TWELVE days Bahá'u'lláh spent in the Najíbíyyih Garden, April 22 - May 3, 1863, rank among the most significant dates in Bahá'í history. It is perhaps surprising then that the exact circumstances of so momentous an event are, Shoghi Effendi explains, "shrouded in an obscurity which future historians will find it difficult to penetrate."<sup>(1)</sup> The "words Bahá'u'lláh actually uttered on that occasion, the manner of his Declaration, the reaction it produced, its impact on Mirzá Yahyá, the identity of those who were privileged to hear Him"<sup>(2)</sup> are not recorded, however, since the beloved Guardian wrote these lines a little light has been shed on these areas by the assiduous endeavours of a number of Bahá'í scholars.

One of the most illuminating contributions is the notice given by Stephen Lambden of a tablet in the name of Bahá'u'lláh's amanuensis, Mirzá Áqá Ján , composed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself. It conveys what would seem to be the crux of the "words Bahá'u'lláh actually uttered on that occasion".

"On the first day that the Ancient Beauty occupied the Most Great Throne in a garden which hath been designated Ridván, the Tongue of Grandeur uttered three blessed verses. The first of them was that in this Dispensation the sword is put aside. Secondly, prior to the completion of one thousand years any divine claim put forward by any person is baseless – each year should be considered a complete year. Both commentary (tafsir) and interpretation (ta'wil) are forbidden. Thirdly, the True One, exalted be His Glory, at that time manifested all the Divine Names upon all things."<sup>(3)</sup>

Beyond this mighty proclamation associated with the first day of Ridván, it appears that Bahá'u'lláh also secretly made explicit His claim to be the Promised One to a small group of believers. The manner of this direct declaration remains obscure. Bahíyyih Khánúm, daughter of Bahá'u'lláh, is recorded as saying, "Four days before the caravan was to set out, the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'u'lláh] called 'Abbás Effendi ['Abdu'l-Bahá] into his tent and told him that he himself was the one whose coming had been promised by the Báb. . . A little later, and before leaving the garden, he selected among his disciples four others, to whom he made the same declaration. . . he enjoined upon them secrecy as to this communication as the time had not come for a public declaration: but that there were



reasons which caused him to deem it necessary to make it at that time to a few whom he could trust".(4) The caravan was to set out on the Twelfth day of Ridván, so it would have been on the Ninth day of Ridván that this full declaration to 'Abdu'l-Bahá would have taken place, followed shortly afterwards with a similar declaration to four others.

The identity of these four souls is a matter for speculation. Mírzá Músá Áqáy-i Kalím, the most trusted brother of Bahá'u'lláh and His foremost Apostle would likely have been among them, as would Mírzá Áqá Jan, who had already recognised Him. Who the other two might be is more difficult to contemplate although they could have been Ismu'lláhu'l-Muníb (more commonly known as Jináb-i-Muníb) and Áqá Muhammad-Ibráhím-i Amír-i Nayrízí who, with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Mírzá Áqá Ján, subsequently accompanied Bahá'u'lláh's horse on either side as He departed from the Ridván garden, singing ecstatic odes in His praise.

The Greatest Holy Leaf, Bahíyyih Khánúm indicates that Bahá'u'lláh's decision to go to the garden was prompted by the practical need to pack in preparation for the impending journey, a need obstructed by the constant flow of visitors to His house. Accordingly, Bahá'u'lláh left for the garden and was joined by his family on the ninth day after His departure, leaving friends to do the remaining tasks at home.(5) The twelfth day was appointed for leaving the garden and initiating the journey to Constantinople, Bahá'u'lláh's place of banishment. A deeper reason than fortuitous circumstance seems, however, to have dictated the stay of twelve days. A tablet of Bahá'u'lláh tells of an overwhelming experience which the Blessed Beauty underwent some time previous to the Ridván declaration, and which also lasted twelve days, after which the ocean of utterance surged.(6) This suggests that the twelve days in the Ridván garden were intended to re-enact or commemorate a preceding spiritual event, which had also lasted a twelve-day period.

One thing is clear. The atmosphere in that holy garden must have been exhilarating, pregnant with symbolism and divine unveiling. Bahá'u'lláh's tent had been placed, according to Bahíyyih Khánúm, at the very centre of the small settlement of tents, where He stayed alone amidst a rich profusion of roses.(7) "So great would be the heap that when His companions gathered to drink their morning tea in His presence, they would be unable to see each other across it."(8) The fragrance of roses, we are told, drew a chorus of nightingales to the gathered petals. Thus even the material setting was conducive to powerful spiritual emotions, the very use of space evoking the cosmic dimensions of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration. Beyond these outward signs, the Blessed Beauty's mercy suffused the realities of things: Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Ridván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes.(9) Today, one hundred and thirty nine years later, we are spiritually transported once more to that recurring "Most Great Festival," that "King of Festivals" which is designated – what could be more hallowed – the "Festival of God".(10) May we learn from Bahá'u'lláh's own example as we conceive the material arrangements for our holiest celebration. May we be so alive to its significance as to taste the very rapture which that same occasion inspired in Bahá'u'lláh's first companions. May we thus, like them, accompany one another in ecstasy and ardour and utter adoration at the threshold of His Beauty, for jubilation alone will do justice to this Day.

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1 God Passes By, p.153

2 ibid.

3 Slightly edited provisional translation by Stephen Lambden, cf. Bahá'í Studies Bulletin, vol. 3.2, p.82

4 Bahíyyih Khánúm, cited in Myron Phelps, The Master in 'Akká, p.39

5 ibid.

6 Cf. Juan Cole, Modernity and the Millennium, p. 115 and Adib Taherzadeh, Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol.2, p. 348

7 Bahíyyih Khánúm, op. cit.

8 Nabil, cited in God Passes By, p. 53

9 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para 75, p. 47

10 Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 153

