The Babites

By Henry Harris Jessup, D.D.

IN the summer of 1897 an aged Persian

Sheikh came to the American Press

in Beirut, bringing a large sheet of

pasteboard on which he wished a map to

be mounted. On one side it was glazed

with black varnish, and had inscribed on

it in elegant Persian script in gold letters

the Arabic words “Ya Beha el Abha,”

“O Glory of the most Glorious,” the

Babite motto. Our clerk, perceiving this,

asked the Sheikh for the card, and said he

would mount the map on a new and

better one.

That Beha motto now hangs in my

study. The old Sheikh said, in explana-

tion of his scheme of mounting a map on

the face of this beautiful motto, “I have

had this hanging on the wall of my room

and prayed to it for twelve years, and

found it to be vanity and worthless. I

now prefer to read the Bible.”

Ever since the first Babite reform move-

ment in Persia in 1845, the Christian

world has hoped that some of its liberal

tenets might lead the Persian people to

Christianity. But thus far the hope has

not been realized. Those who read the

Bible seem to prefer to find an occult

inner double meaning in the simplest lan-

guage, and construct for themselves a

kind of mystic religious philosophy in

which the Persians delight.

According to the best authorities, Bab-

ism arose as follows:

Mirza Ali Mohammed appeared in

Shiraz in 1845, a pupil of Sheikh Ahmed

Zein ed Din, who taught a mixture of

Sufism, mystic philosophy, and Moslem

Shiite law, and said that the absent Mahdi,

now in a spiritual world called Jabalka

and Jabersa, would soon appear, and that

he was the Bab or Door of the Mahdi.

He then made up a system composed of

Moslem, Nusairiyeh, Jewish, and heathen

doctrines; and then claimed to be Bab ed

Din, and afterwards the Nukta or Center

and Creator of truth, and then that he

was Deity personified; then that he was

the prophet Mohammed, and produced

a new book called the Beyān, which is the

Babite Bible, in twenty thousand verses,

Arabic and Persian. Complaint was made

of its bad grammar and that this is a sign

of imperfection. He explained the un-

grammatical Arabic by the fact that the

words and letters rebelled and sinned in a

previous world, then transmigrated to this

world, and, as a punishment for, in a

previous existence, were put under gram-

matical rules; but he in mercy forgave all

sinners, even to the letters of the alphabet,

and released them, and now they can go

as they please!

He was followed by tens of thousands.

In 1849 he was killed, with multitudes of

his followers. Among his followers was

a beautiful and eloquent woman named

Selma, who divorced her husband and

followed Ali Mohammed the Bab, who

styled her Kurret el Ain (light or refresh-

ment to the eye). Ali Mohammed raised

an army to fight the Persian troops, but

was caught and strangled.

Before Ali Mohammed’s death he said

his successor would be a young disciple

named Yahya. This Mirza Yahya suc-

ceeded him, taking the title of “Subh

Azel”—morning of eternity.

The Bab made the month nineteen

days, answering to the nineteen members

of the sacred hierarchy of which the Bab

is the chief.

Subh Azel was the fourth in the hier-

archy, and on the death of the Bab Ali

Mohammed, and the two others above

him on the list, he became chief of the

sect by regular promotion. Upon the

outbreak of persecution against them,

Subh Azel and his older brother Mirza

Hassein Ali, who was styled Beha Allah,

fled to Baghdad and remained from 1853

to 1864, then to Adrianople. Beha had

persuaded Subh Azel to retire and con-

ceal himself from human gaze, saying to

the people that he was present but invisi-

ble. Beha then claimed the succession,

and two hostile parties arose, Azelites and

Behaites. They were both then exiled

(1864) to Adrianople, where plots and

poisoning among the two parties, and

anonymous letters sent to the Sultan

charging each other with political con-

spiracies, led the Sultan to exile (in 1866)

Subh Azel to Famagusta in Cyprus, and

Beha Allah to Acre. Four of the Azelites

were sent with Beha, and their leader

claimed that Beha was instrumental in

having all of them assassinated in Acre.

Subh Azel died before 1880, and Beha

in 1892.

Beha left three sons—Abbas Effendi,

now sixty; Mohammed Ali, now forty-five;

and Bedea, now aged thirty-five. Moham-

med Ali claims that the father Beha ap-

pointed him spiritual head and Abbas

secular head, but Abbas has usurped both.

