THE AZĀLĪ-BAHĀ'Ī CRISIS OF SEPTEMBER, 1867

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I present here the history of a fateful weekend during which the Bābī movement in the nineteenth-century Middle East was definitively split into the Bahā'ī and Azalī religions. There has not before been any extended account of this event that takes advantage of the whole range of available primary documentation for the crisis, or which attempts to weight these documents so as to arrive at a sound picture of the sequence of events and the roles and motives of the main players. In addition, I shall be interested in the way in which this crisis involved a process of boundary-drawing between the two incipient communities. How were events affected by the nature of their leaders' vision of society? That is, I will investigate the significance of the crisis for the definition of the Bahā'ī and Azalī factions of Bābīsm, and, indeed, for the development of the Bahā'ī faith as a separate religion. The basic work of establishing which accounts are more reliable, and reconstructing the train of events has never before been essayed, and necessarily will form part of the task here. I shall also be interested in the literary and religious symbolism used to make sense of the contest between Mīrzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Nūrī (1817–1892), known as Bahā'u'llāh, the founder of the Bahā'ī religion, and Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī (d. 1912), known as Subḥ-i Azal, who said he was the vicar of the Bāb. What large ideological commitments may have helped decide the outcome of this momentous struggle?

Implicit in much of the dissension between partisans of Azal and partisans of Bahā'u'llāh was a different conception of order in society. Mary Douglas writes,

> Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created . . The only way in which pollution ideas make sense in reference to a total structure of thought whose key-stone, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation (Douglas 1984:4, 41).

Bābīsm inherited from Shī'ite Islam strong feelings about ritual pollution, called in Arabic *najāsat*. In traditional Shī'ism, shaking the sweaty hand of a non-Shī'ite would make the believer impure and necessitate repeating ablutions before the next of the five daily prayers could be said. Further, Shī'ite sectarian movements tended to practice systematic shunning, whereby individuals or entire groups came to be viewed as polluted, and with whom all contact was forbidden. The religiously more conservative Azal faction put special stress on these practices.

The practice of ritual pollution has nothing to do with intellectual or theological debate. It is not about the merits of an argument:

> A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone . . . These are pollution powers which inhere in the structure of ideas itself and which

> punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate. It follows from this that pollution is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined. (Douglas 1984:113).

The schism of 1867, it will be argued, was in part about the sort of boundary-drawing through rituals of separation that Douglas has discussed.

The millenarian Bābī movement roiled Iran (1844–1850) under the leadership of Sayyid ʻAlī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, the "Bāb" or supernatural gateway to God (Amanat 1989). After the Bāb was executed in 1850, the leadership of the movement became extremely fragmented, with many claimants to Bābī leadership and to divinity putting themselves forward (MacEoin 1989). Sometimes in the 1850s a single city would be split into three distinct Bābī communities, each with a different "divine" leader. Mīrzā Saʻīd "Basīr" Hindi, a claimant to leadership with great charisma, was executed by a government official in the early 1850s, and many Bābī leaders died in regional conflicts and then the pogrom of 1852 after the Bābī attempt on the life of the shah.

The Nūrī household of four brothers from a great-landlord background was another focus of leadership. They seem to have made a self-conscious decision to put forward the youngest brother, Mīrzā Yaḥyā Subḥ-i Azal, as a sort of first among equals, and to attempt to convince the generality of the Bābīs to look to them, and to Azal in particular, for leadership. They were bolstered in this endeavor by a letter of the Bāb written before his execution that appeared to appoint Mīrzā Yaḥyā to a leadership role (Bāb 2001). The household consisted of Mīrzā Yaḥyā "Azal" Nūrī, of Mīrzā Ḥusayn ʻAlī "Bahāʼuʼllāh" Nūrī, of Mīrzā Mūsā "Kalīm" Nūrī, and of Mīrzā Muḥammad Qulī Nūrī. These were sons, all but two of them from different mothers, of the Iranian nobleman Mīrzā ʻAbbās "Buzurg" Nūrī, who had served in high governmental positions under Fatḥ-ʻAlī Shāh (r. 1797–1834). They were forced into exile in Ottoman Baghdad in the wake of the failed Bābī assassination attempt on Nāṣiruʼd-Dīn Shāh of 1852. Bahāʼuʼllāh was the treasurer for the household and for contributions received in Azal's name from believers. He also screened Azal's appointments and met with pilgrims, given that Azal's position of leader put him in great danger from the shah's assassins. Bahāʼuʼllāh himself in the 1850s was careful to deny that he had a high station or could work miracles (Cole 1997). Despite Azal's reclusive style of leadership, and despite continual behind-the-scenes conflicts between Azal and Bahāʼuʼllāh, they succeeded in presenting a relatively united front from their place of exile in Baghdad (1853–1863). They continued in this vein when the Ottomans first exiled Bahāʼuʼllāh to Edirne in Ottoman Europe near Istanbul. He and his brothers and some Bābīs lived there November 1863 through summer, 1868, and it was midway through this period that open conflict between Azalīs and Bahāʼīs broke out (Cole 1998a: 27–29).

Most Bābīs in Iraq and back in Iran came to accept Azal as the Bāb's vicar by the early 1860s, then, though many of them also came to admire Bahāʼuʼllāh's mystical writings (Browne 1910; Cole 1998b). The Nūrīs had an advantage over would-be Bābī leaders based in Iran, insofar as they were in the Ottoman Empire, which was not eager to execute or entirely silence them given that they might be a card that could be played in Ottoman-Persian relations. The Ottoman Empire, in any case, had, as a result of the Tanzimat reforms and intense European scrutiny of its policies toward religious

minorities, less leeway for arbitrary persecution of the latter. Among the increasingly pro-Azal Bābīs, there was a sprinkling of partisans of Bahā'u'llāh from the late 1850s, who saw him as the esoteric, real successor to the Bāb, whereas they painted Azal as an exoteric figurehead. This sentiment was especially strong in Baghdad, but also could be found as a decidedly minority view in Iran during the early 1860s. The question of Bahā'u'llāh's own evolving self-conception is a vexed one that may never be satisfactorily settled. Some maintain that he all along had messianic aspirations and was simply biding his time in giving some outward support to Azal (Lambden 1991:75–83). Others have seen him as genuinely unambitious until the mid-1860s (MacEoin 1989).

