

The Bab and the Babi Religion

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The Báb and the Bábí Religion

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The Báb and the Bábí Religion

Published in the Egyptian journal al-Muqtataf in 1896 in the wake of the assassination of Irán's Násiru'd-Dín Sháh, for which many at the time wrongly blamed the Bábís or Bahá'ís, who were both at that time often referred to simply as Bábís. The editors introduced it thus:

There has recently been a great deal of talk about the Bábí religion as a result of the death of the late Násiru'd-Din Sháh. We therefore suggested to the erudite scholar Sayyid Mírzá Fadlu'lláh al-Irání [Mírzá Abú'l-Fadl] that he write for us a full-length article on their history and a summary of their teachings. For we found him to be a knowledgeable research scholar concerning the history of the East, intimately acquainted with the Bábí religion. He favored us with the following piece:

It is no secret that the Bábí religion was founded by two famous men from among the people of the East, and they are the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. The Báb, named Mírzá 'Alí Muhammad, was a noble youth from Shiraz, the capital of Fars province, where he was born in Muharram 1235 [20 October 1819] into a merchant family renowned as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandson, Imám Husayn. The Báb's father, Mírzá Muhammad Ridá, died before he was weaned, and he was raised in the house of his maternal uncle, Hájí Mír Sayyid 'Alí, the merchant, in Shiraz.

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From his childhood he was devoted to worship and constant in his prayers, and

when he reached young manhood he grew famous for being pious and God-fearing. He was handsome of countenance, full of dignity, solemn in appearance, and of noble mien. He engaged in commerce with his above-mentioned uncle in the city of Bushire and in Shiraz. Before he made known his claims, he traveled to Iraq on visitation to the shrines of the Imáms — as is the custom among Shí'ís — staying in Iraq less than five months. There his name first attained renown among the people.

When he returned to Shiraz and reached the age of twenty-five, he put forth claims to be the Báb.* This took place on 5 Jumádí I 1260 [23 May 1844]. The first to believe and have faith in him was the famed Mullá Husayn, entitled among the Bábís "the Gate of the Báb," from Bushruiyah in Khurasan. In the same way, several, persons began to follow him, until their number reached eighteen souls, on whom he bestowed the epithet "the Letters of the Living."** He commanded them to set out on journeys throughout Irán and Iraq to inform the learned of his advent and call on them to follow him, but to conceal his name until he should announce it himself in his own time.

Various persons interpreted the name "the Báb" quite differently, each according to his own imagination, in an unfounded manner, as can be concluded from what some of the Egyptian newspapers have recently written. Some understood it to mean "the gate of knowledge," others to mean "the gate of heaven," and still others "the gate of reality." But it can be

* Among Shí'ís, the Báb is the deputy of the Promised One or Mahdi. — EDs. of al-Muqtataf.

** Because this phrase is numerically equivalent to eighteen in the abjad system. — EDs. of al-Muqtataf.

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deduced from his own books that he is the Promised One giving glad-tidings of the descent of the glorious Savior and the entry of the world into a new age. For this reason, his followers have become known as Bábís and gained renown throughout Muslim lands by that name.

When the month of pilgrimage arrived he set out for Mecca. After performing the prescribed rites, he announced his claim at a great gathering — after which his name became famous, his claim spread, and his reputation rose. He returned to Irán and disembarked at the city of Bushire on the Persian Gulf. He was arrested by the governor of Fars, Husayn Khán (entitled Nizámu'd-Dawlih), remaining imprisoned in the city of Shiraz for a number of months until a severe plague struck. Most of the inhabitants fled and they neglected to keep him under guard, so he returned home.

He then traveled to Isfahan, staying at the home of the Imám-Jum'ih,* Mir Sayyid Muhammad (entitled Sultánu'l-'Ulamá'). At that time the governor of Isfahan was Mu'tamadu'd-Dawlih Manúchihr Khán, who was attracted by the beauty of his utterances, was inclined toward him, and came to believe in him. At his request the Báb wrote the volume entitled The Special Prophethood

(An-Nubuwwah al-khássah) on the virtues of our lord the Messenger of God [Muhammad] — may the blessings and peace of God be upon him and his House. He also penned his work called "Commentary on the Súrah of Abúndance" ("Tafsír súrat al-kawthar")** at the urging of Sultánu'l-'Ulamá'.

