



Dawn-Breakers is perhaps the best example of this. When Shoghi Effendi translated the work into English he appears to have extensively edited it and partially abridged it. The Persian version of *The Dawn-Breakers* is a Persian translation from the English text. Scholars are anxious to examine the original manuscript. A few non-Bahá'í scholars have even questioned the reliability of Shoghi Effendi's text in the absence of the original.

Furthermore, sometimes original sources contradict each other. For example: all sources say Mullá Husayn accepted the Báb on the night of 23 May 1844. But several sources, which are second-hand accounts of Mullá Husayn's own account of the night of the Báb's declaration, say that Mullá Husayn did not accept the Bab until three nights' study; in other words, that he started his investigation of the Báb's claim not on 23 May, but two or three nights earlier. But *The Dawn-Breakers* and *God Passes By*, say Mullá Husayn first met the Báb on the night of his declaration.

Much work needs to be done to understand Shoghi Effendi's interpretations of historical events. Apparently Shoghi Effendi did not claim infallibility in matters of historical fact, only in matters pertaining to theological interpretation and matters of protection of the Faith. Thus the Guardian's writings present important challenges for historians.

C. The writings of the Báb have been imperfectly preserved; hence we have not yet been able to establish an authoritative text in Persian/Arabic for many of His works. Future scholars will have to study the various manuscripts and reconcile their variant readings.

D. Further, there is the issue of the accuracy of several extremely early histories. It is known that Mírzá Jání, a Bábí who perished in the persecutions that followed the attempt on the life of the Shah in 1852, wrote a history or part of a history of the Bábí movement. Such a history would be of great significance to Bábí Studies because it was written a mere eight years after the Báb's declaration and only two years after the Báb's death; furthermore, it would have been written before the split between the Azalís and Bahá'ís, a split that imposed two rival theological interpretations on the events of early Babism and raised many historical issues that have not been settled to this day.

Edward Granville Browne found a manuscript in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, which had originally been owned by the Comte de Gobineau, an early scholar of Iran and Babism. This manuscript bore the curious title of the *Kitáb-i-Nuqtatu'l-Káf*, "The Book of the Point of K"; it bore no author's name. Browne believed he had found Mírzá Jání's manuscript and translated the work into English. Possibly the work is based on work by Mírzá Jání, but many of its statements take the Azalí side of disputes between the

Azalí and Bahá'í interpretations of Babism, which suggests that the work is an Azalí rewriting of a very early work that is still lost. In reply to this Azalí version of Bábí history, Mírzá Husayn Hamádání, a Bahá'í, took up his pen and wrote the *Tárikh-i-Jadíd* or "New History" about 1880, a generation after the Báb's execution. This work was also composed based on the lost history of Mírzá Jání, as well as partly on the memories of a very old Bahá'í who had been an early Bábí, named Sayyid Javád Karbalá'í. A comparison of the *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* and the *Tárikh-i-Jadíd* helps to ascertain that both used the same original source for much of their text, but that both later works took liberties with the original. Whether the original work will ever be found remains to be seen. The *Tárikh-i-Jadíd* itself has undergone considerable editing and expansion by various anonymous scribes, which makes determining its original text very difficult as well.

## 2) The Báb

The Báb was born 'Alí-Muhammad on the first day of Muharram, 1235, corresponding to 20 October 1819 on the Gregorian calendar. He was born in the southern Iranian city of Shiraz to a family of prosperous merchants. Both his father, Sayyid Muhammad Ridá, and his mother, Fátimih Bigum, were descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and their families had lived in Shiraz for generations. When 'Alí-Muhammad was seven years old His father died, so responsibility for His upbringing fell to his maternal uncles, especially Hájí Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí.