Probably beginning in autumn of 1865 or winter of 1866, Bahā'u'llāh gradually put forth an open claim of his own to be the promised one spoken of by the Bāb, while living in the house of Amru'llāh (Zarandī 1924:39–40). He thus infuriated Azal and his followers, both in Edirne and in Iran. Bahā'u'llāh reports that, as a result, he overheard partisans of Azal plotting against him in the joint Bābī household at the house of Amru'llāh (Cole 2002). Salmānī reports that Azal attempted to have Bahā'u'llāh assassinated in the late winter of 1866 (Salmānī 1997; 1982: 49–53.) As a result, Bahā'u'llāh broke up his household and moved away from Azal, cutting off contact with him. According to Salmānī, in March and April of 1866, "Darvīsh Ṣidq-'Alī was directed to go to Azal's house every day and fetch whatever he asked. However, as soon as Azal was separated from the rest of us, and his "brotherhood" was ended, Darvīsh refused to go to his house. 'After a thing like that,' he said, 'I cannot go there any more.'"(Salmānī 1997:35; 1982: 93). Ṣidq-'Alī was thus announcing his intention to shun Azal. But Salmānī makes it clear that Bahā'u'llāh expected his companions to follow through on any promises they had made to Azal, even to the extent of dispatching his letters to Iran, if they had so pledged. This fair-mindedness on Bahā'u'llāh's part was made possible in part by his rejection of the notion that some persons are ritually impure, a stance he took at least from his private declaration to some close friends and family members in the garden of Riḍvān near Baghdad in 1863 before his departure for Istanbul (Cole 1998a: 149–50). He even went so far as to say that if a Bābī examined his claims in a fair-minded and judicious manner and ended up rejecting them, he would be in no danger of divine punishment: "Even if you are not, in the end, satisfied with the decree of God and what he revealed, God will nevertheless be pleased with your judgment if it is fair, so that perhaps an eye might be opened by justice and gaze toward God" (Bahā'u'llāh in Cole 2001). The Bahā'īs of Baghdad saw the abolition of ritual pollution among communities as a key Bahā'ī teaching by spring, 1867, as evidenced by their letter to the U.S. consulate seeking freedom from persecution. They complained that past religious communities "consider each other unclean, though they are all human beings, having different and numerous religions" and said of their prophet, "That learned and wise man wrote many works containing the rules of union, harmony and love between human beings, and the way of abandoning the differences, untruthfulness, and vexations between them, that people may unite and agree on one way and to walk straightforwardly in the straight and expedient way, and that no one should avert or religiously abstain from intercourse with another, of Jews, Christians, Mohammadans and others" (Stauffer 1997).

In late spring, 1866, Bahā'u'llāh himself briefly withdrew from contact with any but his closest family, but after two months began receiving visitors again. In the subsequent year (summer 1866 to summer 1867), Bahā'u'llāh wrote many tablets

(letters and treatises in the form of revelation) setting forth his new claims to be the return of the Bāb and the promised one of the Bābīs, thus superseding any authority Azal might have had as the putative vicar of the Bāb (e.g. Cole 2001). Bahā'u'llāh denied in this period that the Bāb had ever actually appointed a vicar [*vaṣī*], though most Bābīs at that point believed Azal had been so appointed. Many Bābīs still hoped for reconciliation between the two brothers, whereas others had already begun choosing up sides.

A partisan of Bahā'u'llāh, Sayyid Mihdī Dahajī, reports that the Baghdad community had by February or March of 1867 split into three factionsBahā'īs, Azalīs, and the undecided, with Bahā'īs in the majority. During that same period, a meeting was held in Baghdad in which the minority Azalīs and the Bahā'īs presented their proofs for their positions to neutral members of the third, undecided faction. He says that the Bahā'īs prevailed:

> At the end of the year 1283 [circa February-March 1867], when I was in Baghdad, news arrived that Bahā'u'llāh had proclaimed his manifestation. Mīrzā Yaḥyā Subḥ-i Azal refused to accept his cause. Between the two, a complete schism had occurred, and recently had led them to separate from one another. Bahā'u'llāh now lived in a separate house, while Mīrzā Yaḥyā Azal had his own dwelling. The friends, in yet another house, were distraught and depressed. Each of the friends in Edirne wrote a daily account of events and sent this news to Baghdad. Every day, as well, verses and tablets of Bahā'u'llāh arrived. The majority of the friends in Baghdad believed in him, whom God shall make manifest [Bahā'u'llāh]. Some persons, seeing that Azal had opposed Bahā'u'llāh, did likewise. Others yet were cautious and bewildered about where their duty lay and what should be done. A great deal of discussion and argumentation took place among these three groups of friends in Baghdadpartisans, opponents, and the undecided. Morning and night, views were exchanged. (Dahaji 2000: 36–38).

It is significant that in Dahaji's account, the various sorts of Bābī were still willing to meet and debate with one another early in 1867, demonstrating that they were not systematically shunning one another and did not view each other as ritually impure.

The same sorts of divisions, along with a willingness to cross them socially, existed in Edirne that year. The social distance between them was increasing, however. In summer, 1867, Bahā'u'llāh rented the house of 'Izzat Āqā. Balyuzi writes that it "was newly-built and possessed a fine view of the river and the southern orchards of the city. Its rooms were spacious, and although the *bīrūnī* was smaller than the *andarūnī*, both had ample space and large courtyards planted with a variety of trees . . . . The companions moved to another house in the same neighbourhood, large enough for them all and provided with a Turkish bath. Visitors also lodged in this house . . ." (Balyuzi 1980: 241). By then, Bahā'u'llāh's and Azal's partisans were living far apart from one another. Late in the summer of 1867, the conflict between Bahā'u'llāh and Subḥ-i Azal had come to a head. The Bahā'ī accounts of the way in which the Tablet of the Divine Test (*Lawḥ-i Mubāhalih*) came to be written by Bahā'u'llāh contain a number of discrepancies, but all agree that it was written in late August or in September of 1867, not long after Bahā'u'llāh had moved to the house of 'Izzat Āqā. Moreover, it came

about as a result of a building conflict between the "Bahā'īs" (Bahā'u'llāh and his partisans) and the "Azalīs" (his half-brother Mīrzā Yaḥyā Ṣubḥ-i Azal and his partisans). Only two years before, they had been outwardly united as Bābīs and most had recognized Azal as at least the first among equals among Bābī leaders, and many saw him as much more. It is not possible to be sure of the exact date for these events. Mīrzā Javād Qazvīnī is the only one who gives a precise day, 26 Rabī' II, 1284, corresponding to 27 August 1867, which fell on a Wednesday rather than (as it should have) a Friday (Qazvīnī 1914: 24). However, several other reliable sources report the month as having been Jumāda I, which coincided with September 1867.

