An Episode in the Childhood of the Bab

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In the Táríkh-i Jadíd.[5]
The Táríkh-i Jadíd (New history) of
Mírzá Husayn Hamadáni (d.c.1881-2) exists in various
recensions written in the early 1880s (roughly between 1296 A.H. and 1300
A.H.). Apart from Mírzá Husayn Hamadání, whose
original draft appears to have made considerable use of a version of the
Kitáb-i Nuqtatu'l-Káf (c.1852), a number of writers,
including Mírzá Abú'l-Fadl Gulpáygáni
(d.1914), Manakji Limji Ha-tan (the Zoroastrian agent in Iran, d.1890), and
Fádl-i Qá'iní (Nabíl-i Akbar, d.c.1892), had a hand
in the emergence of this variously titled work.[6]
At least one recension of it, transcribed in June 1881 (Rajab 1298 A.H.) and
referred to by E. G. Browne as the "London Codex" (British Museum [Library]
ins., Or. 2942), contains the following version of the story of the
Báb's first day at school attributed to Shaykh 'Abid himself:[7]

The first day that they brought him [the Báb] to me at
the school, I wrote down the alphabet for him to learn, as is customary with
children. After a while I went out on business. On my return, I heard, as I
approached the room, someone reading the Qur'án in a sweet and plaintive
voice. Filled with astonishment, I entered the room and enquired who had been
reading the Qur'án. The other children answered pointing to
His Holiness [the Báb]> "He was. "Have you read the
Qur'án?" I asked. He was silent. "It is best for you to read Persian
books," said I, putting the Hákku'l-Yakín [of Muhammad
Báqir Mailisi] before him, "read from this." At whatever page I opened
it, I saw that he could read it easily. "You have read Persian," said I; "Come,
read some Arabic; that will be

better." So saying, I placed before him the Sharh-i-amthila. When I
began to explain the meaning of the Bismi'lláh to the pupils in
the customary manner, he asked, "Why does the word Rahmán include
both believers and infidels, while the word Rahim applies only to
believers?" I replied, "Wise men have a rule to the effect that
extension of form implies> extension of meaning, and
Rahmán contains one letter more that Rahim." He answered,
"Either this rule is a mistake, or else that tradition which you refer to
'Alí is a lie." "What tradition?" I asked. "The tradition" replied he,
"which declares that King of Holiness to have said: "The meanings of all the
Sacred Books are in the Qur'án, and the meanings of the whole
Qur'án are in the Súratu'l-Fátiha, and the meanings
of the whole Súratu'l-Fátiha are in the
Bismi'lláh, and the whole meaning of the Bismi'lláh
is in the initial letter> B, and the meaning of the B
is in the point under the B>, and the point is
inexplicable." On hearing him reason thus subtilely I was speechless with

amazement, and led him back to his home. His venerable grandmother came to the door. I said to her, "I cannot undertake the instruction of this young gentleman," and told her in full all that had passed. Addressing him, she said, "Will you not cease to speak after this fashion? What business have you with such matters? Go and learn your lessons." "Very well," he answered, and came and began to learn his lessons like the other boys. He even began with the alphabet, although I urged him not to do so.[8]

In the Táríkh-i Nabíl Zarandí. Mullá Muhammad, a Bábí from 1848-9 (1265 A.H.) who became one of the leading disciples of Mírzá Husayn 'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh, and who was known as Nabíl-i Zarandí and Nabíl-i A'zam (1831-1892), completed his lengthy history of the Bábí and Bahá'í movements in about 1890 (1308 A.H.).[9]
The first part of this history was edited and translated into English by the late Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957) under the title The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'i Revelation.[10]
The following episode, which obviously differs from the loosely parallel account in the London Codex of the Táríkh-i Jadíd (see below),

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is again narrated on the authority of Shaykh 'Abid:

"One day," he [Shaykh 'Abid] related, "I asked the Báb to recite the opening words of the Qur'án: 'Bismi'lláhi'r-Rahmáni'r-Rahim.' He hesitated, pleading that unless He were told what these words signified, He would in no wise attempt to pronounce them. I pretended not to know their meaning. 'I know what these words signify,' observed my pupil; 'by your leave, I will explain them.' He spoke with such knowledge and fluency that I was struck with amazement. He expounded the meaning of 'Alláh,' of 'Rahmán,' and 'Rahim,' in terms such as I had neither read nor heard. The sweetness of His utterance still lingers in my memory. I felt impelled to take Him back to His uncle and to deliver into his hands the Trust he had committed to my care. I determined to tell him how unworthy I felt to teach so remarkable a child. I found His uncle alone in his office. 'I have brought Him back to you,' I said, 'and commit Him to your vigilant protection. He is not to be treated as a mere child, for in Him I can already discern evidences of that mysterious power which the Revelation of the Sáhibu'z-Zamán [the Lord of the Age, one of the titles of the promised Qá'im] alone can reveal. It is incumbent upon you to surround Him with your most loving care. Keep Him in your house, for He, verily, stands in no need of teachers such as I.' Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Ali [11] sternly rebuked the Báb. 'Have You forgotten my instructions?' he said. 'Have I not already admonished You to follow the example of Your fellow-pupils,

to observe silence, and to listen attentively to every word spoken by Your teacher?' Having obtained His promise to abide faithfully by his instructions, he bade the Báb return to His school. The soul of that child could not, however, be restrained by the stern admonitions of His uncle. No discipline could repress the flow of His intuitive knowledge. Day after day He continued to manifest such remarkable evidences of superhuman wisdom as I am powerless to recount." At last His uncle was induced to take Him away from the school of Shaykh 'Abid, and to associate Him with himself in his own profession.[12]

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In the Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shirtiz. This narrative of the history of the Bábí and Bahá'í movements in Shiraz composed by Hájí Mírzá Habíbu'lláh Afnán (c. 1875-1951), the son of Aqá Mírzá Aqá (a nephew of the Báb's wife) and the grandson of Aqá Mírzá Zaynu'l-Abidin (a paternal cousin of the father of the Báb) remains in manuscript.[13] It opens by providing valuable details about the Báb's parents and genealogy followed by a lengthy narrative attributed to Mullá Fath'u'lláh ibn Mullá Mand 'Alí — at the time of the Báb's childhood, an assistant of Shaykh 'Abid known as the khalif or názim (director) responsible for selecting suitable pupils (ms., p. 6) — which includes several interesting stories about the Báb's childhood allegedly communicated by the Báb's father to Shaykh 'Abid. Since this narrative is likely to remain in manuscript for the immediate future, it may be useful to summarize parts of it:

The Narrative of Mullá Fath'u'lláh. One day early in the morning, Mullá Fathu'lláh observed that Jinabí Muhammad Ridá (the Báb's father) came to the Qahway-i Awliyá' (the mosque-like structure which housed Shaykh 'Abid's school [maktab]). A long-standing friend of Shaykh 'Abid, the Báb's father sat next to him and explained that God, four years previously (in 1820-21), had bestowed a child on him whose characteristics caused him continual astonishment. When the Shaykh asked the reason for this astonishment, Muhammad Ridá expressed his inability to adequately communicate the nature of the Báb's uniqueness. Such wonders, he explained, surround his now five-year-old son that a lengthy volume would be required to fully express them. Having explained his plight, the Báb's father, anxious that his son begin schooling, illustrated with examples the remarkable nature of the Báb.

