

\$3.00 US

Deepen

Vol. 1 No. 1 • Fall 1993

magazine



Entry by Troops

The Tablet of Ahmad

The Seclusion in Kurdistan

plus a pull-out pamphlet and poster

Overcoming Racism

Bahá'u'lláh's Seclusion in Kurdistan

by Bijan Ma'sumián, Ph.D.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following paper examines a part of Bahá'í history of which, as Christ's time in the wilderness, little is known. After the tragic martyrdom of the Báb in July of 1850, many of the followers of the Báb decided to follow Bahá'u'lláh into the exile forced upon Him by the Shah of Persia. During the ensuing years, a number of the faithful became aware of the divine identity of Bahá'u'lláh. Despite this growing recognition of Bahá'u'lláh's superiority, the questionable maneuverings of Subh-i-Azal eventually led to a rift between the faithful and those who chose to follow Azal in his attempt to usurp the authority of Bahá'u'lláh. Unwilling to be the object of such disunity, Bahá'u'lláh chose to depart from Baghdad for the wilderness of northeastern Iraq.

Historians have always experienced difficulty in reconstructing the precise nature of the events that led to Bahá'u'lláh's two-year retirement to Iraqi Kurdistan (1854-1856). Accounts of His daily life in that region also remain, for the most part, sketchy.

Much of this ambiguity may be due to two distinct factors. First, until recently few scholarly attempts were made to provide a clear and concise picture of the events surrounding Bahá'u'lláh's decision to withdraw from the Bábí community of Baghdad. Second, most of what is known today about Bahá'u'lláh's stay in Kurdistan relies either on His own personal accounts or on inferences made from His works penned during that period. None of Bahá'u'lláh's followers shared His self-imposed exile and, consequently, no comprehensive history of those days is left to posterity. However, recent publication of several scholarly works have paved the way toward shedding more light on this rather obscure period in Bahá'í history. The purpose of this paper is to draw upon these new sources and present a logical framework for a better understanding of this significant phase in the metamorphosis of the Bábí religion into the Bahá'í

Faith.

Bahá'u'lláh's Exile to Iraq

Following the failed attempt on the life of Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, the King of Persia, by a small band of radical Bábís, the entire Bábí community came under suspicion. The would-be assassins were immediately arrested and the more well-known figures were fervently sought.

At the time of the assassination attempt, Bahá'u'lláh, who had recently returned from pilgrimage to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbilá, was in Afchá, a summer resort near Tehran. Although He condemned the actions of these radicals, He realized that He might be sought by the government officials as a Bábí leader and He chose to surrender Himself to the authorities. He was taken to a prison where He remained for four months.* During that time, according to His later testimony, He had several mystical experiences which convinced Him that He was the One whose appearance the Báb had foreseen and who was destined to become the next leader of the Bábí movement.¹

In the meantime, at the insistence of Mírzá Majíd-i-Ahi, the Secretary to the Russian Legation in Tehran

* The Síyáh Chál, or "Black Pit." 1) Táherzádeh, Adib, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Vol. I. Oxford: George Ronald, Publisher, 1974 p. 10.

and brother-in-law of Bahá'u'lláh, Prince Dolgorki, the Russian Ambassador, pressured the government of Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh either to produce evidence against Bahá'u'lláh or to release Him.² In absence of any proof, Bahá'u'lláh, Who was initially condemned to life in prison, was forced by the King to choose a place of exile for Himself and His family.

Prince Dolgorki encouraged Bahá'u'lláh to emigrate to Russia but the latter chose Iraq, probably for a number of reasons. For instance, Najaf and Karbilá, two major centers of Shí'íh pilgrimage, were located in Iraq.* Also, Iraq's vicinity with Persia (Iran) made it possible for Him to keep a close eye on the events in Persia and stay in touch with other active Bábís. In addition, the presence of a multitude of Shí'íhs in Iraq provided Him with fertile ground for spreading the teachings of the Báb in those regions.

A group of Bábís chose to follow Bahá'u'lláh into exile in 1853. Among them was His half-brother Mírzá Yahyá, otherwise known as Subḥ-i-Azal (*"Morn of Eternity"*), whom the Báb had appointed to head the Bábí movement after His death.