The accounts we have of the incident derive from a number of pens. I take as my base a very early report written in autumn, 1867, by Mīrzā Javād Qazvīnī, that quotes extensively from Bahā'u'llāh's contemporaneous account (Qazvīnī in Māzandarānī 5:1999: 39n–44n). We also have a much later brief narrative by Qazvīnī, translated by Browne in 1918. Qazvīnī was literate and was on the scene, though he did not see everything with his own eyes since Bahā'u'llāh forbade his partisans to come to the mosque. His accounts often have the ring of truth to them and demonstrate firm knowledge of telling detail. I will also weight very heavily two later narratives of Mīrzā Āqā Jān Kāshī, "Khādimu'llāh," Bahā'u'llāh's secretary (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh in Ishraq-Khavari 1973: 4:277–281; 7:238–246). He was an eyewitness to most of the events he recounted, and he quotes from Bahā'u'llāh's first, early Tablet about the Divine Test, as well as from a later, second such document. I have translated these documents into English (Cole 2000). It is impossible to date the composition of Khādimu'llāh's accounts, for while they appear in tablets that presumably come from the 1880s, he could have been quoting much earlier diary entries. They were probably written, in any case, no more than 15 years after the event, and so are earlier than most other extant memoirs. Khādimu'llāh had direct access, as well, to Bahā'u'llāh's memories of the events. One problem in documenting this fateful weekend is that Bahā'u'llāh had forbidden his partisans to come to the Sultan Selim mosque in Edirne. Khādimu'llāh, however, somehow received special dispensation to do so. I do not have access to most of the narrative of Bahā'u'llāh's disciple and biographer, Nabīl Zarandī, but I do have a paragraph on his attempt to deliver the tablet to Azal, and Nabīl would also be weighted as important (Zarandī 1999). The account of Muḥammad 'Alī Salmānī, Bahā'u'llāh's barber and masseur, provides some interesting information, but suffers from the author not having been directly involved in the events (though he was in Edirne at the time), from his being illiterate, and from his writing decades after the fact. In particular, he appears to confuse two distinct persons named "Sayyid (or Mīr) Muḥammad," and he recounts some events that seem implausible and are unsupported by other sources. The least trustworthy account is that of Mīrzā Ḥaydar 'Alī Isfahānī in his *Delight of Hearts* (*Bihjat as-Ṣudūr*), which is embellished by exaggeration and unbelievable details of a sort that make me question whether he was still in Edirne when the incident occurred (Isfahānī 1914:77–79; Isfahānī 1980:22–24). My suspicion is that he only heard much later oral retellings of it, which had added grandiose details that he reports uncritically. The main value of his brief passages on this subject lies in his revelation that Bahā'u'llāh went to the Mevlevī Sūfī centre after leaving the mosque, something that other sources do not mention, but which is at least plausible.

The earliest two published accounts we have, then, are from an eyewitness, Khādimu'llāh. Late in the 'Akkā period it was apparently common for Bahā'u'llāh to suggest to Khādimu'llāh the gist of what he should write, and then to review it, and make corrections and to add passages in his own words. Later Bahā'ī tradition has maintained that such tablets (the *Lawḥ-i Maqṣūd* is a famous example) only employed this form as a literary device, and that the entire tablet was written by Bahā'u'llāh, some of it in the voice of Khādimu'llāh. This theory strikes me as a little unlikely, however, and it seems more natural to accept that Khādimu'llāh wrote the passages himself as an amanuensis, having been given general instructions by Bahā'u'llāh, and with the latter going over the final text before it was released.

The background to the crisis, as described by Khādimu'llāh, is that Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī, a partisan of Azal's, came into conflict with Bahā'u'llāh in Edirne during the summer of 1867 (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 7:1973:239). According to this text, Bahā'u'llāh informed him, "O Muḥammad, you have no knowledge of the path of the prophets or the character of the pure ones." A few days later he visited Bahā'u'llāh. He made some statement, which was not accepted. A few days passed, and he again asked to come into Bahā'u'llāh's presence. He requested that Bahā'u'llāh order Azal not to write anything more "For Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Isfahānī asked a question about a verse of Persian poetry, and he could not understand its meaning." Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī, although he generally supported Azal, is said to have had a low opinion of his abilities and to have manipulated him, and may have wondered whether he should see if he could develop a similar relationship with Bahā'u'llāh. Bahā'u'llāh said, "Sayyid, what business do you have with this impertinent meddling?"

In the end, Bahā'u'llāh banished him from his presence. Many years later, Bahā'u'llāh wrote,

> Every one of this people well knoweth that Siyyid Muḥammad [Isfahānī] was but one of Our servants. In the days when, as requested by the Imperial Ottoman Government, We proceeded to their Capital, he accompanied Us. Subsequently, he committed that whichI swear by Godhath caused the Pen of the Most High to weep and His Tablet to groan. We, therefore, cast him out; whereupon, he joined Mīrzā Yaḥyā and did what no tyrant had ever done. We abandoned him, and said unto him: "Begone, O heedless one!" After these words had been uttered, he joined the order of the Mawlavis, and remained in their company until the time when We were summoned to depart (Bahā'u'llāh 1971: 164; Bahā'u'llāh 1982: 106–107).

Muḥammad 'Alī Salmānī appears to be referring to this incident when he mentions that Bahā'u'llāh wrote a tablet for a newly-arrived Bābī named Mīrzā Muḥammad Kāzirūnī in which he "dismissed" a "Sayyid Muḥammad," who is certainly Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī (Salmānī 1997:35; Salmānī 1982:93). Salmānī says that Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī was furious with Bahā'u'llāh at the time because the latter had virtually ordered him to leave Edirne, appointing for him a sum of money. "He has shed his poison on me," this Sayyid Muḥammad is reported by Salmānī to have said of Bahā'u'llāh. Salmānī tended to mix up Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī with Mīr Muḥammad Kāzirūnī, and Khādimu'llāh says that Bahā'u'llāh wrote the dismissal letter directly to Isfahānī.

He says Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī then went to Azal and, despite severe reservations about him, put himself out as an Azalī for a while, until the two finally fell out. During this time Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī was cultivating and meeting with about 70 other Bābīs who leaned toward Azal (Bahā'u'llāh 1973: 7:239). There were about 100 Iranian Bābīs in Edirne, so that about 30 were neutral or siding with Bahā'u'llāh around 1866–67.

Salmānī says that Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī complained to Azal that Bahā'u'llāh was claiming to be the embodiment of God's dominion, and that Sayyid Muhammad encouraged Azal to issue the challenge and make his own claims clear. Salmānī writes that Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī:

> went to Azal at the time of the separation and told him, "Our master, Bahā'u'llāh, now claims to be the embodiment of 'Mine is My dominion,' and announces that all must be subject to his command. Here is his tablet revealed for me. What have you to say?"
>
> Azal replied, "His Holiness the Exalted One, the Bāb, appointed me as His successor (*jā-nishīn*). The successor is myself."
>
> "Don't confuse us, " Mīr Muhammad said. "You speak thushe makes a claim that is absolute [or "universal": *kullīyyih*]. Go and sit down; settle the question between you."
>
> "I am willing," Azal said. "I can vindicate my claim in any way he chooses"(Salmānī 1997:35; Salmānī 1982:93–94).

Salmānī now implausibly has Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī serve as a mediator between Azal and Bahā'u'llāh in setting up the mosque meeting. This is highly unlikely for a number of reasons. Isfahānī had already been banished from Bahā'u'llāh's presence, and so would not have been a welcome mediator. Moreover, Khādimu'llāh makes it clear that the news of Azal's challenge reached Bahā'u'llāh at the last moment, and through other persons. Still, the identification of Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī as the instigator of the challenge is borne out by both Khādimu'llāh and Nabīl Zarandī. Bahā'ī sources also are convinced that Azal only issued his challenge in the end because he and Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī were convinced that Bahā'u'llāh would never agree to meet him face to face after he had announced their separation more than a year before (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 1973: 7:240).