The young boy was sent to a local teacher named Shaykh 'Ábid for six or seven years for a private education (there being no public schools in Shiraz at the time). The teacher was a Shaykhí, as were the members of the Báb's family, which suggests that the Báb was exposed to Shaykhí interpretations of Islam from a young age. The Báb very much disliked school, apparently acquired little book learning, and regarded much of the education He received as irrelevant. Some scholars have seen this dislike of his early education as having colored the Báb's approach to religion and having influenced His teachings.[1]

All accounts agree that 'Alí-Muhammad was a precocious, intelligent child, and was devoted to prayer at an early age.

A. Young Adulthood. While in his teens, 'Alí-Muhammad began to work in his uncle's business, and by the time he was sixteen or seventeen he was serving as a commercial agent for the family at their offices in Bushihr, an Iranian city on the Persian Gulf. Through this city flowed imports to Shiraz from India and the Arabian peninsula. 'Ali-Muhammad seems to have been a successful merchant, and His later writings praise business as an important livelihood, but one which must be carried out with strict honesty and complete devotion to God. His own life apparently was extremely pious—He is

known to have prayed much of the morning and afternoon on some days—and His religious interests remained strong. He began to write on religious matters as well. The fact that He started to write before declaring His mission is not unusual; Bahá'u'lláh wrote many works before His declaration, and Muhammad received revelations before declaring His mission. Some of the Báb's earliest writings have survived; they were commentaries on the Qur'án.

About 1840 or 1841 'Alí-Muhammad left the family business and traveled to Karbilá in Iraq, where the third Imám, Husayn, is buried.

There He attended a few classes given by Sayyid Kázim-i-Rashtí, head of the Shaykhí School. Though He remained in Karbilá only eight months, He made an impression on many Shaykhís there.

The Báb may also have been familiar with Sufism, or the Islamic mystical movement. Sufism has generally been discouraged or opposed by the Shí'í 'ulamá (learned), but Sufi writings have long circulated in Persian and Sufi orders are common in Iran. The Báb is known to have been in acquaintance with the leading Sufi in Shiraz. The Báb, however, does not use technical Sufi terminology.

The Báb appears to have been more familiar with esoteric and occult Islamic ideas. He uses chronograms, offers cabbalistic interpretations of words, utilizes numerological principles in His writings, and wrote tablets in the form of talismans. He also alludes to astrological terminology.

The Báb also refers to passages from the New Testament—but not the Old Testament—in His writings. This suggests He had access to the latest translations of the Protestant missionaries of the former book into Persian and Arabic.

'Alí-Muhammad remained in Karbilá until His uncle, Sayyid 'Alí, journeyed there and implored Him to return to Shiraz. This He did in 1842. He married Khadíjih Khánum in August of that year and resumed His business. Unable to devote His time to religious study in Karbilá, 'Alí-Muhammad turned again to writing. His extended periods of prayer and His pious acts further developed His reputation as a mystic. Some time before His declaration to Mullá Husayn, the Báb had a dream where He saw the severed head of the Imám Husayn and was privileged to drink seven drops of the Imáms precious blood; this dream may have symbolically marked the beginning of His prophetic consciousness. He privately made some sort of messianic claim to family members and it was accepted by His wife and His uncle, Sayyid 'Alí. There are also some suggestions that word of His claim began to spread.

'Alí-Muhammad's writings before His declaration, however, do not demonstrate a prophetic consciousness. Todd Lawson noted this in his doctoral dissertation about the Tafsír-i-súrih-i-baqarih or "Commentary on the Surih of the Cow," a work the Báb wrote on a chapter of the Qur'án. This Qur'án commentary was started by the

Báb in November or December 1843, some six months before declaring His mission. The first half was completed by February or March 1844; the second half was revealed after the Báb's declaration. It is the only work of the Báb's revealed before His declaration that has survived intact, and thus it is quite important. It also sheds light on the Báb's attitude toward Shí'í beliefs.

