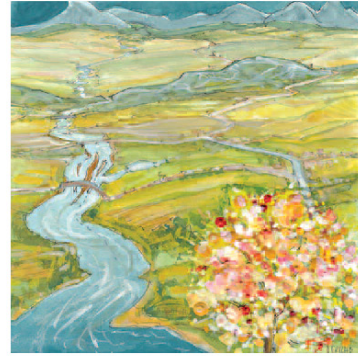


The following story is from the book

The Central Figures

Bahá'u'lláh

Volume Two



These stories are lovingly provided to download as a convenience to teachers or communities otherwise unable to acquire the book. Each book in this storybook series also includes an appendix with questions for discussion and reflection, a glossary of words and phrases used in the stories, a bibliography, and an index.

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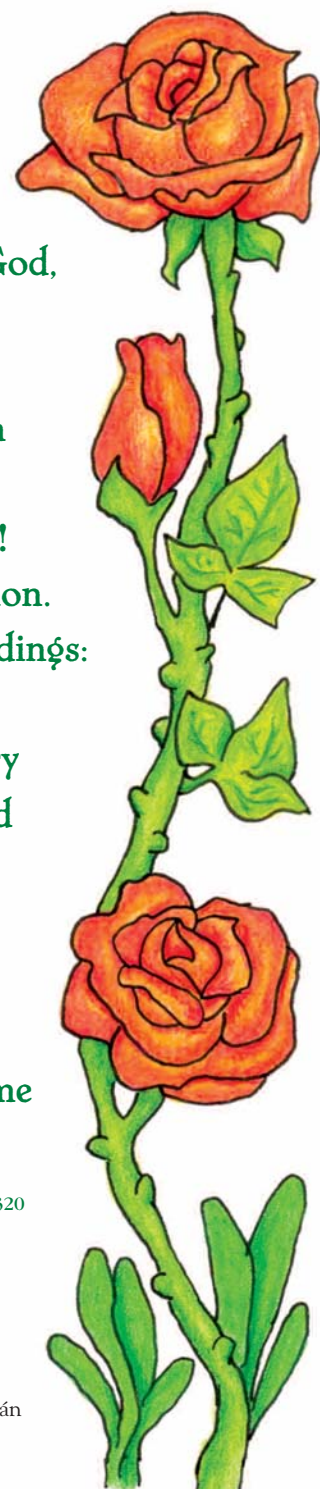

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Release yourselves, O nightingales of God,
from the thorns and brambles
of wretchedness and misery,
and wing your flight to the rose-garden
of unfading splendor.
O My friends that dwell upon the dust!
Haste forth unto your celestial habitation.
Announce unto yourselves the joyful tidings:
“He Who is the Best-Loved is come!
He hath crowned Himself with the glory
of God's Revelation, and hath unlocked
to the face of men the doors
of His ancient Paradise.”
Let all eyes rejoice, and let every ear
be gladdened, for now is the time
to gaze on His beauty, now is the fit time
to hearken to His voice.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 319–320

