

Shíráz: ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb-i-Shírází

The story of ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb, a youth from Shíráz, has been told Bahá’u’lláh, by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and recounted by Nabíl. The first part of the story begins in 1844 in Shíráz soon after the Declaration of the Báb, the second part occurs in Kázimayn/Baghdád area in 1851, and the third part is in the Síyáh-Chál dungeon in Tíhrán towards end of 1852.

1. ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb meets Mullá ‘Alí-i-Bastámí in Shíráz

The Letters of the Living had just come to recognize the Báb, and following the Báb’s instructions, they were leaving Shíráz for various parts of the land to spread the news of the appearance of the Promised one. The first to leave Shíráz was the second Letter of the Living Mullá ‘Alí-i-Bastámí. It is sometime in July or August 1844. The story of what happened is told by Nabíl [Dawn-Breakers Chapter 3, p87-90]:

The Báb then summoned to His presence Mullá ‘Alí-i-Bastámí, and addressed to him words of cheer and loving-kindness. He instructed him to proceed directly to Najaf and Karbilá, alluded to the severe trials and afflictions that would befall him, and enjoined him to be steadfast till the end. “Your faith,” He told him, “must be immovable as the rock, must weather every storm and survive every calamity. Suffer not the denunciations of the foolish and the calumnies of the clergy to afflict you, or to turn you from your purpose. For you are called to partake of the celestial banquet prepared for you in the immortal Realm. You are the first to leave the House of God, and to suffer for His sake. If you be slain in His path, remember that great will be your reward, and goodly the gift which will be bestowed upon you.”

No sooner were these words uttered than Mullá ‘Alí arose from his seat and set out to prosecute his mission. At about a farsang’s distance from Shíráz he was overtaken by a youth who, flushed with excitement, impatiently asked to speak to him. His name was ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb. “I beseech you,” he tearfully entreated Mullá ‘Alí, “to allow me to accompany you on your journey. Perplexities oppress my heart; I pray you to guide my steps in the way of Truth. Last night, in my dream, I heard the crier announce in the market-street of Shíráz the appearance of the Imám ‘Alí, the Commander of the Faithful. He called to the multitude: ‘Arise and seek him. Behold, he plucks out of the burning fire charters of liberty and is distributing them to the people. Hasten to him, for whoever receives them from his hands will be secure from penal suffering, and whoever fails to obtain them from him, will be bereft of the blessings of Paradise.’ Immediately I heard the voice of the crier, I arose and, abandoning my shop, ran across the market-street of Vakíl to a place where my eyes beheld you standing and distributing those same charters to the people. To everyone who approached to receive them from your hands, you would whisper in his ear a few words which instantly caused him

to flee in consternation and exclaim: 'Woe betide me, for I am deprived of the blessings of 'Alí and his kindred! Ah, miserable me, that I am accounted among the outcast and fallen!' I awoke from my dream and, immersed in an ocean of thought, regained my shop. Suddenly I saw you pass, accompanied by a man who wore a turban, and who was conversing with you. I sprang from my seat and, impelled by a power which I could not repress, ran to overtake you. To my utter amazement, I found you standing upon the very site which I had witnessed in my dream, engaged in the recital of traditions and verses. Standing aside, at a distance, I kept watching you, wholly unobserved by you and your friend. I heard the man whom you were addressing, impetuously protest: 'Easier is it for me to be devoured by the flames of hell than to acknowledge the truth of your words, the weight of which mountains are unable to sustain!' To his contemptuous rejection you returned this answer: 'Were all the universe to repudiate His truth, it could never tarnish the unsullied purity of His robe of grandeur.' Departing from him, you directed your steps towards the gate of Kázirán. I continued to follow you until I reached this place."

Mullá 'Alí tried to appease his troubled heart and to persuade him to return to his shop and resume his daily work. "Your association with me," he urged, "would involve me in difficulties. Return to Shíráz and rest assured, for you are accounted of the people of salvation. Far be it from the justice of God to withhold from so ardent and devoted a seeker the cup of His grace, or to deprive a soul so athirst from the billowing ocean of His Revelation." The words of Mullá 'Alí proved of no avail. The more he insisted upon the return of 'Abdu'l-Vahháb, the louder grew his lamentation and weeping. Mullá 'Alí finally felt compelled to comply with his wish, resigning himself to the will of God.