The Báb, he said, though a mere child, exhibits an amazing devotional preoccupation. He recites obligatory and other prayers during the night in a very touching manner. He is able to predict the sex of unborn children and is possessed of

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remarkable prophetic abilities. Though of tender age, he accurately predicted that five women and one child would be killed when disaster would strike the women's bath-house (hamám) of Mírzá
Hádí in Shiraz. He has mysterious dreams indicative of his exalted status. On one occasion, he dreamed that he outweighed Imám Ja'far Sádiq (the sixth Shi'i Imám) when placed opposite him on one of the (two) scales of a huge balance (mizán).

On account of his bewildering nature, Aqá Mírzá
Sayyid Hasan (Hájí Mírzá Uasan Ali, a maternal uncle of the Báb) suggested that the Báb might have been injured (maddatí, perhaps possessed) by fairies (pariyíyán) or malevolent spirits (jinn).
His father consulted an astrologer-soothsayer (munajjim) named Aqá Muhammad Hasan. Though no sign of disorienting supernatural influence was discerned by the latter, protective talismanic devices and prayers (ta'widh wa ad'iyya) were drawn up in the light of the Báb's date of birth. These he subsequently destroyed, making a cryptic statement to the effect that being a source of supernatural protection himself, he stood in no need of protective charms.

Despite, or in view of, the incredible characteristics of the Báb, Shaykh 'Abid agreed to instruct him — both he and Mullá Fathu'lláh were astonished at what Muhammad Ridá had narrated. It was suggested he be brought to school at an appropriate hour on the coming Thursday morning (presumably in 1824-5 A.D. [1240 A.H.]). Then, as was the custom at the elementary school of Shaykh 'Abid, the primer to be used by the Báb would be presented on a sweetmeat tray.

When the day came and the Báb was brought to school, he, in the light of the remarkable stories surrounding him, became the center of attention. Hájí Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí (the maternal uncle and future guardian of the Báb) sat next to Shaykh 'Abid when, following certain formalities, the shaykh asked the Báb to recite an Arabic verse:

[7]

The shaykh, according to the custom, said [to the Báb], "Say: 'He is (huwa) the Opener (al-fattáh), the All-Knowing (al-'Alím).'" [Qur'án 34:25] His eminence [the Báb] was silent. The shaykh repeated himself. Still he remained silent. The shaykh persisted (isrár karda) [with his request]. [At length], he [the Báb] said, "Who is huwa? The shaykh replied, "Huwa signifies God. You are but a child! How is it that you ask the meaning of huwa? He [the Báb] said, "I, verily, am the Opener, the All-Knowing (manam fatháh al-'Alím)."

Shaykh 'Abid was outraged at the Báb's stubbornness and his

daring claim. He brandished a rod, as if to beat him, and sternly admonished him for his pretensions. At his school, the shaykh insisted, the Báb must busy himself with his elementary studies. To this end, the Báb's uncle, Hájí Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí, gave his remarkable nephew some kindly advice and went away.

Such, in outline, is the gist of Mullá Fathu'lláh's narrative which draws, in large measure, on a reported conversation between the Báb's father and Shaykh 'Abid.[14]

The Narrative of Aqá Muhammad [ibn] Ibráhim Ismá'il Bayg. Immediately after setting down the narrative of Mullá Fathu'lláh concerning the Báb's reception at school, Mírzá Habibu'lláh records a story about the Báb's first day at school on the authority of Aqá Ibráhim, an older fellow pupil of the Báb. It has been paraphrased by Hasan Balyuzi:

The Báb had taken a seat, with great courtesy, in between this boy [Aqá Muhammad, then twelve years old] and another pupil [a certain Aqá Mírzá Muhammad Ridá, also twelve years old] who was also much older than Himself. His head was bowed over the primer put in front of Him, the first lines of which He had been taught to repeat. But he would not utter a word. When asked why He did not read aloud as other boys were doing He made no reply. Just then two boys, sitting near them, were heard to recite a couplet from Hafez, which runs thus:

[8]

From the pinnacles of the Throne they whistle down to thee;

How is it that in this snare thou now entrapped be?

"That is your answer," said the Báb, turning to Aqá Muhammad Ibráhim[15]

This narrative is clearly meant to illustrate the Báb's exalted status and supernatural knowledge. As the couplet from Hafez indicates, his true abode is the heavenly world and not this narrow earthly sphere. Worth noting is the fact that as in the narratives quoted and summarized above, the Báb is pictured as being stubbornly silent when pressed to acquire knowledge through ordinary channels. His divinely bestowed knowledge renders normal study essentially unnecessary.

It will be obvious to the reader that the accounts of the Báb's arrival and first day at school cannot all be uncolored eyewitness accounts or strictly accurate historical narratives. The loosely parallel narratives of the Táríkh-i Jadíd and the Táríkh-i Nabíl cannot both be the exact records of the words, observations and actions of Shaykh 'Abid. Neither can they be reconciled with the narratives of Mullá Fath'u'lláh and Aqá Muhammad set down in the

Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiraz. The discrepancies indicate the fundamentally nonhistorical nature of these stories, while the theological points made by all of them are in harmony. The same is also suggested by the fact that the general setting, and certain details, of several of these stories of the Báb's first day at school are paralleled by legendary narratives about the childhood of Jesus as recorded in a wide range of Christian and Islamic literatures.

A comparative and traditio-historical study of the stories about the Báb's school days strongly suggests that they originated in Bábi-Bahá'í circles sometime before the 1880s, and that during a period of oral transmission several versions emerged that, in diverse ways, reflect much older legends about Jesus'

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first day at school. Before discussing the matter further, it will be convenient to give a few details about the Christian and Islamic accounts of Jesus' school days.

APOCRYPHAL ACCOUNTS OF JESUS' FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL

The canonical Gospels, as is well known, record little or nothing (in the case of Mark and John) of the childhood of Jesus. It is only in Luke 2:42ff. that we are told something of the precocious learning of the young Jesus.[16] By the time of the rise of Islam, however, a very large number of apocryphal stories about Jesus' childhood and youth were circulating in written form. One such apocryphal story which is widely attested is that of Jesus at school in Nazareth. It affords some remarkable parallels to the accounts of the Báb's first day at school. There are a very large number of versions of this story (which cannot possibly all be set down here). It must suffice to refer to one of the versions of the In fancy Gospel of Thomas, the many recensions of which (sixth century A.D.? and later, including Arabic versions) attempt to portray Jesus as an infant prodigy: [17]

Now a certain teacher, Zacchaeus by name, who was standing there, heard in part Jesus saying these things to his father, and marvelled greatly that, being a child, he said such things. And after a few days he came near to Joseph and said to him: "You have a clever child, and he has understanding. Come, hand him over to me that he may learn letters, and I will teach him with the letters all knowledge, and to salute all the older people and honour them as grandfathers and fathers, and to love those of his own age. And he told him all the letters from Alpha and Omega clearly, with much questioning. But he looked at Zacchaeus the teacher and said to him: "How do you, who do not know the Alpha according to its nature, teach others the Beta." Then he began to question the teacher about the first letter, and he was unable to answer him. And in the hearing of many the child said to Zacchaeus: "Hear,

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teacher, the arrangement of the first letter, and pay heed to this, how it has lines and a middle mark which goes through the pair of lines which you see, (how these lines) converge, rise, turn in the dance, three signs of the same kind, subject to and supporting one another, of equal proportions; here you have the lines of the Alpha." [The text here appears to be corrupt.]

