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birth of The Bab

Sayyid Ali-Muhammad, known by his spiritual title as the "Bab" (the "Gate"), was born on October 20, 1819, in Shiraz, Persia (now Iran). The Bab was the founder of a 19th-century new religious movement generally known as Babism. The Bab declared himself to be the long-awaited Qá'im (Ariser/Resurrector), the expected eschatological deliverer (known in both Shia and Sunni Islam as the Mahdí), who, according to Islamic tradition, would come to revive Islam when it was at its lowest ebb. While proclaiming himself to be an independent "Manifestation of God," the Bab also spoke of the imminent advent of the Promised One, or "Him whom God shall make manifest." One of the Bab's followers, Bahá'u'lláh, would later receive revelations confirming that he was that Promised One heralded by the Bab.

Armin Eschraghi has argued that the new faith proclaimed by the Bab fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion: a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws (called the Bayán), the Bab pursued three major goals: (1) paving the way for the advent of the Promised One; (2) provoking the clerical establishment and shattering the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and (3) proving the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

Soon after the Bab publicly proclaimed his prophetic mission beginning on the evening of May 22, 1844, the Islamic government then in power in Persia began to suppress the movement and violence ensued. The Bab was arrested and executed by a firing squad of 750 musketeers on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia. Subsequent to an unauthorized and ill-fated attempt on the life of the shah of Persia in 1852, the shah ordered the most brutal tortures and deaths of a great number of Bábís, with estimates ranging from around 5,000 to 20,000 martyrs.

In the fall of 1852, in the wake of the Bab's execution, Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the notorious Siyáh-Chál (Black Pit), during which time he experienced a series of visions that awakened him to his prophetic destiny. He was released, but banished—exiled successively to Baghdad (1853–1863), Constantinople/Istanbul (1863), Adrianople/Edirne (1863–1868), and finally to the prison-city of 'Akká, considered the vilest penal colony of the Ottoman Empire. In 1892, Bahá'u'lláh passed away in Bahjí, near 'Akká in Palestine (now Israel).

In his article on "Babism" published that same year, Professor Browne wrote: "I say nothing of the mighty influence which, as I believe, the Bábí faith will exert in the future, nor of the new life it may perchance breathe into a dead people; for, whether it succeed or fail, the splendid heroism of the Bábí martyrs is a thing eternal and indestructible." The "Bábí faith" that Browne spoke of evolved into the Baha'i Faith, which has since spread worldwide to become the most widely diffused world religion next to Christianity, according to the 2001 *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

Today, Baha'is accept the Bab as a John the Baptist figure, whose words and actions heralded the arrival of Bahá'u'lláh. However, unlike John the Baptist, the Bab revealed much in substance, both in terms of doctrine and religious laws, that was subsequently revoiced and reenacted, with certain revisions, by Bahá'u'lláh.

The Bab did not instruct his followers to formally observe the day of his birth; however, for that occasion, Bahá'u'lláh had revealed the *Lawh-i Mawlúd*, which awaits an authorized translation. Today, Baha'is worldwide annually celebrate the birth of the Bab on October 20 as a holy day, with work and school suspended for the day. There being no required observances, Baha'is are free to creatively organize commemorative activities which, although attended mostly by Baha'is, are open to people of all faiths and persuasions.

J. Gordon Melton

Further Reading

Browne, Edward G. "Bábism." In *Religious Systems of the World: A Contribution to the Study of Comparative Religion*. Edited by William Sheowring and Conrad W. Thies, 333–353. London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1892; Eschraghi, Armin. "'Undermining the Foundations of Orthodoxy': Some Notes on the Báb's Shar'ah (Sacred Law)." In *A Most Noble Pattern: Essays in the Study of the Writings of the Báb*. Edited by Todd Lawson. Oxford: George Ronald, forthcoming; Keil, Gerald. *Time and the Baha'i Era: A Study of the Badi' Calendar*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2008; Saiedi, Nader. *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008.

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