The Báb spoke publicly and wrote his treatises extemporaneously, so that it came to be said he could write a thousand lines of Arabic or Persian in only four

* Friday Prayer leader

** Qur'án 108.

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hours, with the most excellent penmanship and beauty of style. Debates took place between him and the Muslim clergy, most of them recorded in historical works, in which he astonished them with the power of his genius, the swiftness of his pen, and the beauty of his utterance.

A major dispute attended with great agitation arose among the Muslim divines concerning him. Some believed in him, like Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarris al-Hirawí and Habíbu'lláh al-Alawí, while others declared him mentally unbalanced, such as Mír Sayyid Muhammad and his followers. Most issued legal rulings declaring him an unbeliever and demanding his execution, including Muhammad Mihdí al-Kalbásí and his like. The governor removed him from the house of Sultánu'l-'Ulamá' to hiding in his own home, giving it out that he had sent him to Tehran at the command of the late Muhammad Sháh.

He remained hidden in the mansion of Manúchihr Khán until that governor passed away and his nephew, Mírzá Gurgin Khán assumed control of Isfahan. He did dispatch the Báb to Tehran at the order of Muhammad Sháh. When he approached within about a day's journey from Tehran, they sent him away instead to Azerbaijan, where he remained imprisoned in Chihriq and Máku, two fortresses in that province. Then Muhammad Sháh died, and His Majesty Násiru'd-Dín Sháh acceded to the throne of Irán.

Meanwhile, the rancor between the followers of the Báb, on the one hand, and the clergy of Irán and rulers of the country, on the other, intensified. They arose as one against the Bábís, agreeing on the need to exterminate them. War broke out between them in Mazandaran, Zanján, and Nayriz.

A brief account of these events is as follows. The

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above-mentioned Mullá Husayn was journeying with his companions from Khurasan, heading for Karbala in Iraq, when Hájí Mírzá Muhammad 'Alí al-Mazandarání (known among the Bábís as Quddús) and Mullá Muhammad Sádiq al-Khurásaní (whom the Shí'ís called al-Muqaddas), both great religious scholars, caught up with them. They raised black banners and set off. When they reached Sári — the capital of Mazandaran — the city's leading

cleric, Mullá Said, decreed that it was necessary to make war against the Bábís and to root them Out.

The 313 Bábís took refuge at the tomb of Shaykh Tabarsi, one of the famous Muslim scholars, fortifying it and preparing to defend themselves. The two sides engaged in skirmishes from which the Bábís emerged victorious. Then the government ordered the military commander 'Abbás Qulí Khán al-Aríjání to battle against the Bábís, and he joined the governor of Mazandaran, Mihdí Qulí Mírzá, in surrounding them with artillery and disciplined troops. The Bábís responded by taking the offensive and killing a huge number of them. But troops and cannon continually fired on them, the siege became a prolonged one, and in the course of it their leader, Mullá Husayn, was killed.

Hunger began to devour them, when finally the governor and his general promised them safe passage. Yet as soon as they emerged from their encampment and surrendered their weapons, they were surrounded by infantrymen who poured hot lead into them and dispatched them all save their leader, Quddús, and some of his companions. These survivors were sent to Sári, where the chief cleric Mullá Said had them killed, with the cooperation of the Shí'í theological students. He burned their bodies.

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Likewise, in the city of Zanján hostility waxed fierce between the Bábís and the Shí'í clergy, with the Bábís being led by 'Alí Mullá Muhammad Hájí Zanjání, himself a famed religious scholar. The local governor, Amír Arslán Khán Majdu'd-Dawlih, was a maternal uncle of the late Násiru'd-Din Sháh. He instigated the clergy to wipe out the Bábís, so that fighting broke out among them. The governor, faced with severe difficulties, sent to Tehran for reinforcements, receiving troops and artillery. Then the Bábí leader fell, but his immediate followers fought to the last man. The rest were captured and sent to Tehran, where they were later executed.

In Nayriz, a city in Fars province, fighting started up between the two groups. The Bábís there were headed by the renowned religious scholar Sayyid Yahyá Darábí, the son of Sayyid Ja far al-Kashfí the author of such works as *The Brilliance of Lighting* (Saná' barq), and *A Gift for Kings* (Tuhfat al-mulúk), and so forth. The incident ended when Sayyid Yahyá and his companions were killed after they had been falsely promised safe passage.