Hájí 'Abdu'l-Majíd, the father of 'Abdu'l-Vahháb, has often been heard to recount, with eyes filled with tears, this story: "How deeply," he said, "I regret the deed I committed. Pray that God may grant me the remission of my sin. I was one among the favoured in the court of the sons of the Farmán-Farmá, the governor of the province of Fárs. Such was my position that none dared to oppose or harm me. No one questioned my authority or ventured to interfere with my freedom. Immediately I heard that my son 'Abdu'l-Vahháb had forsaken his shop and left the city, I ran out in the direction of the Kázirán gate to overtake him. Armed with a club with which I intended to beat him, I enquired as to the road he had taken. I was told that a man wearing a turban had just crossed the street and that my son was seen following him. They seemed to have agreed to leave the city together. This excited my anger and indignation. How could I tolerate, I thought to myself, such unseemly behaviour on the part of my son, I, who already hold so privileged a position in the court of the sons of the Farmán-Farmá? Nothing but the severest chastisement, I felt, could wipe away the effect of my son's disgraceful conduct.

"I continued my search until I reached them. Seized with a savage fury, I inflicted upon Mullá 'Alí unspeakable injuries. To the strokes that fell heavily upon him, he, with extraordinary serenity, returned this answer: 'Stay your hand, O 'Abdu'l-Majíd, for the eye of God is observing you. I take Him as my witness, that I am in no wise responsible for the conduct of your son. I mind not the tortures you inflict upon me, for I stand prepared for the most grievous afflictions in the path I have chosen to follow. Your injuries, compared to what is destined to befall me in future, are as a drop compared to the ocean. Verily, I say, you shall survive me and will come to recognise my innocence. Great will then be your remorse, and deep your sorrow.' Scorning his remarks, and heedless of his appeal, I continued to beat him until I was exhausted. Silently and heroically, he endured this most undeserved chastisement at my hands. Finally, I ordered my son to follow me and left Mullá 'Alí to himself.

"On our way back to Shíráz, my son related to me the dream he had dreamt. A feeling of profound regret gradually seized me. The blamelessness of Mullá 'Alí was vindicated in my eyes, and the memory of my cruelty to him continued long to oppress my soul. Its bitterness lingered in my heart until the time when I felt obliged to transfer my residence from Shíráz to Baghdád.¹

Note 1: Nabíl adds this comment:

This episode marks the first affliction which befell a disciple of the Báb after the declaration of His mission. Mullá 'Alí realised from this experience how steep and thorny was the path leading to his eventual attainment of the promise given him by his Master.²

[Mullá 'Alí-i-Bastámí will have the honour of being the first to be persecuted and the first to suffer martyrdom for the Cause of the Báb. He will suffer martyrdom in Constantinople.]³

Note 2: Nabíl records how Hájí 'Abdu'l-Majíd, the father of 'Abdu'l-Vahháb, was genuinely filled with a lot of remorse for inflicting the severe beating on Mullá 'Alí-i-Bastámí, and he only felt forgiven for that action several years later:

A few years later, when my son had suffered martyrdom in Tihrán and Bahá'u'lláh had been exiled to Baghdád, He, with infinite loving-kindness and mercy, awakened me from the sleep of heedlessness, and Himself taught me the

¹ *Dawn-Breakers* Chapter 3, p87-90

² *Dawn-Breakers* Chapter 3, p90

³ *Dawn-Breakers* Chapter 3, p91-92.

message of the New Day, washing away with the waters of Divine forgiveness the stains of that cruel act.⁴

