

## Editor's Note

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The scholarship of Mírzá Abú'l-Faḍl is legend among Bahá'ís of the West. Until recently, however, those unskilled in Persian and Arabic had little opportunity to appreciate the range of his learning or the depth of his genius. With the translation of *Miracles and Metaphors* (1981), the facsimile reprint of *The Bahá'í Proofs* (1983), and the publication of the present volume, the learning of Abú'l-Faḍl has emerged from folklore into print.

He was born Muḥammad, the son of Muḥammad Riḍa, to a family of religious scholars of Gulpaygán, a town in central Iran, during 1844. A brilliant student, he completed the traditional Islamic education, and—in his twenties—was installed as a scholar and teacher at an important institution of higher learning in Tehran. In that city he accepted the Bahá'í Faith during 1876, becoming the most distinguished and learned convert of his era.

The next several years were spent traveling, visiting Bahá'í communities, and spreading the Bahá'í teachings in Southwestern Iran. The first letters of this collection are from late in this period. Little is known of Abú'l-Faḍl's life during these years. The letters translated here are among the few documents which throw light on that time. The reader will forgive the references to unknown individuals and obscure events which must (for now) remain unfootnoted and unexplained.

We do learn that Abú'l-Fadl had to travel with great caution, that he was imprisoned a number of times on account of his Bahá'í work, and that sometimes the aggressive enthusiasm of his fellow believers placed him in danger. Noteworthy also is his reluctance, during those early years, to pen lengthy explanations of philosophical questions for the Bahá'ís, especially in supplement to the expositions of Bahá'u'lláh found in the *Kitáb-i Iqán*. This hesitation—happily—he would discard utterly some time later.

From this service in Iran, he was to move, at the bidding of Bahá'u'lláh, across the Russian border to Ashkhabad (*ʿIshqábád*). A sizeable number of Iranian Bahá'ís had migrated to this city, escaping a religious persecution in their homeland that made the rule of the czars seem like liberty. The Bahá'í community flourished, economically and intellectually.

Abú'l-Fadl became a leading figure in that community, and played a central role in Russian recognition of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion—the first such official acknowledgement in Bahá'í history. He was also the architect of other firsts—initiating cordial Bahá'í contact with Christian clergy, helping in the beginnings of the Bahá'í journal *Khurshíd-i Sharq* (Sun of the east). In Ashkhabad he encountered Captain Alexander Tumansky, the famed orientalist who had befriended the Bahá'ís there. Their correspondence eventually produced, after Abú'l-Fadl had moved on to Samarkand, the long treatise translated in this book, *Risáliy-i Iskandariyyih* (The Alexandrian Epistle, or the Alexandrine Tract. Here designated "A Treatise for Alexander Tumansky"). Written only a few months after Bahá'u'lláh's passing, the essay provides an invaluable summary of the life of the prophet, as well as unique information on the controversial histories *Tárikh-i Jadíd* and *Naqṭatu'l-Káf*.

From the Russian Empire, Abú'l-Fadl was called to the Holy Land by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1894. After a stay of ten months, he was sent to Egypt, where a small number of Bahá'ís had clustered from the 1860s. There he associated himself with the scholars of al-Azhar, perhaps the foremost institution of Muslim education, where his vast learning was appreciated almost immediately. Since he was taken to be a Shí'í Muslim (and he made no effort to dispel the notion), the doors of Islamic academe were not closed to him. He attracted a circle of students and admirers, a fair number of whom eventually became Bahá'ís. (Some were expelled from classes when the storm finally broke.)

Rumors circulating after the assassination of Naşir-u'd-Dín Sháh, in 1896, held that the "Bábís" of Iran had murdered their sovereign. There was some talk of exterminating all members of the religion in Egypt. Only later was it established that the shah had been shot by a follower of the Pan-Islamic activist Jamál-u'd-Dín Afghání, and that Bahá'ís had no connection with the plot.

In this volatile atmosphere, Abú'l-Fadl was able to publish the lengthy explanation of the Faith (here titled "The Báb and the Bábí Religion") in the popular Egyptian magazine *al-Muqtataf*. This was probably the first defense of the Bahá'í religion to appear in the Middle Eastern press. It provoked immediate objections from Muslim fundamentalists, which provided another opportunity for the exposition of Bahá'í teachings. It was during this period that Abú'l-Fadl discarded all pretense of Shí'í identity, and when accused of being a Bahá'í replied that he was proud to be so called.

The publication of his eloquent and voluminous *al-Fará'id*, an answer in Persian to an attack on his Faith, in 1898 in Cairo, found little audience in Arabic-speaking Egypt. But *Miracles and Metaphors*

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(*al-Durar al-bahiyyih*), appearing in 1900, and in Arabic, raised the fury of determined opponents among the Muslim ulama. Some of the clergy eventually issued a declaration of apostasy (*takfir*) against him. Had they held power, such a pronouncement would have meant his death. But Egypt was ruled by the British, and their order meant little.

From this Muslim context, Abú'l-Faḍl was called forth to a four year tour of the West. Threatened with schism in America by the Lebanese convert who had first brought the Bahá'í teachings to that land and who now hoped to wrest control of the successful movement from its rightful head, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent out the best that the Bahá'í world had to offer, its most learned and erudite scholar, to guard the newborn community and provide it with a coherent and authentic understanding of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Returning to Egypt from this mission, Abú'l-Faḍl spent the last ten years of his life, except for short visits to Haifa and to Beirut, cloistered in Cairo and Alexandria. There he pursued his true passion: producing unnumbered books and commentaries, maintaining correspondence with the Bahá'ís who clamored for his explanations, keeping to a rigorous program of research and composition until his death in January 1914.

The last essays in this book are from these final years. We find Abú'l-Faḍl complaining of illness, old-age, and lack of time. Yet here do we see his thought at its best and most mature—a consummate blend of faith, reason and humility gained through a life of sacrifice and service. His position as the greatest Bahá'í scholar, favored and lauded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, did not prevent him from expressing his bewilderment or admitting the limits of his knowledge. For him,

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scholarship was not the end of service, but its means. Nor for him was the scholar omniscient or all-wise. Let his own words bear witness:

*There are some scholars who claim to know all the mysteries of creation and all the truths of its genesis. But I do not know the number of the stars or how many grains of sand are in the sea. I have not learned the names of the created things on the moon, or counted how many souls are on Mars, nor do I ask why God did not give human beings wings or eyes in the back of their heads. I cannot fathom the wisdom that led Him to single out the dove for pleasant warbling and the crow for raucous cawing. I have no idea what mothers will be naming their daughters in the future or what fathers will call their sons.*

*Does the status of these matters as unknown mean that they so deserve to attract our attention that we should spend our lives trying to understand them while neglecting the divine promises whose time of fulfillment has arrived?*