Now when Zacchaeus the teacher heard so many such allegorical descriptions of the first letter being expounded, he was perplexed at such a reply and such great teaching and said to those who were present: "Woe is me. I am forced into a quandry, wretch that I am; I have brought shame to myself in drawing to myself this child. Take him away, therefore, I beseech you, brother Joseph. I cannot endure the severity of his look, I cannot make out his speech at all. This child is not earth-born; he can tame even fire. Perhaps he was begotten before the creation of the world.... I strove to get a disciple, and have found myself with a teacher. Therefore I ask you, brother Joseph, take him away to your house. He is something great, a god or an angel or what I should say I do not know."

And when Joseph saw the understanding of the child and his age, that he was growing to maturity, he resolved again that he would not remain ignorant of letters; and he took him and handed him over to another teacher. And the teacher said to Joseph: "First I will teach him Greek, and then Hebrew." For the teacher knew the child's knowledge and was afraid of him. Nevertheless he wrote the alphabet and practised it with him for a long time; but he gave no answer. And Jesus said to him: "If you are indeed a teacher, and if you know the letters well, tell me the meaning of the Alpha, and I will tell you that of the Beta." And the teacher was annoyed and struck him on the head. And the child was hurt and cursed him, and he immediately fainted and fell to the ground on his face. And the child returned to Joseph's house. But Joseph was grieved and commanded his mother: "Do not let him go outside the door, for all those who provoke him die."

And after some time yet another teacher, a good friend of Joseph, said to him: "Bring the child to me to the school. Perhaps I by persuasion can teach him the letters." And Joseph said to him:

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"If you have the courage brother, take him with you." And he took him with fear and anxiety, but the child went gladly. And he went boldly into the school and found a book lying on the reading desk [Cf. Luke 4:16f.] and took it, but did not read the letters in it, but opened his mouth and spoke by the Holy Spirit and taught the law to those that stood by. And a large crowd assembled and stood there listening to him, wondering at the grace of his teaching and the readiness of his words [Cf. Luke 4:27], that although an infant he made such utterances. But when Joseph heard it, he was afraid and ran to the school, wondering whether this teacher also was without skill (maimed). But the teacher said to Joseph: "Know, brother, that I took the

child as a disciple; but he is full of great grace and wisdom; and now, I beg you brother, take him to your house."

And when the child heard this, he at once smiled on him and said: "Since you have spoken well and have testified rightly, for your sake shall he also that was smitten be healed." And immediately the other teacher was healed. And Joseph took the child and went away to his house.[18]

Central to the many versions of the story of Jesus and the alphabet or of his first day at school is the so-called Alpha-Beta Logion which is found in the Epistula Apostolorum [4], attributed to the Marcosians by Irenaeus (Adv. Haer. I.xx.1) and contained in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (Greek A + B + Syriac + Latin + Arabic, etc.) and the related Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (Latin + Slavonic + Arabic + Ethiopic, etc.). Perhaps having originated among second-century Christian gnostics, the following are a few versions of it: [19]

Epist. Apost.: "[Before I say Alpha] First tell me what Beta is." (Greek text corrupt?)

Greek A [Infancy Gosp. Thorn.]: "How do you, who do not know the Alpha according to its nature, teach others the Beta." (Also quoted above.)

[12]

Greek B [Infancy Gosp. Thorn.] "Thou that knowest not the Alpha, how canst thou teach another the Beta?"

Arabic: "Explain to me Alaph, and then I shall say Beth."[20]

While Brian McNeil has argued that the source of the legend of Jesus and the alphabet is to be found in a proverb contained in the Story of Ahikar (Syriac 8:36; Arabic 8:33; Armenian 8:23), Stephen Gero has speculated about a Christian developmental sequence:[21]

A rather interesting, though admittedly very hypothetical, developmental sequence of the story of Jesus and the teacher emerges from this discussion. The original logion in the first stage of oral transmission (lst-2nd century) developed a concise controversy apophthegm. The apophthegm was written down in the second century (Epistula Apostolorum, Marcosians, Irenaeus), but not thereby removed from oral circulation. In the next "tunnel period" of oral transmission, from the second to the sixth century, [during which the history of the transmission of the tradition is obscure] the narrative material was considerably expanded, but the saying itself was preserved unchanged.... The narrative was then fixed in writing in the sixth century, and did not thereafter undergo much further development. However, in this third stage of mainly written transmission, between the sixth and tenth centuries, the saying itself began to be expanded, and brought into conformity, by two successive additions, with a synoptic model. This final stage is represented by the Greek Vorlage of the Slavonic and Greek versions and by the Syrian prototype of the late Syriac versions.[22]

There are then many versions of the story of Jesus and the alphabet in Christian apocryphal and other literatures. As McNeil notes, however, they all agree in telling a story with the following features: "The master attempts to teach Jesus the alphabet. But, he cannot get beyond the first two letters, for Jesus demands that he explain the meaning of the letter Alpha. In most

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versions, he himself then expounds the mystic meaning of the alphabet."[23]

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE STORY OF JESUS AND THE ALPHABET IN ISLAMIC LITERATURES

Not only is the story of Jesus and the alphabet found in Christian sources, but it exists also in many different forms in Sunni and Shi'i Islamic literatures. It is doubtless these Muslim transformations of the Christian story that have contributed to both the form and the content of the stories of the Báb's first day at school. Only a few examples of the Islamic versions can be mentioned here:

The son of 'Adi related on the authority of Abii Sa'id al-Khadri a tradition [from the Prophet Muhammad] that when his mother handed over Jesus, son of Mary, to the school that one should teach him, the teacher said to him, "Write Bismilláhi (In the name of God)." Jesus said to him [the teacher], 'What is Bismi (in the name)?" The teacher replied, "I do not know." Then Jesus said, "[The letter] B' is Bahá' Alláh [the glory of God], and [the letter] sin is Santhu [His grandeur], and [the letter] mirn is Mulkuhu [His Kingdom], and Alláh is the God of gods. And al-Rahmán [the Merciful] means merciful in this world and the next; and al-Rahim means Compassionate in the next world, . . . [etc.]"[24]

Here Jesus is represented as giving a profound explanation of the basmalla on his first day at school. The teacher does not know its deep meaning, so the child enlightens him. The Báb is pictured similarly in the Táríkh-i Jadíd and the Táríkh-i Nabíl.