Bahá'í accounts claim that the Báb's appointment of Azal (who was thirteen years younger than Bahá'u'lláh) was only nominal, as he was only in his teens at that time. The purpose behind this was to divert the attention of the opposition from Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One of the Bábí dispensation, Whose rising prominence was endangering His life.

The arrangement was suggested by Bahá'u'lláh to the Báb, Who approved it. Beside Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, only two other individuals, Mírzá Músá (Aqáy-i-Kalím), Bahá'u'lláh's full brother, and a certain Mullá Abdu'l-Karím-i-Qazvíní, who was later martyred

in Tehran, were aware of this arrangement.³ However, following the Báb's martyrdom, the question of succession came to cause much disturbance among the faithful. It ultimately came to result in a permanent rift between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal.

Azal's Leadership

While future historians may need to further clarify the exact nature of Azal's nomination, there is little doubt at this time that, following the Báb's execution in 1850, the generality of Bábís came to regard Azal as the Báb's successor. At the time of the Báb's execution, Azal had gone into hiding in the mountains of Mázindarán and later managed to flee Persia and join Bahá'u'lláh's family in Baghdad a few months after the arrival of the latter in 1853. The events transpiring in Baghdad during the next few years indicate that Azal was not a particularly effective leader.

Bahá'u'lláh and Azal were of significantly different temperaments and abilities. As a consequence, they had sharply contrasting leadership styles which soon became evident. Whereas Azal was normally withdrawn and retiring, Bahá'u'lláh was energetic and active. Understandably, those who came to support them had opposing views of the other leader's attributes. What Bahá'ís regarded as Azal's cowardice was to Azalís his caution as the surviving head of the movement, and what the latter considered Bahá'u'lláh's ambition was to Bahá'ís His love and concern for a community that, because the martyrdom of the Báb, was demoralized and disintegrating. Nevertheless, it is clear that Azal's continuous insistence to remain in hiding or seclusion was the last thing a struggling community needed.⁴



A view of 19th century Baghdad. It was from here that Bahá'u'lláh departed for Kurdistan and the mountain of Sar-Galú. (Source: *Bahá'u'lláh, King of Glory*)

2) Bályuzí, M. H., *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory*. Oxford: George Ronald, Publisher, 1980, p. 99. *Islám, like Christianity, is divided into two major denominations, the Shí'í sect, which is centered in Iran and Iraq, and the Sunní sect, which is dominant in most of the other countries of the Middle East. 3) Táherzádeh, pp. 53-54. 4) Smith, Peter. *The Bábí & Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shí'ism to a World Religion*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1987, p. 59.

Bahá'ulláh's Seclusion in Kurdistan

The severity of persecutions of early 1850's had driven the Bábís in Persia underground. Only the small community in Iraq could hope to preserve and spread the message of the martyred Báb. However, at this crucial juncture, Azal chose to distance himself from others. According to contemporary accounts, he changed his identity and appearance on several occasions and even threatened to excommunicate anyone who might reveal his identity or whereabouts.⁵

His unforceful response did not sit well with many Bábís. Some saw no difference between the 'hidden Azal' and the Shí'ih's Hidden Imám.* Consequently, dissatisfaction with Azal's leadership began to mount. In the meantime, he continued to maintain the militant policy of the more radical elements of the Bábí movement and encouraged his supporters to, whenever appropriate, attack the "hated" Shí'íhs and even went so far as dispatching an assassin for a second attempt on the life of Násirí'd-Dín Sháh.⁶ In contrast to Azal's seclusive but radical attitude, Bahá'u'lláh began actively to encourage a pacific policy which became an attractive alternative to the more moderate Bábís.

In view of the disasters of early 1850's, Bahá'u'lláh supported a conciliatory attitude toward others and pushed for major reforms in the character and behavior of the Bábís. He even attempted what to radical Bábís was the unthinkable—reconciliation with the Persian government and its representatives in the Ottoman Empire—the same government they held responsible for the execution of the Báb and fierce persecution of their fellow-believers. This policy shift was welcomed by some but incurred the wrath of Azal and those who were content with the status quo. It also contributed to the growing polarization within the ranks of Bábís over the next few years.