B. Declaration. About 2 January 1844 Sayyid Kázim-i-Rashtí died in Karbalá without naming a successor. Since the Shaykhís believed that there was always a Perfect Shí'í on the earth, it immediately occurred to Rashtí's followers that they had to find the new Perfect Shí'í. Furthermore, the year 1260 was about to begin, and many Shaykhís expected that year to usher in the coming of the Qá'im, "He who arises," whom many Shí'ís expected to come. Among the prominent Shaykhís who initiated a search for the Qá'im was Mullá Husayn-i-Bushrú'í, and in May 1844 his travels took him to Shiraz.

According to *The Dawn-Breakers* and to a lesser extent *God Passes By*, Mullá Husayn encountered the Báb by chance on the afternoon of 22 May, accompanied Him to His house, and had dinner with Him. After dinner the subject of Mullá Husayn's search came up and the Báb proposed that He Himself fulfilled all the requirements for being the Qá'im. After several hours of discussion, Mullá Husayn was convinced, and became the first official follower of the Báb. The Báb then began to reveal a commentary on the Súrih of Joseph (the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá).

Other primary historical sources give a slightly more complicated account of the beginnings of the Bábí dispensation. It seems very likely that 'Alí-Muhammad and the Mullá Husayn had met in Karbilá, because Mullá Husayn was the most prominent disciple of Sayyid Kázim, and the Báb had met the sayyid on several occasions and had made quite an impression on some of the Shaykhís there. The Báb's family were active Shaykhís and Mullá Husayn had been in Bushihr immediately before going to Shiraz, so it seems possible Mullá Husayn would have been in touch with relatives of the Báb in Bushihr. None of this precludes the encounter between the two men as being purely fortuitous, but it makes it much more likely their meeting was planned. Furthermore, several primary historical sources state that Mullá Husayn investigated 'Alí-Muhammad's claim for three days before accepting it; one source even quotes Mullá Husayn berating himself for having taken so long. All the sources agree that the Báb's declaration occurred on the evening of 22 May 1844, including the Báb Himself, hence it is possible, even likely, that Mullá Husayn first met the Báb on 20 May instead. If this is true it raises important questions about the accuracy of both *The Dawn-breakers* and *God Passes By*; but there is no

guarantee of infallibility conferred on either work, and the Guardian specifically eschewed infallibility on matters of science and economics, so presumably he did not claim infallibility on matters of history either. Only future historians, with complete access to all the sources, will be able to assess all the sources and come to a consensus about these differing facts.

The Dawn-breakers also states that the Báb told Mullá Husayn not to mention His claim to others, because it was important for others to accept the Báb spontaneously, without previous knowledge of His claims. Over the next few months an additional seventeen individuals accepted the Báb; with Mullá Husayn they were given the title the "Letters of the Living." Scholars have questioned whether the additional declarations of belief were truly spontaneous; some of them were close companions of Mullá Husayn, and all of them were Shaykhís and thus were part of a network of friends who shared a common set of beliefs.

The Báb's claim is another important issue to consider. The title of "the Báb" suggests that He was claiming not to be the Hidden Imám, but merely the gate to the Hidden Imám. A few scholars have emphasized this point strongly and have argued that the Báb changed His mind about His claim; that first He merely claimed Báb-hood, but that after a few months His success led Him to elevate His claim to Imám-hood instead. The Bahá'í reply is that the title "the Báb" should be understood in the context of the principle of gradualism; that had the Báb immediately made public His claim to be the Imám He would have been fiercely opposed, so that by using the title of the Báb He implied a lesser claim and thereby bought precious time to strengthen His movement. The latter approach has much to support it. The Báb Himself says He gradually unveiled His claim to the public, so as not to shock it. There is considerable evidence that the Báb claimed to be the Qá'im from the first night of His mission; Mullá Husayn seems to have understood the Báb to be the Qá'im immediately. Only a few months after the Báb's declaration, one of the Letters of the Living, Mullá 'Alí Bastámí, preached that the Báb was the Qá'im to his Shaykhí friends in Iraq and was tried for heresy and imprisoned as a result.

