

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Government/Politics

Author: Brian Aull

The Prisoner Who Prevailed Over Kings

It is an oppressively hot day in Teheran in August, 1852. The Prisoner is led through the streets in chains, flanked by a mounted guard. He has guided a movement that the authorities regard as a dangerous heresy. He is now wrongly accused of plotting to assassinate the Shah. A friend had urged Him to hide until the storm of persecution blew over. Instead, He calmly rode out to the Shah's army headquarters. Now He is paraded on foot through crowds that have been fanned into rage. A fanatical old woman tries to fling a stone at Him but cannot catch up with the guard. The Prisoner tells them to stop and says, "Suffer not this woman to be disappointed. Deny her not what she regards as a meritorious act in the sight of God."

The Prisoner had grown up as the heir apparent to a ministerial position in the Shah's court. Like most royal court children, He had no formal education. As a child, however, He astonished distinguished clergymen with His profound answers to questions about spiritual subjects. Many felt that He was destined for greatness.

Greatness, however, would not mean living the comfortable life of a royal minister. Rather, He claimed to be the bearer of a new revelation from God, whose purpose is to unite the human family in a universal cause, a common faith that recognizes the divine origin of humanity's great religions. Hoping to silence Him, the authorities condemned Him to a series of imprisonments and exiles. They tried several times to kill Him. Their plans repeatedly backfired. His exiles took Him across the Ottoman Empire. Everywhere He went, He transformed people who met Him. His penetrating wisdom, radiant spirit, and noble character changed the hearts of jailors and townspeople who had at first been hostile.

This Prisoner is Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, which has grown to become a worldwide religion. Far from being silenced, He wrote a series of letters proclaiming His mission to the world's political and religious leaders. The rulers included the Shah of Iran, the Ottoman Sultan, Queen Victoria, Czar Alexander, Kaiser Wilhelm, Louis Napoleon, and Franz

Joseph. He urged them to abandon their nationalistic rivalries, create a collective security system, and defend the rights of the poor. He warned them that “divine chastisement” would overtake them if they ignored His summons. Queen Victoria alone responded with an open mind. The rest rejected His message and soon met the fury of history. The Austrian, German, Russian, Napoleonic, and Ottoman Empires quickly fell, ending dynasties that had endured for centuries. The Shah was assassinated and Iran’s Islamic clergy was weakened by a wave of secularization. The Papacy lost its political power and the equivalent Islamic institution, the Caliphate, was abolished.

This remarkable story is the reason why I write. My goal as an author is to inspire my readers, to give them hope, and to spark confidence in their capacity to shape the future of the world. I draw my inspiration from the insights of Bahá’u’lláh about humanity’s journey and destiny.

Bahá’u’lláh said that humanity is entering a time of profound change. Events have borne Him out. In a few decades, we have progressed from horse-and-buggy transport to supersonic flight. We have unlocked the secrets of the atom, put footprints on the moon, and harnessed electromagnetic fields to transmit messages instantly around the world. We have invented computing machines and developed technologies to shrink them to the size of a thumbnail. Terms such as “smart phone” and “GPS” refer to capabilities that would once have been considered supernatural. The world has become a small place. News of a tsunami in Sri Lanka appears within minutes on an iPhone in Chicago. A mouse click moves billions of dollars across the globe. This contraction of the world brings difficulties. Deforestation on one continent contributes to coastal flooding on another. A banking crisis sends shock waves through the world’s economy. Our stockpiled weapons could make our planet uninhabitable overnight. In response to such challenges, movements and networks for social change have proliferated, pursuing goals such as interfaith dialog, environmental protection, human rights, democracy, and peace.

This transformation is as big as when humans first walked upright, used writing, or fashioned metal tools. This forces us to rethink assumptions and adapt to new realities. Masculine dominance and aggression, for example, are proving less and less effective at solving problems.

Force is losing its force, while cooperation and compassion are becoming more powerful. Where women rise to positions of influence, they bring to the table their strengths as bridge builders and peace makers. It is a sign of the times that Nobel Peace Prizes have recently been awarded to women who ended a civil war in Liberia, stood up for the education of girls, or worked to ban land mines.

Bahá'u'lláh sums up His message: "The world is but one country and mankind its citizens." This is no utopian ideal, but a reality that requires us to outgrow prejudice and provincialism and work to build a world civilization. His mission is to awaken the spiritual, moral, and social capacities we need to take on this task. His teachings span the range from the life of the soul to the security of the nations. The human being, He says, is like a mine rich in priceless gems, and the purpose of true education is to unearth them. People are powerful actors; the betterment of the world can be accomplished through their good deeds. We should each be fair-minded and investigate the truth rather than blindly clinging to biases. We must banish racial bigotry from our hearts and racism from our social systems. The emancipation of women is a potent medicine for the ills of the world. Each person should earn a livelihood by pursuing a calling, yet wealth should be acquired and used to improve the human condition. Unity does not mean uniformity; people can be different and work together. In the public square, we solve problems by deliberating in a spirit of service, humility, and mutual respect rather than trying to win arguments. The world's nations must pool their sovereignty to create a world commonwealth and abolish war.

The leaders of the time of Bahá'u'lláh had the chance to remake the world but lacked the statesmanship. The task has been passed to us, the human family. Let people of all faiths accept the invitation to do this work together.