Another example:

Mary took Jesus to a teacher. The teacher asked, "What is your name?"

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"Jesus," he said.

"Say the alphabet," said the teacher.

"What is the alphabet?" asked Jesus.

"I do not know," he replied.

Then said Jesus, "Get up from your place so I may sit there, and I shall teach you the explanation of the alphabet." The teacher got up, and Jesus sat down and said, "The alphabet begins with four letters, alif, be, jim and dal:

Alif: Alláh, "God";

Be: Bahá Alláh, "God's splendour";

Jim: Jalál Alláh, "God's awesomeness";

Dal: Din Alláh, "God's religion";

He: Huwa Alláh, "He is God";

Waw: Waylat Alláh, "God's woe";

Zayn: Zabániyat al-káfirin, "the myrmidons of infidels";

Ha: Hitta li'l-kháti'ín, "forgiveness for those in error";

Ta: Shajarat Túbá li'l-mu'minín, "the Tuba tree for believers";

Ya: Yad Alláh 'alá khalqihi ajam'ín, "God's hand over all of his creation";

Kaf: Kalám Alláh, "God's Word";

Lam: Liqá' Alláh, "meeting God";

Mim: Málik yawm al-dín, "the king of the Day of Resurrection";

Nun: Núr Alláh, "God's light";

Sin: Sunnat Alláh, "God's path";

'Ayn: 'Ilm Alláh, "God's knowledge";

Fa: Fi'l Alláh, "God's action";

sad: Sidq Alláh fi wa'dih, "God's sincerity in His promise";

Qaf: Qudrat Alláh, "God's might";

Ra: Rabúbiyyat Alláh, "God's divinity";

Shin: Mashí'at Alláh, "God's will";

Te: Ta'allá Alláh'ammá yashkurún, "God is more exalted than that for which he is thanked."

The teacher said to him, "You have done very well, Jesus." He took him to his mother and said, "Your child did not need a teacher."[25]

This version of the story of Jesus' first day at school, translated from an Arabic recension of Muhammad b. Abdu'lláh Kisá 'i's Qisasu'l-Anbiyyá (Tales of the prophets, thirteenth century A.D. and early translated into Persian), has Jesus assume the position of teacher and explain the significance of the twenty-two letters of the "Hebrew" alphabet. Jesus' bewildered tutor takes the learned child back to his mother, telling her that he is in no need of instruction. This is similar to the stories in which Shaykh 'Abid takes the Báb back home to his grandmother (Táríkh-i Jadíd), or uncle (Táríkh-i Nabíl), his father being regarded as having passed away by this time in these two Bábi-Bahá'í versions.

In yet another version of the story of Jesus' first day at school (as a seven-month old baby), which is attributed to the fifth Shi'i Imám, Muhammad b. 'Alí Báqir (c. 675-732), there are obvious parallels to the accounts of the Báb's first day at school found in the Táríkh-i Jadíd and the Táríkh-i Nabíl. Contained in the Kitábu'l-Nubuwwat of Muhammad Báqir Majlisí's Biháru'l-Anwár (a massive compendium of Shi'i tradition and learning that was much read and quoted by well-educated Bábís and Bahá'ís at the time of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, who also quoted it), this story may well have inspired something of the form and content of the story of the Báb's first day at school:

... Abi Jafar said: "When Jesus son of Mary was born and but a day old he was as if a child of two months. So when he was seven months old his mother took him by the hand, brought him to the school (al-kuttáb), and entrusted him to the teacher (al-mu'addib). The teacher said to him, 'Say: Bismi'lláh al-Rahmán al-Rahim.' So Jesus said, 'Bismi'lláh al-Rahmán al-Rahim.' The teacher then said to him, 'Say: abjad.' Jesus lifted up his head and said, 'Do you know what abjad means?' [Outraged, the teacher] rose up with a thonged whip to strike him [Jesus]. He [Jesus] said, '0 teacher! Do not strike me if you know [the meaning of abjad]; otherwise ask

me so that I can expound [its meaning] for you.' He [the teacher] said, 'Expound for me!' Jesus said:

'The [letter] alif signifies the benefits of God (álá' Alláh); the bá', the delight of God (bahjat Alláh); the jim, the beauty of God (jamál Alláh); and the dál, the religion (or judgement) of God (dín Alláh). In hawwaz [letters five through seven], the [letter] há'

signifies the fear of hell (hawl jahannam), the
wáw, "Woe unto the people of the Fire" (wail li-ahl
al-núr), and the zá', the moaning of [those
in?] hell (zafír jahannam). Huttí [i.e., letters
eight through ten] signifies that the sins (khatáya) of
the penitents have been absolved. Kaliman [i.e., letters eleven through
fourteen] signifies the speech of God (kalám Alláh):
"There is no alteration for His words (kalimátahu)."
Sa'fas [i.e., letters fifteen through eighteen] signifies "measure for
measure and portion for portion (sa' bi-sa' wa'l-jaza' bi'l-jaza')
." Qarishat [i.e., letters nineteen through twenty-two] signifies
"their collecting (qarshuhum) and their assembling
(hashruhum).

[Having heard Jesus' words] the teacher said [to Jesus' mother], '0
thou woman! Take your son by the hand [i.e., take him home]. He knoweth and
standeth not in need of a teacher."[26]

It is of interest to note that the versions of the Christian apocryphal
accounts of Jesus and the alphabet were early on elaborated and set in an
Imámological context by (proto-) Shi'i Muslim writers. The
"proto-Ismailian" Persian treatise entitled Ummu'l-Kitáb (Mother
of the book), which apparently reflects late-eighth-century Shi'i gnosis (in a
Khattábí milieu)[27]
and "abounds in precise Manichean reminiscences and features borrowed from the
apocryphal books of the Bible,"[28]
illustrates how the story was adapted by Ismaili esotericists. Commenting on
the proto-Ismaili adaptation of the gnosis of antiquity, Henri Corbin has
written:

The book [Ummu'l-Kitáb] is presented in the
form of an initiatory discussion between the fifth Imám, Muhammad
Báqir, and three of

his intimate disciples or "beings of light"
(róshanián), as the Imám calls them. The
prologue reports a story from the childhood of the holy Imám, when his
teacher, 'Abdulláh Sabbáh, was preparing to teach him the
arithmological powers and symbolic meanings of the letters — i.e., the
jafr, or philosophic alphabet.... However, with the first letter,
alif, their roles were reversed: the poor teacher, whose learning is
outstripped, becomes the pupil, and the young Imám becomes his
initiator. The story repeats the point by point one that is reported in the
Gospel of Thomas and which is also known from the Epistula
Apostolorum: the young Imám has purely and simply been substituted
for Jesus...."[29]

PARALLELS WITH STORIES OF THE BÁB

Having set down some details of the Christian and Islamic versions of Jesus' early educational experiences, it will be convenient at this point to note a few of the detailed parallels with the stories of the Báb's first day at school:

As in certain Islamic versions of Jesus' first day at school, the Báb is asked to recite (or expound the meaning of) the basmalla (Táríkh-i Jadíd and Táríkh-i Nabíl);

As in certain Christian and Islamic accounts, several of the Bábí-Bahá'í narratives indicate that the Báb was stubbornly silent before displaying his supernatural knowledge to his bewildered teacher;

As in certain Christian versions and in some Islamic ones (for example, in the narrative attributed to Imám Ja'far Sádiq quoted above), the account of Mullá Fathu'lláh in the Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiráz has the teacher threaten his precocious pupil by brandishing a rod;

As in certain of the Christian and Islamic narratives, the Báb is said to have been taken home or sent away after displaying his divine knowledge, since he stood in no need of any teacher. Ultimately, however, he is sent back to school.

