

The relation of the Báb to the traditions of Islám

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Each messenger of God is reared in the religion of his forefathers; abiding by its laws until the day he declares his spiritual station, as we find Christ conforming to the Hebrew rites until He announced Himself the Saviour of mankind. The thought and teachings of the new religion brought to earth by each successive messiah are coloured by those of the preceding faith but add a new dynamic force and a fresh spiritual viewpoint. To the external observer the new prophet is a reformer of the established religion but the vital spiritual impetus he brings, passes unperceived; thus it is interesting to remember that the Romans considered Christianity not a new religion but an offshoot of Judaism until as late as the second and third centuries, and in our day, the Bahá'í Faith has been mentioned by scholars as merely another Muslim sect, an estimation as incorrect as the Roman opinion of Christianity.

The forerunner of the Bahá'ís Faith, Siyyid¹ 'Alí-Muḥammad, called the Báb,² was born in Shíráz, Persia, in the year 1819.³ On May twenty-third, 1844, He declared His mission that He came to prepare the world for the advent of a great prophet—"Him whom God should make manifest".

As the Báb was reared in the faith of Islám, to realize His superlative courage and the extent of the difficulties that confronted Him it is necessary to survey the historical background and moral evolution of the Muslim world. To understand the significance of the titles "Gate" and "Point"—why He was acclaimed the Twelfth Imám, as well as from what religious formula came the mystic number nineteen, we must delve into tradition, trace the prophecies made by Muḥammad concerning His beloved son-in-law 'Alí and study the tragic division that arose immediately after the Prophet's death and divided Islám into two irreconcilable factions Sunnite and Shi'ite.

The chief cause of this schism was the Shi'ite contention that the first three Khalífs, Abú-Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uḥmán,⁴ were usurpers, that 'Alí who was the fourth Khalíf should have been the first as his rights of immediate succession were derived from passages in the Qur'án and also from the clearly expressed desire of the Prophet. The Sunnites consider Abú-Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uḥmán as the true successors of Muḥammad elected by the people.

The Shi'ites quote the tradition that tells of Muḥammad's return from his last pilgrimage, he made the mid-day prayer and turning toward his companions said: "I am called from on high and am going to die. Know that I leave you two important things, one of which is more important than the other: they are the verses of the Qur'án and the members of my family. Look and reflect how, after me, you will act toward them and how you will conserve them.

¹ Siyyid is a title given to the descendants of Muḥammad. The word signifies chief or master.

² Báb: gate or door.

³ E. G. Browne: *The Episode of the Báb* (1891) gives the date of the Báb's birth as 20 October 1819. A. L. M. Nicolas: *Seyyed Ali Mohammed dit le Báb* (1905) states that he has in his possession a manuscript which gives it as 26 March 1821. These two works are the main sources of information for this article. M. Nicolas is a distinguished orientalist and was for many years the first interpreter of the French legation in Persia, his book *Seyyed Ali Mohammed* is now extremely rare. I have done my best in translating M. Nicolas' French to remain as close to the original as possible.

⁴ Abú-Bakr was khalíf for but twenty-eight months, dying in the year AH 13 (AD 634). 'Umar reigned ten years and a half, dying in AH 23 (AD 644). 'Uḥmán was assassinated at Medina in AH 35 (AD 656), having reigned twelve years.