The Báb also disguised His claim to some extent by writing tafsír or Qur'án commentary. Qur'án commentary was a highly respected and ancient literary form, and not something expected from a Prophet. The Báb used tafsír as His way to declare His station as well as to define His theology and to state His basic differences with traditional Shí'í interpretations of Islam. Thus He used a venerable old literary medium in a radically new way.

A unique aspect of the Báb's commentaries is that He offered the meaning of the text not sentence by sentence or word by word, but letter by letter. In this manner the Báb wrote entire, lengthy books on short chapters of the Qur'án. Such an approach to commentary was not

altogether new in Islam, but the extent the Báb did it was unique. It allowed the Báb maximal freedom in using the Qur'án as His point of departure for any teachings He sought to give to the Bábís.

Only the first chapter of the Qayyumu'l-Asmá was revealed by the Báb on the evening of His declaration to Mullá Husayn. The entire work, which is several hundred pages in length, required forty days to reveal; it is one of the Báb's longer Arabic works. It was widely distributed in the first year of the Bábí movement, functioning as something of a Bible for the Bábís. In the book the Báb states His claim to be a Manifestation of God, though the claim is disguised with other statements that He is the servant of the hidden imám.

Another important early work of the Báb was the Sahífih-yi-makhzúnih. It was revealed before His departure for Mecca in September 1844, and consists of a collection of fourteen prayers, mostly to be recited on specific Muslim Holy Days and festivals. Thus its content remained within the expectations of Islam.

C. Pilgrimage to Mecca. On 10 September 1844 the Báb departed for Mecca to join the annual pilgrimage. In Mecca He declared His claim publicly at the Kaaba and to the Sharif of Mecca, the custodian of the Kaaba. But the Báb was not accepted.

The pilgrimage trip lasted nine and a half months, ending in mid June 1845, when the Báb reached Bushihr in southern Iran again. During this period He wrote extensively. Some of His more important works were the following:

Khasá'il-i-sab'ih: A work composed by the Báb on His sea journey back to Bushihr after His pilgrimage, which listed some regulations to be followed by the Bábí community. A copy of the manuscript probably still exists in Iran.

Kitáb-i-Rúh ("Book of the Spirit"): This book contains 700 or 900 verses and was revealed while the Báb was sailing back to Bushihr from pilgrimage. The original was nearly destroyed when the Báb was arrested. Several manuscript copies are extant.

Sahífih baynu'l-Haramayn ("Treatise between the Two Sanctuaries"): This Arabic work was revealed while the Báb traveled from Mecca to Medina in early 1845 and is in response to questions posed to Him by a prominent Shaykhí leader.

Kitáb-i-Fihrist ("The Book of the Catalogue"): A list of the Báb's works, composed by the Báb Himself after He returned from pilgrimage to Mecca, 21 June 1845. It is an invaluable bibliography of His earliest writings.

D. The Shiraz Period. Returning to Bushihr on 15 May 1845, the Báb proceeded to Shiraz, but was arrested because of the excitement His followers had created in that city. He was kept under house arrest for some

time. Notwithstanding His confinement, the Báb wrote very prolifically during this period:

**Sahífih-yi-Ja'fariyyih:** The Báb wrote this treatise to an unknown correspondent in 1845. Over a hundred pages in length, it states many of His basic teachings, especially in relation to some Shaykhí beliefs.

**Tafsír-i-Súrih-i-Kawthar** ("Commentary on the Chapter on Abundance"): The Báb wrote this commentary for Vahíd while He was in Shiraz; it is the most important work He revealed during the Shiraz period. Though the súrih is only a few lines in length, being one of the shortest in the Qur'án, the commentary on it is over two hundred pages in length. The work was widely distributed, and at least a dozen early manuscripts are extant.

E. The Isfahan Period. Because of a cholera outbreak, the Báb moved to Isfahan, where the governor, Manuchihr Khán, protected Him and allowed Him to live in secret. The need to maintain some secrecy about the Báb's whereabouts greatly decreased His literary output, especially in reply to letters from followers. Nevertheless, He revealed two major works:

**Nubuvvih khássi:** This work, of fifty pages' length, was revealed in two hours in response to a question by Manúchihr Khán. The work discusses the prophethood of Muhammad.

