

... description: 1920, Ashbee - A Palestine Notebook
author: Mrs. Corinne True
title: Notes taken at ACCA notes: ...

Notes taken at ACCA

Mrs. Corinne True

1920, Ashbee - A Palestine Notebook

Notes taken at ‘AKKÁ

by Mrs. Corinne True

1907

Auto-generated Table of Contents

CHAPTER X

‘ABBÁS THE BAHÁ’Í

‘Akká, March, 1920.

On The ramparts, among the old masonry to a background of crumbling golden stone, there was an impressive little figure, white bearded, with waving white hair. He wore a white ‘emma’ and an ‘abaya’ of tender brown over his gray galabia. It was ‘Abbás the Bahá’í. Later on, thanks to the courtesy of one of our Syrian schoolmasters, we were invited into the house. Word came that he would be very glad to see Mr. and Mrs. Ashbee, and we spent a wonderful hour with him. He was quite willing to talk and our interpreter was clear and true in his English. Old ‘Abbás curled himself up in the corner of his divan, looked at us with his wonderful illuminating eyes that radiate love, and set forth the cardinal points of Bahá’ism.

I have rarely come across a man who so completely sums up the saint, or let us say saint and philosopher combined, for the presence and image of the man are of the Middle Ages, their spirit of personal holiness, while what he says has the lucidity of the Greek, is disruptive of all religions and mediaeval systems, is philosophic, modern, and synthetic.

“First,” said he, “we must get rid of all glosses, Talmuds, codes of divinity, and clerical law. Get back to the revealed word of God where we can. Christ had the revealed word, so had Muḥammad, so had others before them, but – and here’s the point – those revelations were for their own day and environment. You cannot always take the literal interpretation of first-century’ Syria or eighth-century Arabia and say that in its application it is true now.”

He gave the impression of being very modest about his own teaching, adding that the East was in a bad way, “needed light, and had to be told these things. That was the reason for Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb.

“Then,” said he, “all the nations must come together, there must be a league of nations for the government of the world.”

He sketched out a sort of council appointed by the presidents, the kings, and the democracies.

“And the existing League?” we asked. He smiled and shook his head. “That is only the merest beginning. It is not representative of all. It palliates the disease, the disease of discord. It is no remedy.”

But Bahá’ism went much further, and here it cuts itself free from the orientalism of Pauline Christianity and from Muḥammad. There must be equality of the sexes. “Humanity,” said old ‘Abbás as he took a pinch of snuff from a little enamelled box, “is as a creature with two wings – man and woman – you must not cripple either, or you impede flight. Humanity needs both for progress.”

“And the common tongue that is to make it possible for man to speak with man?”

It will, come,” said he.

Janet suggested that the tongue might be English. He accepted the suggestion with a look of warm-hearted love that seemed to imply: “We all of us would like to have our own, but God has found a tongue before.”

Who knows but it may be English yet? Still the last language in which God revealed himself was not Aramaic, nor Greek, nor Hebrew, nor Egyptian, but Arabic. And don’t you make any mistake about it! But the languages of God are many.

He tells somewhere in his teaching: Release comes by making of the will a door through which the confirmations of the spirit move.

And those confirmations of the spirit? They are the powers and gifts with which some are born, and which men sometimes call genius, but for which others have to strive with infinite pains. They come to that man or woman who accepts his or her life with “radiant acquiescence.”

A good phrase, “radiant acquiescence.” Let’s remember it.

As we motored back across the sands, we saw Lord Milner’s destroyer lying outside the harbour. “War,” old ‘Abbás had said, ‘is not of God because it does not unify.” But may it not at times serve as a besom to sweep up ere we begin afresh? That is what it did in South Africa, after which came the peace of Vereeniging and Smuts and Botha became our friends.

The wise men of all time, be it Ptahotep on his tomb, Diogenes from his tub. Plato when he parted from Dion, or Christ with the tribute to tsar, have always

been the passive protest against power. When they offered ‘Abbás his title, with whatever bit of ribbon or strip of paper it was accompanied, he said:

As it comes from the British Government I accept it, as a teacher of God’s word it will make no difference to me.

It is pleasant to think that English administrators go to this wise old man for help and counsel. We dined in the evening with Colonel Stanton, the Military Governor of Haifa, Lord Milner, and Herbert Samuel.

The two last were rather envious of our afternoon with ‘Abbás, and Colonel Stanton told us how he often went to get his advice. “Of course,” he added in the characteristic manner of the British Administrator, “I have to listen for half an hour or so first to the beauty of the flowers and the wings of the mind; after that we get to business.”

I thought of the destroyer lying outside ‘Akká, and waiting to take Lord Milner back to England. Somehow I rather wished he could have put his journey off another day and come with us if we went again to ‘Akká. He was a little melancholy and pessimistic, but he always takes a big sweep.

He came to see us later in Jerusalem, and had a good time with him last December in Cairo, when he called me to give evidence before his Commission. His is a wonderful manner of getting at the point. He has a way of folding himself up behind his eyes when he is asking you a question or thinking about what you say. Perhaps on those occasions he, too, goes for light to the idea behind.

Yes, say his friends, but Lord Milner is getting old, ‘Abbás is older, and his sweep is bigger; for his is – shall we say? – a less bounded, because more oriental, faith in the goodness of God and the destiny of man.

But it is noteworthy, is it not, that while the political vision is from the Englishman, the spiritual vision is not from the Christian, nor from the Jew, but from the Moslem.

“You must learn,” says old ‘Abbás, “to distinguish the sun of truth from whichever point of the horizon it is shining! People think religion is confined in an edifice, to be worshipped at an altar. In reality, it is an attitude toward divinity which is reflected through life,”

POETRY, PROPHECY, AND PARASITISM

land—I put him in because he realized that the game was up, and the age of St. Louis over.

Modern Zionism is like a hen-coop in a storm that pretends to be a habitation. It floats persistently on the: top, deceives and eludes the sharpest eyes, and yet no fish can swallow it For all that the spiritual dream of the Jew is one of the facts of life, and if he would give up his “historical case,” false and unreasonable,

and based on Anglo-American Protestantism, the country might yet be his But he never will, and hence is ever doomed to wander, complain, and stimulate.

Come out and look at it. It's all so lovely and unreal, and of the mind, so full of sunshine, and colour, and contrast. And there are delightful people here. III even take you to old 'Abbás, the Bahá'í, at 'Akká, one of the wisest men. I should say, that ever lived; and there are others, for the country creates unreality and beauty – a sort of mosaic surface-work, glasure of life in coloured faience that glitters in the sun, and yet the very toughest and most impervious of coats . . . Do come!

Jerusalem, December, 1920.

Yes, and there were poets in the land in those days; even though the Administration buried them away in a department of economics. That was where I discovered Hans, Ernest Keppel Bennett to be precise. It is right that poets should leave their mark here, and we were so sorry to lose him. Some absurd providence stuck this gracious, amethystine creature, all delicately cut and faceted, into a smug statistical hole only fit for lumpy chunks cut round en cabochon. He is now in England and getting out that dainty little book, "Built in Jerusalem's