Illustrated by Jasmine Cordini

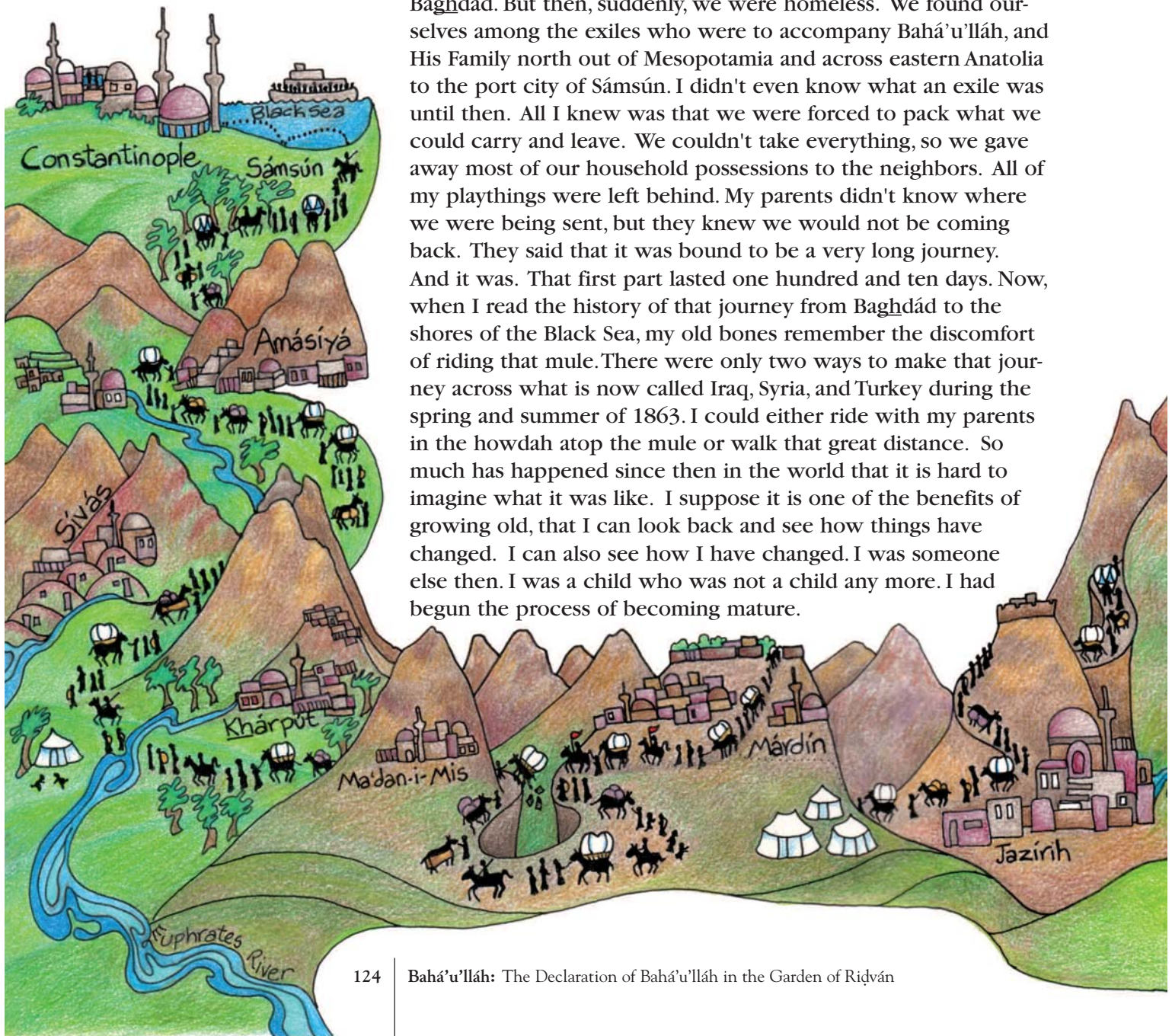


Growing old is very strange. The longer I have to look back on those times, the more significant they seem to become. I was just eleven when we began the great journey from Baghdád. I was still a little girl then, and I didn't understand the events surrounding me. It wasn't until somewhere in the middle of the journey that I began to understand what was happening. It was the year when everything changed in my life. My childhood suddenly ended as our family was forced to leave our home. Looking back, it was the year when we stopped being called Bábís and became known to history as Bahá'ís.



