

*Book Review*

## Review of *'Adasíyyih: The Story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Model Farming Community*

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In *'Adasíyyih: The Story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Model Farming Community*, Paul Hanley, who has long been a leading exponent of the Bahá'í interest in agriculture, has done much more than just tell the story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's model farming community, 'Adasíyyih, in the first half of the 20th century. He provides a panorama of the interest of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith in agriculture and their love of nature from the beginning to today.

The first part of the book explores the life experiences of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and their teachings and roles in agriculture and rural development, before expanding on the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the perfect example, whether it be in providing for the Holy Family in their exile and imprisonment, facilitating the last years in the life of Bahá'u'lláh, establishing the World Centre of the Faith in the Holy Land, and guiding the development of Bahá'í communities around the world. It contains many details of Their personal lives and the guidance and encouragement that They provided to many rural communities and villages. It also shares vignettes of the many simple, rural people whose extraordinary exploits embellished the early history of the Faith.

Among the themes developed in the book, there is the central role of agriculture as the fundamental basis of community in a new global order characterized by peace, justice, equity, and sustainability. Another topic is the role of food, both for health and social cohesion. Hanley also elaborates on the importance of beauty, and the aesthetic branches of agriculture, such as landscape architecture, horticulture, floriculture, and arboriculture.

Despite being a prisoner, 'Abdu'l-Bahá created the Ridvan garden near Akka from 1875 as a paradise of nature for Bahá'u'lláh in his last years. We come to know the devoted gardeners who maintained and embellished the gardens that provided beauty and relaxation, creating a spiritual atmosphere for residents and pilgrims, as well as the villages in Iran from whence many originated. Some Bahá'ís were gradually able to acquire farm land in Palestine and began raising food, which provided for the needs of the resident Bahá'ís and visitors. We are shown how the efforts to beautify the holy places continued after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá under the guidance of the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, and then the Universal House of Justice.

We learn a lot about the life and qualities of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from His childhood to His ability to find the provisions needed by the family and companions under many trying conditions, His ability to relate to and meet the needs of the poor as well as those highly placed, and the many obstacles and threats that He overcame throughout His life. The book is as much a biography revealing some lesser known dimensions of His extraordinary capacities as it is an exposition on agricultural techniques. As a master gardener, He created places of beauty both for peaceful refuge and to receive pilgrims and other visitors. The book also places significant writings of Bahá'u'lláh, such as the *Tablet of the World* and the *Tablet of Carmel*, in their local and global contexts.

The latter part of the book describes in detail the development of 'Adasíyyih and other villages with Bahá'ís in the Holy Land, despite their difficult socio-political contexts, religious and ethnic prejudices, a harsh landscape, degraded land and extreme climate. Some villages were considered endowments for the Bahá'í Holy Places at the World Center, while generating food and income for the Bahá'í community. Two were farmed by the faithful brother and half-brother of Bahá'u'lláh and their families. This included the farms adjacent to the Garden of Ridvan which became the site for the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

After two earlier failures, 'Abdu'l-Bahá invited some farmers of Zoroastrian background from near Yazd in Iran to settle at 'Adasíyyih and, with great effort, turn this most desolate site into a model of modern agriculture. He provided technical advice, planting materials, and guidance on building a community applying spiritual principles both to its own organisation and to its relations with those around it. The process is described in detail to illustrate all the dimensions of such a process of transformation. He personally visited on four occasions, winning the support of the authorities and providing advice and encouragement. During the war, when famine threatened, grain stored at His request was used to feed the starving population of Haifa and vicinity, and even the British troops on their arrival. The villagers built a Bahá'í centre, organized a school for boys and girls, held literacy classes, provided farming guidance, allocated land equitably, established irrigation, drained a malaria-infested swamp, all providing for the needs of what became a model village attracting national and international attention.

For those particularly interested in agriculture, there are details of the regenerative farming techniques used, the diverse crops planted, the reliance on local methods rather than imports, and the development of the local capacity to manage and improve food production without depending on any guidance from outside. These included soil and water management, crop rotation and diversification, and animal husbandry. Equal attention is shown to the social and spiritual dimensions of building a vibrant community that is self-reliant. A local spiritual assembly was elected in 1924 to direct community affairs.

Unfortunately, the village was located on the border of what became a war zone and then the frontier between the Kingdom of Jordan and the state of Israel, and the turmoil of that process and land reform in Jordan led to the end of the Bahá'í community in 'Adasíyyih, whose members were guided to other destinations and forms of service.

The final chapter draws lessons from this experience for communities of today that face many challenges similar to those of a hundred years ago. The advice of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on transforming food and agriculture for sustainability through agroecology mirrors the lessons learned and the example that the early Bahá'ís set, lacking only the spiritual dimension that is the real foundation for such a fundamental transformation. Readers will come away with a deeper appreciation of agriculture and its role in our spiritual, social and economic transformation as we lay the foundations for an ever-advancing civilisation.

## **Publication**

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