

Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

Bāb

(3,186 words)

, an appellation [see the preceding art.] made specially famous by Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad of Shīrāz, the founder of the new religion of the Bābīs [q.v.] and, according to the Bahā'īs [q.v.] the precursor of the new prophet Bahā' Allāh [q.v.]. He is also called by his disciples *Nuḳṭa-i ūlā* ('the first point') or *Ḥaḍrat-i a'lā* ('the supreme presence').

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Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad was born at Shīrāz, of a merchant family, on 1 Muḥarram 1235/20 October 1819 (but according to other sources, exactly a year later, 9 October 1820); becoming an orphan at an early age, he was placed under the tutelage of his maternal uncle Āghā Sayyid 'Alī. At the age of about 19 or 20 he was sent to Būshahr, on the Persian Gulf, to trade there; here, at the same time, he gave himself up to earnest religious meditations, as he had done before since his childhood. When on a pilgrimage to Karbalā', he made the acquaintance of Sayyid Kāẓim Raṣhtī [q.v.], the head of the religious movement of the Shaykhīs, who showed a high and unusual regard for him. Sayyid Kāẓim died at the end of 1259/December 1843; before his death he had sent disciples into all parts of Persia in search of the awaited *Mahdī*, the *Ṣāhib al-zamān*, who, according to his prophecies, would not be long before manifesting himself. One of the disciples of the *sayyid*, Mullā Ḥusayn of Bushrūya, who had arrived at Shīrāz and had been strongly affected by the fascination of the young 'Alī Muḥammad, was the first to recognise him as the 'gateway' to Truth, the initiator of a new prophetic cycle, since, during the night of 5 Djumādā I 1260/23 May 1844, he had replied in a satisfactory way to all his questions, and had written in his presence, with extreme rapidity and all the time intoning what he was writing in a very melodious voice, a long commentary on the *sūra* of Yūsuf; this commentary is known to the Bābīs by the name of *Ḳayyūm al-Asmā'*, and considered as the first 'revealed' work of the Bāb. The rapidity with which he wrote and the indescribable charm of his voice seem to have been the characteristics which have most impressed Muslim as well as Bābī writers. In the summer of 1844, the Bāb, who had been making drastic attacks on corrupt Shī'ī *mullās* and *mudjtahids* with their own weapons, quickly collected a number of disciples, among whom were 18 called by him

the *Ḥurūfāt al-Ḥayy* ('The Letters of the Living'). Mullā Ḥusayn is also known among the Bābīs by the title of *awwal man āmana* ('the first believer'), and by that of *Bāb al-Bāb*, which the Bāb himself later gave him. In the autumn, after the 'Letters of the Living' had been despatched to proclaim his mission in the various provinces of Persia, the Bāb set out on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The journey left a bad impression on him. This is reflected in several passages in the *Bayān*, where he speaks of the dirt and promiscuity of the boats and of the low moral character of the quarrelsome and violent pilgrims. Either during a stay in the port of Muscat, or in the heart of the holy city of Mecca, the Bāb, according to the sources, must have declared more openly his mission as *mahdī*, but to no purpose. In the spring of 1261/1845 the Bāb returned to Shīrāz, where his preachings and public declarations (for during the journey he had written another book, *Ṣahīfa-i bayn al-Ḥaramayn* ('book [written] between the two Holy Places') in which he lays down the purport of his mission) caused some trouble; the Bāb's missionaries who, on his order, had dared to add to the *adhān* [q.v.] the phrase 'and I confess that 'Alī before Nabīl (the Bāb) is the mirror of the breath of God', were arrested, brought before the Governor of Shīrāz, Mīrzā Ḥusayn Khān Ādiūdān-bāshī, severely punished, and expelled from the city. A representative of the reigning sovereign (Muḥammad Shah), Sayyid Yaḥyā-i Dārābī, sent to conduct an enquiry, was won over by the charm of the Bāb, and became converted to the new doctrine. Whilst all this was going on, Mīrzā Nūrī (the future Bahā' Allāh) and his brother Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī (the future *Ṣubḥ-i Azal*) at Tehran persisted in the new faith, after a meeting with Mullā Ḥusayn. At Shīrāz an epidemic of cholera broke out, and everyone from the Governor down prayed for deliverance. The Bāb remained at Iṣfahān, where he was protected by the governor, the Georgian Manūčīhr Khān Mu'tamad al-Dawla. On the death of the latter the Bāb was called to Tehran by order of the minister Ḥādjdjī Mīrzā Āghāsī, but shortly before arriving in the city he was arrested and sent as a prisoner to the fortress of Māhkū in the trackless mountains of Ādharbāydiān (summer of 1263/1847). In 1264/ April 1848, following more serious disorders which had broken out in different parts of Iran on account of Bābī propaganda [see BĀBĪS], the Bāb, whose powerful religious influence had converted the governor of the fortress of Māhkū, 'Alī Khān, was transferred to a more rigorous prison, the remote castle of Čihriḳ. Shortly afterwards, in July, he was removed to Tabrīz to be questioned by a committee of *mudjtahids*; it was decided to condemn him forthwith. The powerful minister Mīrzā Takī Khān, who had succeeded Ḥadidjī Mīrzā Āghāsī after the latter's dismissal by the new sovereign Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh (1848), considered that the death of its founder would break up this dangerous movement which was continuing to attract new adherents. In the spring of 1266/1850 the news of the execution of the seven martyrs of Tehran [see BĀBĪS], among whom was his uncle and well-beloved tutor, reached the Bāb in the fortress of Čihriḳ where he had been reimprisoned, and greatly distressed him. He prophesied that his end was near. He was taken at the end of the month of Sha'bān 1266/July 1850 to Tabrīz, and was condemned to be shot at the same time as two of his disciples, Mullā Muḥammad 'Alī of Yazd and Āghā Sayyid Ḥusayn. The second, during the doleful procession of the three condemned men through the streets of Tabrīz, under insults and blows, made pretehee of abjuring the Bābī faith, and was released; he had previously been charged by