FOR THOSE WHO GO FIRST

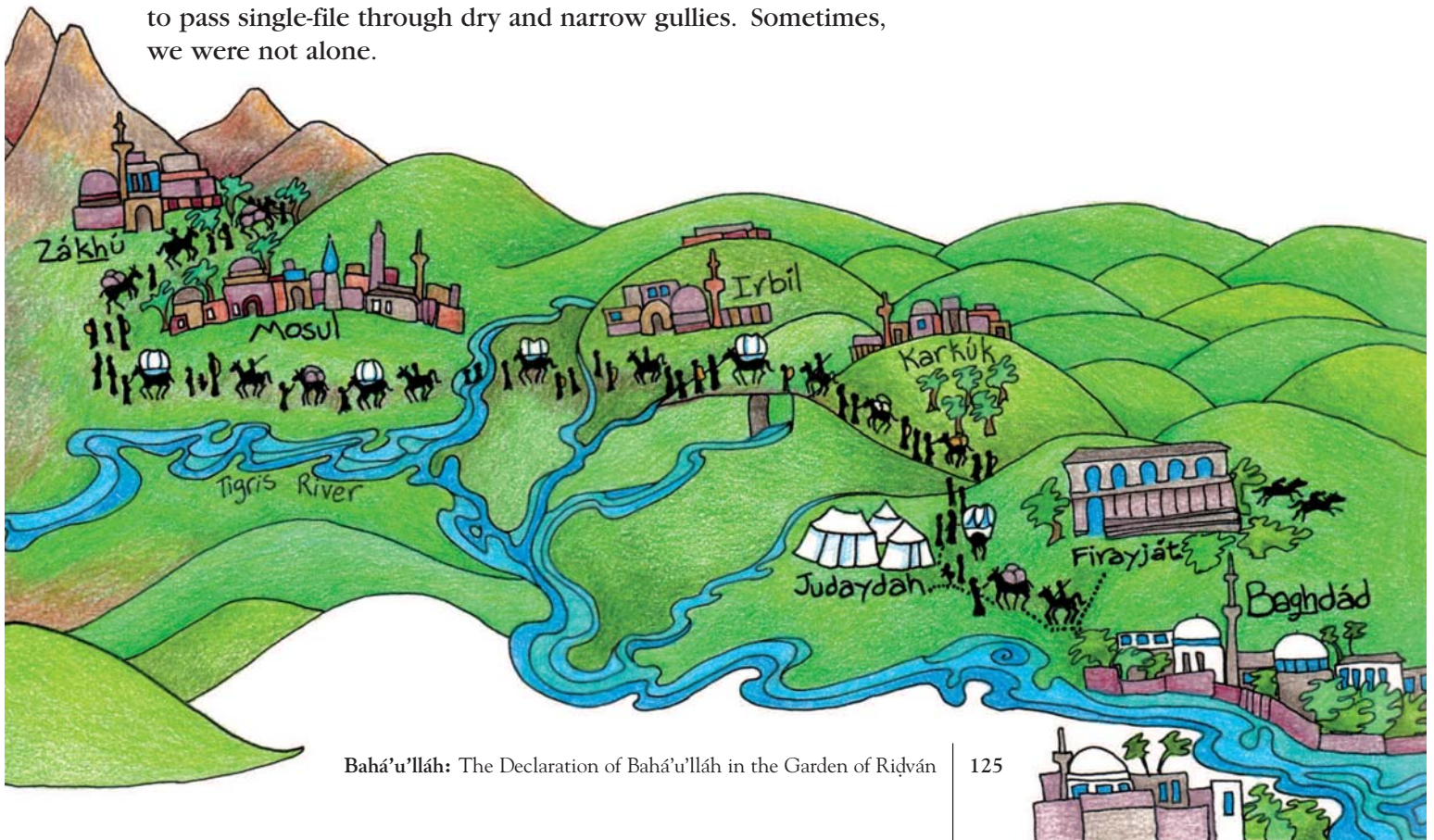
*Written by Joseph Sheppard
Illustrated by Cindy Pacileo*



It all happened within the span of a few days. For as long as I could remember, our family lived in that big house in Baghdád. But then, suddenly, we were homeless. We found ourselves among the exiles who were to accompany Bahá'u'lláh, and His Family north out of Mesopotamia and across eastern Anatolia to the port city of Sámsún. I didn't even know what an exile was until then. All I knew was that we were forced to pack what we could carry and leave. We couldn't take everything, so we gave away most of our household possessions to the neighbors. All of my playthings were left behind. My parents didn't know where we were being sent, but they knew we would not be coming back. They said that it was bound to be a very long journey. And it was. That first part lasted one hundred and ten days. Now, when I read the history of that journey from Baghdád to the shores of the Black Sea, my old bones remember the discomfort of riding that mule. There were only two ways to make that journey across what is now called Iraq, Syria, and Turkey during the spring and summer of 1863. I could either ride with my parents in the howdah atop the mule or walk that great distance. So much has happened since then in the world that it is hard to imagine what it was like. I suppose it is one of the benefits of growing old, that I can look back and see how things have changed. I can also see how I have changed. I was someone else then. I was a child who was not a child any more. I had begun the process of becoming mature.