In the meantime, while Azal continued to be reclusive, Bahá'u'lláh began to write prolifically and remain publicly visible and easily accessible to those

who turned to Him for guidance and leadership. He also showed marks of a competent leader by establishing an organized network of communication which linked the fragmented communities of Persia and Iraq. Under His supervision, the Bábís of Persia would travel to Iraq, if necessary in the guise of Shí'ih pilgrims, bring Him letters and questions from other believers, and depart with His replies. He also had couriers assigned specifically to undertake such travels and visit the local communities en route, thus bringing together various communities and groups.

Ultimately, this network seems to have succeeded in reviving the cohesiveness of the Bábís as a religious group and significantly contributed to ascendancy of Bahá'u'lláh over Azal. It also generated a loyal band of followers for Bahá'u'lláh inside Persia who, by their partisanship, tended to devalue the overall status and leadership abilities of Azal.⁷

Concurrently, inside Persia some well-known Bábís began to show discontent with Azal's leadership. Others found his writings uninspiring and severely inadequate and began to challenge his authority. A few went so far as refuting his claims to successorship, advancing counter-claims, and disseminating their own writings.⁸

Still others began to turn to Bahá'u'lláh for spiritual guidance. One such individual was Hájí Mírzá Kamálú'd-Dín-i-Naráqí who initially asked Azal to enlighten him on the Qur'anic verse "All food was allowed to the children of Israel except that which Israel made unlawful for itself." Azal wrote a commentary on this verse which Naráqí apparently found inadequate. The latter then presented the same question to Bahá'u'lláh. In response, Bahá'u'lláh wrote what is today known as the *Tablet of All Food* (or "*Lawḥ-i-Kullu't-Ta'am*").*

Bahá'u'lláh read this commentary to Naráqí, but did not give it to him.⁹ While it is not precisely known why He did so, His purpose may have been to avoid further hostilities between Himself and Azal and greater divisions among the faithful. Nevertheless, Naráqí evidently was so impressed with Bahá'u'lláh's explanation that he immediately pledged allegiance to Him. The news of this event further damaged Azal's

5) Ibid, p. 60. * Shí'ih tradition holds that twelve Imáms, or holy leaders have appeared since the time of Muhammad. According to tradition, the twelfth and last of these Imáms wandered into a cave and was never seen again. The Shí'íhs believe that, like Elijah, this "Hidden Imám" would one day reappear. The name 'hidden Azal' was used by some as a callous joke. 6) Ibid. 7) Ibid, p. 62. 8) Táherzádeh, p. 202. * An in-depth examination of the Tablet of All Food will appear in an upcoming issue. —Ed. 9) Bályuzí, p. 113.

credibility and increased Bahá'u'lláh's popularity.

Azal's Reaction

Azal was alarmed by the rising prestige of his half-brother. He was also becoming disheartened by the growing number of defections and opposition from well-known figures in the movement. Therefore, aided by a close companion, Siyyid Muhammad-i-Isfahání,* he initiated an organized campaign to regain his credibility. This involved, among other things, efforts to discredit Bahá'u'lláh and represent Him as someone who was attempting to "usurp" his position.

Bahá'u'lláh, in His turn, was becoming increasingly saddened by those in the community who were spreading rumors against Him and who failed to see the clear indications of His superior knowledge and ability as well as His sincere concern for a disunified community. Soon His close associates began to observe in Him signs of pending withdrawal. His attendant, Mírzá Aqá Ján, heard Bahá'u'lláh refer to those who considered themselves to be His enemies shortly before His retirement, likening them to the unfaithful of the past who, "...for three thousand years have worshiped idols, and bowed down before the Golden Calf.

Now, too, they are fit for nothing better.

"What ties can bind them to the One Who is the supreme embodiment of all that is lovable?"¹⁰

Retirement to Kurdistan

On the morning of April 10th, 1854, to their utmost surprise, Bahá'u'lláh's household awoke to find Him gone. He had left Baghdad for the mountains of Sulaymáníyyih in the heart of Kurdish Iraq.

