

The Bab and Babeism: Part 2

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THE BAB AND BABEEISM .

PART II .

Les Religions et les Philosophies de l'Asie Centrale. Par M. le
COMTE DE GOBINEAU (Ministre de France à Athènes). 2me
Edition . 1866. Paris : Didier et Cie.

Bab et les Babis, ou le Soulèvement Politique et Religieux en Perse
de 1845 à 1853. (Mirza Kazem Beg.) Journal Asiatique, 1866 .
Paris : A. Labitte.

INMazenderantheBabeeswere completely
parts of the kingdom neither their crushed, but in other
numbers nor their influence
were in any way diminished ; and the severity with which the
Government treated those of the leaders whom they could get into
their power showed what importance was attached to the move
ment, and how fearful they were of its results. Against Gourret
oul-Ayn they could for the moment do nothing. At the
first
outbreak of hostilities her followers had flocked to the standard
of Moullah Houssein, and she herself had disappeared no one knew
where, but was in reality in concealment in Teheran. The Bab ,
who was looked upon as the author of all these disorders, was

naturally not allowed to be at large at this crisis ; and he had been removed even in the time of the reign of the late king from his house at Shiraz to the more Sehrig, in the province of Gholan, on the borders of the Caspian Sea , where he was kept closely confined . The circumstances connected with his trial and death coincide with the close of the struggle at Sheik Tebersi, and the first commencement of the trouble in Zendjan. Their history ought, according to chronological arrangement, be given in this place ; but we may perhaps with advantage defer its consideration till after the history 246 The Contemporary Review .

of the outbreak in Zendjan. To this we may now turn. The principal leader in this outbreak was Moullah Mohammed Ali , a native of Zendjan, a small town in the province of Khamseh . He was a Moudjtehid, and long before the name of the Bab had become known in Persia he had made himself remarkable for various strange interpretations of the Koran, in which he declared that nothing in the world was unclean and impure. The Mohammedan religion had proscribed many things, and with the faithful it was a matter of conscience to abstain from all contact with wine, pork, dogs, dead bodies, and blood. A few things indeed remained doubtful, such as opium and tobacco, but even these were never touched by strict Mohammedans. * Mohammed Ali boldly broke through all these restrictions, and declared that all things were free to all, and no man could contract impurity by the lawful use of anything. Of course such opinions, openly expressed, created great scandal among the Moullahs and all the orthodox party ; but their remonstrances produced no effect. The disregard of religious prohibitions was too much in accordance with the secret practice of many † who vehemently supported these new opinions. The dispute occasioned by this controversy rose at length to such a height that the Government had to interfere, and Mohammed Ali was arrested and taken to Teheran , where he was kept in a kind of honourable confinement under the care of Mohammed Khan, the head of the police. During his enforced sojourn in the capital he became acquainted with Moullah Houssein Boushrewyeh, and from him learned the principles and substance of the Babees doctrines. These he found to agree in the main with the interpretations of the Koran which he had himself promulgated ; a correspondence with the Bab enlightened him still further and completed his conversion, and he professed himself one of his followers. Taking advantage soon afterwards of the interregnum which ensued on the occasion of the death of Mohammed Shah, he set the injunction of the Government at defiance, and returned to Zendjan, where he was at once received in triumph. Before his imprisonment he had already had many followers ; their number was now increased by the accession of all the Babees in the town and in the surrounding country, who welcomed his conversion to their doctrines, and at once

placed him at their head, and bade defiance to their opponents. The town thus became divided into two rival parties, and Mohammed Ali, at the head of the Babees, a small but determined band, found himself opposed to the governor of the city, who was sure of the

* See Palgrave's account of the strictness with which this abstinence is enforced in

Nedjed, where the partaking of wine or tobacco is looked upon as a greater sin than adultery, theft, or murder. (Palgrave's " Central Arabia .")

+ In spite of the religious prohibition drunkenness is a very common failing in Persia . Gobineau, p. 69.

The Bab and Babeism .

247

support of the orthodox Shiite party, and could command the obedience of the royal troops. For some time the two parties watched each other with jealous apprehension, and a conflict became more and more imminent. The governor was anxious to delay it as long as possible. Mohammed Ali, on the other hand, sought to precipitate it before the zeal and enthusiasm of his followers should have had time to cool; and an event soon occurred which gave rise to the conflict. The governor had rashly ordered one of the personal followers of the Babe chief, who had refused to pay his share of some tax , to be thrown into prison. Mohammed Ali demanded his release, and as this was refused, with some of his partizans he broke open the doors of the prison and set the man free. Their passions once excited , they proceeded to further acts of violence ; and turned their arms against the members of the opposite party, some of whom they killed, and burned their houses to the ground. The struggle was now openly begun . Mohammed Ali collected his adherents together, put arms into their hands, and with their help took possession of one part of the town, which he fortified . It was, however, impossible to gain any permanent advantage without the possession of the citadel, which was built in a position of great strength in the centre of Zendjan , and commanded the town. It was then in the possession of the royal troops, and the first attempt to dislodge them was unsuccessful. The next day (May 28th, 1849) the Babees returned to the attack with fanatical determination, and carried everything before them. The troops were forced to evacuate the citadel, and the Babees established themselves in it. Elated by his success , Mohammed Ali next made an attempt to take the governor , Emir Aslan Khan , prisoner ; but was defeated , and compelled to retreat. At the same time the governor could do nothing more than fortify the part of the town he occupied , and await reinforcements. The delay was profitably employed by the Babees in still further fortifying the citadel and carrying into it provisions .