When Muhammad Sháh died in 1848 AD. and Násiru'd-Din Sháh acceded to the throne on 10 September of that year, Irán was a land of anxiety and strife because of the country's mismanagement at the hands of the Turks from Ervan who had monopolized official posts in the department of the first minister, Hájí Mírzá Aqásí. The governor of Khurasan, Muhammad Hasan Khán Salár, announced his secession from the Iránian state, claiming to be an independent monarch and making peace with the rulers of Bukhara, of the Afghans, and of the Turkomans.

All these vexations increased with the appearance of the Bábís and the bloody

battles that occurred because of them. Then Mírzá Taqí Khán the new first

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minister, determined to execute the Báb — thinking that he could root out the Bábís by dispatching their leader. He issued an edict ordering his death to Hishmatu'd-Dawlih Hamzah Mírzá, the governor of Tabriz and the paternal uncle of Násiru'd-Din Sháh. The governor, however, refused to obey, saying: "I am disillusioned and disappointed. I had hoped that the Iránian government would command me to make war against one of the great Powers. I never thought it would order me to kill one of the pious children of the Prophet, who never misses saying his supererogatory prayers and lacks no noble moral human characteristic." The first minister therefore ordered his own brother, Mírzá Hasan Khán, the commander of the troops in Azerbaijan, to kill the Báb. He was hung in a public square of Tabriz and executed by firing squad on 28 Shabán 1266 [7 July 1850].*

When the Báb was killed, his teachings gained even greater renown, and his followers were persecuted with even more vigor. Some of the Bábí leaders grew famous for claims to holding various stations — such as being a prophet, or a legatee, or a guardian, or a mirror, and the like. Their views differed, they fell into sectarian divisions, and many of them went astray. Some became engrossed in forbidden activities and mortal sins.

Things were made even worse when a youth named Muhammad Sádiq Tabrizí fired at His Majesty Násiru'd-Din Sháh in 1268 A.H. [1852 AD.] when His Majesty emerged from his palace to go hunting in the village of Niyávrán, about two hours journey from

* Muhammad Nabíl-i Azam Zarandí, *The Dawn-Breakers* [Matali'-i anvar], trans. and ed. by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1936) ch. 23; Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, pp. 77-82.

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Tehran. In Tehran and elsewhere the Bábís were severely persecuted and were arrested as a group, whether innocent, obedient, or rebellious. They killed many of them in the most painful and horrible manner.

Among those slain in this incident was the famed Mirror Qurratu'l-'Ayn [Táhirih], the daughter of Hájí Mullá Sálíh, the leading cleric in Qazvin. She was the wonder of her age in her knowledge, eloquence, beauty of expression, and her mellifluous tongue. She had adhered to the Shaykhí school, devoting herself to studying works of theology. When the Báb made himself manifest and his treatises gained a wide audience, she embraced his teachings, becoming one of his greatest supporters. She was at that time in Karbala, conducting debates with the clergy there and silencing them with the power of her eloquence and the wealth of her knowledge.

The religious scholars of Iraq grew greatly agitated, and she was forced to go to Baghdad, where she stayed with some of her companions and servants at the

home of the renowned Ibnu'l-Alúsí, the chief jurisconsult [muftí] of Baghdad. He was the author of the Qur'án commentary *The Spirit of the Meanings* (Rúh al-ma'ání), published at the Bulaq press in Egypt. She stayed at his house for about two months, debating the Muslim clergy in Baghdad. They raised her case to Istanbul, and she was forced to return to Irán at the order of the Ottoman Sultán 'Abdu'l-Majid.

When she reached Irán, she continued to debate the clergy in Kirmansháh and Hamadan. She arrived in Qazvin and lived in the house of her father until her uncle was murdered in that city. She then went to Tehran where she stayed at the home of the famous Legislator, Bahá'u'lláh. After a while she was captured, remaining imprisoned in Tehran until the incident of 1852 mentioned above, when she was strangled to

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death and her body was thrown down a well at the garden known as Bágh-i Ilkhání.

Ibnu'l-Alúsí wrote, "The Qurratis are followers of a woman named Hind, known as Umm Salmah. She was given the epithet Qurratu'l-'Ayn [Solace of the Eyes] by Sayyid Kázim Rashtí in his correspondence with her, and after Rashtí's death she joined those emulating the Báb. But she opposed him in several matters, including religious laws — indeed, it was said that she wanted all religious laws abolished. But I never noticed any such tendency during all the two months she stayed at my home. What numerous discussions we two had, during which she threw off all dissimulation and hostility! I witnessed such erudition and perfection in her as I never saw in most men. She was intelligent, humble, extremely chaste, and upright. I have written an account of what passed between us during our discussions elsewhere, and if you read that it will be clear to you that her great learning is not in doubt."

