

Birth and Childhood of the Bab

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Birth and Childhood of the Bab

David Merrick

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Early Life of the Báb

"Verily, as a child I was aware of the truth of My own Self, and God is the Almighty, the All-knowing."

Family

It was 20 October 1819; the very first day ushering in a new Islamic year. In south-western Iran, in the lovely city of Shíráz; within the upper chamber of His uncle's house, the Báb was born; and in that very house, His future wife Khadijah was also to be born. He was given the name, 'Alí-Muhammad, after the Prophet Muhammad, and His Successor 'Alí.

His family was highly-regarded; both His mother Fátimih and father Muhammad-Ridá, traced their ancestries back, beyond the illustrious martyr Husayn, to Muhammad Himself.

The Báb's father was a cloth-seller in comparatively humble circumstances, and many of their relatives were merchants, considered exemplary by the whole region for their integrity and purity, and well-loved by all.

First Two Years

His mother would often relate, how from the very first moment of birth, the Báb was utterly unlike all other children; He was so perfectly serene, all the time; wholly lacking any sign of displeasure, often His mother would become taken over with anxiety.

Stories

Whoever encountered Him, whether friend or stranger, was struck with wonder at the extraordinary character of the Child.

Being only a few years of age, He would lift up His hands to the threshold of the One God, reciting beautiful prayers. Rising up in the midst of the night, He would stand to offer His prayers, and be brought to tears.

Always preoccupied with the celestial world, immersed in rapture, the Báb would at times be sad, or happy.

Mothers-to-be would pass Him, and He would disclose what they were due, and He would reveal to those around incidents before they were known.

Bathhouse Collapses

One day, as the Báb was sleeping at the bathhouse between His uncle and father, He suddenly arose, and stated to them, "The vaulted roof of the steam chamber of Mírzá Hádí's bathhouse has just caved in; five women and one child were killed under the rubble." His uncle protested. "What manner of foolish talk is this!" he exclaimed; "Go to sleep, and stop saying such things!" "It is just as I say," answered the Child. In a short while, a tumult of voices began to arise, crying that Mírzá Hádí's bathhouse was wrecked and there were women under the rubble. One person said twenty women; another said thirty, or forty; and later it was determined that it was exactly as the Child had informed them.

Dream of Balance

One morning, the Báb shared with His family a significant dream.

"Last night," He said, "I saw a large balance hanging in mid-air within a vast space. The revered sixth Imám was sitting on one of the two plates. He was so heavy, his plate touched the ground, and the other stood high in the air. An invisible person lifted Me up, and placed Me onto the empty plate; My plate was so heavy, it returned to the ground, and the dish with the Imam rose up into the air."

The Child's father recoiled at such a blasphemy, and sternly warned Him to cease speaking in such ways.

Soothsayer

With so many astonishing things occurring, an astrologer was brought in to see the Child, to say protective prayers for Him. The astrologer made some calculations, and said, "He is protected from evil influence; he has suffered no harm." On learning the Báb's birthdate, he wrote down some protective charms and prayers, entrusted them to the family, and recited some mysterious verses; then he left. On His departure, the Báb immediately tore up all the talismans, writings and instructions he had given the family, and tossed them all out, and observed to His father, "You make a great show of assistance:- but I am that Assistance."

About the School and Tutor

The Báb was disinclined to study; all the same, once He was passed four years, His uncle took Him off to school in the old neighbourhood of Shíráz, close by

where His grandfather and uncle lived. This mosque-like school had several rooms, with an encircling porch; in its courtyard were a number of revered graves of saintly people. The honoured schoolmaster was a tall, dignified man with a long beard, and ranked among the leading clergy of Shíráz. He accepted only children brought up with good manners, and parents wishing their youngsters to be tutored by him came beforehand to meet him in person, requesting a place either by letter or distinguished acquaintance.

Submission to School

The Báb's father, therefore, came one morning, and sat next to the schoolmaster, who was an old friend of his from the past. He told him how he had finally been graced with a Child, and yet His behaviour was such, as to cause wonder and astonishment to everyone. Pressed hard to continue, he was quite at a loss where to begin. After describing the exceptional challenges and circumstances of the Child, he said he felt it was now time for His education and training, and desired the schoolmaster to give Him that necessary tuition.

The master and principal were quite astounded at everything they heard, and decided the Báb would be brought into the school the following Thursday morning.