We do not propose to enter into a detailed account of the struggle which took place. In many respects it resembles the struggle at

Sheik Tebersi, which was just terminating as the Babees of Zendjan were rising to arms. In both we find the same desperate courage , the same unflinching resolution to die rather than to yield ; the same ingenuity employed by the Babees in surprising and defeating their enemies. For more than three months the contest was carried on with unvarying success on the part of the Babees. During that time the town was laid in ruins : in parts, whole streets were burnt ; in others, the houses were pulled down to prevent their being occupied by the enemy, or to facilitate an attack ; but, in spite of all the efforts of the royal troops, they made no progress. At length, in 248

The Contemporary Review .

the beginning of September, after a desperate assault, which had been most successfully repelled by the garrison of the citadel, the generals of the king became convinced that they had no chance of success in their present mode of carrying on the attack. At a council of war it was resolved to change their plan of action, and to reduce the siege to a strict blockade, as had been formerly done at Sheik Tebersi, and in this way to starve them into submission. In Zendjah the blockade was, of course, easier of execution than it had been in the mountains of Mazenderan . The lines were drawn closely round the citadel ; the supplies of water were cut off ; and to the horrors of famine, which threatened the brave garrison , was added the dread of thirst. The Babees procured for themselves, indeed, some water by digging wells ; but scarcely in sufficient quantity for their need.

But while the troops were lying inactive round the citadel of Zendjan, Mohammed Ali was not idle. The numbers of the besieging force were so great as to make it useless to sally forth and attack them ; the leader of the Babees tried, therefore, to gain some advantage by means of a stratagem, and sent two of his most devoted followers to Ferrouk Khan, who was in command of a cavalry regiment. They appeared before him as deserters from the Babees cause, they wept over their past errors, and assured him that all their companions would gladly submit if they were not restrained by fear of Mohammed Ali. If he could be taken prisoner, or killed, all the others would yield at once ; and they offered to show a secret path which led straight to his house. Ferrouk Khan fell into the trap. Taking with him a hundred of his best soldiers, he followed his guides along the secret passage they had described till he came to a place which had been previously fixed upon by the Babees. His guides here suddenly disappeared, and almost immediately a violent explosion took place. The Babees surrounded the unhappy band, who were all slain , with the exception of twelve men, among whom was Ferrouk Khan, who was taken prisoner. On hearing the explosion, the royal troops had rushed at once to the place, believing that a magazine had exploded, and hoping to profit by the disorder which would have ensued ; but it was to find themselves attacked and compelled to retreat with great loss. Ferrouk Khan and his com

panions were afterwards put to death .

During some months the blockade continued, and desultory skirmishes took place, in which the Babees gradually lost ground, but which had no perceptible influence on the progress of the siege.

Between the two parties the war was carried on in the most merciless manner ; no quarter was given, or if by chance any lives were spared amid the excitement of the conflict, the prisoners were only reserved to meet a more lingering death by inhuman torture. Some months

The Bab and Babeism .

249

had now elapsed since the Bab had been put to death, and the circumstances attending his end had excited a large amount of compassion throughout the country ; compassion which was now bestowed on the small band who were maintaining so desperate a struggle in Zendjan. Mirza Taghy Khan perceived that it was not safe to increase this feeling, or to prolong the suspense ; and he ordered a large reinforcement to proceed to Zendjan, with several cannon . This was in the month of January, 1850, and by the end of the month all the preparations were made for opening fire. Beneath the storm of

missiles the walls and houses soon crumbled to pieces ; in spite of this the Babees still defended their position with such desperate courage that none of the royal troops dared approach ; but a misfortune, disastrous to their cause, now happened. During the thick of the fight Mohammed Ali had his arm broken by a musket shot. Few were aware of it at the time, and he was carried , without attracting any notice, into a house near at hand, round which the fight was raging with unceasing fury. A gun was brought to bear upon it ; and at length the whole house fell in, but even then the Babees could not be driven from the ruins. To Mohammed Ali, however, the result was fatal. The contusions he had suffered from the falling stones and timber, and the impossibility of giving proper attention to his wound, had together so inflamed it that he was brought to his last hour. As he felt death approaching he called his followers round him, and encouraged them , as Moullah Houssein had done before at Tebersi. He bade them continue the struggle; and promised that he would be restored to life again in forty days ; and that if they should be slain the same happy future would be in store for them. As long as he was alive his words found a response in the hearts of the Babees ; as soon as he was dead the hopelessness of their position became evident. Their outworks and defences were destroyed, their provisions were exhausted ; and now their leader was gone, and they had no one who could at all supply his place. The chief men among the Babees held a consultation together, and determined to capitulate. They wrote, therefore, to Emir Aslan Khan, the governor of the city, and Mohammed Khan, the commander of the troops, offering to lay down their arms if their lives were spared. The conditions were accepted, and a solemn promise was given that no punishment of any kind should be inflicted on the Babees ; and,

trusting to this, they left their fortifications, and came into the royal camp. The first question asked of them was what had become of Mohammed Ali ? they replied that he was dead ; and as the answer was received with incredulity they confirmed it by showing the spot where he was buried. The grave was at once opened, his body torn from its resting-place, dragged through the streets of the

250 The Contemporary Review .

now desolate and deserted town, and at length left to be devoured by the wild dogs. The disrespect shown to the dead body of the late chief of the Babees was a pretty clear intimation of the manner in which the governor and commander - in - chief meant to deal with their prisoners. Their lives had been promised ; but the terms of the treaty were as little regarded as they had been in Mazenderan. The whole body of the Babees, with the exception of the three principal men, were put to death, either with the bayonet or by being blown from guns. The three men, whose lives were momentarily spared, Mirza Rizay, Hadji Mohammed Ali, and Hadji Mohsen, were taken to Teheran , where they were condemned to have their veins opened. When this sentence was announced to them they exhibited no surprise, only they inveighed bitterly against the Government for its want of faith both towards themselves and their companions. God, they said , would not behold such crimes with indifference, and would take signal vengeance on the perpetrators ; and, as a proof, they warned the prime minister that he would suffer death in the same manner as he was now inflicting it on them.* M. Gobineau does not vouch for the truth of this prophecy ; but the fact is certain that, some years afterwards, Mirza Taghy Khan , having fallen into dis favour with the king, was condemned to death , and perished by having his veins opened.