In one of His later writings, Baha'u'llah thus explained His reason for leaving Baghdad:

*"The one object of Our retirement was to avoid becoming a subject of discord among the faithful, a source of disturbance unto Our companions, the means of injury to any soul, or the cause of sorrow to any heart."*¹¹

Abu'l-Qásim-i-Hámadání, a Muslim, was the only person who accompanied Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad and remained aware of His whereabouts in Kurdistan. Evidently, Bahá'u'lláh gave this individual a sum of money and instructed him to act as a merchant in that region.

"The one object of Our retirement was to avoid becoming a subject of discord among the faithful, a source of disturbance unto Our companions, the means of injury to any soul, or the cause of sorrow to any heart."

—Bahá'u'lláh

Hámadání occasionally visited Bahá'u'lláh and brought Him money and certain goods. Bahá'u'lláh who was intent upon living a life of complete solitude decided to conceal His true identity by dressing in the garb of a poor dervish and assuming the fictitious name of Darvish Muhammad-i-Irání. He only took with Himself one change of clothes and an alms-bowl or *káshkúl* * which is typically carried by dervishes.

In the first phase of His retirement, He lived on a mountain named Sar-Galú, about three days' walking distance from Sulaymáníyyih in the Iraqi Kurdistan.¹² Milk and rice were His main sources of sustenance there, which He evidently obtained by occasionally traveling to nearby towns.¹³ His dwelling place was sometimes a cave and at other times a rude structure of stones that was also used as shelter by peasants who, twice a year (during planting and harvest), traveled to that area.¹⁴

It is not entirely known how Bahá'u'lláh's days were spent in Sar-Galú. Some Bahá'í accounts suggest that He was going through the same purification process which all prophets must

* Referred to by the Guardian as, "the Antichrist of the Bahá'í dispensation" 10) Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979, p. 119. 11) Ibid. * Bahá'u'lláh's *káshkúl* is preserved in the Bahá'í International Archives at Háifá, Israel. 12) Bályuzí, 116. 13) Táherzádeh, 61. 14) Effendi, 120.

Bahá'u'lláh's Seclusion in Kurdistan

go through before revealing their mission.¹⁵ Thus, He is believed to have been mostly engaged in writing and chanting prayers in the wilderness and reflecting upon the events that had transpired and possibly what the future had in store.

One thing is, however, clear. He was extremely distressed during this period. In a letter to His cousin Maryám, written after His return to Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh stressed His utter loneliness in Sar-Galú by stating that His only companions in those days were the 'birds of the air' and the 'beasts of the field.'¹⁶ Additionally, in the *Kitáb-i-Iqán* which He wrote later, He described His state of mind in that region as follows:

*"From Our eyes there rained tears of anguish, and in Our bleeding heart there surged an ocean of agonizing pain. Many a night We had no food for sustenance, and many a day Our body found no rest. Alone, We communed with Our spirit, oblivious of the world and all that is therein..."*¹⁷

For some time, Bahá'u'lláh was successful in completely severing ties with the outside world, but this did not last long. Either the travelers who passed through or the migrant farm workers who visited the Sar-Galú mountains must have come into contact with Him or observed Him living a life of asceticism which was favored by the mystics (Sufis) who resided in those regions and related their observations to others. Consequently, through word of mouth, His fame as a detached Soul who had chosen to live in wilderness and to eschew human society began to spread to neighboring towns.

Shortly thereafter, Shaykh Ismá'il, the leader of the mystic Naqshbandí Sufi group, came into contact

with Bahá'u'lláh. It is not known how the two first met. What is clear, however, is that soon the Shaykh developed an attachment to Bahá'u'lláh and, over time, persuaded Him to leave Sar-Galú and take residence in his seminary (or *takyah*) in the city of Sulaymáníyyih. Bahá'u'lláh's stay in Sar-Galú lasted less than a year, from April of 1854 to sometime in 1855, although the exact date and circumstances of His departure from Sar-Galú remain unknown.

