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1. OCR text

The word Báb signifies "gate," and, when assumed as a personal title, indicates that the person so called claims to be a "gale" or channel of communication between Shite Moslems and the "Twelfth Imam," who has been living in the fairy city of Iabulsa since he disappeared from mortal eyes. For one thousand years there have been no : but in 18rg was born in Shiraz one Mirza Ali Muhammad, who on May 23. 1844, claimed a divine mission as the " Báb" and even asserted later that he was the Twelfth Imam himself returned from his thousand years " occultation." He fell a victim to the fury of the Mullas in 1850, but from his blood sprang a sect which still numbers its adherents by Relentless persecution by the Mullas and the Persian officials drove the Babis to take up the rôle of Ishmaelites, and to commit rash acts, which led to massacres and decrees of wholesale exile: but the seed sown by Mirza Ali Muhammad has not been uprooted, and is a factor in Persian politics, a terror to the Mullas and a constant source of disquiet to the Government.

The mystic hierarchy invented by the Báb was directed after his death by one whom he had called Subh-i-ezel, or the "Morning of Eternity"; but in 1866, when the chiefs of the sect were in exile at Adrianople, a rival arose declaring himself to be that prophet foretold by the Báb as " Him whom God shall manifest," and drew away much people after him. Thus there are now two camps among the Babis, the Ezelis and the Beháís, whose respective chiefs, Subh-i-ezel and Behá, were expelled Roumelia for pestilent fellows, and sent, the one to Famagusta in Cyprus, the other to Acre Syria, whence they maintain at this day a zealous propaganda in Shiite regions. Both were "interviewed" by the author of this book, whose attention had been directed some time previously to the history of the Babi heresy; and the results of his researches and interviews are appended in the present volume to a translation of a Persian traveller's narrative written some six or seven years ago to support the legitimacy of Behá's claims.

The Persian text is not before us: we have in this volume an Introduction, mainly autobiographical, by the editor; the translation of the " Narrative" ; and numerous appendices on points of Shi'ite doctrine, bibliography, additional historical authorities, and so forth. The whole is set out with a laborious minuteness and impartiality which is worthy of a more important investigation.

For, speaking candidly as laymen, we must own that the history of a recent sect which has affected the least important part of the Moslem world (nor that part very deeply) and is founded on a personal claim which will not bear investigation for a moment, seems to us quite unworthy of the learning and labour which the author has brought to bear upon it. An ex parle statement of trivial history, a record of not very momentous experiences in easily accessible places like Fama-gusta and Acre, and a laborious and indiscriminate collation of very recent evidence, are hardly atoned for by a few really interesting and valuable notes on points of Shiite observance and doctrine. The

whole presentation of the subject smacks unpleasantly of book-making; the author seems determined in his Introduction to elevate his theme to the dignity of an epoch-making religious movement, on the principle of "omne ignotum pro magnifico"; and to that end adopts a personal attitude almost inconceivable in a rational European, and a style unpardonable in a University teacher. Here is Mr. Browne's description of his first view of Behá:—

In the corner where the divan met the wall sat a wondrous and venerable figure.... The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul: power and authority sat on that ample brow.... No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love, which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!

As Mr. Browne seems to have been "struck all of a heap" whenever he met any prominent Babí whatever, he had an exceedingly emotional time in Cyprus and Syria.

When we turn to the "Narrative," to Mr. Browne's notes, or to other accounts of the Babís, we can find nothing to account for such an attitude as the author elects to take up. The "Báb was simply another (and not a very striking specimen) of those Mahdis who appear periodically in all parts of the Moslem world in response to a craving for movement which the stationary revelation of Mahomet fails to satisfy, and to lead a temporary revolt against the oppression of the Tradition and the Schools. We cannot find that Mirza Ali Muhammad had any Idea to reveal to mankind, any secret whereby Islam was to be rejuvenated: he claimed a "mission" and founded a mystic organisation and a secret society, facts sufficient in themselves to draw after him a crowd of devoted followers in the imaginative East. When examined, this "Báb" was found to be a commonplace pre-tender, very imperfectly cognisant of the Tradition and the Schools which he opposed: but the simple fact that he did oppose them and suffered martyrdom is enough for many thousand Persians and Mr. Browne. There are no signs that Mirza Ali Muhammad will leave any permanent mark on religious or political history; he has no claim to rank even with Waháb or the Soudanese prophet; yet Mr. Browne can speak of him in terms not unworthy of the camel-driver of Mecca! Time may vindicate the author: but for the present we can only record our belief that the prominence given to the " Báb" in this book is an absurd violation of historical perspective; and the translation of the Traveller's Narrative a waste of the powers and opportunities of a Persian scholar.

[See also the flyleaf of the copy of A Traveller's Narrative on which is found Hogarth's 1892 handwritten note; the post-it note is from K. Asplund (2004).]

METADATA

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