the Bāb to carry out his last wishes and to deposit some of his personal belongings and writings in a safe place. (He was, however, killed at Tehran shortly after having carried out this mission). The Bāb was secured with the same ropes as his disciples to a pillar in the courtyard of the barracks at Tabrīz, and the Christian regiment of the Bahādurān, commanded by Sām K̲hān, fired. The first shot, according to the descriptions even in Muslim sources and others hostile to the reformer, raerely severed the ropes, leaving the Bāb completely free. Sām K̲hān, terrified, refused to re-open fire, and consequently another firing-squad was detailed. On 9 July 1850, about midday, the Bāb paid for preaching his doctrine with his life. The mangled body was thrown into a ditch in the town and after many vicissitudes (disinterred by the Bābīs, hidden for several years at Tehran), it was removed on the order of Bahā' Allāh [*q.v.*] to 'Akkā, where it now rests in a large mausoleum on the slopes of mount Carmel.

¶

Works.

The works of the Bāb, all manuscript— some lost, others of doubtful authenticity (partially due to unexpected feuds after his death between Bahā'īs and Azalīs, see **BĀBĪS**)—are very numerous. In more or less chronological order, and mentioning only the best known, they are: 1. The *Ḳayyūm al-Āsmā'* or commentary on the *sūra* of Yūsuf, referred to above, of more than 9,300 verses divided into 111 chapters (one per verse of the famous *sūra*), which opens with the well-known apostrophe to the kings of the earth: 'O kings! O sons of kings! do not take unto yourselves that which belongs to God!'; this work is in Arabic, but has been translated into Persian in full by the famous Bābī heroine Ḳurrat al-'Ayn Ṭāhira; 2. Epistles (*alwāḥ*) to various persons, such as Muḥammad Shāh, Sulṭān 'Abd al-Mad̲jīd, Nad̲jīb Paṣhā, *wālī* of Baghdād. 3. the *Ṣahīfa-i bayn al-Ḥaramayn* , written on his pilgrimage between Mecca and Medina (1844-5). 4. The Epistle to the Sharīf of Mecca. 5. The *Kitāb al-Rūḥ* (Book of the Spirit) of 700 *sūras* . 6. The *Ḳhaṣā'il-i Sab'a* (the seven Virtues), wherein the modification of the *adhān* is set forth. 7. *Risāla-i Furū'-i Adliyya* (treatise on the divisions of justice). 8. Commentaries on the *sūras al-Kawthar* (cviii) and *Wa 'l-'aṣr* (ciii), and other small treatises and epistles all of which date from the beginning of his imprisonment at Māhkū. 9. Nine commentaries (*tafsīr*) on the entire Ḳur'ān, now lost, written, according to the testimony of his copyist Shaykh Ḥasan-i Zunūzī, in the castle of Māhkū. 10. Various epistles to leading Shī'ī theologians and to Muḥammad Shāh, written in the same fortress. 11. The Arabic (shorter) *Bayān* and the Persian *Bayān*, the sacred books *par excellence* of the new revelation; the former divided into 11 *wāḥids* (units) of 17 chapters (*bābs*) each, the latter into 9 *wāḥids* of 19 *bābs* each except the last *wāḥid* , which has only 10 *bābs*. 12. The *Dalā'il-i Sab'a* (the seven Proofs), the most important of the polemical works of the Bāb. 13. The *Lawḥ-i Hurūfāt* (Table of the Setters), a semicabalistic writing addressed to the Believer (*dayyān*) from the castle of Čihriḳ, etc. Although the Bābīs are also called *ahl-i Bayān* (the people of the *Bayān*), one must understand by *Bayān* in this sense, according to the explicit declaration of the Bāb himself (Persian *Bayān*, 3rd *wāḥid*, chapter 17), everything which issued from his pen.