Khādimu'llāh reports that one Friday morning Azal abruptly issued a document (*sanad*) calling for Bahā'u'llāh to meet him at the Sultan Selim mosque in Edirne that very afternoon. The Selimiye is perched on a hill and is a central place for Edirne. A highly impressive structure designed by the great early modern architect Sinan, until recently it had among the largest domes, and highest minarets, of any mosque in the world. It was built at the command of Sultan Selim II (1569–1575). The challenge document envisaged that Azal and Bahā'u'llāh would face each other there and call down ritual curses on one other, in hopes that God would send down a sign that would demonstrate the truth of one or the other. This custom, called *mubāhalih* in Persian, is a very old one in the Middle East, and appears to have evoked the contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians. The Iranian tobacconist Hasan Āqā Salmāsī, who was not a Bābī, was with Azal when he wrote the document, and was responsible for spreading

knowledge of it among the Iranian Bābī community (many of whom frequented his shop). One who heard about the challenge was a recently-arrived Bābī, Mīr Muhammad Mukārī Shīrāzī (whom Salmānī called "Kāzirūnī"), who appears to have been sitting in the tobacconist's shop talking with the Azalīs when his conversation turned to the conflict between Azal and Bahā'u'llāh, and Hasan Āqā told him about the recently-issued challenge. This individual must have been from a village near Kāzirūn in Fārs province. Some sources call him "Mukārī," others "Shikārī," others "Kāzirūnī" and still others "Shīrazī." Mukārī, a caravan leader, was an old-time Bābī who had accompanied the Bāb to Mecca, and had also been in the party that went with Bahā'u'llāh from Baghdad to Istanbul. Khādimu'llāh says that it was only after the *mubāhalih* document was issued that Mīr Muhammad Mukārī became aware of it. Mukārī, like most Bābīs, accepted Azal's leadership, but he may initially have been one of those who hoped for reconciliation between Azal and Bahā'u'llāh.

Khādimu'llāh reports that Mukārī then went to the house of 'Izzat Āqā and informed Mīrzā Muhammad Qulin, Bahā'u'llāh's half-brother, of the challenge. In a letter written from Edirne to his friends in Qazvīn, Mīrzā Javād reports, "One day I was in the house of God [Bahā'u'llāh's mansion], when I noticed that someone had arrived in the receiving room.He said, 'I met with the idolaters [Azalīs]. After some conversation they made a decision and wrote out a document." Mukārī did not have the document with him, clearly, but was reporting it. Mīrzā Muhammad Qulī told Mukārī that there was no need for the Bāb's camel driver (*jilūdār*) actually to present the document. Rather, they were ready to appear. Qazvīnī says he instructed Mukārī to go and tell Azal and his companions to come to the mosque (Qazvīnī in Māzandarānī 1999: 5:39n). Khādimu'llāh depicts Mukārī as actually meeting with Bahā'u'llāh at that point, and says that Bahā'u'llāh himself told him "Go and inform the gentleman that I am waiting in the mosque" (Bahā'u'llāh /Khādimu'llāh 1973: 4:278). Bahā'u'llāh had been preparing to take his midday rest, according to another account by Mīrzā Javād Qazvīnī. Instead, he set out that very hour for the Sultan Selim mosque. Mīrzā Javād reports of Bahā'u'llāh that "from the moment of his exit from the house until he entered the above-mentioned mosque, in the streets and markets, he continued to utter verses in an audible voice so that all who saw him and heard the verses were astonished" (Qazvīnī 1918:24–25). In his contemporary letter of the time, Mīrzā Javād describes the scene with similar language, but mentions that Bahā'u'llāh addressed his verses to Mukārī. Since, however, Mukārī had been sent to inform the Azalīs that Bahā'u'llāh had accepted the challenge, it seems more likely that he met back up with Bahā'u'llāh later at the mosque. The only source we have for Bahā'u'llāh's afternoon discourse, therefore, is Bahā'u'llāh's own later report of it to companions like Javād Qazvīnī and Khādimu'llāh. Qazvīnī says that when Mukārī arrived at Azal's house, his wife came out and said, "It will be today"(Qazvīnī in Māzandarānī 1999: 5:42n).

When Bahā'u'llāh arrived at the mosque, the preacher was preaching a sermon. Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī reports that the preacher fell silent on Bahā'u'llāh's entry, "either by choice or because he forgot what he had to say." Bahā'u'llāh took his seat on the mosque floor amongst the worshippers, and gestured for the preacher to continue his sermon. "Time passed and everyone expected Azal to arrive also, but to their great surprise he never appeared" (Isfahānī 1914:78; 1980:23). News that Bahā'u'llāh was

waiting at the mosque spread among the network of Bābīs. Khādimu'llāh reports that the news reached him while he was shopping for household goods at the bazaar, and that he immediately set off for the Sultan Selim. He saw that a crowd of curious onlookers lined the way near the mosque and they gestured toward it, indicating that "Şeyh Efendi" (as Bahā'u'llāh was known in Edirne) had gone that way. Inside, he found that the worship ceremony was over and Bahā'u'llāh was sitting alone with Mīr Muhammad Mukārī, reciting a stream of verses that had reduced the other to tears. Bahā'u'llāh had forbidden the other Bābīs from attending. At length Bahā'u'llāh dispatched Mukārī to remind Azal again of the appointment, saying "O Muḥammad, go to them and say, come, with your ropes and your staff" (a reference to the magic snares and staffs used by Pharaoh's magicians in their contest with Moses) (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 1973: 7:240–241).

According to Khādimu'llāh, when Mukārī arrived at Azal's house the latter came out to see him and replied directly that the confrontation would have to be postponed. Khādimu'llāh dramatizes Mukārī's attempt to convince Azal to come to the mosque, having him say, "You yourself chose these arrangements. You stated a preference for this matter. You wrote a document saying that whoever did not appear today is false and far from the truth. Then how can any word of yours be depended upon?" (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 1973: 4:278). Mīrzā Ḥaydar 'Alī reports that Azal said he was ill (Isfahānī 1914:78). Mukārī returned, unsuccessful, to the Sultan Selim mosque, rejoining Bahā'u'llāh there, and delivered Azal's message. Qazvīnī says that Mīr Muḥammad arrived saying, "Mīrzā Yaḥyā asks to be excused because today it is not possible for him to present himself. He therefore begs you to appoint another day, and to write a note to this effect, signed and sealed, that whoever does not present himself at the appointed time is an impostor" (Qazvīnī 1918:25).