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In connection with the last parallel, it should be noted that the various Bábí-Bahá'í accounts of the Báb's first day at school differ with respect to who took the Báb away and the place to which he was taken. The account in Táríkh-i Jadíd has it that Shaykh 'Abid took the Báb home to his grandmother. That in the Táríkh-i Nabíl has Shaykh 'Abid take him to the office of his uncle, Hájí Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí. The narrative of Mullá Fath'u'lláh in the Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiraz records that Hájí Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí was present with the Báb during the first part of his first day at school and made sure that he commenced his education before going away. These discrepancies can be partly explained in the light of the confusion surrounding the date of the Báb's father's death and who thereafter took care of him.[30]

As already indicated, it would seem probable that several, if not all of the accounts of the Báb's first day at the school of Shaykh 'Abid are, in large measure, hagiographic reworkings of elements contained in the Islamic versions of Jesus' first day at school.[31]
While the Báb does appear to have been a remarkable youth, the details of the accounts of his first day at school are unlikely to be historically accurate. Though it is alleged that Shaykh 'Abid "used to relate"

(Táríkh-i Jadíd) or "related"
(Tiárikh-i Nabíl) such stories, it is unlikely that
the accounts, in all their (sometimes) contradictory details, originated with
him. The Báb's one-time teacher died around 1846-7, about thirty-five
years before the Táríkh-i Jadíd was written and
almost forty-five years before Nabíl completed his
Bábí-Bahá'í history. The authors of neither work,
it is very likely, had ever met Shaykh 'Abid — Nabíl became a
Bábí about two years after the shaykh passed away.

The narratives of the story of the Báb's first day at school are thus
not direct eye-witness testimonies, but accounts attributed to an eye-witness
(Shaykh 'Abid) by others — no chain (isnád) for the
transmission of the story is provided. Even if it is assumed that the
narratives actually originated with Shaykh

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'Abid (and this is unlikely), they must have been orally circulated for between
thirty-five and forty-five years before being written down, and so have been
subject to embellishment. Shaykh 'Abid, having apparently become a
Bábí toward the end of his life, may have spoken about the
remarkable behavior and erratic schooling of the Báb.[32]
But it is almost certainly the case that whatever traditions about the
Báb's early schooling that may have existed were, during a generation of
oral circulation, embellished and linked with the unhistorical narrative of
Jesus' first day at school contained in Christian and Islamic literatures. Just
as proto-Ismailis adapted the Christian apocryphal account of Jesus and the
alphabet to the fifth Imám, so did pious Bábís and
Bahá'ís adapt the Islamic versions of the story to highlight the
remarkable youth of the object of their adoration, the Báb.[33]

That certain details within the accounts of the Báb's first day at
school are nonhistorical, or a pious reflection of the creative imagination of
learned Iranian Bahá'ís who lived during the middle decades of
the nineteenth century, should not be taken to indicate that these stories are
meaningless fabrications.[34]
Since they convey religious perspectives, they are no less meaningful than, for
example, the ever-increasing number of New Testament (synoptic) pericopes which
critical research now suggests are essentially unhistorical.

The legendary and mythic dimension of Bábí and
Bahá'í historical narratives does not devalue these writings. The
saintly characters from whom certain pericopes contained in such chronicles
originated were, despite and because of their piety, given to myth-making and
the creation of legend. The more or less precritical religious and ideological
milieu within which nineteenth-century Bábí-Bahá'í
narrators lived led them to creatively mix "what took place" with what,
theologically speaking, "ought to have taken place." For many among the devout,

legend and myth were important vehicles for the expression of

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meta-historical religious perspectives. It was their conviction that religious truth goes beyond what "actually took place." The primitive Bábí kerygma and the concrete facts of Bahá'í history were, in certain circles, adapted and embellished with legend and myth in order to infuse them with religious meaning, and thereby attract prospective converts to the Bábí and Bahá'í fold.

While it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that Bábí-Bahá'í historical sources stand in need of a wholescale demythologization, the recognition that they contain legendary accounts and mythic elements and the appreciation of the function and meaning of these elements is important. The nonhistorical dimension within the sources cannot be ignored either by the scholar who desires to determine what happened or by the devotee seeking religious meaning.

Finally, I would like to make a few basic points of a general and methodological nature relating to the academic analysis of primary, nineteenth-century Bábí and Bahá'í historical sources. In studying these sources, it is important to develop an awareness of their frequent hagiographical, apologetical, or polemical orientations and an ability to recognize and understand the function of such levels of thought as meta-historical legend and myth. Failure to acknowledge or to understand such dimensions in the sources can result in an unconscious fundamentalism that will lead both to a distorted presentation of historical facts and an inability to divine the religious message conveyed in these sources.

Narratives, and other elements found in the sources, that are obviously nonhistorical or meta-historical to the knowledgeable student (who may nonetheless be alive to their religious meaning) may be mistakenly taken to be "concrete facts" of history by anyone who assumes a naively fundamentalist, or a narrowly historical, approach. It is thus important that the study of Bábí and Bahá'í doctrine — the universe of religious discourse —

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go hand in hand with any historical analysis. The precritical nature of a good many of the sources demands this methodological orientation.

Nonhistorical elements within Bábí and Bahá'í historical sources are frequently to be accounted for in the light of a desire on the part of the pious to demonstrate either a prophetological typology or some prophecy-fulfillment scheme. The early believers were eager to demonstrate that the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh mirrored and were as miraculous as those of such former major prophets as Muhammad and Jesus.[35] In addition, they wished to demonstrate that

Bábí-Bahá'í history is in conformity with all manner of eschatological prophecies.[36]

While I am not suggesting that all the typological speculations and prophecy-fulfillment schemes that are spelled out in the sources have no concrete historical bases at all, it should be borne in mind that a consciousness of their theological function often enables the scholar to identify and explain a good many contradictions and proven errors.

It should be recognized, further, that certain narratives are the result of several decades of oral transmission, and that during this period even "eye-witness accounts" originally rooted in historical fact have been embellished with nonhistorical elements, censored (or partially altered) to conform to a developing Bábí-Bahá'í theology, or transmitted inaccurately.

