

and is as mutable as the colour of the chameleon. They are at least agreed on one expectation, concerning the twelfth Imam, who disappeared in 260 A.H. (874 AD) and at first maintained communication with the faithful for a period of 69 years through saintly intermediaries known as Báb or 'gate'. This twelfth Imam will return in the fullness of time as the Mahdí, to bring the golden century on earth.

At the beginning of this century a certain Sheikh, born in Lahsa in Eastern Arabia, attracted great audiences in Yazd and later Karbila, by the grave of Husayn the son of Ali. He taught that the second and fifth of the five essential teachings can be discarded, since they are already implicit in belief in the station of the prophets, but that the three remaining dogmas must be supplemented by a fourth, that is, the belief that there is always a visible head in the Church who enjoys special spiritual guidance from the Imáms and transmits their teaching and wishes to the faithful. Moreover, he announced that the Muslims were in error in their belief in a physical resurrection, since the physical part of the human person is irrevocably condemned to die. His followers called themselves Shaykhís. After his death, in 1826 or 1827, he was succeeded by his pupil Kázim, who continued his preaching until late 1843 or early 1844, and concentrated in his last years especially with the imminent arrival of the "Lord of the Century", that is, the reappearance of the hidden Imám in a new form. He was to appear as a young man, a descendant of the Prophet, untutored in human learning.

This prophecy made a strong impression on Ali Mohammad, a young man from Shiráz, who was visiting the Shî'a holy places of Karbila and Kázimayn and for a short time was part of Kázim's audience. He was born on October 9th, 1820, and his family were accounted as Siyyids (descendants of Husayn). His father had died while he was just a boy, and he was brought up by a maternal uncle, who intended him for a career in commerce, and sent him to Bushihr when he was about 15 years old to begin work in his trade. Ali Muhammad, however, had been drawn to religious speculation from his youth, and felt he was destined for something higher. It is probable that he read and discussed widely in Bushihr, and that he had already adopted the inner worship of the Imams which led him to join the Shaykhís and filled him with longing to visit Karbila. We cannot say with certainty when this visit occurred, but it seems likely it was in 1843 since in 1842 he was back in Shiraz, where he married and had a son who died soon after the birth. [1] We can hardly suppose that the pilgrimage that led to such a radical change in his attitude took place before this. Moreover, everything indicates that his visit took place during the last year of Kázim's life. While still entirely full of the impression of the holy places, Ali Mohammad wrote his first work, "Pilgrim's Book", in which he describes how the true believer should perform his pilgrimage, and in which he expresses his boundless worship and devotion to the holy Imams, and the profound desire that he may be granted the privilege of communing with them and witnessing their return to the world.[2]

His heart's desire was fulfilled. The zuhúr (revelation) took place on May

23rd, 1844, when Ali Muhammad became aware that he heard the divine voice in his heart and that he was the Báb (gate) through whom the knowledge of the Imám could be attained, just as Ali was the Báb through whom humanity entered the city of the knowledge of the Prophet.

He now wrote his second work, entitled the Surah of Joseph, which is something like the Qur`án: it is divided into surahs, each with one of the verses of the Surah of Joseph (Surah 12 of the Qur`án) as a motto. The work retains the broad lines of the teaching of Muhammad, but some important deviations are prescribed throughout, and he himself is called the divinely inspired Prophet.

We do not know what led him to the conviction of his vocation, but we can certainly guess. It was the discovery that he had the gift of words. Had not Muhammad seen the proof of his divine mission in the incomparable words that were placed in his mouth? Moreover, he possessed the three characteristics of the reborn Imám that Kázim had listed. It seems that he had indeed received no more than ordinary elementary education. The expertise that is apparent from his writings was acquired through independent study. His knowledge of grammar was never to amount to much. Finally, it was now exactly a thousand years since the disappearance of the last Imám (from the year 260 to 1260, A.H.), and there is a widespread expectation in the East that a new dawn for humanity would break after a period of a thousand years.

The firm conviction with which the Báb began his reforming work; the eloquence with which he defended it; and his personality, which according to many witnesses inspired affection, love and respect, soon meant that he was surrounded by a large number of devoted followers, including members of his family and even the uncle who had raised him, and many of his former schoolmates. Soon missionaries were sent out to announce the appearance of the Báb and his teaching. He himself set out towards the end of the year for Mecca and Medina, accompanied by a single disciple, with the aim of further preparing himself for his mission.[3] On his return to Bushihr in August 1845 he was imprisoned and taken to Shiraz, where he remained in detention until the spring of 1846.

The moving story of the suffering of the Báb and his followers, which can only be compared with that of the first Christians, begins at that point. It has been told in incomparable style by Count de Gobineau in his well-known work "Les Religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale", 2nd edition, p. 141-307, and by many other authors after him. I will not attempt to sketch those awful event again. The Báb was dragged from one prison to another and finally executed. In various places his disciples, including many prominent men and women, found themselves forced to defend themselves with weapons, and when after heroic resistance they were finally forced by exhaustion to accept solemnly sworn articles of peace, they were perfidiously murdered. After the execution of the Báb (8 July 1850) and the subsequent harsh persecution of the Bábís which the government had ordered [4], three embittered young men, in contravention of their master's teachings, made an attempt on the life of the Sháh (15 August 1852). This led to persecutions on the scale of Nero [5] which

subsided only after the forceful representations of the European envoys. The prominent followers of the Báb who had escaped the bloodbath, including some of the most influential, had taken refuge in Baghdad, which was Turkish territory.