Salmānī says that "Mīr Muḥammad" (whom we know to be Mukārī here) went back and forth to Azal's house two or three times, and that Azal at one point promised to come, but never did (Salmānī 1997:35; 1982:93). Salmānī is probably right that Mukārī made two trips, one after he had met Mīrzā Muḥammad Qulī at Bahā'u'llāh's house, and one from the mosque later that afternoon. However, the detail from the contemporary letter by Qazvīnī that in response to the first trip, one of Azal's wives had come to the door and said the contest would occur that day, rings true, and might help explain Azal's seeming inconsistency if she was unaware that he was saying he was ill. After a while, Bahā'u'llāh, Mukārī and Khādimu'llāh, who had joined him, said ritual prayers (*ṣalāt*) (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 1973: 7:241). Bahā'u'llāh waited till sundown, but Azal never arrived. (In the Muslim world, sundown marked the beginning of the new day, so at that point the date appointed by Azal in his initial challenge passed).

Bahā'u'llāh walked with Mukārī and Khādimu'llāh through Edirne's streets that dusk, no doubt feeling triumphant. He is said by Khādimu'llāh to have delivered a long Arabic sermon to Mukārī as they walked in the lanes, proclaiming himself the return of the Bāb and of the Prophet Muḥammad, stating his fearlessness before both clergy and kings, and celebrating his victory over Azal, whose boasting had been revealed to be empty. Although Khādimu'llāh says that "everyone" heard the sermon, it was in classical Arabic, which no one in the street could have understood except Ottoman

clerics or the more educated Iranian Bābīs (or those who had spent a long time in Baghdad), and these appear not to have been present. It so happened that on the route Bahā'u'llāh took lay a tobacco shop, that of Ḥasan Āqā Salmāsī, which was frequented by partisans of Azal. Ḥasan Āqā had been the first to know of Azal's initial challenge, and had been responsible for spreading news of it among the Iranian Bābīs in Edirne. Bahā'u'llāh stopped at Ḥasan Āqā's store and told him, "Based on the decision that the gentleman had announced in his proclamation, the countenance of the All-Merciful [Bahā'u'llāh] presented himself, whereas the idolaters repudiated their own agreement."(Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 1973: 4:278–80).

As he continued on his route, Bahā'u'llāh passed the Mevlevī *tekye* or Ṣūfī centre, and decided to join the chanting, dancing, whirling mystics to celebrate his day of triumph. Mevlevīs were followers of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, and their twirling dances to the accompaniment of chants from the Mathnavī or mystical "couplets" of Rūmī made them known in the West as the "whirling dervishes." Referring to Rūmī, whom many Iranians look upon as a significant spiritual teacher, Bahā'u'llāh quipped, "Mawlānā needs a visit from us."(Isfahānī 1914:78; 1980:23). Bahā'u'llāh went into the building. Mīrzā Ḥaydar 'Alī says that there were many others, including city notables, around Bahā'u'llāh at this point, but we cannot be sure that was true. Here, too, the dervishes are reported to have ceased their dancing and chanting on Bahā'u'llāh's entrance, until he and his companions were seated and he gestured for the festivities to resume. Salmānī in his homely style says that when Bahā'u'llāh finally reached home, he commented, "The fellow said he would appear. But there was no sign of him" (Salmānī 1997:35; 1982:95). As soon as he arrived home that Friday evening, Bahā'u'llāh wrote out the *Sūrat al-Mubāhalah* or *Tablet of the Divine Test*. Calligraphed by 'Abdu'l-Bahā', it summarized some of the discourse he had delivered to Mukārī while walking down the street after the event. It fixed a further two days in which Azal might fulfill his challenge, Sunday and Monday, during which Bahā'u'llāh would be at Sultan Selim mosque waiting for him (Bahā'u'llāh/Khādimu'llāh 1973: 7:241, Māzandarānī 1999: 5:29).

Mīrzā Ḥaydar 'Alī wrote in his memoirs that Bahā'u'llāh himself pointed out the next day how on that Friday on two occasions worshippers had fallen silent at Bahā'u'llāh's entrance. This coincidence was clearly held by the Bahā'īs to be an auspicious sign. That Saturday Bahā'u'llāh sent the *Tablet of the Divine Test* to Ḥasan Āqā the tobacconist. He entrusted delivery of this tablet to Muḥammad "Nabīl-i A'ẓam" Zarandī, but stipulated that he only hand it over to one of the Azalīs who frequented the shop if he received a sealed note from Azal, in accordance with the agreement struck Friday afternoon. Nabīl triedthree days with partisans of Azal who socialized at the tobacco shop, but proved unable to procure from Azal any such warranty, nor did Azal appear either Sunday or Monday at the mosque (Zarandī in Māzandarānī 1999: 5:30n; Qazvīnī 1918:25). Nabīl himself tells the story in this way:

> He favored me with his grace by entrusting that Tablet to this servant, so that I might deliver it, and read it out to them. For Sayyid Muḥammad [Isfahānī] always said, "We shall make the truth known by means of a divine test [*mubāhalah*], and Bahā'u'llāh will never come."

> Also, Bahā'u'llāh told me to compose a poem recounting the details of the day, from his departure from his house until his return from the Sultan Selim mosque, and to send it along with the blessed Tablet [*Sūrat al-Mubāhalah*] to Azal. That very moment I put everything that had happened into verse, and delivered the poem, with the Tablet. When Mullā Muhammad Salmāsī Tabrīizī saw the Tablet, he said, "I swear by God, nothing but the truth could be ascribed to the author of these words!" He stood up and said, "I am going to Sayyid Muhammad [Isfahānī] and will say to him, 'Either you must bring from Yahyā a paper with his seal on it, and without delay, or you will have to admit that you lied and you'll never again challenge someone to a ritual cursing match.' "
>
> I sat in the shop. When he came back, he said, "I will bring the paper stamped with a seal tonight." For three days, I went every day, and Mullā Muhammad spoke ill of those persons. They had written far and wide that they had come to the mosque for the divine test, and that Bahā'u'llāh did not show up. Mullā Muhammad Tabrīzī also saw the verse narrative, and wept upon reading it, saying, "If Sayyid Muhammad [Isfahānī] and Mīrzā Yahyā [Azal] had been able to produce verses in a whole week such as you wrote out in one day, at that time they might have had a right to put themselves forward" (Zarandī in Māzandarānī 1999: 5:30n).