The study of Bábí and Bahá'í history will be severely handicapped if a critical and comparative study of all available sources bearing on important episodes is not carried out. This is especially so inasmuch as certain historical chronicles have come to be accorded an almost canonical status within the modem Bahá'í community, while others of great importance have come to be ignored or viewed with considerable suspicion.[37]

There are parallel accounts of major episodes in nineteenth-century Bábí and Bahá'í history that invite comparative and critical analysis. These numerous and often conflicting

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accounts exist in a plethora of Muslim, Bábí, Azali, Bahá'í, and other sources that have, on the whole, never been carefully examined. Bahá'í historiography is in its infancy. It is hoped that this essay, if nothing else, will highlight the need for Bahá'í historians to acknowledge and appreciate the legendary and mythic elements within the rich legacy of their scriptural and historical tradition.[38]

NOTES

I would like to express my thanks to Mr. William Collins, Dr. Moojan Momen, Dr. Peter Smith, Dr. Denis MacEoin, and Mr. Abú'l-Qásim Afnán A'lá'í for valuable critical comments on various rough drafts of this essay.

1. Cf. Abbas Amanat, "The Early Years of the Bábí Movement: Background and Development" (Ph.D. Thesis, Oxford University, 1981) p. 100f.

2. See Hasan Balyuzi, The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973) pp. 32ff, 230 note 4.

3. On legends surrounding the birth and childhood of the Imám Husayn, see, for example, Mahmoud Ayoub, Redemptive Suffering in Islam (The

Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978) p. 69ff.

4. Other stories of the Báb's childhood also clearly utilize traditional motifs and legends. For example, the story that he exclaimed "The Kingdom is God's" (al-mulk li'lláh) at the moment of his birth (see, Kitáb al-Nuqtát al-Káf [Leiden: Brill, 1910] p. 110f. and Táríkh-i Jadíd [Cambridge University Press, 1893] p. 262).

5. On the Táríkh-i Jadíd, see Denis MacEoin, 'A Revised Survey of the Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History," Part II (Unpublished dissertation, 1977) p. 195ff.

6. MacEoin, "Revised Survey," pp. 205-206. Cf. Amanat, "Early Years," p. 427f.

7. See E.G.Browne, Jadíd, Introduction, p. xlix.

8. Browne, Jadíd, pp. 262-64.

9. Shoghi Effendi, The Dawn-Breakers. Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing

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Trust, 1932) Preface, p. xxxvii. Cf. MacEoin, "Revised Survey," p. 214ff.; Amanat, "Early Years," p. 429f.

10. The Dawn-Breakers is an edited English translation of the first part of Zarandi's history (up to 1852-3). The original text has not been published.

11. Hájí Mírzá Sayyid Ali was one of the maternal uncles of the Báb who looked after him following the death of his father. See Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 334f, 85ff.

12. Shoghi Effendi, The Dawn-Breakers, pp. 75-76.

13. Hájí Mírzá Habibu'lláh Afnán was, like his father, a Bahá'í. He was originally named Muhammad 'Alí. For some details of his life, see Muhammad Ali Faydí, Kitáb-i Khánidán-i Afnán (Tehran, 132 Badi' [1975-6]) p. 230ff.; Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 32n.; idem., Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980) pp. 430ff., 475; cf. Hussám Nuqabá'í, Manábi'y-i Tárikh-i Amr-i Bahá'í (Tehran, 133 Badi' [1976-71) p. 64.

A manuscript of the Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiráz exists in the Iran National Bahá'í Archives (Ms. no.1027D) and a photocopy in the private library of the late Hasan Balyuzi (now the Afnán Library). I am extremely grateful to Dr. Moojan Momen for making a photocopy of Hájí Mírzá Habibu'lláh's

manuscript available to me.

14. See Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiráz , pp. 5-14 (the narrative of Mullá Fath'u'lláh). This narrative puts into the Báb's father's mouth a cycle of infancy stories that probably originally circulated separately and orally.

At one point in the Táríkh-i Jadíd (London Codex), it is worth noting in connection with this cycle of stories, we read: "... as a boy he [the Báb] used to predict of pregnant women whether they would bring forth a male or a female infant, besides foretelling many chance occurrences, such as earthquakes and the ruin of certain places, as they actually took place." (p. 265) Cf. also Abdu'l-Husayn Ayari (Avárih), al-Kawákib al-Durriyya, vol. 1 (n.p., n.d.) p. 33; Hájí Muhammad Mu'in al-Saltana, Táríkh-i Amr (ins.) p. 28ff. Cf. Amanat, "Early Years," p. 124f.

15. See Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiráz , pp. 14-15 (the narrative of Aqá Ibráhim) paraphrased by Balyuzi in The Báb, pp. 34-35. I have slightly altered Balyuzi's translation of the couplet from Hafez. Immediately

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following the narrative of Aqá Ibráhím is an account of an episode in the childhood of the Báb designed to highlight his supernatural knowledge, the story of the "unresolved theological problem." (pp. 15-17, summarized by Balyuzi in The Báb, p. 35)

16. On the canonical Gospel accounts of Jesus' infancy, reference may be made to Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (London, 1977).

17. On the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and related Infancy Gospels, see Stephen Gero, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas" in Novum Testamentum 13 (1971) pp. 46ff (and Báb.); E. Hennecke, New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. I (SCM Press, 1973) p. 388ff. (and Báb.).

18. The Infancy Gospel [Story] of Thomas 6: 1ff.; 7: 1ff.; 14: 1ff.; 15: 1ff.; New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 1, p. 394ff (see fn. 17 above). Also, M. R. James, The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford, 1926) p. 49ff. for an English translation of Greek Text A.

19. See S. Gero, "Thomas," p. 71f., for a more detailed list of versions of the Alpha-Beta Logion.

20. Translation from: Gk. A — New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. 1, p. 394; Gk. B. — James, The Apocryphal New Testament, p. 56; Epist. Apost. + Arabic — Gero, "Thomas," p. 71.

21. Brian NcNeil in "Jesus and the Alphabet" in Journal of Theological Studies (NS), Vol. 21 (1971) pp. 126-28. writes: "I suggest that the source of this legend is to be found in the Story of Ahikar, in one of the

proverbs which Ahikar imparts to his nephew. This is now extant in three versions:

Syriac viii.36. 'My son, they say to the wolf, "Why dost thou follow after the sheep?" He said to them, "The dust is exceedingly good for my eyes." ... And they brought him into the schoolhouse [lit., "the house of the scribe"]: the master said to him, "Aleph, Beth"; the wolf said, "Kid, Lamb."'

Arabic viii.33. '0 my boy! They made the wolf go to school that he might learn to read, and they said to him, "Say A, B." He said, "Lamb and goat in my belly."'

Armenian viii.23. 'Son, they gave teaching to the wolf's cub, and said: "Say thou ayb, ben, gim [i.e., the first three letters of the Armenian alphabet]"; and he said, ayts, bouts, garhn [i.e., goat, kid, lamb]."'

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(Citing texts and translations from F. C. Conybeare, J. Rendel Harris, and Agnes Smith Lewis, The Story of Ahikar [Cambridge, 1913]).