These two things are indissolubly joined until the day when they rejoin me in the basin of Kawthar (Paradise). While they are among you, you cannot separate yourselves from them.” The Prophet added: “God is my friend, and I am the friend of all believers.” Then he took ‘Alí’s hand and raising it cried: “Whosoever considers me as his friend, is the friend of ‘Alí. O my God! Love whoever loves him and detest whosoever is his enemy; come to the aid of whoever aids him and abase whoever wishes to abase him.”⁵ The Qur’án contains many verses concerning the station of ‘Alí.⁶ In verse 4:62, Muḥammad says: “O believers! Obey God, obey the apostle and those among you who exercise authority. Bring your differences before God and before the apostle, if you believe in God and in the last day. This is the best way to end your disagreements.” Jábir (son of ‘Abdu’lláh) asked Muḥammad the meaning of this verse saying: “Who are those of us who will exercise authority and about whom God says: ‘Obey Me and them’?” The Prophet replied: “They are my khalífs after me, O Jábir (son of ‘Abdu’lláh)! They will be the guides who will show the way. The first among them is ‘Alí (son of Abú-Tálib), after him, Ḥasan, then Ḥusayn, then ‘Alí (son of Ḥusayn); after him, Muḥammad (son of ‘Alí) and this one is known in the Tawráh* under the name of Báqir. It is too soon for thee to render thy services unto him.⁷ When thou seest him, give unto him my salutation. His successor shall be Šádiq Ja’far (son of Muḥammad). After him will come Músá (son of Ja’far), then ‘Alí (son of Músá), then Muḥammad (son of ‘Alí). After him ‘Alí (son of Muḥammad), and then Ḥasan (son of Muḥammad) ‘Askarí. Then will come my namesake⁸ Ḥujjatu’lláh fí’l-Arḍ (the proof of God on earth), the purest among the pure, Muḥammad (son of Ḥasan) ‘Askarí. This twelfth Imám is him to whom God will give victory from rising until setting, and it is he who will be hidden among his followers and his saints. While he is hidden, no one will believe in his reign, except those privileged ones in whose hearts God will have planted faith in him.”⁹

This evidence, in the words of Muḥammad Himself, renders it obvious why the Shi’ites consider ‘Alí should have been the first spiritual and political director, both Imám and khalíf of the nation. It is clear to them that he was destined by God to fulfil this function that was to remain by direct inheritance in the Prophet’s family. Hence the election of Abú-Bakr as the first khalíf, though he was a holy man and the father-in-law of Muḥammad, was opposed to the design indicated by the Prophet. The Shi’ites recognize the Imám as the only legitimate chief of the Muslim world, both spiritual and temporal; they do not admit the authority of a khalif raised to sovereignty by human investiture instead of divine decree. Dr E. G. Browne¹⁰ says: “In a word, the khalíf of the Sunnís is merely the outward and visible Defender of the Faith: the Imám of the Shi’ites is the divinely-ordained successor of the Prophet, one endowed with all perfections and spiritual gifts, one whom all the faithful must obey, whose wisdom is superhuman, and whose words are authoritative.” In various Shi’ite sects ‘Alí is elevated to nearly the same exalted station as Muḥammad, and his holiness was so apparent that even the Sunnites recognized him as the first Imám but never as the first khalíf.

Wide as is this chasm between the two sects there is still another cause of grave disunion that revolves around the ḥadíth.¹¹ These ḥadíth are the oral decisions and judgments of Muḥammad plus those of His Companions. Decisions of procedure, justice or manners derived authority, if a precedent could be traced through a ḥadíth to the Prophet or a disciple. The ḥadíth served to elucidate and extend the existing laws and

⁵ This passage is the explanation of Qur’án 5:71. Nicolas: 1905, pp. 82-84.

⁶ Qur’án 2:203, 275; 4:62; 5:60, 71; 33:34; 56:10; 66:4; 76:7, 8. Nicolas: 1905.

* The Law (Torah, Tawráh, Pentateuch)

⁷ i.e. you will still be alive when he reigns.

⁸ The Imáms reigned from AH 40 to AH 260 when Ḥujjatu’lláh Muḥammad disappeared.

⁹ Qur’án 4:62. Nicolas: 1905.

¹⁰ E. G. Browne: 1891, note O, p. 296.

¹¹ The word ḥadíth will be used throughout this article as a singular and collective noun. Ḥadíths is scarcely possible in English and the employment of the Arabic broken plural aḥadíth is not desirable.

occupied the same position as the Talmud in the Hebrew religion. The Qur'án is the written law, the ḥadīth the oral law. Only the smallest proportion of the vast quantity of ḥadīth existing throughout the Muslim world are authentic, but this does not diminish their influence. For the Sunnites the ḥadīth of Muḥammad alone are articles of faith, while the Shi'ites accept the words of the Imáms as well. Only a perception of the importance of this "divine literature" can guide us through the maze of Islamic doctrines and demonstrate that in reality there are two religions: one based on the Qur'án and the traditional sayings of the Prophet, and the other resting almost entirely on the ḥadīth of Muḥammad and His family, that is to say the family descended from His daughter of Fátimih and 'Alí.