The Child arrived as planned, and a servant brought in the customary small copper-tray, filled with sweets and a student's version of the Qur'án.

Close Observation

The Báb entered, greeting everyone present, then He sat down before the schoolmaster. The master, principal, and several mature students, were thoroughly enthralled as they watched the Báb closely. Soon after, His uncle arrived and sat next to the master, and some pleasantries followed.

Alphabet, Reads Qu'ran, Reads Persian

The schoolmaster wrote out the alphabet for Him to learn. In a while, he went out on some business, and upon his return, he heard someone reading the Qur'án in a most sweet and plaintive voice. Enchanted, he entered the room and enquired who had been reading so beautifully. The other children pointed at the Báb, saying, "It was Him!" When the schoolmaster asked if He had really been reciting the Qur'án, He kept His silence. So the schoolmaster advised he try reading Persian books, and placed one in front of Him. Seeing the Báb could easily read whichever page was opened, he tried Him with some Arabic.

Reading from Qu'ran

The master took the Qur'án from the tray of sweetmeats and opened it, saying to the Báb, "Come, read!" The Báb smiled. "As you please," He said. The master asked Him to repeat, "He is the Deliverer, the All-Knowing." The Child remained silent, and the master repeated the verse; yet He still kept silent, and the master continued persistently.

The Báb asked the master, "Who is 'He'? Please explain." The master replied,

"'He' is God. You're merely a child, why concern yourself with the meaning of 'He'?" The Báb answered the master:- "I am the Deliverer, the All-Knowing!" The master flew into a furious rage and picked up his stick. "Never utter such things here!" he exclaimed, shaking. His uncle couldn't restrain his smile. The Báb commenced reciting, and after ordering certain arrangements, His uncle left.

Báb Silent and Refined, Hafiz

The Báb was soon kneeling in a refined way between two twelve-year-old pupils, His head bowed over the student Qur'án; yet He held Himself in peace. His fellow pupil noticing this, asked Him, "Why are You not reading out the lesson like the other children?" Two other pupils were sitting nearby, reading aloud some poems; shortly they uttered the verse: "From Heaven's heights, the birdsong calls to you, in sorrow that you're trapped in walls of clay;" the Báb turned to His fellow pupil, and told him, "There is your answer," which charmed His companion.

Bismillah

On another occasion, the Báb was asked to recite the opening words of the Qur'an. The Báb was unwilling, pleading that He would need to know what the words signify before attempting to pronounce them. When the schoolmaster pretended not to know their meaning, the Báb began to explain them with such a sweetness, knowledge and fluency, that the master was left dumbstruck that he was the student of this Child.

Sent Back to Uncle

Amazed at everything he was witnessing, the schoolmaster brought the Child back to His home. His grandmother came to the door, and the schoolmaster informed the family of what had passed, saying he was not fitted to instruct their Child. The family warned Him sternly to follow the example of His fellow-pupils, and observe silence, listening attentively to the teacher.

Returns to School

So the Báb returned to the school, and set about learning His lessons like all the other boys, starting with the alphabet, whilst His master tried hard to dissuade Him. Yet the soul of that Child could not be restrained, and no discipline could repress His flow of intuitive knowledge. Day after day, He continued to manifest an unearthly wisdom impossible to put into words.

Writing

Before the Báb had begun to practise writing, He used to bring with Him a pen-case and engage in writing. His schoolmaster assumed He was trying to imitate other boys by scribbling on the paper. After several days, the master took the paper from Him to see what He was doing, and saw to his surprise that He had actually written something, though He had never practised; and on reading it, discovered it was a study of the mystery and knowledge of Divine Unity, written in the purest and most eloquent style, of unfathomable

profundity.

Calligraphy Exercises

As the Báb was returning from school one afternoon, a certain man noticed He was carrying a bundle of papers, and he asked what they were. Very courteously, the Báb replied that they were His calligraphy exercises. When the man inspected them, he was amazed and marvelled at their excellence for such a very young child.

Praying in Garden Outings

When the season was clement, on Fridays it was customary for the boys to invite their teacher and fellow-pupils on an outing to one of the numerous gardens bordering the city, and as they enjoyed themselves, they would often find the Báb had become drawn away into a secluded, shady spot in a corner of the orchard, where He would become enrapt in prayer and meditation.