De Gobineau has also devoted a chapter (p. 308 - 358) to the books and teachings of the Bábís, but in the nature of things this is not as accurate as one might wish. Only recently have we become better acquainted with them, and with the subsequent fate of the Bábís, through the excerpts and reports of Baron Rosen in the Collections scientifiques de l'Institut des langues Orientales (St. Petersburg), in the Zapisiski der Russische Maatschappij van archaeologie, and especially in the superb articles of the young English scholar E.G. Browne in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society and his extensive notes to "A Traveller's Narrative", which was cited above.

Just as the revelation of Muhammad is called the Qur`án, the Báb called his revelation the Bayán (the clear explanation). It consists of many writings, some of which bear only the general name, while others have particular titles. They are written partly in Arabic and partly in an idiosyncratic Persian, full of Arabic words, and are sometimes difficult to understand for the uninitiated because of the many allusions and the use of a strange symbolism of numbers and letters. [7] One of the most important parts of their rich contents for our purposes is the argument for the truth of the new religion. Browne proves the following clear overview of this (Journal R. Asiat. Soc. 1889, p. 913-918) [back-translated from the Dutch text, to reveal differences between de Goeje's translation and Browne's original]:

The unchangeable essence of God has existed from eternity to eternity in unapproachable glory and holiness. No one has known it as it should be known, no one has praised it as it should be praised. It is above all names and free from all comparisons. All things are known by it, while it is itself too glorious to be known by any other thing. From it began his creation, which had no beginning and will have no end. This emanation or creation was produced by the Highest Will and, although it is eternal in duration, it is subordinate to it as to cause. Since it is impossible for created being to know the divine being, the Highest Will is required, for their guidance and teaching, to reveal Himself from time to time in a human form. These incarnations are known as Prophets. There have been many of these in the past, just as there will be in the future. That which in the past has spoken in every prophet, now speaks through the Bab and will speak through "Him whom God shall reveal", and after them through others, since there is no end to these revelations. The Highest Will is like the sun, which rises day after day, yet is in reality always the same sun even though in everyday life we speak of 'today's sun' and 'yesterday's sun'. In the same way, although in everyday language we speak of Adam, Noah, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad as different people, yet in truth that which spoke in each of them was One, that is, the Highest Will. This is the meaning of Muhammad's words: "As for the prophets, I am they". The most recent revelation of the Highest Will occurred 1270 years

ago {ie. From Muhammad's call, not from the Hejira}, and now he has revealed himself in Mirza Ali Muhammad {the Bab} and speaks through them.

Each revelation announces the following one. For example, the Jews knew that they could expect a Messiah, but when he came in form of Jesus, they rejected him because they had imagined his arrival differently. In the same way, the followers of Christ were told that he would return, yet nevertheless, when he returned as Muhammad, most of them could not recognize him. To the present day, they are waiting for his arrival, although it occurred more than a thousand years ago. In the same way, the Muslims are awaiting the coming of the Imam Mahdi and pray daily that the day of his appearance may be near, and they do not mention his name without adding, "God speed his blessed coming." Nevertheless, now that he has come with signs and proofs, they refuse to recognize him, because the manner of his appearance does not accord with their own false imagining of how he ought to come.

You Muslims blamed the Jews because they did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. Every day you condemn the Christians because they did not recognize Muhammad as the promised comforter, although Christ had clearly predicted his coming. [8] You admit that they thought they could expect certain miracles as announcing the promised One, but that these were meant in a spiritual sense and should be so interpreted. In this you are correct. All the Holy Books are written in a mystical language which needs an explanation, just as the Prophet said of the Qur'an that every verse has meanings within meanings. This symbolic language is common to all the prophets, but the holy books themselves provide the key. By the Sun, for example, is meant the Highest Will, which reveals itself in the prophet of the century. By the moon and the stars are meant his closest followers and students.

Notes

[The footnotes have been changed into endnotes and renumbered in one sequence]

[1] His widow lived until 1883.

[2] Browne, in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 1889 p. 901.

[3] A Traveller's Narrative written to illustrate the Episode of the Báb, translated into English, with an introduction and explanatory notes, by Edward G. Browne, M.A., M.B., Cambridge 1894, p. 241 f.

[4] Narrative p. 47: "more than four thousand souls were slain, and a great multitude of women and children, left without protector or helper, distracted and confounded, were trodden down and destroyed."

[5] Narrative p. 120. Bábís were even sold as slaves, p. 120 note 2.

[6] See a note by Prof. Barbier de Meynard in the Journal Asiatique 1892, II p. 300, 301.

[7] Rosen, in Coll. Scient. 1896, p. 3 wittily remarks that "The reader must kiss goodbye to every grammatical nicety, and must forget not a little of logic

and common sense, and then he may perhaps understand the mysteries of these literary works which the adepts in the faith, with unintentional irony, call 'The clear explanation'."

[8] In the East, the word paraclete is confused with periclytus, and this is regarded as the Greek equivalent of Muhammad "the well-praised."

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