Around the same period new developments took place in Baghdad and Persia which were indicative of



further radicalization of Azal and his supporters. Some of the more learned Bábís who had found Azal's leadership wanting began to challenge him by advancing counterclaims to leadership and disseminating their own writings. It is believed that at one time, as many as twenty-five individuals had advanced some type of claim to spiritual authority.¹⁸ Among them were Mírzá Assad'u'lláh-i-Khúy surnamed Dayyán (Judge) by the Báb, and

Nabil-i-Zarandí (the author of *The Dawn-Breakers*).

Probably the most serious challenge came from Dayyán. His threat became even more serious when a cousin of the Báb, Mírzá 'Alí-Akbar, began openly to support him and to defy Azal. The latter felt so threatened by this new development that he first condemned Dayyán in one of his books "*The Sleeper Awakened*" (or "*Mustáyyiqíz*") and then sentenced both him and the Báb's cousin to death.

Mírzá Muḥammad-i-Mázindarání, a devoted follower of Azal, set out for Persia to carry out the sentence, but Dayyán could not be found in his native Adhírbáyján. Shortly after Bahá'u'lláh's return from Sulaymáníyyih, however, the assassin succeeded in completing his mission by murdering both Dayyán and the Báb's cousin in Baghdad.¹⁹

Before Bahá'u'lláh's return, and to the dismay of many, Azal also forced the Báb's widow to marry him. When Bahá'u'lláh later learned of this union, He

15) Ibid., 121. 16) Ibid., 120. 17) Táherzádeh, 61. 18) Ibid., 68. 19) Ibid., 251.

severely censured it. Azal's main motive in entering this marriage may have been to enhance his credibility as the Báb's rightful successor. Later, he even allowed his chief accomplice, Siyyid Muḥammad-i-Isfahání, to marry the same widow.²⁰

For the time being, however, Bahá'u'lláh remained unaware of these developments. He had recently started the second phase of His self-imposed exile in Sulaymáníyyih.

Sulaymáníyyih

At the time of Bahá'u'lláh's seclusion Sulaymáníyyih was a town of about 6,000 inhabitants, the majority being Sunní Kurds. This group was hostile toward Muslims of Shí'íh background (such as Persians) whom they regarded as seceders from Islam. Nevertheless, Bahá'u'lláh seems to have been quickly accepted and respected by the local people. This may have been due to His attire and lifestyle as a dervish and the reverence that the venerable Shaykh Ismá'il displayed toward Him by personally inviting Him to the town.

For a short while, no one suspected Bahá'u'lláh to be possessed of any wisdom or learning. However, this did not last. One day, a student of Shaykh Ismá'il who attended to Bahá'u'lláh's needs, accidentally came upon a specimen of His calligraphy — an art which Bahá'u'lláh, like most children of nobility in Persia, had learned in childhood. His penmanship was of such high quality that it took the student by complete surprise. He decided to show it to his instructors and fellow students. The seminary was also bewildered. They had not expected such penmanship from an uneducated hermit. Examples of Bahá'u'lláh's writing style soon became available in town through His correspondence with certain Sufi leaders in the area.²¹ Thus, His true identity and aristocratic past soon became known to the Naqshbandí mystics as well as the general populace.

Life Among the Sufis

The Naqshbandí order was originally founded in Central Asia by Bahá'u'd-Dín Muhammad-i-

Naqshbandí (1317-1389 A.D.). Later, the order broke into two main factions. One was the Mujaddíyyih order which was established by an Indian thinker, Aḥmad-i-Sirhindí (1564-1624 A.D.), and which flourished in India. The other was the Khálidíyyih order which was founded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Dīyá'u'd-Dín Khálid-i-Shahrízúrí (d. 1827) and which spread in Iraq and Syria.²²

Sirhindí, a Muslim elite, vehemently opposed the religious laxness he observed in the thinking of most converts from Hinduism to Islam in India. He advocated strict observance of Islamic laws. He also wrote extensively against both Shí'íism and Hinduism and rejected the doctrine of "existential monism" (*vahdat -i-vujúd*) which was promulgated by the renowned Muslim mystic Ibn-i-Arabí.²³

