

## **The Genesis of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths in Shíráz and Fárs**

*Mírzá Habib 'u'lláh Afnán (tr. and annotated by Ahang Rabbani)  
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How Muslims in past centuries dreamed about, attempted to actualize, and conceived the apocalyptic and messianic events of the End Times cannot be ignored in any comprehensive approach to the study of Islam. This volume consists of an English translation of one important source that contributes to our understanding of nineteenth-century Islamic messianic movements: Mirza Habib Allah Afnan's (1875-1971) history of the Babi and Baha'i religions in Shiraz. Born in Shiraz, Afnan grew up in the home of Sayyid Muhammad 'Ali Shirazi, "The Bab," (1819-50) and was raised by his widow, Khadijah Begum.

The Bab was born into a Shi'i Muslim merchant family during the early Qajar period, a time when many of his contemporaries expected the near advent of messianic and apocalyptic events. Among the groups so inclined were the "Shaykhis," devotees of Shaykh Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Din al-Ahsa'i (d. 1826). The Bab was initially a Shaykhi and a follower of Sayyid Kazim Rashti (d. 1843), al-Ahsa'i's successor. In the 1840s, he claimed to be the expected *qa'im* (messianic "ariser") or *mahdi* ("rightly guided one") and founded a religion that he hoped would change the world and usher in an era of peace and justice. These assertions led to his execution in Tabriz, Iran, in 1850. In subsequent years, most of his followers looked to Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri, "Baha'u'llah," as the Bab's successor and a figure who, in his own right, fulfilled Babi and other messianic expectations.

Afnan's life spanned significant phases of Baha'i history. He was seventeen years old when Baha'u'llah died, and was an important witness for the period during which Baha'u'llah's son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, became the community's leader. This history should be considered an important secondary source for oral history of the earlier Babi period, since Afnan was himself from the Bab's family, spent most of his life in the Bab's house, and heard stories about the Bab from older family members as he was growing up. Later, he functioned as house's custodian and caretaker, for the Bab had designated it as a place of pilgrimage for his followers.

The translation is divided into seventeen mostly thematic chapters, several of which focus on a particular decade, such as the 1880s or the early 1890s. The narrative ends in 1910. Rather than being a general account of Babi-Baha'i history, Afnan states that he has confined his reminiscences to

the history of events in Shiraz. Of the events associated with the Bab's life, of particular interest is his account of how the Bab made his messianic claims known to Mulla Husayn Bushrui in 1844, whom he recognized as his first adherent, and whose embrace of the faith marked, at least for the Bab, the onset of the eschatological *yawm al-qiyamah* (Day of Resurrection).

This account differs from the most widely available version of the events found in Muhammad Nabil Zarandi's late nineteenth-century narrative, translated into English as *The Dawnbreakers*. While the original Persian version of his chronicle remains unpublished, a comparison with even the English translation reveals interesting differences regarding the events leading up to and including the moment when the Bab revealed his mission to Bushrui. Beyond this significant episode, Afnan narrates several of the major events and phases in the Bab's life and career that are of interest to historians, including his early childhood and pilgrimage to Makkah.

While Shiraz has historically been associated with the Bab, Baha'u'llah's life took him from Qajar-era Tehran to various parts of the Ottoman Empire as an exile and prisoner. He died in the prison city of Acre, Palestine, in 1892. During this time, most of the Bab's followers had accepted Baha'u'llah's messianic claims and propagated his emergent religion in Iran and elsewhere. Afnan focuses on those events related to the Baha'i religion that took place in Shiraz: an account of the first Baha'is in the city to be executed for their beliefs, Shirazi Baha'i involvement in Iran's Constitutional Revolution, efforts to repair and restore the Bab's house, and the challenges posed to the city's Baha'is by those groups and individuals who opposed the religion. In his narrative, Afnan includes copies of numerous *alwah* (scriptural Tablets) sent by Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha to members of his family. He also writes about the women of the Afnan household, thus providing insight regarding gender relations during the Qajar era.

The translator attaches several useful appendices to the end of the text. Among these are a genealogy of the Bab's family on his father's side and brief biographies of key members of the Afnan family. As the original Persian version of Afnan's history has never been published in the original language, it would have been useful if Rabbani had included the Persian text as one of these appendices.

The biggest problem with this volume has to do with its scholarly apparatus. Rabbani employs a transliteration scheme based on the archaic and obsolete system used in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* during the nineteenth century. He does not exactly follow this system, however, as he omits the Persian *idafah* construct markers in his transliterations. Thus, for example, rather than using "Masjid-i Vakil" or "the Vakil Mosque," he ren-

ders the phrase as “Masjid Wakil” (p. 258). Although he correctly omits the *idafah* construct that links proper names, removing it from all of the other constructs is like omitting words from a translation. Finally, the entire text would have benefited from a more careful proofreading and editing.

None of these shortcomings, however, take away from the importance of this narrative for those who wish to study Babi and Baha’i history. Anyone interested in Islamic messianic movements; Iranian history; or Shaykhi, Babi, and Baha’i studies will find ample information about these subjects in this important historical work.

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