They are now divided, the two younger

brothers being in a bitter lawsuit with

Abbas, who has all the prestige of holding

the funds, and the reputation among his

followers of being a reincarnation of Christ.

To understand Babism, we should re-

member the sources from which it was

derived. Jemal ed Din, the Afghani, says

that its author borrowed from Hinduism,

Pantheism, Sufism, and the doctrines of

the Nusairiyeh. The Nusairiyeh of north-

ern Syria believe in one God, self-existent

and eternal. This God manifested him-

self seven times in human form, from

Abel to Ali, son of Abi Talib, which last

manifestation was the most perfect.

At each of these manifestations the

Deity made use of two other persons, the

first created out of the light of his essence

and by himself, and the second created by

the first.

The Deity is called the Maana—the

meaning or reality of all things; the

second, the Ism—name or veil, because

by it the Maana conceals its glory, while,

by it, it reveals itself to men. The third,

the Bab—Door, because through it is the

entrance to the knowledge of the two

former.

The following table shows the seven

trinities of the Nusairiyeh:

Maana. Ism. Bab.

1. Abel Adam Gabriel

2. Seth Noah Yayeel

3. Joseph Jacob Ham ibn Cush

4. Joshua Moses Daw

5. Asaph Solomon Abdullah ibn Simaan

6. Simon (Cephas) Jesus Rozabah

7. Ali Mohammed Salman el Farisee

After Ali, the Deity manifested himself

in the Imams, in some of them totally

and in others partially, but Ali is the

eternal Maana, the divine essence, and

the three are an inseparable trinity. Now

add to this the mystic teaching of the

Mohammedan system of Sufism or Tusow-

wof.

Pure Sufism teaches that only God

exists. He is in all things and all things

are in him. All visible and invisible things

are an emanation from him and are not

really distinct from him. Religions are

matters of indifference. There is no dif-

ference between good and evil, for all is

reduced to Unity, and God is the real

author of the acts of men. Man is not

free in his action. By death the soul

returns to the bosom of Divinity, and the

great object of life is absorption into the

divine nature.

Bear in mind also the doctrine of the

Persian or Shiah Moslems, that Ali was

the first legitimate Imam, or Caliph of

Mohammed, and that he existed before

Adam, and that the twelfth Imam, Mo-

hammed Abdal Kasim, was the Mahdi,

and that he is now concealed in some

secret place and will appear again on

earth. Add to this the highly imagina-

tive and mystic character of the Persian

mind, its fondness for poetry and relig-

ious extravagance, and you have a prep-

aration for the appearance of a man who

had the intellect, strong will, and abhor-

rence of sham to make him a leader among

his fellows.

Abbas Effendi, the oldest son of Beha,

is now living in Haifa, with about seventy

or eighty of his Persian followers, who are

called Behaites. Nothing is heard of

Subh Azel or his followers.

Some years since, Dr. Ibrahim Khei-

rulla, an educated Syrian of great mental

acumen, conceived the idea of introducing

Beha-Babism into the United States. He

declared Beha to be the Messiah returned

to earth and Abbas to be his reincarnation.

He visited Abbas, and from time to time,

as his accredited agent and promoter, has

brought his disciples, chiefly American

women, to visit Abbas, and some of them

at least have bowed down and worshiped

him as the Messiah.

A cousin of Dr. Kheirulla who is clerk

of the American Press in Beirut has given

me the following statement:

“The Doctor, after the death of his first

wife in Egypt in 1882, married first a

Coptic widow in El Faytûm, whom he

abandoned, and then married a Greek

girl whom he also abandoned, and who

was still living in 1897 in Cairo. He was

at the World’s Parliament in Chicago, and

tried to promote several mechanical in-

ventions, as a rubber boot, envelopes, but-

tons, etc. At one time he was worth three

thousand pounds. He then obtained the

degree of Doctor, and taught mental phi-

losophy. He then helped a Greek priest,

Jebara, in publishing a book on the unity

of Islam and Christianity, which fell flat

and had no influence on the public mind.