When the revolt in Zendjan was finally crushed, the Bab, in whose name the rising had taken place, had been already some months dead. After the first charge had been brought against him, before the court of Teheran, he was enjoined, as we have already seen , to keep to his house. This injunction the Bab scrupulously obeyed, and for some months remained unmolested at Shiraz, during which time his doctrines made rapid progress throughout the whole of Persia . On the outbreak of hostilities in Mazenderan the Govern ment considered him responsible for them. He had never in any way, by word or act, incited his followers against the estab lished Government ; he had never desired that his doctrines should be promulgated by force ; but when an outbreak took place, involv ing such tremendous issues as the one in Mazenderan, which was begun in his favour and carried on in his name, it was impossible that he could be acquitted of all complicity, or escape all suspicion. As long as he was at large, it was possible for him to place himself at the head of a rising which might prove to be more formidable even than the one begun by Moullah Houssein, and , therefore, at the

very commencement of the outbreak in Mazenderan, to secure the safety of the state, he was placed under arrest and transferred to the fortress of Tjehrig.t Here he remained till the death of

- Gobineau, p. 253.

† In this statement we have followed M. Gobineau . Another account is given by the

The Bab and Babeism .

251

Mohammed Shah , when a new régime began, and measures of severity were carried into execution. When Mirza Taghy Khan took into his hands the reins of power, he was confronted by Babeism , and deemed the destruction of its author to be the surest way of destroying it. At first he had no intention of putting the Bab to death . To do so would only have been to place him in the position of a martyr, and he was rather anxious to destroy the favourable opinion which had attached itself to the Bab and his doctrines, and to disgrace him in the eyes of the people ; could this be done, it did not very much matter what became of the Bab himself.

For

this purpose the prime minister proposed to bring him to Teheran, and in all the towns to exhibit him publicly in chains ; whenever an occasion offered to require him to dispute publicly with the Moullahs, without allowing him a fair opportunity of reply, and even at times enjoining him total silence. In addition, a series of petty persecutions, and the fear of death impending over him, would combine to dishearten and crush him, and render him at length the sport instead of the admiration of the people. With any man of less ability, less character, and less resolution than the Bab, this plan might have succeeded ; but with him it soon became evident that such a scheme would only recoil against its originators. The wonderful influence exercised by the Bab since his imprisonment in Tjehrig would have been sufficient to prove this. In the prison his life had been gentle and unobtrusive ; and his time was divided between prayer and work . To those with whom he conversed he often spoke of his own death as an event not very distant, but which had for him no terror. Few were able to resist the charm of his manner, and of his general conversation, or failed to be impressed by the expression of his face ; even the soldiers did not escape the influence he exerted ; and if the Bab was publicly exposed in the manner proposed, instead of being disheartened by being confronted with his enemies, it was possible , nay probable , that he might extort sympathy from many, and gain them over to his doctrines. The plan of Mirza Taghy Khan, if successful, would no doubt have done more to destroy Babeism than anything else ; but the danger arising from its possible failure was too great to allow of its being tried, and the Government resolved, therefore, to put him quietly to death . Journal Asiatique (April - May), according to which the Bab, wearied by the close con

finement to which he was subjected in Shiraz, and by the petty persecutions inflicted on him by the clergy of the town, made his escape to Ispahan, where he implored and obtained the protection of Menoutjehr Khan , the governor of that city, a man who, without becoming a convert, had been favourably impressed by the preaching of Moullah Houssein . At Ispahan the Bab remained protected and concealed until the death of Menoutjehr Khan , in 1847, when the Government took measures for his arrest, and had him conveyed to Tjehrig. Both statements appear to be founded on original Persian documents. In any case he was a prisoner at Tjehrig on the death of Mohammed Shah .

252 The Contemporary Review .

An order was sent to Prince Hamze Mirza, who had been transferred from Khorassan to Azerbedjan, to take the Bab from the fortress of Tjehrig, and convey him to Tebriz.* Two disciples of the Bab, who had been active in disseminating Babeë doctrines, and had shared the imprisonment of their master, were sent at the same time, Seyd Houssein, a native of Yezd, and Moullah Mohammed Ali , + a native of Tebriz .

After his arrival at Tebriz, the Bab was allowed to see all who chose to come and visit him, and many did so from very various feelings of curiosity, or of sympathy. This was probably allowed from motives of policy, that all might be cognizant of the steps the Government was taking, and certain that the Bab was really in their power. For the same reason, all the proceedings connected with his death were prolonged and conducted in the most public manner possible. On his death the Government had now finally resolved ; only it was necessary that it should be preceded by some form at least of a trial. Accordingly, Hamze Mirza, to whom the proceedings were entrusted, required the Moullahs and the principal men of the city to meet together, and confute the Bab. They assembled in a room in the fortress, but the Moullahs, absolutely declined to enter on any discussion ; the time for that, they said, was past ; efforts had been made to induce the Bab to abjure his doctrines and had failed , and nothing now remained but to make him suffer the penalty due to his error. The laymen present in the assembly were bolder, and on various points tried to prove to the Bab the error of his views, but they soon had reason to repent of their imprudence, as all their arguments were in turn easily disposed of. At length Hamze Mirza, seeing that matters were not going on very favourably for his side, interfered , and, addressing the Bab, required from him some proof of his divine mission . “ I have heard ,” he said, “ that you assert that you have a divine nature, and have dared to write a Koran ,

which

has been impudently disseminated among the people.

If what

you assert is indeed the case, turn towards that crystal chandelier, and pray that a new verse may be revealed to you." The Bab did so at once, and repeated some verses which were not to be found in any of his published writings. Hamze Mirza was at first rather surprised, but commanded them to be taken down in writing. Allowing a short interval to elapse, he said to the Bab that if those words were a revelation from heaven, they were no doubt engraved on his mind, and required him to repeat them again. This, it is asserted, he

* Another name for Tebriz is Tauris, and it is so called in the Journal Asiatique.

+ It is difficult to distinguish the different persons who bore the name of Mohammed

Ali, and were of note in the Babeer movement. There were three principal men,

Mohammed Ali Balfouroushy, Mohammed Ali Zendjany, and Mohammed Ali of Tebriz.

The Bab himself was Ali Mohammed.