2. 'Abdu'l-Vahháb meets Bahá'u'lláh in Kázimayn/Baghdád

Some years after the above incident with Mullá 'Alí-i-Bastámí, both father and son (Hájí 'Abdu'l-Majíd and 'Abdu'l-Vahháb) moved to Baghdád. From Baghdád they moved to Kázimayn, which is adjacent to Baghdád (it is across the river Tigris from what is now called old Baghdád). Kázimayn is where the 7th and 9th Shí'a Imáms are buried and therefore one of the holy cities for the Shí'a. Hájí 'Abdu'l-Majíd described this to Nabíl (at this stage Hájí 'Abdu'l-Majíd had not recognized the station of the Báb, while it seems 'Abdu'l-Vahháb had):

From Baghdád I moved to Kázimayn, where 'Abdu'l-Vahháb established his business. A strange mystery brooded over his youthful face. He seemed to be concealing from me a secret which appeared to have transformed his life. And when, in the year 1267 A.H. [1851 C.E.], Bahá'u'lláh journeyed to 'Iráq and visited Kázimayn, 'Abdu'l-Vahháb fell immediately under the spell of His charm and pledged his undying devotion to Him.⁵

Balyuzi in his book, Bahá'u'lláh – King of Glory [Chapter 18, p96], relates this about 'Abdu'l-Vahháb in Kázimayn:

Next, we meet this God-intoxicated youth in Kázimayn,⁶ the holy city adjacent to Baghdád, where he had set himself up in a shop. The year is 1851. Bahá'u'lláh is temporarily in 'Iráq, having gone there on the advice of Mírzá Taqí Khán, the Amír Kabír. Kazimayn with its two sacred shrines was frequently visited by Bahá'u'lláh. It was inevitable that the Shí'rází youth should encounter Bahá'u'lláh and, having encountered Him, become fervently attached to Him. Now he knew no peace save in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, Who was still known only as Jináb-i-Bahá by the Bábís, and as Mírzá Husayn-'Alí-i-Nurí by the world at large. Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Vahháb's dearest wish was to travel back to Írán in the company of Bahá'u'lláh. But Bahá'u'lláh persuaded him to remain where he was, with his father, and gave him a sum of money to enlarge and extend his trade.

3. 'Abdu'l-Vahháb follows Bahá'u'lláh to Tihrán and is arrested

But 'Abdu'l-Vahháb's heart could not be stilled, and he could not bear the separation from Bahá'u'lláh, who had returned to Tihrán. After a short while, he also set out for Tihrán. Balyuzi in Bahá'u'lláh – King of Glory [Chapter 18, p96-97], relates this:

⁴ *Dawn-Breakers* Chapter 3, p90

⁵ *Dawn-Breakers* Chapter 3, p90

⁶ It is also stated that it was in Karbilá that this young man had his shop and it was there that he met Bahá'u'lláh.

He ['Abdu'l-Vahháb] reached the capital at the time when the misguided attempt had been made on the life of the Sháh and Tíhrán was in turmoil. 'Abdu'l-Bahá relating in a Tablet the story of that glorious youth, speaks of the officials searching everywhere for the Bábís, and 'Abdu'l-Vahháb, undaunted, giving praise to his Lord in the market-place. He was seized and thrown into the Síyáh-Chál. Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Vahháb-i-Shírází had, at long last, found that repose, that peace of heart and mind which his whole being craved, for he was continuously in the presence of his Lord. He was chained with Bahá'u'lláh.

And it is while imprisoned in the Síyáh-Chál, in the same set of chains linked to Bahá'u'lláh's chains, 'Abdu'l-Vahháb is taken and martyred. This occurred sometime between end of August to early December 1852, the period Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the Síyáh-Chál.

4. Abdu'l-Vahháb martyrdom: Bahá'u'lláh gives him His own shoes

Many years later, Bahá'u'lláh Himself described to Nabíl the circumstances surrounding 'Abdu'l-Vahháb's martyrdom and how He gave His own shoes to 'Abdu'l-Vahháb as he was taken to be martyred [Dawn-Breakers Chapter 26, p632-634]:

Every day Our gaolers, entering Our cell, would call the name of one of Our companions, bidding him arise and follow them to the foot of the gallows. With what eagerness would the owner of that name respond to that solemn call! Relieved of his chains, he would spring to his feet and, in a state of uncontrollable delight, would approach and embrace Us. We would seek to comfort him with the assurance of an everlasting life in the world beyond, and, filling his heart with hope and joy, would send him forth to win the crown of glory. He would embrace, in turn, the rest of his fellow-prisoners and then proceed to die as dauntlessly as he had lived. Soon after the martyrdom of each of these companions, We would be informed by the executioner, who had grown to be friendly to Us, of the circumstances of the death of his victim, and of the joy with which he had endured his sufferings to the very end.