He then opened a medical clinic to cure

nervous diseases by the laying on of hands

and reading from Psalm xxix., 7, the

words, ‘The voice of the Lord divideth

the flames of fire,’ etc., etc. Then he

went to Chicago and tried trade, and then

teaching, and preaching, and pretty much

everything else. He is a smart talker,

full of plausible argument, and can make

white appear black. Of late he has had

little to do with religion. It can be said

to his credit that, after receiving aid in the

Beirut College, he paid back the money

advanced to him.”

Up to last summer he had the confidence

of Abbas Effendi and represented him in

the United States. The “Egyptian Ga-

zette” of November, 1900, states that Dr.

Kheirulla on his last visit to Haifa differed

with Abbas, claiming that Beha Allah

only was the true divinity, and Abbas is

simply a teacher. Dr. and Mrs. Goet-

zinger, on the other hand, maintain that

Abbas must be worshiped with divine

homage, as he is the true Christ. Some

of the American Babites now follow Dr.

Kheirulla and some Dr. Goetzinger, but

the latter has the official credentials, and

thus the house is divided against itself.

In Baghdad in 1860 the Babite house

was divided into Behaites and Azelites.

In Haifa it is divided between Abbas

Effendi and his two brothers Mohammed

and Bedea. In America it is between Dr.

Kheirulla and Dr. Goetzinger.

The “Egyptian Gazette” states that

Dr. Goetzinger expected two hundred

pilgrims from America to visit and wor-

ship Abbas during the present season.

On a recent visit to Haifa I called on

Abbas Effendi and had a half-hour’s con-

versation with him. My companion was

Chaplain Wells, of Tennessee, recently

from the Philippines, who had met at

Port Said an American lady on her way

to Haifa to visit Abbas Effendi. We met

her at the hotel and had a four hours’

conversation with her. She seemed fasci-

nated or hypnotized by the Effendi. She

had been converted four years ago under

Mr. Moody’s preaching in New York,

attended the Brick Church for a time,

and in some way heard of Abbas Effendi

as being an eminently holy man. Said

she: “I feel in his presence, as I did

in Mr. Moody’s presence, that he is a

very holy man and brings me nearer to

God than any other person.” She said

that she was his guest, and that every

morning he expounds the New Testament

in Arabic. “His two daughters, who know

English, take notes and then translate

them to me.” We asked her if there were

not scores of godly, learned ministers in

America who could explain the New

Testament in English without needing an

interpreter. She said yes, but seemed

to have a hazy idea that there was some-

thing different in Abbas. While we were

conversing in the hotel parlor a tall man

passed the door, clad in a long robe, and

she whispered to us, “There goes that bad

man Bedea Effendi, brother of Abbas, who

wants to kill him. He is a spy.”

I went out and addressed the man in

Arabic, and he told me he was a younger

brother of Abbas, and he had a room at

this hotel. I sent word by this good lady

to Abbas Effendi, and he appointed nine

o’clock the next morning for an interview.

Chaplain Wells went with me. The

Effendi has two houses in Haifa, one for

his family, in which the American lady

pilgrims are entertained, and one down

town, where he receives only men. Here

his Persian followers meet him. They

bow in worship when they meet him on

the street or when they hear his voice.

On Friday he prays with the Moslems in

the mosque, as he is still reputed a good

Mohammedan of the Shiite sect.

We entered a large reception-room, at

one end of which was a long divan

covered, as usual in Syria, with a white

cloth. In a moment he came in and

saluted us cordially with the usual Arabic

compliments, and then sat down on the

end of the divan next to the wall and

invited us to sit next to him.

Beha Allah, the father of Abbas, used

to wear a veil in the street and live

secluded from the gaze of men, living in

an atmosphere of mystery which greatly

impressed his devout Persian followers.

But Abbas Effendi, on succeeding his

father, threw off this reserve, and is a man

among men. He has been in Beirut often,

and has a reputation of being a great

scholar in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic,

writing with equal ease and eloquence in

all. He visits his friends in Haifa, and

is a man of great affability and courtesy—

traits which characterize many of the

Mohammedan and Druze Sheikhs and

Effendis whom I know in Beirut, Sidon,

Damascus, and Mount Lebanon. After

another round of salutations, I introduced

myself and Chaplain Wells, and told him

that, although a resident of Syria for forty-

five years, I had never visited Haifa

before, and, having heard and read much

of his father and himself, I was glad to

meet him.

He asked my profession. I told him I

was an American missionary, and was

connected with the American Press and

Publishing House in Beirut.