The Bab and Babeerism. 253

failed in doing, though the Babees indignantly deny it. In any case, the occurrence was not very miraculous. It was quite possible for him to have composed some lines, which he knew by heart, without having committed them to paper; and it was as easy for him to repeat them the second time as the first. After this episode the assembly broke up. It could not be called in any sense a court of justice, nor could the proceedings be honoured with the name of a trial, but the obstinate adherence of the Bab to his own opinions served as a pretext for putting him to death. The real reason was to be found, not in the difference between him and the Mollahs, but in the outbreak, which had only just been quelled in Mazenderan, and the revolt which was still making head in Zendjan.

Sentence of death was given against the Bab, and it was resolved to carry it out in the most public manner, that no doubt might exist as to the fact, and that none of his followers might have any grounds for believing that he was still living, and in concealment, and would some day appear again. On the following day the Bab and his two companions, Seyd Houssein and Mohammed Ali, were led out of the prison with an iron collar fastened round their necks, to which was attached a long cord, held by one of the common executioners.

In this guise they were paraded through the streets of the town, in the midst of an overwhelming crowd. Some of the spectators indeed turned aside with disgust from the sickening sight; others, who were Babees in disguise, tried to excite compassion for their unhappy fate; but the greater number vied with each other in pouring upon them abuse, in covering them with filth, in ill-treating them in every

way. Three times the procession stopped before the houses of the three principal men among the clergy of the town, with whom the Bab was confronted. Before one of them his enemies assert that the Bab abjured his faith, and prayed for mercy. The fact is not very probable; at any rate it made no difference in the fate of the Bab. The three chief Moudjtehids solemnly ratified the sentence of the law in the presence of the people, and delivered the victims over to death. On one of them, however, the sentence was not to be carried into execution. On leaving the last of the three houses the physical strength of Seyd Houssein completely gave way; he fell to the ground, and, with tears, asked for mercy. He was raised with difficulty, and told to curse the Bab. Seyd Houssein obeyed. He was then promised his liberty if he would spit in the Bab's face. Seyd Houssein did so. His irons were at once taken off, and he was left crouching in the middle of the street, while the procession, with the accompanying crowd, passed on. As soon as the street was empty Seyd Houssein rose up, and leaving the town, took his way to Teheran.

254 The Contemporary Review .

Every effort was now made to shake the firmness of the other disciple of the Bab, Mohammed Ali; but in vain. His wife and children, who were living at Tebriz, were brought from their home and placed before him; but their tears and entreaties made on him no impression. He looked at them unmoved, and would not listen to their prayers. When Seyd Houssein had denied his master and spat in his face, Mohammed Ali kissed his hand with every mark of the deepest respect, and exclaimed aloud to the people, "This man is the gate of the truth, the Imaum of Islamism,"* and the only favour he now deigned to ask was that he might be put to death before his master. At length, seeing that no impression could be made on him, and that he remained firm in his attachment to the Bab, the two men were conducted to the ramparts and let down from the wall by cords passed under their shoulders till their feet nearly touched the ground. In front of them was a large open space, where the whole population of the town was assembled. After the two men had been fastened to the wall, an officer ordered a company of the regiment of Behaderan to advance. The regiment was entirely composed of Christians, and had been selected from fear that the Mussulmen might refuse to act. The last words were addressed by Mohammed Ali to the Bab. "My master, are you satisfied with me?" The order was given to fire, and he was killed at once. The Bab had escaped unhurt; but the cord which had fastened him to the wall was cut, and he fell to the ground. Rising quickly to his feet, he began to run; and then, seeing a guard-house, he rushed into it. For a moment the whole multitude, seeing the Bab escape unhurt, looked on breathless with astonishment, and soon murmurs of applause and sympathy were heard, as they fancied a miracle had taken place. Had the Bab, at

the very first, rushed into the crowd and called upon them for their help, there is little doubt that to a man they would have turned in his favour, and another revolt would have begun, of a very different character from the struggles of Mazenderan and Zendjan. But the Bab was worn out with the sufferings of the past day, and scarcely conscious of what he was doing ; and instinct led him to take refuge in the first shelter he could find. The officers had heard the murmurs of the crowd behind them , and perceived at once the whole danger of the crisis. Any delay would have been fatal. They at once entered the guard-house with some soldiers, and there despatched the Bab. His body was dragged for some days through the streets of the city, and then thrown outside the walls.

The execution of the Bab took place on July 15th , 1849, and when, some months later, in January, 1850, the three last survivors of the Baboes of Zendjan were put to death, the Government began

- Journal Asiatique, No. XXVI. p. 377.

The Bab and Babeism .

255

to breathe more freely. If the proceedings against the Bab had been instigated by the hatred of the clergy, the active measures against the rebels of Mazenderan and Zendjan were taken by the Government solely from an instinct of self-preservation. The movement, purely religious in its first beginnings, had assumed a distinctly political character. When Moullah Houssein appeared before Mohammed Shah and his minister, Mirza Aghassy Khan, he hoped to secure their co-operation in obtaining the various reforms, civil and religious, which he, along with the other Babees, desired to see carried out. Could the Babees have succeeded in gaining over the king, they would have been quite content, as they had no wish to make a change in the dynasty ; but when they found their hopes were vain , more especially when, shortly after, they found themselves persecuted , and yet forming together a large and united force, with arms in their hands, the idea of making a change in the established Government presented itself vividly before their minds. The Bab'was naturally selected as the claimant to the throne, nor were they at a loss to find grounds on which to base his rights. The title of Seyd, which was appropriated by his family, asserted his descent both from Ali and Yezdegerd, the last of the Sassanian kings. Such only were considered by the Persians as the rightful occupants of the throne ; and though the nation had acquiesced through centuries in the various dynastic changes which had taken place, still the rightful title to the throne was not forgotten . On this slender ground, therefore, of his dubious descent from Ali, the Bab was proclaimed as the rightful possessor of the crown ; and though his claim was soon disposed of by his death, the political aspect of Babeism continued, even if it was not developed. Other claimants arose, and one of these was able to raise the standard of revolt at Neiriz just about the time when the

struggle in Zendjan was drawing to a close. Seyd Yahia - Darabi* had been a disciple of the Bab, and an earnest propagator of the Babees doctrines, but his zeal for the cause was prompted chiefly by a desire for self-aggrandisement. The death of the Bab seemed to open up to him a favourable opportunity for the furtherance of his ambition. He collected a band of men at Neiriz, and proclaimed himself as the successor of the Bab. A few zealous Babees were among his followers, and they continued the resistance to the forces sent against them to the very last; but the greater number were very indifferent, and sought only to promote their own advantage. The rising was not supported by the Babees generally, and had very little influence on their cause. Darabi at length submitted to the Seyd Yahia -Darabi is only mentioned in the Journal Asiatique, No. XXIX., August -September.