**Tafsír-i-Súrih-i-va'l-'asr** ("Commentary on the Chapter on Time and Age"): This is one of the two important works the Báb penned in Isfahan, between September 1846 and March 1847. It was revealed spontaneously in response to a request by Mír Sayyid Muhammad, the chief cleric of the city; much of it was revealed in a few hours, to the astonishment to those present.

F. The Máh-Kú Period. The death of Manuchihr Khán in March 1847 ended the Báb's protection and He was arrested; He was transported to Tehran, then to Tabriz, and finally to the mountain fortress of Máh-Kú, near the border of Turkey and Russia, where few of His followers could reach Him. He reached Máh-Kú in the late summer of 1847. At first the conditions of confinement were severe, but gradually the Báb's captors gave Him greater freedom of movement and the right to receive guests.

In both Máh-Kú and in the later prison of Chihríq the Báb had the time and opportunity to write extensively. He penned works that announced His station as a Manifestation of God openly, abrogated Islamic law, and ordered His works proclaimed widely. The result were some of His most important and influential works:

**Persian Bayan:** This is undoubtedly the most important work of the Báb and contains the mature summary of His teachings. It was composed in

Máh-Kú in late 1847 or early 1848. The work consists of nine chapters titled váhids or "unities," which in turn are usually subdivided into nineteen bábs or "gates"; the one exception is the last unity, which has only ten bábs. The Báb explained that it would be the task of "Him Whom God Would Make Manifest" to complete the work; Bahá'ís believe the Kitáb-i-Iqán to be the completion of the Bayán. Each unity begins with an Arabic summary of its contents, which makes it easier to read than many of the Báb's works. Extracts of this work are published in Selections from the Writings of the Báb; A. L. M. Nicholas translated the entire work into French, in four 150-page volumes.

Arabic Bayán: This is the shorter and less important of the two Bayáns composed by the Báb. It consists of eleven váhids or "unities," each with nineteen bábs or "gates." It offers a succinct summary of the Báb's teachings and laws. It was composed at Máh-Kú in late 1847 or early 1848.

Dalá'il-i-sab'ih ("Seven Proofs"): There are two works by this name, the longer one in Persian, the shorter one in Arabic; both were composed in Máh-Kú in late 1847 or early 1848. Nicholas called the Persian Seven Proofs "the most important of the polemical works that issued from the pen of Sayyid 'Alí Muhammad" (MacEoin, Sources of Early Bab Doctrine and History, 85). The work was written to either a non-Bábí or to a follower whose faith had been shaken, but we do not know the person's identity. The Arabic text summarizes the seven proofs found in the Persian text. An interesting historical question is whether the Arabic or the Persian text was written first.

G. The Chihríq Period. After seven months, because of pressure from the Russian government the Báb was moved to another fort, Chihríq, which was farther from the Russian border. Confinement was again severe for a time. His stay in Chihríq ran from early May 1848 through July 1850, except for three months when He was taken to Tabriz.

While in Chihríq the writings of the Báb took another turn. The works He produced were more esoteric or mystical and less thematically organized. Two major books were produced, in addition to many minor works:

Kitáb-i-asmá ("The Book of Names"): This is an extremely long book about the names of God. It was penned during the Báb's last days at Chihríq before His execution. The various manuscript copies contain numerous variations in the text; this book will require considerable work to determine its original text.

Kitáb-i-panj sha'n ("Book of Five Grades"): This is one of the Báb's last works, having been composed in March and April of 1850. The work consists of eighty-five sections. These are arranged in seventeen groups, each under the heading of a different name of God. Within each group are five "grades," that is, five different sorts of sections: verses, prayers, homilies,

commentaries, and Persian language pieces. Each group was sent to a different person and was composed on a different day. Thus the work is a kind of miscellany of unrelated material. Some of the sections represent further exposition of basic themes in the Báb's teachings; others consist of lengthy iterations of the names of God, and variations on their roots.