We were awakened one night, ere break of day, by Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Vahháb-i-Shírází, who was bound with Us to the same chains. He had left Kázimayn and followed Us to Tíhrán, where he was arrested and thrown into prison. He asked Us whether We were awake, and proceeded to relate to Us his dream. 'I have this night,' he said, 'been soaring into a space of infinite vastness and beauty. I seemed to be uplifted on wings that carried me wherever I desired to go. A feeling of rapturous delight filled my soul. I flew in the midst of that immensity with a swiftness and ease that I cannot describe.' 'Today,' We replied, 'it will be your turn to sacrifice yourself for this Cause. May you remain firm and steadfast to the end. You will then find yourself soaring in that same limitless space of

which you dreamed, traversing with the same ease and swiftness the realm of immortal sovereignty, and gazing with that same rapture upon the Infinite Horizon.’

That morning saw the gaoler again enter Our cell and call out the name of ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb. Throwing off his chains, he sprang to his feet, embraced each of his fellow-prisoners, and, taking Us into his arms, pressed Us lovingly to his heart. That moment We discovered that he had no shoes to wear We gave him Our own, and, speaking a last word of encouragement and cheer, sent him forth to the scene of his martyrdom. Later on, his executioner came to Us, praising in glowing language the spirit which that youth had shown. How thankful We were to God for this testimony which the executioner himself had given!”⁷

5. The Master recounts ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb’s martyrdom to a group of Western believers

Sixty years later, one day near the end June 1912, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in Montclair, New Jersey, He described the circumstances surrounding ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb’s martyrdom to a small group of Western believers who were present. The group included Lua Getsinger and Juliet Thompson, and it was Juliet who recorded what transpired on that occasion in her diary.⁸ It was afternoon after lunch and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was talking to this small group about what it means to love and follow the Manifestation of God and that this requires the ultimate sacrifice. He then gave the example of Abdu’l-Vahháb. He spoke about Abdu’l-Vahháb’s love for Bahá’u’lláh, how he was chained to Bahá’u’lláh in the *Siyáh-Chál*, and how he joyfully went to his martyrdom. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reached that part of the story, Juliet writes how His whole state of being changed:

The Master's whole aspect suddenly changed. It was as though the spirit of the martyr had entered into Him. With that God-like head erect, snapping His fingers high in the air, beating out a drumlike rhythm with His foot till we could hardly endure the vibrations set up, He triumphantly sang 'The Martyr's Song':

"I have come again, I have come again,
By way of *Shiráz* I have come again!
With the wine cup in My hand!
Such is the madness of Love!"

"And thus," ended 'Abdu’l-Bahá, "singing and dancing he went to his death"

Tears swelled in my eyes, blurring everything. When they cleared, I saw a still stranger look on His face. His eyes were unmistakably fixed on the Invisible. They were filled with delight and as brilliant as jewels. A smile of exultation played on His lips. So low that it sounded like an echo He hummed the Martyr's

⁷ *Dawn-Breakers* Chapter 26, p632-634.

⁸ *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, March 25 to December 7, 1912; p320-321; Kalimát Press, 1983

Song. "See," He exclaimed, "the effect that the death of a martyr has in the world. It has changed My condition."

After a moment's silence, He asked: "What is it, Juliet, you are pondering so deeply?"

"I was thinking, my Lord, of the look on Your face when You said Your condition had been changed. And that I had seen a flash of the joy of God when someone dies happily for His Cause."⁹

Note: Juliet Thompson did not speak Fársí, and furthermore these are her recollections and should not be regarded as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exact words.

* * * * *

⁹ *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, March 25 to December 7, 1912; p320-321; Kalimát Press, 1983