256 The Contemporary Review .

Government, and his life would have been in all probability safe, had he not been murdered by the son of a man who had been killed in the attack on Neiriz. The lives of his two sons were spared, but the Babees who were with him were all put to death. Another claimant * was found, among the members of the Babees council, or the Unity, in the person of Mirza Asad Oullah of Tebriz, who was surnamed Deyyan, or the Supreme Judge. He proclaimed himself to be the successor of the Bab, but was at once disowned by the leaders of the sect, some of whom followed him as he fled into Arabistan or Khuzistan, and drowned him in the Shât- el- Arab. But while the Babees refused to recognise any self- elected successor of the Bab, they had no intention of allowing themselves to be discouraged or disheartened by the want of a head. This was, indeed, necessary according to the principles of their faith; and, therefore, soon after the death of the Bab, the members of the Unity met together at Teheran to elect a successor. Their choice fell on Mirza Yahya, a youth of about seventeen, whom we have already seen present at the council held in Mazenderan. This Mirza Yahya was the son of Mirza Bouzourg Nouri, the lieutenant of the Governor of Teheran. His mother died when he was born, and he was brought up from his infancy by the wife of one of the Babees chiefs, who had been warned in a dream of his miserable condition. This woman was known by the title of Djenab -Beha, or The Precious Excellency, and occupied a high position in the councils of the Babees. At the age of five Mirza Yahya was sent to school, but only remained there three days, as his foster -mother objected to some correction he had received from his master. His removal from school does not, however, seem to have affected his learning, as he is reported to have been thoroughly conversant with every subject of knowledge and science. On his election he received the title of Hezret- e- Ezel, The Eternal Highness, to distinguish him from the first Bab, who was called Hezret-è- Alá, The

Sublime Highness. Immediately afterwards he left the capital, where he would not have found the necessary leisure to direct the affairs of the sect, and where his life would have been in danger. As it was, the Government was informed of his election, and made diligent search after him, but in vain ; he was, however, in consequence, obliged to remove from one city to another, and at length judged it prudent to cross the frontier, and take up his residence at Bagdad. Here he was beyond the power of the Persian authorities, at the same time that he was in constant communication with the Persian pilgrims, who poured through Bagdad every year in great numbers on their way to the shrines of Kerbela and Nedjef. After these events matters remained pretty quiet in Persia for Gobincau, p. 277 .

The Bab and Baberism .

257

nearly two years. The Babees were not suppressed, in fact, they were as numerous as ever, but they judged it to be more prudent at that time to make no public demonstrations, but secretly to increase the number of their adherents, and organize their forces, so as to be ready in case events should become in any way propitious to them. The principal man among them at this time was Moullah Sheykh Ali . He had become a convert to Babeism when Ali Mohammed had been elected the head of the Sheykhys, and received the title of Bab. Since then, he had never ceased to propagate it actively in the various cities of the empire, and though not appearing in any prominent position, or occupying at that time the place of a leader, no one devoted more time or labour in making the doctrine known. Disguised at one time as a dervish, at another presenting the appearance of a rich merchant, changing his character as occasion required, he was to be found preaching in all the principal towns. After the death of the Bab, and the election of Mirza Yahya to that dignity, he established himself at Teheran, and there formed a secret society of the Babees, despite the emissaries of Mirza Taghy Khan, who were able to report nothing to their master.

The active vigilance of the minister was no doubt one reason why the Babees thought it best to do nothing during these years. He had shown what he could do, and his severity they knew would be mercilessly directed against any one who should oppose him ; prudence for the time became the better part of valour. But about the beginning of the year 1852, owing to a series of petty court intrigues, and the suspicion of a plot for placing Abbas Mirza, the brother of the reigning king, on the throne, to which Mirza Taghy Khan was supposed to be privy, the prime minister was driven from power, and at last put to death by order of the king, at a small village near Kashan. He died by having his veins opened, as the Babees martyrs of Zendjan had foretold . His successor in power was Mirza Agha Khan, who had been Minister of Foreign Affairs, but was untried in his present exalted post. As his rule, in consequence, did not pro

mise to show the same vigour as that of Mirza Taghy Khan, the Babees, with Moullah Sheykh Ali, endeavoured to take advantage of the change, and began at once to plot against the Government. We have already seen how the death of the king in Persia places all law and order in abeyance, and they thought that if such an interregnum could be created they might be able to gain some permanent advantage amid the general confusion. A plot was therefore formed to assassinate the king, and twelve men were sworn to carry it into execution. Rumours to this effect had been circulated through the town, and reached the ears of the king's ministers; even the day when the act was to be carried into effect was named; but the secret

VOL . XII. S

258

The Contemporary Review .