Every day was a kind of awakening, as I found new meaning in every detail of the trip. There was a rhythm to the stages of our journey as we traveled by day and slept by night. The going was very slow. There was the endless dust and no rest on the back of the mule. Mostly the traveling was boring. There was nothing to do. The mules were too far apart for anyone to carry on a conversation. A couple of the young men took turns singing poems in a loud voice for the entertainment of the rest as we rode. I liked that.

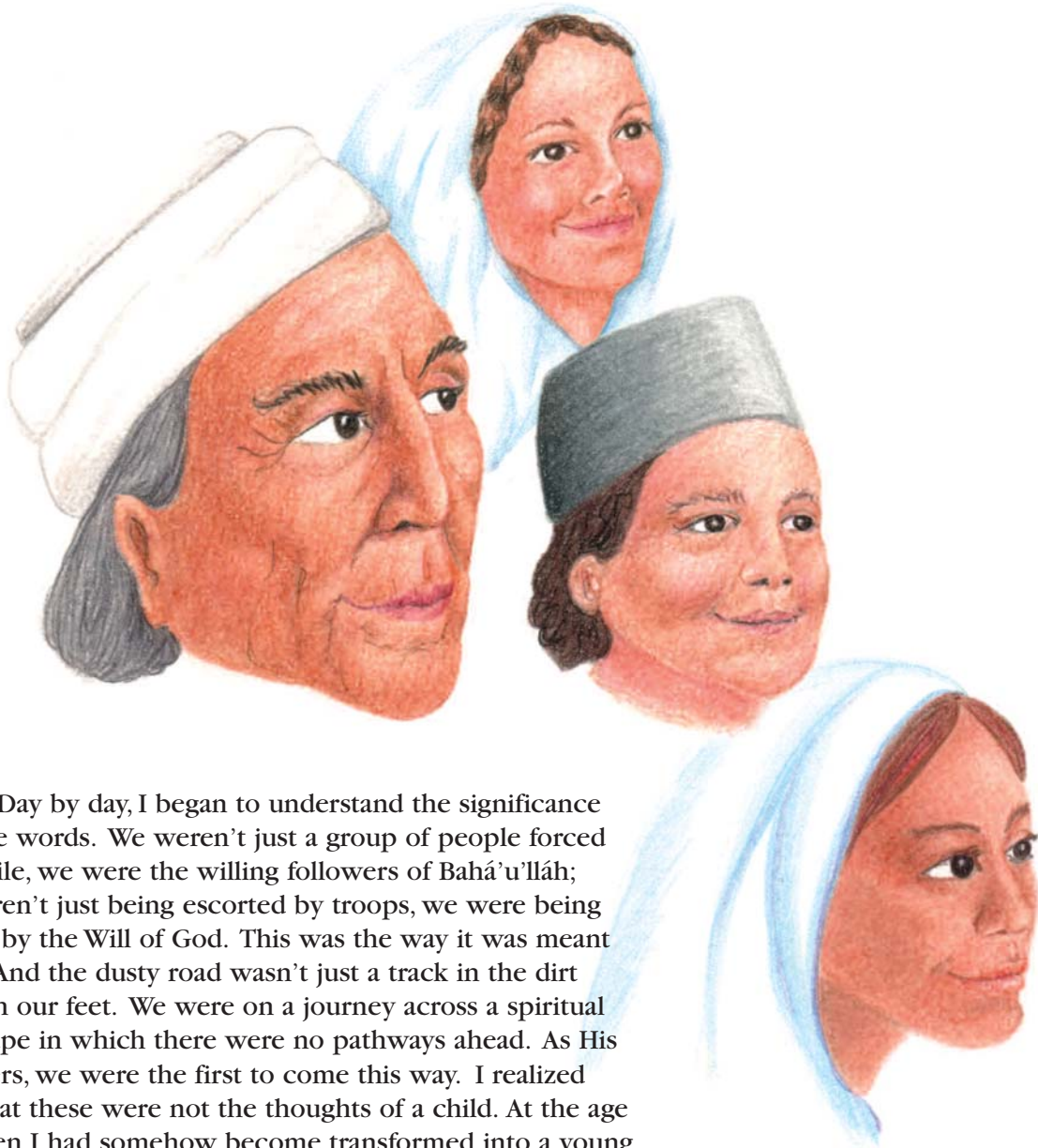
I remember that there was a lot of time for private thought. At the end of each day, when we stopped to set up camp for the night, I would look at the winding dirt trail ahead and try to imagine where the next day's journey would take us. Sometimes, our caravan of almost seventy mules and horses had to pass single-file through dry and narrow gullies. Sometimes, we were not alone.