Late for School and Devotions

Some mornings the Báb was late coming to school, and whenever the master would ask the reason, the Child would remain silent. So the master would sometimes send out his pupils to call at His home, and ask Him to come in to school. The boys would return with the news that they found Him deeply immersed in His devotions. On one occasion when He arrived late to school, the schoolmaster questioned Him on this, and the Child said, quietly, that He had been in the house of His 'Grandfather', in allusion to the Prophet Muhammad. The schoolmaster remonstrated that He was only a young child, from whom such conscientious devotion was not required, yet the Child replied again quietly, 'I desire to be as My Grandfather', and His schoolmaster dismissed these words as childish naiveté.

Fly Beyond Throne

One day, the Báb said to the boy next to Him, "I am so light, if I wish, I can fly up beyond the Throne of God; would you like Me to journey there?" He made a movement from the ground. The schoolmaster, who had been secretly listening to their whisperings, smiled in astonishment, and as he did so, the Child suddenly ceased speaking.

Scientific Debate

Each morning, the learned schoolmaster would gather with the theological students, to engage in discussion and debate together. One day, a scientific topic was being discussed, and despite the considerable debate that followed, it still remained unresolved. The schoolmaster promised to study the matter overnight, and they would explore it again until it was resolved satisfactorily. At this, they ended the debate.

At this point the Báb raised up His head, and addressed them, resolving for them the answer they sought. The students and master were completely dumbfounded and bewildered. They asked the young Child how He could possibly

have gained this knowledge, and the Child responded, "Should through grace the Holy Spirit again assist, others will do what Christ has done."

Night Prayer on a Mountain

The Báb was still eight, when He journeyed out amidst a group, for a certain holy shrine. It was an arduous route, that tested even the strongest men. They arrived, completely exhausted, and offered the late afternoon and evening prayers, ate dinner, and went straight to bed.

At about midnight, His uncle awoke, and discovered the Báb was not in bed; deeply perturbed, he was overtaken with anxiety that He might have fallen from the mountain.

Searching around extensively, he eventually heard a voice coming from the lower extremities of the mountain, raised in prayers of glorification to the Lord. Following the melody of the chanting, the uncle found his Child, standing alone and in private, in consummate rapture, voicing prayers and supplications to the One Who transcends all mention, on the cold and deserted mountainside, at that late hour of the night.

Báb's Father Dies, Maternal Uncle Rears

When the Báb was only nine years old, His father passed away, and from that moment He was reared in the bosom of His uncle. His uncle witnessed such remarkable things, that years later when the Báb raised the new Call of God, he pledged himself in the path of the Cause, and willingly sacrificed both possessions and life.

His uncle removed his Nephew from the school, and associated Him within his own commercial venture; and in this the Báb revealed signs of a power and greatness that few could approach and none could rival.

Commerce in Búshihir

The Báb moved from His uncle's office in Shíráz, to the port city of Búshihir. There He engaged in commerce, associating with all levels of society, dealing with everyone in such a fair way, they were most satisfied and grateful. In every gathering and assembly, men praised His splendid qualities. There, the many signs and evidences of His sanctity and the wonderful verses flowed freely from Him, attracting great envy and jealousy from the men of learning and position.

Purity

The Báb was always to be found in a state of utmost humility and lowliness; His downcast eyes, His extreme courtesy, and the serene expression of His face, made an indelible impression upon all who met Him. His purity of character, simplicity, sweetness of spirit, charm of manners, captivating gentleness, self-effacement, high integrity, and extreme devotion to God, drew people about Him. He could not open his lips without stirring the hearts to their very depths, opening before those who heard Him, unlimited horizons, varied,

coloured, and mysterious, revealing a blinding light that transported people into a state of ecstasy.

Husayn Eulogy Gatherings

With exceptional care, the Báb attended gatherings extolling the virtues of the Imam Husayn. Entranced with the chanting of eulogies, tenderness and devotion raining from His eyes in streams of tears, and words of prayer and praise murmuring from His trembling lips, He inspired all around with tender sentiments and dignity.

Worship

The Báb would climb on to the roof of His house each Friday at noon, to hold communion with His Beloved. Rapt in hours of prayer and glorification, He was wholly unmindful of the fierce summer sun and the bustling world around.

At the dawnbreak of every day, with face gazing toward the city where Bahá'u'lláh moved, He would greet the rising sun with a heart overflowing with love, joy and adoration, as He looked forward to the Spiritual Sun soon to arise in that city. With such transports of delight He greeted its beaming rays, that those around thought He was in love with the sun itself.