As the cause of Islám spread and imposed its faith on conquered peoples they enlisted under the banner of one of the two main sects. Persia became Shi'ite for various reasons, some historic, some religious and others political. The chief historical motive lay in the marriage of the daughter of the dethroned Persian ruler Yazdigird III, to Ḥusayn, the son of 'Alí. This union bound Persia with a mighty tie to the cult of the Imáms.

Let us now turn our attention to the Báb and His connection with Islám. What does the title Báb signify? The explanation rests upon a Shi'ite tradition. Muḥammad said of 'Alí: "I am the City of Knowledge¹² and 'Alí is the Gate thereof." Here we find a first Báb who is none other than the successor of Muḥammad. Each Imám in turn became the Gate to this divine City and when the text is cited which says that after the Imáms, the gate of Knowledge swung closed and would be reopened only by the Twelfth Imám,¹³ who was hidden but living; we remember that Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad announced His mission by crying: "The Gate is open and I am that Gate." It is obvious that the Reformer accepted the Shi'ite traditions and declared Himself the continuation of the Imáms, in fact, the reappearance of the Twelfth Imám, Şāhibu'z-Zamán (Lord of Time, one of his many titles), the direct and divine inheritor of Muḥammad. The Prophet said: "I am the City of Knowledge: 'Alí is the Gate thereof." If one would enter the City one must pass through the Gate; therefore the immense Significance of the title "Báb" is apparent. Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad is the door through which come the pure teachings of the past age and he is also the Gate to the City of the new revelation.

The Twelfth Imám, Muḥammad, son of Imám Ḥasan-i-'Askarí, was born according to most historians in AH 255 and succeeded his father in the Imamate in AH 260. The Shi'ites believe he never died but disappeared before he ever reigned in an underground passage; that he still lives, surrounded by a chosen band of faithful followers, in one of the mysterious legendary cities, Jábulqá and Jábulsá. When the fullness of time is come, when the earth is flooded with injustice, and the faithful are plunged in despair, he will come forth, overthrow the infidels, establish universal peace and justice, and inaugurate a millennium of blessedness.¹⁴ The prophecies concerning him are legion, many ḥadīth attributed to Muḥammad speak of him and the whole of Islám was breathlessly awaiting the day of his reappearance. The eleventh Imám died in AH 260 and the holy Midhí (Rightly Guided) disappeared before he played the role of Imám on this earth: therefore the gate of divine science swung closed on that date, and, according to prophecy, would be opened by God after the space of one day. In the Qur'án we are told that a day of God amounts to one thousand years in our calculation, so it is easily computed that the year foretold for the reopening of the sacred Gate is 1260. The Báb declared Himself in 1844 of our era which equals AH 1260. In the eighth Váhid of the Bayán the Báb says: "... But thou wast in the manifestation of the Nuqṭiy-i-Bayán (i.e. the Báb, the 'Point of Revelation') when all believers in the Apostle of God were expecting the appearance of

¹² i.e., Divine knowledge containing all knowledge. It is a ḥadīth.

¹³ Şāhibu'z-Zamán, the Lord of Time; Mihdí, the Rightly Guided; Qá'im, he who executes the orders of God; these are but a few of his titles.

¹⁴ See E. G. Browne: 1891, note O, p. 296, for explanation of occultation of the Twelfth Imám.

the promised Mihdí; for this tradition is from the Apostle of God, and all, simple and gentle, are agreed therein. Now there is no doubt that the substance of Faith was confined to the Shi'ites, and that the sect of Islám is the same outward sect whereof the adherents call themselves Shi'ites; while men avowedly call Fárs the 'Abode of Knowledge':¹⁵ yet, although the Tree of Truth arose, not one of the people recognized it (even) after perceiving it. The degree of their remoteness is evident, for this sufficeth unto their abasement; yet night and day they exclaim 'Speed! Speed!' ... So likewise in the manifestation of the Nuqṭiy-i-Bayán (i.e. the Báb) if all should be assured that this is that same Mihdí (whose coming was) promised, whom the Apostle of God foretold, not one of the believers in the Qur'án would have turned aside from the saying of the Apostle of God. So likewise in the manifestation of Him whom God shall make manifest behold the same thing, for should all be assured that he is that same 'He whom God shall make manifest' whom the Nuqṭiy-i-Bayán foretold, not one would turn aside."¹⁶ It is clear from these passages that the Báb referred to Himself as the Twelfth Imám and mentioned the purity of the Shi'ite sect.