The Báb left behind numerous treatises and books written in Persian and Arabic, two of which were mentioned above. They included the *Treatise on Justice concerning Islamic Duties*, the *Commentary on the Surah of the Cow*, *The Best of Stories*, the *Book of the Names of All Things*, and the *Persian Bayan*.^{*} His enemies accused him of departing from the canons of eloquence and breaking the rules of grammar. It was said that when he was thus criticized he replied that the words had been enchained and when he appeared he freed them from their imprisonment.

But I noticed in the Bayán that he responded to

^{*} *Ar-Risálah al-'adliyyahfí al-fará'id al-Islámiyyah*; *Tafsír Súrat al-Baqarah*; *Ahsan al-Qisas*; *Kitáb asmá' kull shay'*; *al-Bayán al-fársí*.

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that objection by first saying that he had never studied grammar and conjugation, and had not studied in school. He said he never claimed to be a scholar. Rather, he was an unlettered Persian youth given a command by his Lord

and inspired by His knowledge. Second, he said that those who rejected the Qur'án criticized the Messenger of God in exactly the same way, and he gave examples of Qur'án verses to which objections had been made as breaking the rules of grammar and linguistic principles. The truth is that the books of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and the treatises of the latter's son 'Abbás ['Abdu'l-Bahá], are not such as can be criticized in this manner.

The Báb made precise calculations, but this is not the time to discuss them in detail. For instance, he expressed the number 19 by the word wáhid [one] in accordance with the numerical value of the letters in Arabic. And he expressed the product of its multiplication by itself [$19 \times 19 = 361$] by the phrase kullu shay' [everything]. On the number 19 he constructed a calendar, ordered the ranking of his companions, divided the chapters of his books, and arranged the laws and manners attending on his path. He ordained very severe and difficult commands; and since they proved impossible to implement, Bahá'u'lláh revised and improved them, as we shall explain.

Bahá'u'lláh, whose name was Mírzá Husayn 'Alí, was born on 2 Muharram 1233 [12 November 1817], and his father was Mírzá 'Abbás, known as Mírzá Buzurg Núrí, a prominent minister of the government of Fath-Alí Sháh. The Núrí family is well-known in Irán.

When the Báb arose and his renown spread far and wide, Bahá'u'lláh believed in him, lending great strength to the Bábís. Their word was exalted, their

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communities increased in number, and their teachings spread in Tehran and Mazandaran. Bahá'u'lláh carried on a clandestine correspondence with the Báb. Their intermediary was Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Karim Qazvíní, the amanuensis who wrote out the Báb's Tablets. When the events of 1852 occurred, as we said above, Bahá'u'lláh was arrested and imprisoned for about four months. He was arraigned before a council of ministers and was defended by the Russian ambassador. When his innocence of the accusation that he conspired with the would-be assassins of the Sháh was established, that sovereign ordered his release and his banishment to Iraq. He therefore left Tehran, escorted by Iránian soldiers and some horsemen from the Russian embassy sent to safeguard him against being murdered on the way. He arrived in Baghdad in 1269 A.H. [1853 AD.].

In Baghdad as well, he proved a mainstay for the power of the Bábís, Whose condition was improved by his arrival. He was extremely dignified, majestic, and mild tempered. He began improving the deteriorating morals of the Bábís, reforming their untoward works and uniting them. Their call attained great renown, their fame spread far and wide, and Bahá'u'lláh's writings acquired a large audience. He lived in Iraq about twelve years, until rancor and hatred burst forth in the breasts of some of the Iranians dwelling there and the flame of enmity and strife was ignited between the two groups. This led to Bahá'u'lláh's exile to Istanbul at the command of the Ottoman Sultán 'Abdu'l-'Azíz. After staying there about four months, he was commanded to

proceed to Edirne in Rumelia, where he settled for about five years. He exerted himself in promulgating the teachings of the Bábís until a new outbreak of opposition and complaints led to his

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further banishment to 'Akká in Ottoman Syria. In 1285 A.H. [1868 AD.] he set out for that city with his family and servants.

His determination to advance his followers and raise their morals never faltered, in spite of the persecution he suffered; he enjoined on them just laws and honored their ears with beautiful homilies. He adorned his works, which numbered more than a thousand, with the best moral counsels and advice, embellishing them with the most comely parables and examples. He made it incumbent on them to educate their children, both male and female, both intellectually and ethically, and to concern themselves with spreading knowledge and extending its range. It is even said he commanded that teachers inherit along with relatives.