Sends Excessive Sum

During business one day, a man entrusted to the Báb an article to be sold at a fixed price, and the Báb in due course sent its value to him. When the man discovered it greatly exceeded the price, He wrote immediately to the Báb, asking how it could be. The Báb answered, He had received his due; the article had at one point reached that value, and although it was sold later at a lower price, the Báb assured him it was His duty to offer him the higher price for his due. No amount of entreating by the client, could convince the Báb to receive back the excess He had given him.

Overthrow of Corrupt Customs

Some merchants came to the Báb one day and negotiated for some indigo dye. After sealing the bargain and carrying away the dye, they returned again to bargain, as was the custom; they insisted and pleaded, yet the Báb stood firm by what they had agreed, declaring that many of their customs were wrong and would soon be abolished. At length, He informed them they could bring it back, but He would not bargain. They complained they would lose their standing with the merchants if they brought it back. The Báb notified them: "I am ending this custom." The Báb did not yield to their efforts, and eventually ordered the merchandise brought back to His shop.

When one of His uncles arrived a little while later, they came to see him and complained about His behaviour, saying, he had insulted them and ruined their reputation by receiving back the dye, and that he should counsel Him never to repeat such offences.

The uncle approached the Báb, requesting why he so disrupted the customs of

the land; the Báb stood firmly, and said He would do so again should it arise.

Through the Báb's unflinching justice, He thoroughly demolished the corrupt practices of the people.

Counselling the Báb to Forebear

As His remarkable character shone its influence far and wide, a great many people were agitated with jealousy and concern, seeing such a young merchant of little schooling demonstrating such erudition and influence. From their chairs, altars, and pulpits, the clergy and lawyers of repute and learning, unanimously engaged in His eradication and suppression.

One of the Báb's uncles tried to pressurise the Báb through an acquaintance, to cease writing and speaking in ways that would raise up their jealous reactions, only to be informed of its little use. "We are earthbound," he was told, "and He is celestial - our counsel has no influence on Him."

Wish to Leave, Uncles' Procrastination

After six years' residence in Búshíhr, the Báb wished to visit the holy sites of the Imams. He wrote several times to His uncles, requesting them to take charge of the business. The uncles procrastinated and did nothing, and eventually the time came for departure. The Báb settled His accounts with everyone, prepared a detailed ledger, closed the books, sealed the entrance, and entrusted the key to the building's custodian, to give it to the first of His uncles who should arrive.

Uncles' Reaction

The uncles received a letter from the Báb, explaining what He had now done; there was deep worry and complaint at Him, as they expected their excellent reputation in the commercial community to be ruined by clients left with broken dealings.

When His uncle arrived and received the key, he found everything was most satisfactory and accurate, and with great relief he wrote back to his brothers and praised the Báb for leaving everything in such exceptional order.

Mulla Husayn

The Báb journeyed to the vicinity of the holy shrines, and as He stood in prayer at the sanctuary of the Shrine of the Prince of Martyrs, He caught the sensitive eye of Mullá Husayn.

Báb Enwrapped

Mullá Husayn saw the Báb offering His entreaties with an intense humility and rapture unknown among any of the clergy, the mystics, or the pilgrims; he was astounded and attracted by his beauty and perfection. He approached the Báb, and greeted Him. Wrapped in devotions, the Báb was unable to reply; Mullá Husayn moved to the back, and awaited Him there. Having completed His prayers in the inner sanctuary, the Báb went out into the courtyard, and to Mullá

Husayn's utter astonishment, He repeated the prayers.

Again Mullá Husayn approached, and greeted Him. Still occupied with His prayers, the Báb made no response, further deepening the young scholar's wonder.

Once He had completed His prayers, the Báb moved outside the courtyard, and a third time, Mullá Husayn approached Him with greetings. This time, the Báb returned his welcome, and explained that twice having been shown his courtesy, yet He was too absorbed and transported to offer a response. Whoever should attain so sacred ground as they were on, must forget themselves and all earthly matters.

Mullá Husayn's Reaction; with the Báb

Amazed that a young merchant could manifest such extraordinary depth of humility, reverence, piety, and veneration, he expressed his deepest gratitude and thanks, and asked if he might make a courtesy call. Receiving directions to reach the Báb's home, Mullá Husayn said it would be a great honour in return to receive him at Siyyid Kazim's assembly. The Báb assented that there could be no harm, and promised to attend the session.