H. Trial and Martyrdom. The trial of the Báb is another controversial event in His life, because His enemies later claimed that He had recanted His beliefs under the pressure of interrogation. There is no evidence of this, however, except their statements.

The Báb's execution for His claims is perhaps the most dramatic event connected with His life. All accounts—those of neutral European observers and enemies of the Báb—agree that the first volley of bullets from a firing squad of 750 Christian Georgian soldiers harmed neither the Báb nor His companion, but cut their ropes and freed them. Bábí accounts state that the Bab had been conversing with a disciple of His when the guards came for Him, that the Báb said He had to finish the conversation, and that after the first volley missed the Báb returned His cell to complete the conversation. The guards found Him there and led Him back to the square; a second firing squad of Muslims succeeded in shooting Him, though even their bullets spared His face.

I. Selection of a Successor. Before His death, the Báb selected an honorary successor or titular head of the Bábí Faith, Mírzá Yahyá, to whom He gave the honorific Sub-i-Azal ("Morning of Eternity"). At the time Mírzá Yahyá was still a teenager, had never demonstrated leadership in the Bábí movement, and was still living in the house of his older brother, Bahá'u'lláh. All of this lends credence to the Bahá'í claim that the Báb had appointed Mírzá Yahyá the head of the Bábí Faith so as to divert attention away from Bahá'u'lláh, while allowing Bábís to visit Bahá'u'lláh and consult with Him freely, and allowing Bahá'u'lláh to write Bábís easily and freely. Furthermore, there is a long history in Shí'ism of hidden leaders, with their deputies wielding the true power (the four bábés themselves are the first examples of this, as is 'Alí-Muhammad's choice of the title "the Báb").

### 3) The Writings of the Báb

Unfortunately, most of the writings of the Báb have been lost. The Báb Himself says they exceeded five hundred thousand verses in length; the Qur'án, in contrast, is 6300 verses in length. If one assumes 25 verses per page, that would equal 20,000 pages of text. Shoghi Effendi mentions nine complete commentaries on the Qur'án, revealed during the Báb's imprisonment at Máh-Kú, which have been lost without a trace. Establishing the true text of the works that are still extant, as

already noted, is not always easy, and some texts will require considerable work. Others, however, are in good shape; for example, several of the Báb's major works are available in the handwriting of His trusted secretaries.

Most works were revealed in response to specific questions by Bábís; this was also true of Bahá'u'lláh's later writing. This is not unusual; the genre of the letter has been a venerable medium for composing authoritative texts as far back as the Apostle Paul. Three quarters of the chapters of the New Testament are letters, were composed to imitate letters, or contain letters within them. Sometimes the Báb revealed works very rapidly by chanting them in the presence of a secretary and eye-witnesses; here again, Bahá'u'lláh followed the same practice later.

Dozens of works by the Báb have survived; some in many manuscripts, others in only one. Denis MacEoin, in his *Sources for Early Bab Doctrine and History*, gives a description of many of them. In addition to major works, the Báb revealed numerous letters to His wife and followers, many prayers for various purposes, numerous commentaries on verses or chapters of the Qur'án, and many khutbihs or sermons (most of which were never delivered). Many of these have been lost; others have survived in compilations.

[1] Cf. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 114-21, where he discusses the Báb's education. Bahá'ís tend to assume that the question of the education of a Manifestation is irrelevant. But one can imagine God using the Manifestation's education as part of the instrument through which revelation is given. Furthermore, neither the Báb nor Bahá'u'lláh referred to materials to which they did not have ordinary access; for example, Bahá'u'lláh never comments at all about Chinese religious ideas and philosophy, even though they were highly developed and sophisticated. It appears that revelation only rarely drew on information not otherwise available to the Manifestation through books.

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