22. Gero, "Thomas," pp. 72-73.

23. McNeil, "Jesus and the Alphabet," pp. 126-27.

24. Cited in J. Robson, Christ in Islam (London: John Murray, 1929) p. 92. The version of this tradition translated by Robson is closely parallel to that in al-Tha'labi's well-known Qisas al-Anbiyá' (4th ed. [Cairo] 1382 A.H., p. 522).

25. Translation from W. M. Thackston, Jr., The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa'i (Boston, 1978) pp. 332-33.

26. Translated from Mullá Mulláininad Báqir Majlisí, Bihar'ul Anwár (Tehran: Dár al-kutub al-Islámiyya, n.d.) Vol.14, pp. 286-87. Note that in this version of the story of Jesus' first day at school Jesus is represented as explaining the abjad arrangement of the Arabic alphabet (eight meaningless words which act as a mnemonic device for remembering the numerical values of the letters) as if its first six "words" represent the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. A similar version of Jesus' first day at school is referred to by E. Sell and D. S. Margoliouth in an article entitled "Christ in Mohammedan Literature" (in A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, Vol. II [Edinburgh, 1909]) — again attributed to the 5th Shi'i Imám:

Jesus was so intelligent that, when nine months old, his mother sent him to school. The master said the Bismi'lláh — " In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" — which the child at once repeated after him. The Master then gave a number of words to be read, of which the first was abjad.

Jesus wished to know why he should do this, upon which the master became angry and struck him. The child said: "If you know explain; if you do not, listen. In abjad, a stands for Alláh la ilah ("there is no God but God"), b for Bahjat Ulláh ("grace of God"), j for Jalal Ulláh ("glory of God"), d for Din Ulláh ("religion of God").

See also, for a more or less parallel version of this narrative, al-Tha'labi, Qisas al-Anbiyá' (Cairo, 1382 A.H.) pp. 521-22.

27. So Corbin who notes that Abu'l-Khattáb was the 'too enthusiastic disciple of the Imám Ja'far al-Sádiq (d. c. 765)." (See Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis [London, 19831 p. 154).

28. H. Corbin, Cyclical Time, p. 56, fn. 100.

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29. Ibid., p. 168. The Persian treatise Ummu' l-Kitáb was edited by W. Ivanow in Der Islam XXIII.

30. Considerable confusion exists in Bábí-Bahá'í sources as to the exact date of the Báb's father's death. While, for example, Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl-i-Gulpáygání states in his Táríkh-i Zuhúr (c. 1900?, trans. in The Bahá'í Proofs [2nd. Ed., Chicago, 1914] pp. 31-113) that Sayyid Muhammad Ridá "... died before his son [the Báb] ... was weaned" (presumably before he was two years old, p. 35), Hájí Mírzá Habibu'lláh explicitly writes (Táríkh-i Amriy-i Shiráz, p. 17) that he died when the Báb was nine years old (that is in 1828-9).

Amanat ("The Early Years," p. 102 + fn. 5) rejects the earlier dating of the Báb's father's death. Though he does not spell out his reasons, he is probably correct. This, it seems to me, in the light of a Muhammad ("type") — Báb ("antitype") typology. Since the prophet Muhammad's father, according to a multitude of Muslim sources (see for example, A. Guillaume, The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Alláh [Oxford 1970] p. 69) died during his wife's pregnancy, the tendency would be to have the Báb's father die shortly after his wife's conception or giving birth. It is probably in the light of such an underlying typology that the Táríkh-i Jadíd and Táríkh-i Nabíl presuppose (in the story of the Báb's first day at school) that Sayyid Muhammad Ridá had died before the Báb entered Shaykh 'Abid's school. That the Báb's father is not mentioned in the account of the first day at school in the narrative of Mullá Fath'u'lláh (in the Tarikh-i Amriy-i Shiráz he fades from the scene), despite the fact that he is represented as having arranged for his schooling shortly before his entering Shaykh 'Abid's school, may be rooted in a drawing on oral traditions that presuppose the early death of the Báb's

father — not in harmony with the rest of his narrative, or indeed with Hájí Mírzá Habibu'lláh's own statement that Sayyid Muhammad Ridá died when his son was nine years old, that is, about four years after he entered the school of Shaykh 'Abid. Mullá Fathu'lláh's having Hájí Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí present at the time of the Báb's first day at school is in conformity with the widely attested fact that he (in particular) supervised the Báb's education after his father's death (cf. Táríkh-i Nabíl). If, of course, the Báb's father did die before the Báb's elementary education began — the "Muhammad-Báb

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typology" reflecting historical fact or perhaps not being relevant — then the veracity of Mullá Fath'u'lláh's narrative is called into question; unless, and this is very unlikely, the Báb's father died a few days before the Báb went to school.

31. That elements derived from the Islamic accounts of Jesus' early school days were hagiographically reworked in Bábí-Bahá'í circles in order to fill out the doubtless reliable tradition that the Báb's early schooling was erratic and largely unsuccessful need not be taken to indicate a dishonest manipulation of written sources. In a missionary, promulgatory, or devotional context, the tendency to spontaneously embellish the story of the Báb by drawing on elements existing in the reservoir of prophetological legend would not, in a nineteenth century Bábí-Bahá'í context, have been something untoward or theologically illegitimate — especially in the light of the Bábí-Bahá'í conviction that major prophets of God are all essentially one.

32. Shaykh 'Abid is said to have written a monograph or tract on the childhood of the Báb, presumably shortly before his death in c. 1846-7. (See Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 231, fn. 4; Amanat, "The Early Years," p. 104, fn. 4). It is apparently in the hands of Muslims not well-disposed toward the Bábí-Bahá'í movement. It would be rash, assuming this tract really does exist, to argue from silence that it must be the source of the diverse and contradictory accounts of the Báb's first day at school — some of the content of which could have been orally circulating. Unless Shaykh 'Abid's alleged monograph surfaces, it would seem best to ignore the unlikely possibility that it contains an account of the Báb's first day at school parallel with the later written versions.

Even if this were proven to be the case it could be argued that Shaykh 'Abid himself drew on and adapted the Christian-Islamic versions of Jesus' early schooling.

33. Other stories about the Báb's childhood seem to reflect a "Jesus-Báb typology." In, for example, the Kashfu'l-Ghitá 'an

Hiyálu'l-A'dá (Ishqabad, n.d.), Mírzá
Abu'l-Fadl-i-Gulpáygání (1844-1914) relates a story that
he heard from Sayyid Jawád Karbalá'i (d. Kerinan, c. 882-3) to
the effect that the Báb came late to school and, when asked by his
teacher where he had been, stated that he had been (praying) in the house of
his ancestor (dar khánih-i jaddam). (pp. 83-4.

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Cf. also, the similar story related on the authority of Hájí
Sayyid Muhammad Shírázi, p. 84) It is not impossible that this
narrative reflects the story of the young Jesus at the Jerusalem Temple (Luke
2: 41-52) — as, for example, the Báb was understood to have been "in
the house of his ancestor" so Jesus explained that he was in his "Father's
[God's] house" (Luke 2: 49). Cf. Amanat, "The Early Years," p. 126f.