was so well kept that they could never arrive at the bottom of it, or, which is more probable, they did not give any particular credence to the report, and made little effort to trace it out. Suspicion pointed to Sheykh Ali, but his place of concealment could not be discovered. In furtherance of their plan three men of the twelve conspirators hired themselves as gardeners to work in the royal grounds, and thus have an opportunity of getting near the person of the king. They were working one day near the place where the king was conversing with his courtiers, when some water-melons were brought to the royal party, of which they partook; and the king, seeing these men labouring in the heat of the day, ordered some of the fruit to be taken to them. The three Babees were so touched by this kindness, that they had scruples about carrying their plan into execution. According to the Eastern notion, the person of the king, of whose hospitality they had partaken, was now sacred to them, at least for some days, and they were further unwilling, after what had passed, to assassinate him on his own grounds. A change of plan was therefore made. Some days after (August 16th, 1852) the king was going out for a ride, and as he was passing along one of the streets of Teheran with his attendants, some in advance, others a little behind him, he saw the three men standing by the road. They cried out that they had a petition to make, but instead of waiting till he should summon them, they rushed up to him. One of them seized his horse by the bridle, and at the same time fired a pistol charged with shot; the two others did the same, and some of the charge took effect in the king's arm. The king resisted to the best of his power; and as they were trying on both sides to drag him from his horse, they kept his equilibrium, and he was able to maintain his seat. By this time the attendants of the king came to his rescue; one of the Babees was killed, the other two were seized and bound. The whole town was in a state of alarm, the troops were ordered under arms, and the gates of the city were shut. After a time the minds of the people began to quiet down, as they saw that it was only an attempt at assassination, and not the commencement

of a general rising.*

The wound of the king was of no consequence ; but the attempt to assassinate him revealed the existence of a conspiracy, and the continuance of an almost-forgotten danger. For two years little had been heard of the Babees, and it was hoped that they had been finally suppressed ; now, their existence as a large and thoroughly organized body became again apparent. The Government felt themselves

* * In the account of the attempt at assassination of the king, we have endeavoured to

reconcile the different and somewhat conflicting statements of M. Gobineau and of the

Journal Asiatique.

The Bab and Babeism .

259

surrounded by secret dangers, with which they scarcely knew how to cope : but the first thing to be done was to trace out the authors of the conspiracy in Teheran itself. The agents of the police were required to keep a vigilant watch over the whole town, and especially over the houses of any suspected Babees, and their efforts were soon rewarded with success. The house of one Souleyman Khan soon attracted their notice, where secret meetings appeared to be held. Forcible entrance having been made into it, they arrested, not only the master of the house, but fifteen other persons, with several women and children. Among the women was Gourret-oul-Ayn , who was not placed in the common prison with the others, but conducted to the house of Mahmoud Khan, the head of the police, and consigned to the care of his wife. Several other arrests were made, and the Government soon found that they had about forty Babees in their power . The two men who were seized when attempting to murder the king were first interrogated. In spite of the tortures to which they were subjected, nothing could be drawn from them.

They confessed that they were members of a widely -spread conspiracy, but nothing could make them give up the names of their accomplices. They admitted their guilt in attempting the life of the king, but justified their act by saying that they were only obeying their orders, and had been actuated by no feelings of hatred. “ If this had been the case, ” they said, “ they could easily have killed the king by a single shot ; but their orders had been to cut off his head, and to do this they had tried to drag him off his horse. ” “ Their pistols , ” they remarked at the same time, “ were charged with shot, and not with ball, and they only fired to disable him , and so effect their purpose more easily . ” As the Government could get nothing out of these men, it tried some of the other prisoners, but found them all equally firm . They would give no information, nor reveal the names of any of their accomplices. Nothing therefore remained but to try them— or rather punish them — for we cannot give the name of trial to the mere form which was gone through. The Government was uncertain of the number of the Babees, or indeed who were and who were

not infected with the doctrines of the sect ; and therefore thought it politic to implicate as many as possible in the punishment of those they had in their power. These unfortunate men were distributed among the principal men of the town and the chief officers of the Court, who were told that their treatment of the Babees would be a test of their loyalty. The hint was taken, and the prisoners were subjected to the most awful tortures, without however wavering in the smallest degree in their faith . Gourret-oul-Ayn was treated with greater respect ; and if she would have consented to deny her faith , it is probable that not only her life would have been spared,

s2
260 The Contemporary Review .

but that she would have been set at perfect liberty. Such at least was the promise which Mahmoud Khan gave to her from the prime minister if she would give up her faith ; but Gourret-oul-Ayn treated it with scorn . “ I shall not regain my liberty,” she said , “ but I shall gain something far better. To -morrow you will have me burnt, and I shall then bear, I trust, a noble testimony to God and to his Highness. And you, Mahmoud Khan, listen to my words. The master whom you serve, so far from recompensing your services, will cause you to be put to death. My death shall be a sign to you of the truth of my words.” This prophecy of Gourret-oul- Ayn was fulfilled some years later, when Mahmoud Khan fell into disgrace with the king, and was strangled. On the morrow , too, as she had foreseen , Gourret-oul-Ayn was brought before the principal officers of state, and required to deny that she was a Babea. This she obstinately refused to do ; whereupon they condemned her to be burnt. She was carried back to the citadel, one of the veils worn by Persian women was thrown over her, and she was led to the stake. Before setting fire to the pile the executioners mercifully strangled her, so that the flames consumed only her dead body. The ashes were thrown to the winds.

The death of Gourret-oul-Ayn was followed the next day by the execution of all the remaining prisoners. Among their number we meet again with Seyd Houssein, who had denied the Bab at Tebriz. As soon as he recovered a little from the physical prostration into which he had fallen , he had made the best of his way to Teheran. The consciousness of his guilt weighed heavily upon him ; and, presenting himself before the Babea leaders, he confessed with tears his crime. His repentance was accepted, and he was forgiven ; but in his own mind he could find no peace, and he only longed for an opportunity when by his death he might seal his testimony to the truth of Babeism . When inquisition was made for the members of the sect in Teheran, he made no attempt to escape, but had shared joyfully with the others the fearful tortures to which all had been subjected ; and equally with them , when brought before the council, had boldly confessed his faith. Sentence of death was passed upon

all the prisoners, some forty in number. They had been present when Gourret-oul-Ayn was condemned, and had seen her led away to execution, and now they were only anxious to emulate her constancy. On the next day the whole band was ordered to execution. They came out, men, women, and children, enfeebled by suffering, their bodies showing the marks of the tortures which they had endured, and which the pen refuses to describe; but their courage was unshaken. Some of the children died on the way, and their bodies were thrown beneath their parents' feet; but these latter passed
The Bab and Babeism . 261

over them without a sign of emotion. An immense crowd gathered on their way; but this time the sympathy was too great to allow an opprobrious word to be spoken, and a deep silence pervaded the whole multitude, broken only by the voice of the Babees, joyfully chanting the burden of one of their hymns,
“ In truth we belong to God, and we return to him . ”