He attacked attempts by some Indian Muslims to reconcile Ibn-i-Arabí's idea of existential monism with the Vedantic school of Hinduism, which held that the ultimate goal of one's spiritual destiny was complete "physical" reunion with the essence of Brahma (God). Ultimately, his ideology came to have great impact on the rest of the Muslim world. Sirhindí also advanced certain claims. For instance, he claimed to be the *Qayyúm*²⁴ (the Herald of the *Qá'im* or Promised One); the Perfect Man who acted as God's intermediary among the faithful.²⁵

Shaykh Khálid-i-Shahrízúrí, a native of Iraqi Kurdistan, was among the thinkers whose line of thought were influenced by Sirhindí. Around 1811 to 1812, he traveled to Sulaymáníyyih and spread His teachings in that region. Like Sirhindí, Khálid also claimed to possess supernatural or mystical powers. His influence lives on to this day in Sulaymáníyyih and Baghdad as well as in Damascus, Syria, where he spent the last seven years of his life. Following Khálid's death, the Naqshbandís in Kurdistan began to refer to themselves as the Khálidíyyih (followers of Khálid) and call Shaykh Khálid by the surname *Mawláná* ("our lord").

The Bábís and Naqshbandís represented two distinct reformist trends in the nineteenth-century

20) As the vast majority of Bábís came from Muslim backgrounds, many of them tended to retain the traditional Muslim attitudes towards women as property. In Azal's case, he had obviously ignored the impropriety of these marriages. The widow of the Báb was eventually placed under the protection of Bahá'u'lláh. 21) Táherzádeh, p. 62.

22) Cole, p. 5. 23) This is a belief that God and His creation share the same essence. 24) Bahá'ís believe Bahá'u'lláh was the true *Qayyúm* ("One Who will make the *Qá'im* rise"), heralded by the *Qá'im* ("One Who Arises" i.e. the Báb). 25) Cole, pp. 5-6.

Bahá'ulláh's Seclusion in Kurdistan

Middle East. They both favored elimination of non-revelatory accretions to the pure Faith of Muhammad. For instance, the tradition of blind imitation (*taqlíd*) practiced by Shí'íhs was attacked by both groups as was the doctrine of existential monism. Therefore, the Khálidís should have readily accepted many of Bahá'u'lláh's theological interpretations. However, the Bábís and Naqshbandís disagreed as to the extent of reforms needed in Islam. While the Naqshbandís were content with certain theological and ritual reforms within a strictly Sunní school of Islam, the Bábís were convinced that nothing short of the messianic advent of the Promised Mahdí in the person of the Báb could remedy the ills of Islam and of mankind in general.²⁶



The mountains of Sar-Galú in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was among the caves of this area that Bahá'u'lláh lived during His time in the Wilderness. (Source: Bahá'u'lláh King of Glory)

Shortly after the true identity of Bahá'u'lláh was revealed, the Khálidí seminary became engaged in the study of *Meccan Victories* (*Al-Futúhat al-Makkíyyah*), the well-known work of the renowned mystic thinker Ibn-i-Arabí. In response to a request, in the course of several interviews, Bahá'u'lláh answered the seminary's questions regarding certain abstruse passages in this book and even made corrective remarks concerning some of Ibn-i-Arabí's beliefs. For example, He may well have objected to Arabí's advocacy of the doctrine of existential monism. The Khálidís readily accepted His assertions, perhaps because they also believed in the eventual spiritual (as opposed to physical) reunion of man with his Creator.

Shaykh Ismá'il, the Khálidí leader, evidently was impressed enough by Bahá'u'lláh's comments to request that He compose an ode (or *qasídih*) in the

same style as a famous mystic work, Ibn-i-Fárid's *Poem of the Way* (or *Nazmu's-Sulúk*). Bahá'u'lláh complied with this request and wrote a very long poem of some 2,000 verses, but He chose to preserve only 127 of those verses and destroyed the rest of the poem, presumably because they expressed His messianic feelings too forcefully.²⁷ Today this work is known among Bahá'u'lláh's faithful as the *Poem of the Dove* (or *Al-Qasídah-al-Warqá'íyyih*).