34. An admittedly speculative suggestion would be that the circulation of the
story of Jesus' first day at school in nineteenth century
Bábí-Bahá'í circles owed something to the pious
creativity of Sayyid Jawád Karbalá'i (on whom see, for example,
'Azizu'lláh Sulayináni (ed.), Masabihy-i Hidáyat,
Vol. II [Tehran, n.d.] p. 471ff.). He had close links with the Báb's
family, apparently induced Shaykh 'Abid to view the Báb and
Bábism with favor, and confided in Gulpáygání who
had a hand in the writing of the Táríkh-i Jadíd.

35. Partly in view of the Bábí-Bahá'í
doctrine of "return" (raj'a), such a typology also informs the
accounts of the lives of leading Bábís and Bahá'ís.
In the light, for example, of the fact that Mullá Muhammad 'Alí
Bárfurúshí, Quddús, was once seen as the "return of
Jesus" (who figures in Muslim eschatology), he is said to have been born of a
virgin (see Kitáb-i Nuqtat al-Käf p. 199 and cf.
Táríkh-i Jadíd [Appendix II] p. 366). Enemies of
the Bábí-Bahá'í movements, it might also be noted
here, take on the characteristics of traditional and eschatological opponents
of Shi'i Islám. The Shaykh leader Karím Khán
Kirmaní (1810-1870) is pictured in certain sources as being "one-eyed"
or a latter-day manifestation of the Muslim Antichrist, the Dajjäl
(for some details, see my "Antichrist-Dajjal: Some Notes on the Christian
and Islamic Antichrist traditions, and their Bahá'í
Interpretation" in Bahá'í Studies Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 3
[December, 1982] pp. 3-43).

36. In Nabíl Zarandi's Táríkh, for example, it is
asserted on the authority of Mullá Mírzá Muhammad Furughi'
that in accordance with Islamic prophetic tradition
(Hádíth) Mullá Husayn informed Quddús
that exactly 313 Bábís had arrived at the shrine of Shaykh

Tabarsí in Mázindarán (see The Dawn-Breakers, p. 256). Though it may have been the case that Mullá Husayn arrived at this place with companions whose numbers eventually reached 313 (cf. E. G. Browne [ed.], A Traveller's Narrative [Cambridge University Press, 1891]

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p. 37), the fact that estimates of the number of Bábís present during the Mázindarán upheaval (which lasted from mid-October 1848 to early May 1849) "differ widely" (For details see Momen, "The Social Basis of the Bábí Upheavals in Iran (1848-53): A Preliminary Analysis" in International Journal of Middle East Studies 15 [19831 p. 161f.) suggests that the figure 313 is more meta-historical than concrete fact. The sources, furthermore, are confused as to at which point the number 313 was attained, if indeed, this figure is mentioned at all.

A study of the various accounts of the Báb's pilgrimage could provide further examples of the interplay between what "actually happened" and what, in the light of eschatological prophecies, "ought to have happened."

37. In modern Bahá'í circles the Kitáb-i Nuqtat al-Káf (among other sources) has come, I think incorrectly, to be deemed an Azali fabrication. While there are problems surrounding the origins and authorship of this work it does contain material which accurately reflects Bábí perspectives of the early 1850s. It is neither anti-Bahá'í, nor devoid of historical value. The part of the Táríkh-i Nabíl translated by Shoghi Effendi has, on the other hand, come to be invested with an exaggerated authority. Valuable and important though this work is, it is but one among other important Bahá'í interpretations (as far as the published part is concerned) of Bábí history. Its existence does not make reference to other, sometimes conflicting, sources meaningless, irrelevant, or "heretical."

That "parts of the manuscripts" of the Táríkh-i Nabíl were reviewed and approved, some by Bahá'u'lláh, and others by Abdu'l-Bahá" (The Dawn-Breakers, p. xxxvii) need not be taken as proof that every detail within it is an infallible expression of concrete historical fact. It should be borne in mind that: We do not (apparently) know which "parts of the manuscripts" (note the plural, manuscripts) or which manuscript Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá reviewed; that Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá "reviewed" parts of the manuscripts of Nabíl's narrative should not be taken to signify that they were operating like modern Western reviewers who might be particularly concerned with empirical historical accuracy.

If a given narrative, such as that attributed to Shaykh 'Abid, expressed a "spiritual truth," Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá would very likely have regarded it as acceptable, whether or not it represented

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"historical fact" in all its details. In this respect, it is also worth bearing in mind that the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá contain meta-historical materials. Prophet figures and holy men are primarily concerned with the promotion of spirituality, and not the furtherance of an academic historiography. Can one, indeed should one, imagine Jesus arguing with the scribes and Pharisees about whether Old Testament pericopes come from the alleged "J," "E," "D," or "P," pentateuchal sources or whether Moses lived in the sixteenth or thirteenth century B.C.? This might be an exaggerated rhetorical question, but it is in this light that it is worth noting that Abdu'l-Bahá "reviewed" many of the writings of early Western Bahá'ís, praised them, and approved their publication despite the fact that a good many of them — as Abdu'l-Bahá was obviously well aware — contained ideas that were not in accordance with Bahá'í teachings. His generous doctrinal liberality, designed to encourage and foster unity, outweighed a rigid imposition of doctrinal orthodoxy in secondary matters. It is not then enough to assert that because Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá "reviewed" parts of Nabíl's narrative that this work is alone worthy of scholarly attention, or that it constitutes an infallible touchstone for determining the empirical truth of divergent historical perspectives. In scholarly circles it is well known that Nabíl's narrative contains errors of a concrete nature.

The Bahá'í Faith is neither enhanced by nor dependent on an uncritical acceptance of narratives reported by Bahá'í historians. Bahá'ís are not obliged to view them as either canonical or infallible. Neither Abdu'l-Bahá nor Shoghi Effendi claimed infallibility when conveying historical data.

38. I should like to point out to the Bahá'í reader who may believe that an academic analysis of Bábí-Bahá'í historical sources is a "threat to faith" that such scholarly endeavors are not designed to destroy faith. Ultimately, they may actually promote a more balanced faith when findings are articulated by Bahá'í theologians. That certain narratives in well-known Bábí-Bahá'í sources can be shown to be essentially legendary or meta-historical does not mean that they become less meaningful for the Bahá'í believer. They may, in fact, become more meaningful, and less historically problematic. The modern

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scholarly recognition that the Gospels are not exactly concrete historical narratives does not make them spiritually meaningless for the mature Christian believer.

In a devotional context, there is no reason why legendary Bábí-Bahá'í narratives should not be read and pondered. It would be unfortunate if a scholar should argue that his or her

exposition of the nonhistorical nature of aspects of Bábí-Bahá'í history should necessitate the communal eradication of meaningful myth and legend. Also unfortunate would be the thoughtless condemnation of scholars who attempt to argue that cherished stories are legendary or contain non-historical elements.

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