At times one of their number, faint from loss of blood, stumbled and fell, but soon resumed his place and joined his voice with the others. When they arrived at the place of execution, life was once more offered to them, and again refused, and the executioners were bid to do their work. We do not care to dwell on the scene of butchery which followed, and which ended only with the covering shades of night. The heads were suspended from the stake, and the bodies left to be devoured by the dogs. The events of that day left a deep and lasting impression on the people of Teheran. M. Gobineau, who speaks from personal knowledge, says that he often heard the scene described, and in the interest and sympathy which were shown, it would be easy for any one to suppose that the whole population were Babees at heart. The sufferings of these men did more for Babeism, and made more converts, than all the preaching of the most ardent disciples of the Bab; but the conversions needed to be kept secret. From the day when they were executed at Teheran, in 1852, Babeism became a proscribed word, and every one was afraid of the slightest suspicion of sympathy with the cause attaching to him.

The causes of the partial success of such a movement, and the general sympathy it inspired, are not far to seek. Babeism presented a curious mixture of political and religious motives which united very different men together in the common bond of a brotherhood. It was not the result of the dreams or speculations of a religious enthusiast; it sought after practical results, which the leaders ever kept in view, however they might seek to influence the minds of their followers by awaking the zeal of religious fanaticism. The reforms the Babees desired were few, but practical. Western civilization had made its way; free thought was not unknown; and rumours of constitutional liberty had been heard, and they wished to

enjoy some of its blessings. The feeling was shared by many who were not Babees in their religious belief, but who gave them their hearty sympathy, when they sought to restrict the despotic power of the king, to do away with the luxury of the Court, to place some check on the power of the minister, and especially on the subordinates in the chief towns and in the provinces ; finally, to have equal justice administered between man and man. But while Babeeism could

262 The Contemporary Review .

thus appeal to the sympathy of many, its strength rested on the principle which is strongest in human nature — the principle of a firm religious belief. This united the adherents closely together, and gave them in the hour of trial a fanatical courage. And there were peculiar advantages which gave Babeeism so much strength, and attracted so many to its faith . On the one hand, it was an offshoot of a philosophic school which had become widely spread in Persia, and many of the Sheykhys, and especially the personal disciples of Seyd Kazem , became the followers of the Bab ; on the other hand, while discarding many of the tenets of Mohammedanism , it adopted those doctrines which would find special favour in Persia, as the Imamide Isna acharide, or a belief in the twelve Imams.

When we come to look further into the doctrines of Babeeism, we find in them a curious combination of Shüte Mohammedanism , of ideas taken from ancient Oriental philosophy, and practices which might be borrowed from the precepts of Christianity. These doctrines are put forward in the writings of the Bab and his followers, but a statement of them may be found in the Biyyan, or Exposition, a general name which the Bab gave in succession to three distinct works. The third * of these, the Book of Precepts, is a kind of catechism, in which we find a summary of Babee teaching, whence we may extract some of the principal doctrines of the Babee faith .

The first part of it refers to the nature of the Deity.

God is One, Unchangeable, Eternal, and has no associates. This formula is the same as that of the Mohammedan faith, “ There is no God but God ; ” but the meaning intended to be conveyed is different. The latter believe that there is only one God, and no other beings partake of the divine nature ; the Bab asserts not only that there is one God, but that there is nothing else : not only all created things, but the very act of creation itself, is an emanation from God, and all things will be finally resolved again into God . We saw this idea expressed in the verse of the hymn the Babees sang as they were led to execution, “ In truth we belong to God, and we return to him ; ” and, thus explained, the formula of the Babee faith is the assertion of pure Pantheism .. A further consideration, however, shows us several doctrines peculiar to the Bab. In His nature God is essentially creative, and has in this respect seven attributes, which are called letters or words. They are force, power, will, action, condescension, glory, revelation . Many other attributes belong to

God, but these are employed in the work of creation, and from them result all the life and activity in the world, which represent the character of God.

As the number 7 represented the creative power of God, so also

* The translation of this is given in M. Gobineau's work .

The Bab and Babeism .

263

another number was chosen to represent the Divine Unity, and this number the Bab stated to be 19. The reason of this choice is curious.

As in Hebrew and Greek, the letters in Persian are used also for numerals ; and the numerical value of the word hyy , which means " living ," is 18 ; h = 8, y = 10. If we take the form ahyy, which means " the One who gives life," we have the addition of a, whose numerical value is 1, and together the word has the numerical value of 19— (1 + 8 + 10 = 19). The Bab supports the choice of the number by instancing the Arabic use of the word wahed, " one," a word often used by the Koran to designate God . The numerical value of this makes up again 19— (6 + 1 + 8 + 4 = 19) . The letter a in ahyy, which seems brought in so conveniently to make up the requisite number, is in reality of great consequence, and is called the Point, as representing the Unity of God. Having thus established the number 19 as the numerical representation of God, it is made the unit of division of everything. In the year there must be 19 months, in the month 19 days, in the days 19 hours, in the hours 19 minutes, and so on with everything. In the colleges of priests which he intended to establish there were to be 18 priests in each college, with 1 at their head. The Council of Unity, the governing body of the Babees, which represented the Unity of God, was to consist of 18 members, with the Bab at their head.

Pantheism fails to account for the existence of evil. The Bab attempts to explain it by saying that the evil is the consequence of the separation of the part from the whole, which is necessitated by the work of creation, and whereby loss, and even total destruction, may ensue. Hence the creature is not perfect as God, although part of Him, nor can it be as long as it is separated ; but this separation is only temporary ; at the day of judgment all things will be again united to the divine essence, and return to their former perfection. In the meantime an opportunity is offered to men to destroy part of the evil. As this evil arose in the act of creation, when man was separated from the perfect Unity of God, and as he can increase it by being separated further from God, so it is in his power to destroy it, partly or wholly, by having a more perfect knowledge of God, and entering into closer union with Him. God has placed this in man's power, and for this purpose has given a series of different revelations by the mouths of his prophets. The first revelation was given by Moses, and continued to be developed till the time of David, the last of the prophets, when that revelation ceased . It was found to be insufficient, and a fuller revelation was given by Jesus Christ.