Siyyid Kazim

Mullá Husayn conveyed to Siyyid Kázim all that had occurred. Siyyid Kázim had devoted his last few years to broadcasting the characteristics of the coming Lord of Command, and smiled, and said, "That which my heart had understood in dreams was hidden behind a veil, and is now found."

Before dawn one day, Siyyid Kazim arose and dressed in his cloak, and made ready to leave his home. He requested a student to accompany him, saying that a highly distinguished Person had arrived. As they walked through the streets in the breaking light, they reached the house of the Báb, who was standing expectant at the door, wearing a green turban, showing indescribable humility and kindness. He lovingly embraced Siyyid Kazim, who stood speechless in a state of profound reverence. The Báb led them to the upper floor, and they entered a chamber filled with flowers and the loveliest perfume. Seated and overpowered with a sense of delight, the Báb handed to Siyyid Kazim a silver cup filled to overflowing. He held the cup with both hands, and drank deeply with unrepressed joy. A single verse was all that was uttered in that encounter. The Báb arose, and accompanied them to the threshold, and bade them farewell. The student was mute with wonder at the cordiality of the Báb and the astonishing reverence of His teacher.

Báb Visits Siyyid Kazim's Session

On the Friday morning, the Báb made His promised visit to Siyyid Kazim's capacity-filled home. The Báb sat at the threshold, and the Siyyid fell absolutely silent for quarter of an hour. Everyone was astonished. When one of his disciples begged him to continue, He resumed again on the signs of the Promised One. "He is manifest as the sun! the Truth is more manifest than the

ray of light that has fallen upon that lap of that Youth," he said, pointing to the Báb. "Why is it," the questioner enquired, "you indicate neither His name nor person?" The Siyyid replied by pointing to his own throat, implying they would both instantly cease to live. He descended from the pulpit, and Mullá Husayn brought the Báb to be seated beside the Siyyid.

Suspecting that the Báb held a clue to the mystery, one of the students sought out His presence, as He stood rapt in prayer at the doorway of the shrine of the Imam Husayn. Tears were raining from His eyes, and from His lips, words of glorification and praise of unutterable power. The words, 'O God, my God, my Beloved, my heart's Desire' were uttered with a frequency and ardour that the visiting pilgrims near enough to overhear, instinctively interrupted their devotions, and marvelled, and were moved to tears, as they learnt from Him directly the lesson of true adoration. Having completed His prayers, the Báb would return quietly to His home. Each time that student ventured to approach Him, a force he could neither explain nor resist held him back.

Uncle goes to 'Atabát and Appeals Return

After six months, His mother insisted her brother go out and bring the Báb back to Shíráz. The Báb desired to stay, and promises made by local notables during tea and sherbet confirmed His uncle in his inclination towards the Báb's higher callings. Pursuing his sister's request, the uncle explained to Siyyid Kázim how the Báb's mother had not seen her only child for so long, and wished to arrange His marriage. The Siyyid though wishing not to interfere, eventually asked if it should please the Báb, that He should return, and so His uncle returned to Shíráz, followed a little later by the Báb.

Marriage in Shíráz

After several months in Shíráz with His mother, the Báb desired to journey back. His mother anxiously spoke with her brother, and made arrangements for the Báb's marriage to Khadijah. The wedding took place on Friday 25 August 1842, in the presence of merchants, noblemen, and the clergy. According to custom, the men gathered in the house of the Báb's uncle, and the women next door in the residence of Khadíjih's father.

Being close to the commencement of His Cause, the Báb did not travel, but prayers and verses flowed continuously from Him.

Ahmad, the Báb's Son (Dies)

Khadijah soon was with child, although the Báb had foretold it was not his destiny to live on this earth. The labour was very difficult, and several times all hope was lost for the mother. During her final pains, the Báb penned a prayer upon a mirror and it was held before her face. As Khadijah's gaze fell upon the mirror, the lifeless child was delivered, and she recovered. He entreated God, that the child might be received as a beloved sacrifice foreshadowing His own. The Báb's mother, however, was furious, that He possessed such incredible powers yet chose not preserve the child's life.

Khadijah's Dream of the Lion

One night as Khadijah was asleep, she dreamt of a fearsome male lion that dragged her around her courtyard two-and-a-half times, with her hands around its neck. She awoke trembling, and the Báb told her their life together would last just two-and-a-half years.

And so it would be, for soon the Báb arose with the new Call of God, and their world and the world of all people, would be forever changed.

Info

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