“Yes,” said he “I know your Press

and your books. I have been in Beirut,

and knew Dr. van Dyke, who was a most

genial, learned, and eloquent man, and I

highly esteemed him.”

I said his greatest work was the trans-

lation of the Bible into Arabic.

He at once rejoined: “Very true. It

is the best translation from the original

made into any Eastern language. It is

far superior to the Turkish and the Per-

sian versions. The Persian especially is

very defective. Nothing is more difficult

than to translate the Bible from its origi

nal tongues. The translator must fully

understand the genius of both languages

and grasp the inner spiritual meaning.

For instance, Jesus the Christ said, ‘I

am the bread which came down from

heaven.’ Now, he did not mean that he

was literally bread, but bread signifies

grace and blessing; *i.e*., I came down from

heaven as grace and blessing to men’s

souls. But if you translate that into Per-

sian literally, as bread, it would not be

understood. The same difficulty exists,”

he continued, “in translating the Koran

into another language.”

I said that I quite agreed with him, as

the English translations of the Koran are

in a great part dry and vapid, but that

there is a difference between translating a

text and explaining it. A translator must

be faithful to the text itself.

He then said that hundreds had tried

to translate the Koran from Arabic into

Persian, including the great Zamakhshari,

and all had utterly failed.

I remarked that it was a great comfort

that the Bible was so well translated into

Arabic, and had been so widely distrib-

uted, and that since 1865, when Dr. van

Dyke completed the translation of the

whole Bible, our Press had issued more

than six hundred thousand copies, and

this year would issue from thirty thousand

to fifty thousand copies.

I then remarked that the Mohammed-

ans object to our use of the term “Son

of God,” and asked him if he regarded

Christ as the Son of God.

He said: “Yes, I do; I believe in the

Trinity. But the Trinity is a doctrine

above human comprehension, and yet it

can be understood.”

He then asked me: “Did Christ under-

stand the Trine personality of the Deity,

*i.e*., the Trinity?”

I said, “Most certainly.”

“Then,” said he, “it is understandable,

yet *we* cannot understand it.”

I replied, “There are many things in

nature which we believe and yet cannot

understand.” I told him the story of the

old man who overheard a young man ex-

claim to a crowd of his companions, “I

will never believe what I cannot under-

stand.” The old man said to him, “Do

you see those animals in the field—the

cattle eating grass, and it turns into hair

on their backs; sheep eating the same

grass, and it turns into wool; and swine

eating it, and it becomes bristles on their

backs; do you believe this?” The youth

said, “Yes.” “Do you understand it?”

“No.” “Then,” said the old man,

“never say you will not believe what you

do not understand.”

The Effendi remarked: “Yes, that is

like a similar remark made once by a

Persian to the famous Zamakhshari, ‘I

cannot understand this doctrine of God’s

Unity and Eternity, and I will not believe

it.’ Zamakhshari replied, ‘Do you un-

derstand the watery secretions of your

own body?’ ‘No.’ ‘But you believe

they exist? Then say no more you will

not believe what you do not understand.’”

I then explained to the Effendi our

view of salvation by faith in Christ; that

whosoever believeth in him shall not per-

ish, but have everlasting life, and that,

being justified by faith, we have peace

with God; that Christ has paid the ran-

som, and now God can be just, and yet

the justifier of them who believe. “And

does your excellency believe this?” He

replied promptly, “Yes.” “And do you

accept the Christ as your Saviour?” He

said, “Yes.” “And do you believe that

Jesus the Christ will come again and judge

the world?” He said, “Yes.”

I then drew a little nearer to him and

said: “My dear friend, I am more than

sixty-eight years of age, and you are almost

as old, and soon we shall stand together

before the judgment seat of Christ. Now

I want to ask you a very plain question.

I have seen in an American paper [the

“Literary Digest”] a statement that an

American woman, evidently of sincere

character, had stated that she came to

Haifa and visited you, and that when she

entered your room she felt that she was

in the very presence of the Son of God,

the Christ, and that she held out her arms,

crying, ‘My Lord, my Lord,’ and rushed

to you, kneeling at your blessed feet, sob-

bing like a child. Now, I could not

believe this, and thought it a newspaper

invention. I wish to ask you whether

this is true. Can it be right for the crea-

ture to accept the worship due only to the

Creator?”