'Alí was the first Báb and we will now see that he was the first Nuqṭih or Point as were all the Imáms, and as Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad was in His turn.

'Alí said: "All that is in the Qur'án is contained in the first Súrah,¹⁷ all that is in the first Súrah is contained in Bismi'lláhi'r-Raḥmání'r-Raḥím,¹⁸ all that is in the Bismi'lláhi'r-Raḥmání'r-Raḥím is contained in the B of Bismi'lláh, all that is contained in the B of Bismi'lláh is contained in the point that is beneath the B—and I am that Point."¹⁹

The letter B in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish alphabets is composed of a single line with a diacritical point directly beneath it (↵). The point differentiates the letter B from its fellows and is in reality its essence. Muḥammad is the point, because he is the essence of the B which is the essence of Bismi'lláh, which is the essence of the knowledge of God; this knowledge being the origin and final cause of creation, Muḥammad is the Point of this world and the worlds to come. The Shi'ites transfer this station to 'Alí after the Prophet's death, and thence to the Imáms in rotation. The Báb, in the ninth Báb of the third Váḥid of the Bayán, tells us that "All that is in the Bayán is synthesized in one of the verses of the Bayán." The tenth Báb explains that this is the first verse. In the commentary on this Báb, the Báb announces that "Today, if someone transported himself to the commencement of the manifestation of Muḥammad, which is the place where the Primal Will²⁰ is fixed, he will see that (all things) which, in the Qur'án, are (things) are through him, whether good or bad. They have been manifested from the (sea) of his manifestation, as all rests upon him. Therefore, the aim of the first verse was the (essence of the) being of Muḥammad in the Qur'án. Therefore, 'all things flow from the B of Bismi'lláh', simply signifies that Muḥammad Himself is the B. Very well, let him who has transported himself to the appearance of Muḥammad, also transport himself to the Bayán. All who believe in God or believe in an existence outside God, all this exists solely because of the Nuqṭiy-i-Bayán, and it is He Who writes this verse. All that is in the Bayán is synthesized in one of the verses, and it is He the B of Bismi'lláh and this B is a proof in itself. Therefore, as words and letters are only made real through the Nuqṭih (Point) also, through Him the realities of human beings will manifest and multiply."²¹ In the eleventh Báb of the third Váḥid of the Bayán the Báb writes: "All that is in this verse which is the synthesis of the Bayán is in the Bismi'lláhi'l-Amana'i'l-Aqdas." Thus we see that the

¹⁵ The Abode of Knowledge (Dár al-'Ilm) is the official title of Shíráz.

¹⁶ Passages from the eighth and ninth Váḥid of the Bayán given in the original and translated by E. G. Browne: 1891, note N, p. 292.

¹⁷ Verse; division of the Qur'án.

¹⁸ "In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful"

¹⁹ Nicolas: 1905, p. 11.

²⁰ "The Primal Will: the first creation of God. The Primal Will then created the world. It is reflected in Muḥammad as in a mirror, and in this mirror one can see nought but what is reflected, that is to say the Primal Will." Nicolas: 1905, p. 12, fn.

²¹ Nicolas: 1905, p. 12.

Báb has changed the formula of adoration; if that of Muḥammad sufficed for His time, it does not suffice for the new day and the divine attributes of “In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful”, are inferior to those indicated by the new formula: “In the Name of God, the Inaccessible, the Sanctified”. If the Báb had not made Himself a part of Islám His new doctrines would have had a less far-reaching and dynamic effect, as it was He Who electrified the clergy by claiming to be the reappearance of the Twelfth Imám and then proceeding to make such drastic reforms as the changing of the very formula of adoration of the Muslim world. The commentary of the Bayán continues: “All material letters exist and flow from a point—a line is nothing but a succession of points;—therefore, the reality of the letters does not exist nor develop except through the point of Truth. This Point, in the Qur’án, is Muḥammad, in the Bayán, the master of the Seven Letters (‘Alí Muḥammad contains seven letters when written in Arabic) and in the manifestation of ‘Him whom God Shall Make Manifest’, it is Divine Truth, the Divine being, camphor in essence, even the essence itself, as, by its own light, it is the sun of truth.” We may interpret this as meaning that words have a form and a soul: the form is derived by the repetition or the prolongation of the Point, and the soul is derived from the prolongation, or emanation of the Point of Truth: and this point of truth was Muḥammad in the Qur’án, the Báb in the Bayán, and Bahá’u’lláh, “He whom God has made manifest” in our day. What is this prolongation of which the Báb speaks? It is the relation that exists between the Primal Will, the Messengers of God and the fresh dynamic power which flows through the world at each prophetic period. Bahá’u’lláh, the prophet of our age, the fulfilment of the Báb, says in the Seven Valley’s: “*But, in every state for every letter, a sense is intended in accord with the requirement of that state. Yea, the traveller (in search of truth) understands an allegory from every name and a mystery from every letter!*”