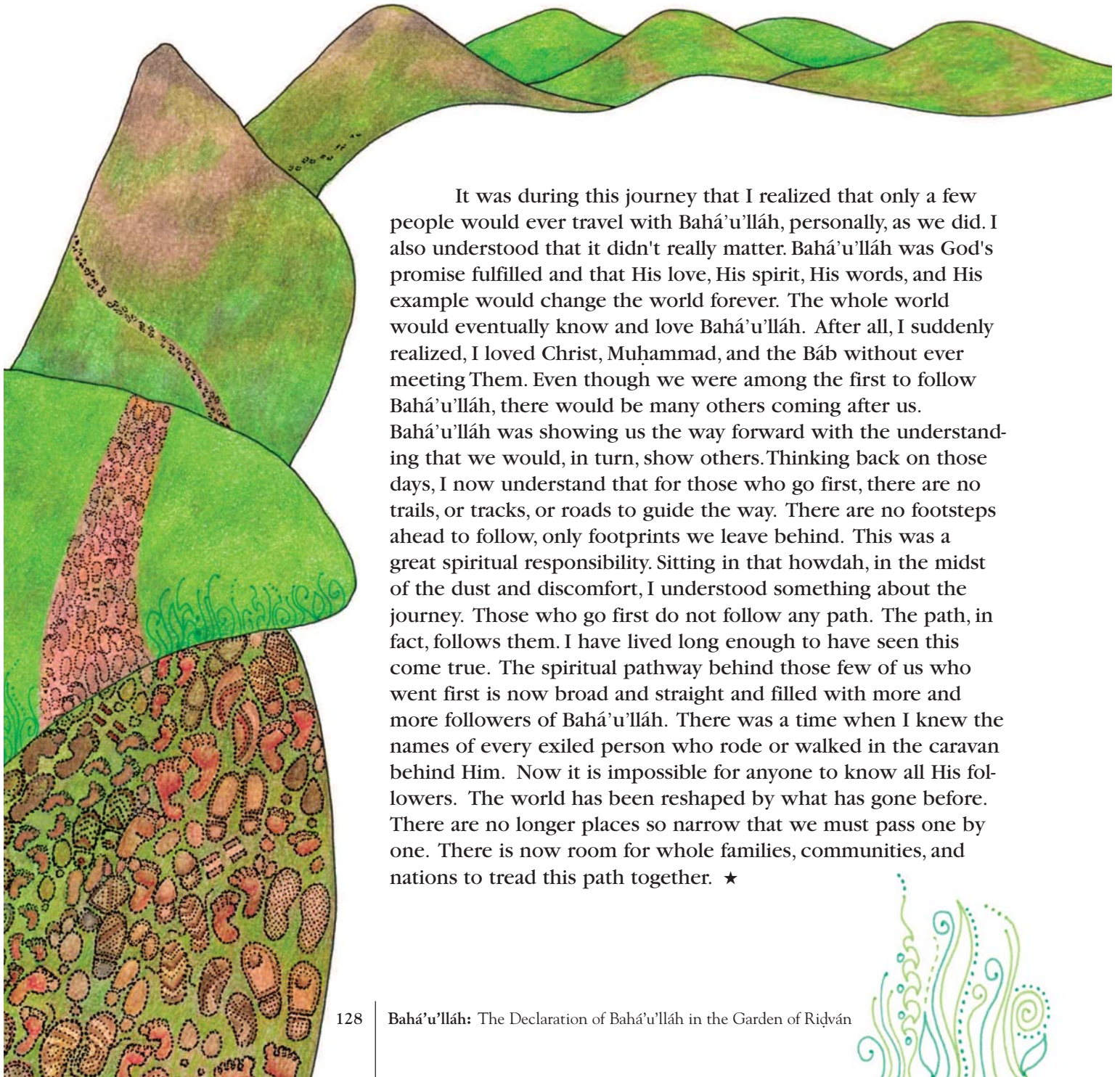
Bahá'u'lláh: The Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Riḍván