Under the influence of his teaching the world made a rapid advance, and was prepared to receive the instructions of Mahomet. In these latter days a new revelation has been given in the person of the Bab.

264 The Contemporary Review .

None of these prophets could be considered as mere men ; the words they spoke, their spiritual life, indeed , was nothing else but the breath of God ; they were a kind of divine emanation. In this series the last revelation is different from all the others, and as it is now the most perfect, it cannot be confined , like the previous ones, to one person, but must be composed of nineteen different persons. In this hierarchy the Bab held the highest place ; yet he was only one of the nineteen ; nor was his life essential to its continuance ; his place could be occupied by another, and it was the same with all the other members of the Unity, — Mohammed Ali Balfouroushy, Gourret-oul-Ayn, and all the rest. Others could succeed them ; and so Mirza Yahya was elected as the second Bab ; another woman , Djenâb Moteherreh, the Purified Excellency, took the place of Gourret -oul-Ayn, for it was one of the fundamental principles that one of the members of the Unity should be a woman . In this way we see provision was made for the continual succession in the Unity, and it gave to the present revelation a much more enduring character than had belonged to any of the others.

We must be careful, however, not be misled by this succession.

The names were changed, the persons were different, but the same spirit or mind continued to pervade each individual member of the Unity. When Moullah Houssein was dying at Sheik Tebersi, and Mohammed Ali at Zendjan, they promised their followers that they would return to life in a given period. By most of their followers probably this may have been understood as we should take it — the rising again to life of the same body ; but this was far from being the Babe meaning. Nor can we take it to be the same as the doctrine of the Indian metempsychosis, according to which the same life, or rather the same person, continued to exist under different forms. With the Babees it is the same portion of the divine essence which is united to different persons in succession, and which leads them to live and act very much in the same way as those lived and acted whowere influenced by it before. The Bab became thus a reproduction of Mahomet, who was the reproduction of the prophets who had preceded him . At some future time another prophet will arise, who shall have the same portion of the divine essence as was associated with the person of the Bab . And this was the doctrine in conformity with which Moullah Houssein, at the close of the struggle in Mazenderan, gave to his principal followers the names of some of the Imams, or holy men, of the Mahommedan religion. The revelation which the Bab gave is not intended to be final. The composition of the first Biyyan, the Koran of the Babe faith, proves this, as it was left incomplete. Of course, to be perfect it must be composed in

nineteen different sections, and of these the Bab only wrote eleven,

The Bab and Babeism .

265

leaving it to his successor to write the others. Who this should be he did not intimate, but only spoke of him as " The one whom God shall manifest." These are the words usually employed by the Mahommedans when speaking of the return of the Imam Mehdy at the last day ; and this much the Bab left on record, that when his great successor shall appear, the time of the present era will be drawing to a close, and the day of judgment will be at hand. The Bab had only come to prepare the way for him , and make men acquainted with the truth . The time of his coming is left uncertain, and his name was not given ; but the Bab intimated that it would have the numerical value of nineteen . With this hint the Babees have tried to speculate who it should be, and some are inclined to fix upon the present Bab, Mirza Yahya, as the one designated ; but this belief is not generally shared in by the members of the sect, and the whole matter is left in uncertainty. Whenever this great prophet does come, all evil in the world will cease, and all imperfections will come to an end, because all things will be reunited to the one divine essence .

These tenets remind us of the Oriental philosophies, from whence neo - Platonism borrowed some of its speculations; the practical precepts which the Bab gave reflect much of the spirit of Christianity. The distinction which the Mohammedan law had laid down between things clean and unclean was to be abolished, and all things in nature were declared to be pure. The restrictions which were laid upon women in the East were declared to be no longer in force. The use of the veil was entirely done away ; in this Gourret-oul-Ayn had already set the example. No man was allowed to have more than one wife, and in his treatment of her he was enjoined to be kind and gentle. Divorce was allowed, but encompassed with so many restrictions that it became almost a prohibition. In this matter we cannot do better than transcribe the words of the Bab : " Never divorce your wife, or if you are obliged to do so, wait for the cycle of a year. It may be that you will return to a fondness for the union. And know that permission is given to those who have wives to reconcile themselves to them ninety times even after they have waited for a month. May you never dwell in the shade of the gates which lead outside the truth ." These laws struck at the very root of the immorality and depravity which were the result of the Mohammedan law, and tended to bring in a better spirit in all conjugal as well as social relations. All the other laws were conceived in the same spirit, and exhibit Babeism to us as a mild, just, and tolerant faith. The fearful cruelties practised in Mazenderan and Zendjan must no more be attributed to its teaching than the horrors of religious wars can be laid to the account of the spirit of Christianity. Punishment awarded

was to consist either of fines, or, if the man was married, in a separation from his wife for a given number of days, according to the gravity of the offence. Capital punishment was never to be inflicted even in the case of unbelievers. The restriction laid upon the latter were very tolerant; they were excluded from five provinces, but were allowed full liberty to traffic, and possess property in all other parts of the empire. These laws were all framed with a view to the time when Babeism shall become the one prevailing religion of the world, a period eagerly and with certainty anticipated by faithful Babees. Looking at its present results, it does not seem to have exercised much perceptible influence in Persia ; but M. Gobineau, who speaks from personal knowledge of Persian society, describes the fire as still smouldering beneath the surface, and of the Babees as awaiting only an opportunity for recommencing the struggle. His Eternal Highness and the other apostles of the faith are working in secret , and making many converts. Of this we cannot speak for certain . But there is no doubt that if Babeism ever became dominant it would change the whole state of society. The form and expression of the belief are framed to suit the Eastern mind, but the spirit which underlies it is of a very different temper from that which has prevailed in the Mohammedan empire for so many centuries, and would bring the nations of the East into a closer relation with the spirit of Western civilization and Christianity.

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