This counter-challenge had met Azal's request that another day be appointed, and was probably intended to show the ultimate in fairness to Azal, who had claimed to be ill on the day he had originally fixed for the divine test. In this way, Azal was deprived of any such excuse, since he had two whole further days to meet the new challenge, and would have had to be on his deathbed to make a plausible plea of illness again! For his part, Azal appears to have given himself an out insofar as he refused to take delivery of Bahā'u'llāh's sealed note and refused to reciprocate with one of his own. From an Azalī point of view, there never was an agreement from Mīrzā Yahyā's side to Bahā'u'llāh's stipulations for a new rendezvous. Some Azalīs, the Bahā'īs allege, wrote letters back to Iran reversing the actual course of events and having Azal appear while Bahā'u'llāh cowered in his house. Whether this is true and what exactly was Azal's reaction to the fiasco could only be explored with better access than I now have to Azalī sources. The Bahā'īs interpreted as a sign of cowardice Azal's failure to show up on any of the three days he or Bahā'u'llāh had put forward, and partisans of Bahā'u'llāh such as Mīrzā Javād Qazvīnī and Mīrzā Hādī Shīrāzī put that spin on the these events, quickly spreading news of them and the related tablets to Iran (Tāherzādeh 1974–1987: 2:298). Mīr Muhammad Mukārī, is also reported by Salmānī to have said of Azal, "That man is nothing but a liar. He never showed his face" (Salmānī 1997:35; 1982:95). He took leave of Bahā'u'llāh and set out for Istanbul. As we saw in Bahā'u'llāh's own account, above, Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī fell out with Azal (perhaps as a result of his poor performance in the challenge) and joined the Mevlevī Sufi order. He was exiled with the Bahā'īs to 'Akkā in 1868, where he spied on them for the Ottomans. Some of the rougher Bahā'īs in 'Akkā, furious that he was interfering by his intelligence-gathering with the ability of Iranian Bahā'īs to visit Bahā'u'llāh, murdered him and two of his associates in 1872, against Bahā'u'llāh's wishes.

The crisis produced three contemporary texts or discourses by the two leaders. The first was Azal's challenge, which unfortunately is not reprinted in any of the sources available to me. The second is Bahā'u'llāh's oral discourse, delivered to Sayyid Muhammad Mukārī in the streets of Edirne after they had departed the mosque at sundown. The third is the *Tablet of the Divine Test*, penned late Friday evening after Bahā'u'llāh had returned home from the chanting and dancing session of the Mevlevī Sufis. Although the oral discourse on the way back from the mosque was delivered only that evening, and probably memorized on the spot by Khādimu'llāh, Bahā'u'llāh most likely composed elements of it earlier in the day, beginning with his swift march to the mosque at midday, when he was said to have amazed bystanders by reciting verses as he went. One important theme is the comparison of this divine test to the contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians. This theme emerges as early as Friday afternoon when Bahā'u'llāh sent Mukārī for the second time to fetch Azal, telling him, "O Muhammad, go to them and say, come, with your ropes and your staff." This language is repeated in the body of the subsequent evening discourse. It evokes Qur'ān 20:59–72, which speaks of the Egyptian magicians menacing Moses with their rope snares and their staffs:

> So we showed Pharaoh all Oursigns, but he cried lies, and refused. 'Hast thou come, Moses,' he said, to expel us out of our land by thy sorcery? We shall assuredly bring thee sorcery the like of it; therefore appoint a tryst between us and thee, a place mutually agreeable, and we shall not fail it, neither thou.'
>
> 'Your tryst shall be upon the Feast Day.' said Moses.
>
> 'Let the people be mustered at the high noon.'
>
> Pharaoh then withdrew, and gathered his guile. Thereafter he came again, and Moses said to them, 'O beware! Forge not a lie against God, lest He destroy you with a chastisement. Whoso forges has ever failed.'
>
> And they disputed upon their plan between them, and communed secretly, saying, 'These two men are sorcerers and their purpose is to expel you out of your land by their sorcery, and to extirpate your justest way. So gather your guile; then come in battle-line. Whoever today gains the upper hand shall surely prosper.'
>
> They said, 'Moses, either thou wilt cast, or we shall be the first to cast.'
>
> 'No,' said Moses. 'Do you cast!'
>
> And lo, it seemed to him, by their sorcery, their ropes and their staffs were sliding; and Moses conceived a fear within him. We said unto him, 'Fear not; surely thou art the uppermost. Cast down what is in they right hand, and it shall swallow what they have fashioned; for they have fashioned only the guile of a sorcerer, and the sorcerer prospers not, wherever he goes' (Qur'ān in Arberry 1973: 1:343–342).

This theme of Bahā'u'llāh as a new Moses is also evoked when he says in the discourse that the palm of his hand was rendered white (the miracle of the suddenly whitened palm was attributed to Moses in Muslim tradition), and he refers to his "staff," saying,

"were we to cast it down, it would swallow to the entire creation," just as Moses' staff swallowed the magicians' serpents.

Bahā'u'llāh begins the discourse by saying that he had departed from his house with "manifest sovereignty," presumably meaning that he went of his own sovereign will to confront Azal. He tells Mīr Muhammad Mukārī that the spirit has thereby vacated its seat, and that thereby the spirits of the pure ones went forth, along with the souls of the past messengers. "Spirit," of course, is an Islamic sobriquet for Jesus, but it is unclear if that is the referent here. I think Bahā'u'llāh is referring more to the Holy Spirit. Bahā'u'llāh then says he is the return of the Bāb, and also the return of the Prophet Muhammad. (It is thus particularly appropriate that he wins his victory in a mosque). Bahā'u'llāh is here appealing to the Bābī doctrine of the "return" or *raj'at*, wherein the personality-attributes of past historical persons recur in contemporary human beings. Although the messianic figure sought by the Bābīs was called by the Bāb "He whom God shall make manifest," Bahā'u'llāh in this period seems instead to have said he was the "return" of the Bāb, establishing a continuity between the Bāb's writings and persona and his own. Bahā'u'llāh announces his defiance of all the clergy, mystics, and monarchs on earth, insisting that he would recite God's verses to them without any fear. These assertions also echo the Moses theme, insofar as he defied Pharaoh (civil authority) and his priests (religious authority). Bahā'u'llāh notes that he is, technically speaking, acting contrary to religious counsels in agreeing to meet with a hypocrite and an idolater like Azal. And despite this one exception, he does insist that the bonds with any loved ones (such as a brother) who rejected Bahā'u'llāh's cause in favor of Azal had from that moment been severed. He defines Azal as having previously been the embodiment of only one of God's names, and to prefer one of the divine names over God himself would be a form of idolatry. He redefines religious authority (prophets, messengers, imams and vicars) as being legitimate only if it upholds Bahā'u'llāh's Cause. (This assertion undermines Azal's authority as the supposed vicar of the Bāb.) Finally, Bahā'u'llāh complains that Azal had once been just one of the Bābīs, like any other man, but that his passions and selfishness had led him to begin having grandiose ideas about himself. Bahā'u'llāh explains that he had himself helped build Azal up, to his current regret, for a "secret reason" (*ḥikmat*). (The traditional Bahā'ī explanation is that Azal was put forward as the exoteric leader in order to protect the real leader, Bahā'u'llāh, though this story no doubt presents an overly rationalized picture of the complex relationship between Bahā'u'llāh and Azal, 1850–1865).