In this poem, Bahá'u'lláh displays the ability to express Bábí theological beliefs in Sufi terminology.

This is not surprising, however, in view of the fact that Sufi works were popular in Persia and, over the centuries, had left a lasting impact on the culture and literature of that country. Persians of nobility, such as Bahá'u'lláh, were raised on such Sufi classics as Rúmi's *Mathnaví* and Aṭṭár's *The Conference of the Birds* (or *Mantiq'u't-Tayr*). Moreover, Sufism had experienced a revival in 19th century Persia and was highly favored in the court circles which included the

family of Bahá'u'lláh.²⁸

Also, Sufi expressions which emphasized personal transformation of character enabled Bahá'u'lláh to richly describe His doctrine of spreading Babism through the force of example rather than militancy, as had been the case with the supporters of earlier religions. He continued to use this mixture of Bábí and Sufi terminology until the period preceding the year of the public declaration of His Station in 1863, during which time He gradually began to adopt a distinctly different style. In addition to the *Poem of the Dove*, Bahá'u'lláh wrote several works of note with highly mystical flavor before 1863. Among these were the *Hidden Words*, the *Seven Valleys*, the *Four Valleys*, and the *Book of Certitude* (or *Kitáb-i-Iqán*).

Even though there are similarities in both style and content between Bahá'u'lláh's *Poem of the*

26) Ibid., pp. 5-7. 27) Ibid., p. 92. 28) Ibid., p. 21.

Dove and Ibn-i-Fárid's *Poem of the Way*, there are also significant metaphysical and theological differences between the two. For instance, in the course of his poem, Ibn-i-Fárid, who adhered to existential monism, claimed to have physically seen the "Essence" of the Beloved (God) and ultimately, through a chain of events, experienced moments of reunion with Him. Bahá'u'lláh does not make such a claim anywhere in His poem as, to Him, God's essential nature is beyond human comprehension. Instead, He employs messianic themes and refers, in veiled language, to an exalted station of Prophethood for Himself, which Ibn-i-Fárid does not.

Bahá'u'lláh's Return to Baghdad

The exact circumstances surrounding Bahá'u'lláh's return from Sulaymáníyyih are not entirely clear. It is known that late in 1855, Hámadání, Bahá'u'lláh's Muslim companion, was returning from Persia and heading to Sar-Galú with some goods for Bahá'u'lláh, but was attacked by thieves and fatally wounded. Before his death, he bequeathed all his possessions to the mysterious Darvish Muḥammad-i-Irání. About the same time, reports of a mysterious darvish from Iran had begun to reach Baghdad. Hámadání's death left little doubt for the family of Bahá'u'lláh as to the true identity and whereabouts of Darvish Muḥammad, since the former had also disappeared in Baghdad at about the same time as Bahá'u'lláh two years previously. They realized that the mysterious darvish must be Bahá'u'lláh.

At this time, in the absence of effective leadership, the morale of the Bábí community had deteriorated considerably, much as was the case with their ancient counterparts during the absence of Moses. This decay caused such stress for the family of Bahá'u'lláh that they finally convinced His brother Mírzá Músá to try to find Bahá'u'lláh and ask for His return. Thus,

He continued to be respected by many Sufis in Kurdistan long after His return and, even today, some of the inhabitants of Sulaymáníyyih still possess samples of Bahá'u'lláh's works with which they refuse to part at any price

Mírzá Músá requested his Arab son-in-law, Shaykh Sulṭán, to locate Bahá'u'lláh and bring Him back to Baghdad. Even Azal now wanted his half-brother to come back, though it is not clear why. Perhaps, in light of the growing number of defections and rival claimants, he felt Bahá'u'lláh might be willing to lend some of His prestige to his sagging leadership.²⁹

Azal's supporters offered a different interpretation of the events that led to Bahá'u'lláh's return. They claimed that Bahá'u'lláh left Sulaymáníyyih in 1856 at the command of Azal. They also maintained that Bahá'u'lláh considered Himself to be under Azal's authority. However, the contents of two early poems of Baha'u'llah present strong evidence to the contrary.