In the twelfth Váḥid of the Bayán, the Báb says that “*The Point is like the sun, and the other letters are like mirrors placed before the resplendent star.*” Thus, the Point of Truth is reflected in the words which the Messenger employs to express himself, or one might say, the words themselves take part in the Truth. The Primal Will or Eternal Truth is a point, it is reflected in the being of the ordained personage who, by this fact, becomes the mirror of the Point and is, in consequence, the Point itself. As he is the Point, one can easily conceive that he would be the synthesis of all knowledge, therefore—The City of Knowledge. Today there is a road leading to this City, and this road is the Báb and His successor; there are many Gates of access to the City who are the people of Unity; once within its walls the traveller contemplates the Point of Truth, which is none other than the Unity of God.

Turning now to the mystic number nineteen: it is found in the sacred formula of Islám which contains nineteen letters as does the Bismi’lláhi’l-Amna’i’l-Aqdas of the Báb, and it is from these that the Nineteen “Letters of the Living” are derived: each letter represents a holy person surrounding the manifestation of the Báb.

One must not suppose the Báb to have represented only a continuation of the religion of Islám, or to have founded merely another Muslim sect. Never was there a greater reformer, never a more revolutionary influence. His reform began at the very roots of the Muslim world. He arose at a time when the true religion of Muḥammad was choked with superstition and hatred, the clergy corrupted, and Islám in darkness. Nicolas²² says of Him: “The sight of the immorality, the shamelessness and vicious lies of the clergy, disgusted His pure and sincere soul: He felt the need of introducing basic reforms to remedy the public evils and must, more than once, have hesitated before the prospect of the revolution He would have to precipitate to deliver the minds and bodies of the people from the yoke of brutality and force which weighed upon all Persia to the immense advantage of a corrupt minority and the debasement of the true religion of the Prophet. His per-

²² p. 203.

plexity must have been great, his agony terrible, and he must have needed the heart of triple bronze of which Horace speaks to dive headlong into the sea of superstition and hatred which must inevitably submerge Him. It is one of the most magnificent examples of courage that have been given humanity to contemplate, and it is also an amazing proof of the love which our hero bore for his fellowman. He sacrificed himself for humanity: for it He gave His body and His soul, for it He underwent privation, insult, injury, torture and martyrdom. He sealed with His blood the past of universal brotherhood, and like Jesus he paid with his life for announcing a reign of concord, of equity and of the love of one another. He perceived clearly what formidable dangers overshadowed Him, He himself knew well to what savage extremes excited fanaticism could lead: but all His reflections on this matter could not deter Him from the path He had resolved to follow: fear had no hold upon His tranquil soul and without deigning to cast a backward glance, calm, and in full possession of Himself, He entered into the furnace.”

It is clear that the titles taken by Siyyid ‘Alí Muḥammad were not idle names but titles reaching back to the birth of Islám, that he represented a continuation of the true teachings and fulfilled the prophecies the whole Muslim world awaited yet, He introduced beliefs so diametrically opposed to orthodox Islam that one cannot but regard Him as the forerunner of a definitely new religion. The Báb’s most revolutionary doctrine was that of the succession of prophets. He conserved the belief that Muḥammad was the incarnation of universal Intelligence but with a modification of the utmost importance: He maintained that the Primal Will was mirrored in the hearts of the different Prophets Who succeeded one another and of them Muḥammad was only one.

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