There are many details that remain unclear with regard to the events of that day. Is it possible to make a clear distinction between the roles of Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī and Mīr Muhammad Mukārī in the issuance of Azal's challenge? Khādimu'llāh's version, of the 1880s, explains the origins of Azal's challenge in the disgruntlement toward Bahā'u'llāh of Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī. Salmānī, as we have seen, at some points confused Sayyid Muḥammad Isfahānī with Mīr Muḥammad Mukārī (or certainly did not carefully distinguish in his narrative between the two). The illiterate Salmānī seems unaware of the written document Azal released, and instead makes "Mīr Muḥammad" a go-between, and paints him as hostile to Bahā'u'llāh. In contrast, Shoghi Effendi has Mukārī resent *Azal*'s claims (Rabbani 1970:168). This assertion is certainly

an error, and is directly contradicted by Mīrzā Haydar ʻAlī Isfahānī, who makes it clear that Mukārī accepted Azal as the Bāb's vicar and could not believe he would break the Bāb's covenant (Isfahānī 1914:77). (Tāherzādeh, who translated this passage from Isfahānī, left out the information about his favoring Azal, substituting ellipses: Tāherzādeh 1974–1987: 2:295). Haydar ʻAlī's report makes far more sense than Shoghi Effendi's version, written over 75 years after the events, since if Mukārī already resented Azal, why was he visiting with him or the Azalīs that Friday morning, on which he heard of Azal's challenge? Why did he try so hard to ensure that Azal showed up and that there was a fair contest? It is far more likely that he was a typical Bābī and recognized Azal. In Shoghi Effendi's version, Mukārī prevails upon Azal to issue the challenge for a meeting at the Sultan Selim mosque so as to settle the issue. But the version of Khādimu'llāh merely has Mukārī find out about the challenge through Āqā Hasan and depicts him as delivering the news of it to Bahā'u'llāh's household. The contemporary letter by Mīrzā Javād Qazvīnī does seem to say that after Mukārī had been conversing for a while with the Bābīs, the document was issued. It is possible that the whole affair had already been set in motion by earlier discussions between Azal and Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī, and that the direction Mukārī's conversation took that morning merely provided an occasion for Hasan Āqā to announce the document containing the challenge. It seems unlikely that Mukārī served as anything more than a pretext for its promulgation. Khādimu'llāh makes it clear that Mukārī found out about it after the fact. If he at that time accepted Azal as the vicar of the Bāb but had a somewhat open mind about Bahā'u'llāh's claims to be the return of the Bāb, this impartiality may help explain why some sources make him pro-Azal and others make him pro-Bahā'u'llāh. Moreover, Salmānī may not have been alone in confusing this "Mīr" (i.e. Sayyid) Muhammad Mukārī with Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī.

It is a minor point, but it seems to me unlikely that Bahā'u'llāh delivered his discourse to Mukārī on the way to the mosque, as Qazvīnī alleges in his letter (he was not himself allowed to go to the mosque with Bahā'u'llāh, so he is repeating perhaps garbled hearsay). Rather, Khādimu'llāh says Bahā'u'llāh delivered his sermon to Mukārī on the way back from the mosque, and to this he was certainly an eyewitness, and most probably was the one who recorded or memorized the discourse for later transcription. Because the sermon to Mukārī says that Bahā'u'llāh "will go" to the mosque, it may have been thought necessary that it was composed on the way there rather than on the way back. But this approach to the text is overly literal, ignoring the possibility that the future tense is a rhetorical device, and it contradicts Khādimu'llāh's eyewitness account.

Further confusion was introduced by Mīrzā Haydar ʻAlī Isfahānī, whose account seems especially untrustworthy in some regards. Khādimu'llāh's narrative, written presumably in the 1880s, contains no mention of any participation in these events either by the Ottoman governor of Edirne or of the city notables, and does not speak of crowds at any point lining Bahā'u'llāh's path. Had these persons and events been involved in the story, given how much prestige they bestow on Bahā'u'llāh, it seems to me highly unlikely that Khādimu'llāh would have neglected them. Nor are they mentioned by Qazvīnī, another eyewitness. Still, the author of *The Delight of Hearts* says that Azal wrote a letter to Hurşid Paşa, the Ottoman governor of Edirne, complaining about Bahā'u'llāh and charging that he was not sharing the Ottoman stipend with the other

Bābīs (Isfahānī 1914:76–77; 1980:22). (Bahā'u'llāh denied this vehemently, and also at one point has some fun with the Azalīs, saying that these same persons who complain so bitterly about needing a bigger share of the Ottoman stipend also claim to be divine.) Isfahānī has Hurşid Paşa showing the letter to Bahā'u'llāh and seeking advice on how to deal with the conflict. Bahā'u'llāh is said to have offered to meet Azal any time, and to acknowledge the justice of his claims were he actually to come to such a rendezvous. Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī reports that the governor first suggested to Azal that he go to Bahā'u'llāh's house, but that Azal declined, saying that he and his brother did not visit each other's houses. (This statement probably echoes Azal's view of his brother as ritually polluted). The alternative of the governor's mansion was rejected because, Azal was supposed to have said, Bahā'u'llāh's Shī'ite sensibilities made him see civil government as a usurpation of authority that should belong to the Imam. Finally, he is said to have suggested the Great Mosque of Sultan Selim as the meeting place. Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī also depicts a thronging crowd around Bahā'u'llāh as he marched to the mosque that Friday afternoon, stopping traffic, with many in the crowd attempting to kiss his feet.

All of these assertions are lacking in earlier and more reliable reports, and they seem to me to be pure fantasy. We are told by eyewitness Āqā Husayn Āshchī that the governor, Hurşid Paşa, did have social relations with Bahā'u'llāh (Āshchī 1997:43–44). But neither Khādimu'llāh nor Bahā'u'llāh refer to any role in these events for the governor, and it is absolutely incredible that they should not have mentioned it if he had had one. Moreover, it is not plausible that there were crowds in the street around Bahā'u'llāh as he went to the mosque. The crowds would already have been *in* the mosques, since it was the time of Friday congregational prayers. Other sources, like Mīrzā Javād, simply note that Bahā'u'llāh's chanting of verses as he walked toward the mosque elicited the amazement of bystanders who saw him. Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī also depicts the governor and city notables as accompanying Bahā'u'llāh from the Sultan Selim mosque to the Mevlevī *tekiye* and sitting with him at the latter place. These elements of Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī's account strike me as almost certainly untrue. Unfortunately, the great early twentieth-century Bahā'ī historian, Fādil Māzandarānī, gives credence to some of these details from Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī in his account of the incident (Māzandarānī 1999: 5:27–29). Shoghi Effendi, on the other hand, does not mention any role for the governor. He does, however, attribute a role to Sayyid Muhammad Mukārī of Shiraz in pressing Azal to issue the initial dare and depicts Mukārī as a strong partisan of Bahā'u'llāh, something that the phrasing of Khādimu'llāh's account makes most unlikely. The latter proposition is flatly contradicted by Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī, who plainly says that Mukārī was initially a partisan of Azal.