Further, he ordained that they should busy themselves in industry or commerce and forbade sloth and inactivity. He commanded them to love other human beings of whatever sect or religion — teaching them that religions were revealed for the sake of love and concord, and that they should not make them a source of contention and disunion. He encouraged them to obey their rulers and to comply with the laws of the state, forbidding them to interfere in politics. He explicitly proclaimed in his books that the authority of rulers is divinely bestowed. He therefore prohibited them from speaking badly of kings and rulers.

He made a distinction between social behavior and ritual worship, referring matters of worship to the revealed Book and matters of social behavior to councils of justice. He strictly proscribed the esoteric interpretation of scripture. In addition, he forbade them to curse, swear, use foul language, backbite, slander, murder, commit adultery, or to do anything that would be at variance with true humanity, or would

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introduce anxiety or turmoil into the body politic. He even enjoined them against bearing firearms, except with the approval of the state, and outlawed the practices of temporary marriage and the taking of concubines, commanding them to content themselves with one wife — and certainly never more than two.* He made divorce more difficult. They fast, pray, perform pilgrimage, and contribute to religious charity according to the laws ordained for them in religious books. Bahá'u'lláh succeeded in spreading his teachings and improving the morals of his people, passing away on 29 May 1892, corresponding to 2 Dhu'l-Qa'dah 1309.

The first to record the history of the Bábís was Mírzá Taqí Mustawfí Káshání [1801-1880], known as Lisánu'l-Mulk, the author of the book *Supplanter of Past Chronicles* (Násikhu't-tawárikh). In his chronicle of the Qájár dynasty, he mentioned the advent of the Báb and the events that

succeeded it according to the account that had gained prominence among the enemies of the Bábís. He ascribed to them moral corruption and atheism and said things about them that create an aversion toward them in hearts and disgust the souls of men. For during the period when the Bábís were being persecuted, their opponents endeavored mightily to spread slanders against them, accusing them of licentiousness and immorality. There was no sin but that he ascribed it to them, no vice but that he characterized them by it.

Rumors were rife and minds grew perplexed, and

* 'Abdul-Bahá has interpreted the text of the Kitáb-i Aqdas [Most Holy Book] to mean that only one wife is actually permitted, though Bábí law allowed two. In Islam, up to four wives and unlimited concubines were allowed by the Qur'án under certain circumstances.

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the Bábís remained obscure to the Europeans. Therefore, a group of learned and judicious scholars arose to discover the doctrines of the Bábís and to investigate their customs. Among them is the erudite Mr. Edward Browne, a teacher of Oriental languages at Cambridge University. He journeyed to Irán in 1305 A.H. [1888 AD.], where he associated with the Bábís and acquired some of their books. He then traveled to Syria and entered 'Akká, meeting with Bahá'u'lláh. He returned to Europe and published accounts of what he had witnessed in learned journals.

Likewise, Professor Baron von Rosen, an educator in St. Petersburg, translated some of Bahá'u'lláh's writings and published them in Russia and elsewhere in Europe. Also among them is Captain Alexander Tumansky, an officer who travelled to the city of Ashkhabad and thence to Irán, meeting with the Bábís and gaining an intimate knowledge of their ways and morals, who has begun a work on their history.

Some Easterners have undertaken to compose histories of the Bábís, including Mírzá Muhammad Husayn Hamadání, who wrote *The New History*. He accompanied His Majesty Násiru'd-Din Sháh on his first trip to Europe, and on his return he stayed in Istanbul and discovered something of the Bábí path. When he arrived in Irán he wrote his above-mentioned history, which was subsequently translated into French and English in Europe. Also among them is the itinerant historian Abú'l-Fadl Muhammad ibn Muhammad Ridá Gulpáygání, a resident of Bukhara and the author of the book *The Decisive Decree* (Fasl al-khitáb).

As for Lisánu'l-Mulk, mentioned before, who wrote the *Supplanter of Past Chronicles*, he moderated his tone a bit in that book when he again discussed Bábí history. What he wrote about the Bábís in the

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original text of the chronicle is closer to reality than his account in the volume dedicated to Qájár history. Time will no doubt tear the veil from the wondrous events associated with the Bábís, which have been concealed out of

political motives. This should suffice anyone desiring to investigate the matter. God is the preserver of guidance and the granter of confirmations.

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