The Doctrine of the Bāb. The contents of the *Bayān* can perhaps be reduced to four fundamental points: (a) the abrogation of sundry laws and pronouncements of the Qur'ānic *sharī'a* regarding prayer, fasting, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, but nevertheless upholding the truth of the prophetic mission of Muḥammad, whose prophetic cycle ends with the year 1260/1844; (b) the spiritualistic interpretation of the eschatological terms which appear in the Qur'ān and other sacred works, such as 'Paradise', 'Hell', 'Death', 'Resurrection', 'Return', 'Judgment', 'Bridge' (*Ṣirāt*), 'Hour', etc., all of which allude not only to the end of the physical world but also to that of the prophetic cycle. From certain passages it seems that it must be understood that the true world being that of the spirit, of which the material world is nothing but an exteriorisation, God effectively destroys the world at the end of each prophetic cycle in order to re-create it by the Word of the subsequent prophet; the creative worth of the Word is given great importance in the *Bayān*; (c) the establishment of new institutions: a new *qibla* (towards the abode of the Bāb), a new, and rather complicated, devolution of inheritance, ¶ etc.; (d) a continuous and powerful eschatological tension towards *man yuḥiruhu allāh* ('the One whom God will manifest'), the future prophet. It could thus be upheld that the expectation of the 'Promised One' is the essence of the *Bayān*; indeed, the most banal precepts are set forth in an eschatological light. For example, having stated that the Bābī should possess no more than 19 books, and all these on the *Bayān* and the knowledge of the *Bayān*, it adds: 'All these commands are for this reason, that nothing be put in the presence of Him Whom God Shall Manifest, unless it be the *Bayān* itself (Arabic *Bayān*, trans. Nicolas, 223).

With regard to the precepts concerning travelling, it is laid down that journeys shall not take place at the time when the 'Promised One' towards whom alone all must travel, will be made manifest (*ibid.*, 166). The care for property, particularly recommended by the Bāb, is justified eschatologically, in order that the eyes of 'Promised One' shall not look upon anything unclean (159). As well as the familiar passage (166) 'All of you get up from your seats when you hear the mention of the name of Him Whom God Shall Manifest And in the ninth year you shall attain to perfect Good', which the Bahā'īs interpret as predicting the prophetic vision of Bahā' Allāh [q.v.] in the Tehran prison in the year 9, *i.e.*, 1269/1852-3, various other passages of the *Bayān* effectively suggest that the Bāb believed the Future Manifestation possible at a nearer date. Particularly interesting is the fine chapter XI of the IVth *wāḥid* of the Arabic *Bayān* (138-9): 'Be not the instruments of your misfortunes, for not to be grieved is one of the greatest commands of the *Bayān*. The fruit of this command shall be that you shall not grieve Him Whom God Shall Manifest'.

