

**The Messiah of Shiraz:  
Studies in Early and Middle Babism**

*Denis MacEoin*

*Leiden: Brill, 2009. 738 pages.*

The book under consideration deals with Babism and Shaykhism, two religious movements of nineteenth-century Iran. According to MacEoin, they are principally of note in that they were the precursors of the Baha'i faith. The book consists of the author's Ph.D. thesis on the emergence of Babism from

Shaykhism (completed in 1979, 250 pages); nine articles subsequently published in various journals and books, mainly on different aspects of Babism; seven articles written for the *Encyclopedia Iranica*; a conference paper; and the author's translation of the first one-and-a-half chapters of the Bab's Persian-language *Bayan*. Almost all of this material is available on-line (for the Ph.D. thesis, see [www.h-net.org/~bahai/diglib/books/K-O/M/maceoin/FROMSHAYKHISMTOBABISM.pdf](http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/diglib/books/K-O/M/maceoin/FROMSHAYKHISMTOBABISM.pdf)). As such, this book does not constitute new research and must be regarded more as a retrospective on one scholar's work. This leads to two questions: For whom is this work intended and how should one review such a book – should one evaluate it on the basis of these works' value at the time they were published or now?

With regard to the first question, MacEoin states in his preface that the main readership of this work will be Baha'is (p. xviii). This seems unlikely, however, due to its price and the notoriety he has gained among Baha'is by attacking their faith since leaving it around 1979. The alternative readership, those doing research on Babism or Shaykhism, will either have most of the material in this book already or will find it cheaper to download this material from the Internet. It is, therefore, difficult to determine who will purchase this book (although, of course, university libraries will feel obliged to do so).

With regard to the second question, there is no doubt that for many decades little research had been done on Babism and Shaykhism. When MacEoin's Ph.D. thesis first appeared thirty years ago, therefore, it represented a major advance and, in many ways, set the standard for subsequent research. Over the ensuing years, however, the work of other scholars has increasingly overshadowed it and overturned many of its conclusions. This means that anyone not already well-informed about the subject is likely to be misled in many places by reading this book. For example, the author's conclusion that Karbala's Shaykhi community does not seem to have been unduly hostile to the Babis in the early period (p. 234) seems well supported by the evidence presented for the period 1844-47 (pp. 203-34) – unless one is aware that in 1982 a document was published that showed that this community's leader had signed a fatwa against the Bab's emissary in January 1845.

MacEoin's analysis of the doctrines of Shaykhism and early Babism has been overtaken by Armin Eshraghi (*Frühe Šaiḫi- und Babi-Theologie: Die Darlegung der Beweise für Muhammads besonderes Prophetentum* [Leiden: Brill, 2004]); his frequent complaints about the incomprehensibility of the Bab's writings (pp. 188-89, 327-28, and elsewhere) have been rendered

moot by the work of Todd Lawson (Ph.D. thesis, *Gnostic Apocalypse in Islam: The Literary Beginnings of the Babi Movement* [London: Routledge, forthcoming]) and Nader Saiedi (*Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb* [Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008]); and his historical analyses now fail to take into account the work of Abbas Amanat (*Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989]) and Ahang Rabbani (*The Genesis of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths in Shíráz and Fárs* [Leiden: Brill, 2008]). This is, of course, apart from numerous articles that have also appeared in recent years.

The miscellaneous articles in the last part have many overlaps and yet, when put together, do not cover the subject comprehensively. They are increasingly colored by the author's hostility toward the Baha'i faith. This is at its most blatant in some of these later articles (see particularly pp. 495-536 and his accusations of "misrepresentation" and "distortion"), although it occurs in more subtle ways even in his Ph.D. thesis. Two examples of this are giving a non-Baha'i tertiary source (a biographical dictionary) precedence over Baha'i authors who had worked with primary sources (see p. 188, n. 144) and the classical Orientalist turn of accusing an easterner who has dreams and visions of "mental imbalance" (p. 67). The encyclopedia articles are mostly redundant.

In his preface, MacEoin points out many of this volume's problems. He mentions the fact that there has been much subsequent research; asks us "to be kind to the faults of youth" (by which I assume he means the inappropriate and often incorrect use of terms such as *charisma* and *motif* in an attempt to make the work appear analytical but which, in fact, is just an irritation); and also mentions the "long sentences," the "use of jargon," and the "density of style" (p. xxi).

It is unfortunate that, as MacEoin says, he has only "lightly edited" the work. Surely in the age of word processors it is relatively easy to do a more thorough editing. Even the light editing that has been done, however, was done in a manner that is uncharacteristically careless for MacEoin, who is normally very careful and thorough in his work. On page 30 (nos. 74 and 75), for example, two new works have been added without giving the necessary page numbers. Strangely, errors that are not in the original thesis have been introduced: for example "Hasan Mulla `Ali" (p. 150, l. 13), which in the original thesis is correctly "Hasan `Ali Mirza"; the incomplete phrase "Muhammad Mahdi Kazimi (b. 1901) known as" has been thrust inappropriately into a list of nineteenth-century clerics (p. 45, ll. 1-2); and

“al-Hilli” has been incorrectly changed to “Muhacqiq al-Hilli” (p. 73, l. 7 up) – the correct form “Allama al-Hilli” being on the first line of the same page.

The book does not seem to have received even a rudimentary copyediting by the publisher. Apart from frequent meaningless phrases that should have been corrected, as well as missing or duplicated words, it appears that someone electronically replaced instances of “Bab” with “Bab” resulting in numerous occurrences of “proBably.” Did anyone proofread this book before it went to the printers? In addition, the index of six pages is ridiculously small for a 700-page book.

In summary, one cannot help feeling that neither the publisher nor the author have taken much interest in this book. The author could have spent his time much more productively by carefully editing, bringing his Ph.D. thesis up-to-date, and leaving out the rag-tag collection of articles in the book’s second half. This would have resulted in a useful piece of work that combined the excellent qualities of the original thesis with contemporary relevance. It would also have brought the price of the work down to an affordable level and increased its readership.

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