The first of these two poems, *Rash-i-Amá* (Sprinkling of Essence), is perhaps the earliest of Bahá'u'lláh's known works. This work was penned in 1853 in a dungeon in Tihrán known as the "Black Pit." Together with the second poem, *Al-Qasidah-al-Varqá'íyyih* (Poem of the Dove), which was revealed before His return from Kurdistan, the two provide irrefutable evidence that Bahá'u'lláh had messianic expectations and had received supernatural intimations in the early 1850s.

Baha'u'llah later stated that His return from Sulaymáníyyih was mainly due to the plight of the leaderless Bábí community of Baghdad. He seems to have taken Shaykh Sulṭán's mission as a sign that God wanted Him to return.³⁰

It took Shaykh Sulṭán and a companion approximately two months before they located Bahá'u'lláh in the vicinity of Sulaymáníyyih. After a while, Bahá'u'lláh consented to depart for Baghdad, where He arrived in March 19, 1856. His stay in Kurdistan took exactly two lunar years.³¹

Following His return, Bahá'u'lláh maintained correspondence with some Sufis in Kurdistan. Two of His well-known works were written in response to

29) *Ibid.*, p. 20. 30) Effendi, p. 126. 31) The calendar used in Muslim countries is based on a number of orbits of the moon around

Bahá'u'lláh's Seclusion in Kurdistan

questions posed by such individuals. The *Seven Valleys* was penned in reply to a query of Shaykh Muhyí'd-Dín, the judge of the town of Kháníqayn in Kurdistan, and the *Four Valleys* was written in response to questions by Shaykh Abdu'r-Rahmán, the leader of the Qadiríyyih Sufis. He continued to be respected by many Sufis in Kurdistan long after His return and, even today, some of the inhabitants of Sulaymáníyyih still possess samples of Bahá'u'lláh's works with which they refuse to part at any price.³²

Bahá'u'lláh's return to Baghdad signaled the beginning of a new era in the Bábí movement. It initiated a period marked by His growing prominence as the head of the Bábí community and simultaneous decline in the fortunes of Azal.

After a seven year span that witnessed a gradual but notable transformation in the character and attitudes of the community, in 1863, Bahá'u'lláh publicly declared Himself the Promised One. In a

relatively short period of time, the vast majority of the Bábís gave allegiance to Him and became designated as *Bahá'ís*, or followers of Bahá. A small number remained faithful to Azal and became known as Azalís. An insignificant number in Persia remained loyal to the Báb. Today, both Azalí and Bábí movements are virtually extinct while the Bahá'í Faith has now become the second most widely spread religious system in the world. ❀

About the Author

Dr. Bijan Ma'sumián is a member of the Central Texas Association for Bahá'í Studies and serves on the Local Spiritual Assembly of Austin. His professional time is spent as an instructional systems designer for the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation.

He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and fellow author Farnaz, who teaches comparative religion at Austin Community College. Providing valuable assistance in reorganizing their research materials is their three-year-old son Adib.

the earth, as opposed the western calendar, which is based upon the earth's orbit around the sun. This makes the Muslim calendar shorter than that used in the West. 32) Bályuzi, p.118.

Writer's *Deepen* Guide

magazine

Goals

Deepen is dedicated to the pursuit of the following goals:

- 1) Expand the reader's knowledge of the teachings, history and spirit of the Bahá'í Faith.
- 2) Explore the application of the Bahá'í teachings, attitude and goals as they relate to society.
- 3) Provide resources, encouragement and inspiration in order to spur the reader to greater heights of spirituality and service to the Cause.

Style and Content

The editorial staff reserves the right to edit or otherwise revise the content of submissions

Articles/Research

Submissions should address one or more of the above goals. Submissions should also address one or more of the goals of the Three Year Plan. Writers are also encouraged to identify connections with or applications in the teaching or consolidation work, if possible.

Notes should be in the form of endnotes, rather than footnotes. All quotations should be documented and selections from the sacred writings should include complete attributions. For example:

- 3) The Báb, cited by Nabíl-i-A'zam, *The Dawn-Breakers:Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, p. 190, 4) *Ibid.*, p. 194-195