As we passed through various villages and towns, people would come out of their homes to welcome us. This was surprising to me. They showed us every respect as they paid homage to Bahá'u'lláh. In their desire to be close to Him, many of these villagers walked for some distance beside us before returning home. It didn't seem to matter to them that we were exiles and being escorted by soldiers. In the evenings, I began to notice something that made me wonder. Looking back along the path made by the passage of the hooves of pack animals and the feet of these people, I saw that the path behind us was always a lot wider and straighter than the one ahead. My thoughts were also centered on the growing realization that we were now Bahá'ís and that eventually there would be no more Bábís. The change would occur within each of us individually. I remember when I first understood this. Ever since I could first recall, my parents spoke of the Báb's promise that after Him would appear the One He called: "He Whom God will make manifest." Back in Baghdád, our family prayed every day for Him to come and rescue us from what had happened to us since the Báb was executed. Then, Bahá'u'lláh gathered together the faithful just before we left Baghdád at a place He called Riḍván, and He declared that the promise was fulfilled. About halfway along the journey afterwards, I remember looking out through the opening in the curtains of our howdah one morning and watching the movement at the front of the caravan. At the lead of our weary band of exiles, Bahá'u'lláh was riding on His beautiful roan horse. I remember saying to myself: "There rides He Whom God has made manifest."



Day by day, I began to understand the significance of these words. We weren't just a group of people forced into exile, we were the willing followers of Bahá'u'lláh; we weren't just being escorted by troops, we were being guided by the Will of God. This was the way it was meant to be. And the dusty road wasn't just a track in the dirt beneath our feet. We were on a journey across a spiritual landscape in which there were no pathways ahead. As His followers, we were the first to come this way. I realized then that these were not the thoughts of a child. At the age of eleven I had somehow become transformed into a young adult. I could see beyond myself and my own experiences. I had begun to see the spiritual implications of things.



It was during this journey that I realized that only a few people would ever travel with Bahá'u'lláh, personally, as we did. I also understood that it didn't really matter. Bahá'u'lláh was God's promise fulfilled and that His love, His spirit, His words, and His example would change the world forever. The whole world would eventually know and love Bahá'u'lláh. After all, I suddenly realized, I loved Christ, Muḥammad, and the Báb without ever meeting Them. Even though we were among the first to follow Bahá'u'lláh, there would be many others coming after us. Bahá'u'lláh was showing us the way forward with the understanding that we would, in turn, show others. Thinking back on those days, I now understand that for those who go first, there are no trails, or tracks, or roads to guide the way. There are no footsteps ahead to follow, only footprints we leave behind. This was a great spiritual responsibility. Sitting in that howdah, in the midst of the dust and discomfort, I understood something about the journey. Those who go first do not follow any path. The path, in fact, follows them. I have lived long enough to have seen this come true. The spiritual pathway behind those few of us who went first is now broad and straight and filled with more and more followers of Bahá'u'lláh. There was a time when I knew the names of every exiled person who rode or walked in the caravan behind Him. Now it is impossible for anyone to know all His followers. The world has been reshaped by what has gone before. There are no longer places so narrow that we must pass one by one. There is now room for whole families, communities, and nations to tread this path together. ★