He smiled and seemed somewhat dis-

turbed, and said, “What is this sudden

change of subject? Where were we?—dis-

coursing on the high themes of the Trinity

and redemption and divine mysteries, and

now you suddenly open an entirely different

subject. This is entirely different; let us

keep to theological themes.”

I replied: “It is a change of subject, but

I am seriously anxious to know whether

that statement is true.”

He then said very calmly, “I am only

the poorest and humblest of servants.”

I saw that he was not disposed to

answer such a point-blank question and

seemed much embarrassed, and glanced

towards an attendant or disciple, a young

Persian, who sat in a chair facing us.

So I took up another question. I said:

“The Christ promised to send the Holy

Spirit, the Paraclete. Now, the Moham-

medans claim that Mohammed is the

Paraclete. We claim and believe that He

is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the

Trinity.”

“Yes,” said he, “I know that you be-

lieve that. That is your doctrine; but

that is a very profound subject and very

important.”

I saw from his manner that he was get-

ting weary of talking, and told him who

my companion was—the Rev. Captain

Wells, a United States chaplain from the

Philippines, who was a strong temperance

advocate, and had made a report to Presi-

dent McKinley urging the prohibition of

the use of liquor in the United States

army. He expressed his approval of the

total abstinence principle and his gratify-

cation that there is a temperance reading-

room in Beirut.

I then alluded to the “Episode of the

Bab,” written by Professor E. G. Browne,

of Cambridge, and asked him if he knew

Professor Browne and his book? He

replied: “Professor Browne has not com-

prehended our views. He heard us and

then heard our enemies [the Subh Azel-

ites], and wrote down the views of all.

How can he get the truth? Now, suppos-

ing that a man wanted to learn about the

Jews, and you are, we will suppose, an

anti-Semite. He asks you about the

Jews and writes down your views. Then

he asks a Rabbi and takes down his views,

and prints both. How can he get at the

real truth? So with Professor Browne. He

sees us through the eyes of our enemies.”

I then invited the Effendi to let me

know when he came to Beirut, that I might

call on him. He replied: “When I come

to Beirut, I shall do myself the honor of

calling upon you.”

And then we took our leave, with the

usual profuse Arabic salutations.

Now, what can one say in brief of such

a man? Whether intentionally on his

part or not, he is now acting what seems

to be a double part—a Moslem in the

mosque, a Christ, or at least a Christian

mystic, at his own house. He prays with

the Moslems, “There is no God but God,”

and expounds the Gospels as an incarna-

tion of the Son of God. His dislike of

Professor Browne comes from the fact

that Professor Browne visited Subh el

Azel in Cyprus and obtained from him

documents which reflect seriously upon

Beha Allah, and charge him with assas-

sination and other crimes.

His declarations of belief in the Trinity

and redemption through the Christ must

be interpreted in the light of Sufist pan-

theism and of his belief in a succession of

incarnations, of which his followers regard

him as the last and greatest.

It is difficult to regard without indigna-

tion the Babite proselytism now being

carried on in the United States. One

American woman who passed through

Beirut recently, *en route* for the Abbas

Effendi shrine, stated that she was at first

an agnostic and found that a failure; then

she tried Theosophy, and found that too

thin; then she tried Christian Science and

obtained a diploma authorizing her to

heal the sick and raise the dead, and found

that a sham, and now was on her way to

see what Abbas Effendi had to offer!

Surely that woman has found out what

it is to feed on ashes.

At the military barracks in Beirut is a

tower clock with an eastern face keeping

eastern time, in which it is always twelve

o’clock at sunset, and a western face keep-

ing European time. Abbas Effendi seems

to the people of Syria to have these two

faces—the eastern for the Moslems and

the Turkish Government by which he is

kept in exile from Persia; and the west-

ern for the pilgrims who come from New

York and Chicago.

On Mount Cannel are certain round

stones, geodes of flint, hollow and lined

with crystals of quartz. The people call

them Elijah’s watermelons. They look

smooth and round and melon-like on the

outside, but inside are nothing but crystals,

which would tax the digestion of a tougher

man than even the stalwart Tishbite.

These pilgrims are attracted by the rumor

of spiritual fruits in Haifa just under the

Carmel of Elijah, but they may find to their

sorrow that there is no more true nourish-

ment in them than in Elijah’s watermelons.