The metaphysics of the Bāb is similar in certain ways to that of the Ismā'īlīs. It sets out, in essence, as opposed to the unitary conception of existence as in Pantheism and to the dual conception (divine/human) of orthodox Islām, a division of Being into three parts: the World of the Essence of God, absolutely unattainable and transcendent, the World of Nature and of Man, and the World of the Manifestation, that very pure mirror in which alone God can see himself. The Bāb's doctrine seems to attach very great importance to this invisible world which is

concealed behind and between visible things: thus, all the eschatological terms, such as beatific vision, death, eternity, paradise, etc., being solely in accordance with the vision of the prophet, there remains only very little room in which to interest oneself in the life of the other world, which has led certain authors, perhaps wrongly (see E. G. Browne in the Preface to M. H. Phelps, *Abbas Effendi*, London 1912), to believe that the Bāb denies the immortality of the individual soul, at least in the traditional sense of the word. In the same way, his conception of the return of Muḥammad, of the *imāms*, etc., in its actual presentation has led some writers wrongly to believe that he subscribes to the doctrine of reincarnation. On the contrary, the Bāb in his original conception of the novelty of the different 'worlds' of the successive prophetic cycles, besides denying the Islamic and Christian dogmas of the resurrection of the body, denies as well the reincarnation of the soul in another body; when he writes (Arabic *Bayān*, *wāḥid* I, chapter 2 ff.) 'Those (our lieutenants) are, firstly Muḥammad, the prophet of God, then those who are the witnesses (the *imāms*) of God for his creatures ...', he means to say that they 'have been created in another world', *i.e.*, that God has re-created them *ex novo* in the world of the *Bayān* after having created them in the world of the Ḳur'ān. It is easy to deduce from such a 'bookish' conception of the worlds of nature and of the spirit that letters, the written word, and the corresponding numerical values have enormous significance for the Bāb. The love of calligraphy (according to tradition, his own writing was superb) is for him a feature of religion, and more than once, in the *Bayān*, he commands that copies of the Holy Book should be conserved in the most elegant writing possible. The number 19, for instance, has great importance in Bābī numerology; having abolished the 'natural' calendar, the Bāb substitutes for it a purely spiritual and mental calendar of 19 months each of 19 days, each one bearing the name of an attribute of God. The last month (that of *Alā'*) is that of fasting, effective from dawn to sunset. This calendar, with some minor modifications, has been adopted by the Bahā'īs also. The Bāb took pleasure also in writing the most complicated *hayākil* (pi. of *haykal*, 'temple' or 'shape'), a kind of talisman in an obscure *shikasta* script, which he considered to be the most acceptable to God.

It would be difficult to put into order the very varied moral and juridical precepts contained in the *Bayān*. Beside such excellent verses as 'Each day recalls my Name. And if each day my thought penetrates into your heart, then are you among those who are always in God's thoughts' (Arabic *Bayān*, *wāḥid* V, chapter 9), one finds prescriptions which seem not a little strange, such as the injunction, already quoted, not to possess more than 19 books, or discursions on the correct way to eat eggs. The extreme leniency of the penalties, which are reduced to fines and to the prohibition of sexual relations with one's own wife, is characteristic. The greatest penalty is incurred by the homicide: the culprit is condemned to pay 11,000 *mithkāl*s of gold to the heirs of the victim, and to abstain from all sexual activity for 19 years. Some penalties are likewise inflicted not only on those who strike their fellow-creatures, but also on those who lift their voices against them. Certain passages seem, however, to deal with relations between believers and unbelievers (it is only in the Bahā'ī doctrine that Holy War and the confiscation of the goods of unbelievers have been definitely abrogated). There exist, moreover, regulations concerning taxes on benefits, on capital, etc. Divorce is allowed, but discouraged. Widowers and widows are

obliged to remarry, the first after 90 days, the latter after 95. Ritual purity and seclusion of women are abolished. Public worship is abolished, except for the rites of the dead. The Bāb's birthplace, the places of his imprisonment, etc., are recommended as places of pilgrimage. Every eighth day one should invite 19 persons, giving them 'if only a glass of water'. All alcoholic drinks are forbidden, and it is as strictly forbidden to beg as it is to give individual alms to beggars.

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