From a welter of conflicting accounts and detail, I have attempted to construct as complete and as plausible a picture of events on that long weekend of September, 1867 as is possible from currently available sources. In my telling, the crisis began more distantly with the conflict between Azal and Bahā'u'llāh in 1866–1867, and more proximately with Bahā'u'llāh's "dismissal" of Sayyid Muhammad Isfahānī, who appears to have been the one who convinced Azal to issue the challenge to a divine test.

On the morning of that Friday in September 1867, Mīr Muhammad Mukārī Shīrāzī, a newly arrived old-time Bābī, was sitting with partisans of Azal at the tobacco shop of the Shi'ite, Hasan Āqā Salmāsī. He was told about Azal's challenge to a *mubāhalih*, which functioned in the way Douglas explained, as a ritual of separation intended to uphold the structure of the Bābī religion by demarcating the vicar or the messiah as having passed beyond acceptable boundaries, having become impure and accursed. Mukārī hurried to Bahā'u'llāh's residence, the house of 'Izzat Āqā, where he informed Mīrzā Muhammad Qulī, Bahā'u'llāh's brother, of the announced rendezvous at the Sultan Selim mosque. He was sent back to Azal to confirm that Bahā'u'llāh would be there, and one of Azal's wives replied that so would Azal. Mukārī rejoined Bahā'u'llāh at the mosque, where Bahā'u'llāh spent the afternoon reciting verses and waiting. After some time, he sent Mukārī for a second time to Azal, who begged off on grounds of severe illness, and who asked that Bahā'u'llāh appoint another day for the challenge. At sunset Bahā'u'llāh, Mukārī, and Khādimu'llāh left the mosque and walked in the streets of Edirne, with Bahā'u'llāh delivering a messianic discourse to Mukārī, announcing himself as a new Moses, and as the Return of the Bāb and Muhammad. They stopped at the tobacco shop and Bahā'u'llāh told Hasan Āqā what had happened. Then Bahā'u'llāh stopped in at the Mevlevī Sufi chanting and dancing session that evening. When he arrived home, he composed the *Tablet of the Divine Test* and 'Abdu'l-Bahā' calligraphed it. He sent it the next day with Nabīl Zarandī to Hasan Āqā's shop in an attempt to have it delivered to Azal and to receive from him a sealed reply, but in this mission Nabīl failed, though he kept trying all day Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

Azal's unwillingness to follow through on his own challenge appears to have caused his stock to fall enormously both among the Bābīs in Edirne and those in Iran, despite attempts of his partisans to muddy the waters. The weekend of the divine test was a crucial propaganda tool for Bahā'ī missionaries in Iran, and helps explain the relatively rapid desertion of Azal by so many Bābīs in Iran who had relatively recently looked to him for leadership. The entire incident appears to have been a crucial miscalculation on his part. He seems to have thought Bahā'u'llāh would not consent to face him. And while he may have genuinely been ill on the Friday he had appointed for the challenge, most Bābīs, who interpreted reality rather symbolically, might well have seen his illness itself, on the day he chose for the confrontation, as a divine sign. Certainly, few could forgive him for not meeting Bahā'u'llāh's subsequent challenge.

The incident spelled closure for the Bahā'īs in their relations with Azal and the Azalīs. No further serious hope seems to have been entertained of restoring Bābī unity. The Azalī-Bahā'ī split was permanent, and the Bahā'īs had become convinced that they needed fear nothing from Azal. With the passage of time, chroniclers such as Mīrzā Haydar 'Alī Isfahānī embellished the story, adding in pashas and street crowds, and thus endowing the events with the sort of exoteric significance that the Bābī-Bahā'īs attributed to them on the esoteric plane. Subsequent Bahā'ī theologian-historians began the process of erasing Azal from history, denying his popularity among the Bābīs 1854–1865, and finding it implausible that an old-time Bābī like Mukārī could have initially leaned toward Azal. By the time we get to Tāherzādeh in the 1970s, information to the contrary is being actively suppressed in English. Bahā'u'llāh in the view of these later

partisans had to have not only won out that September, he had to have always possessed supremacy. That the magnitude of Bahā'u'llāh's victory can only be diminished by rendering Azal a non-entity did not faze them.

At the time, Bahā'u'llāh was able to cast the crisis rhetorically as a replaying of the contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians. He depicted Azal as the representative of hidebound and selfish religious hierarchy, prideful and haughty before God. From the point of view of Bahā'u'llāh's partisans, Azal played the worldly "magician." Bahā'u'llāh was a serene and fearless Moses, imbued with charismatic power and ensured of success. His "staff" of divine support and audaciousness swallowed up Azal's challenge and erased the efficacy of whatever poor gifts the latter might have possessed. The ritual of separation constituted by the *mubāhalih* was felt in the aftermath by a majority of Bābīs to have demarcated a social and cosmic boundary between the wrongness of Azal and his partisans and the rightness of Bahā'u'llāh and his. Bahā'u'llāh's ability to enchant the mundane world by pointing to signs within it of recurrent divine dramas was one key to his growing popularity among the Bābīs. It seems to me most likely that Azal was bluffing all along. He believed in shunning, and in the ritual pollution of the Bahā'īs. His reclusiveness probably reflected this belief that he was living in an unclean world. He refused to come to Bahā'u'llāh's house as a matter of course, and probably never intended to come into Bahā'u'llāh's presence in a Sunni mosque. He was, however, egged on in issuing the challenge by Mīrzā Muḥammad Isfahānī, in the hopes of creating some ritual theater by presenting Bahā'u'llāh with a challenge to which he could not respond. The *mubāhalih* would have been an easy victory for Azal if Bahā'u'llāh had also been unalterably wedded to the practice of shunning and belief in ritual pollution. He would have declined to meet Azal, and so would have been the party that was faced down. Azal and Isfahānī almost certainly believed that this would be the outcome. This calculation depended upon the practice of some strict Shī'ites of holding non-believers and heretics to be ritually polluted (*najis*) and untouchable. If both sides treated the other as ritually impure, no one would appear for the divine test, and the initial challenger would win by default. By declaring himself the One whom God shall make manifest, foretold by the Bāb, Bahā'u'llāh had introduced a schism into Bābīsm and so broken "that which should be joined," transgressing a clear structural line of both social and cosmic import (as in the Douglas quote above). Azal probably could not bear to come into his presence for this reason, and he believed that his half-brother felt the same way about him. Here Azal made a crucial error. Bahā'u'llāh was moving toward a universalist vision of human unity across religious and other boundaries, and had already abolished the whole notion of ritual pollution. He might not enjoy meeting those of whom he disapproved, but nothing in his beliefs categorically forbade him from doing so. To the contrary, his followers had been taught by spring of 1867 "that no one should avert or religiously abstain from intercourse with another, of Jews, Christians, Mohammadans and others." It may well have been Bahā'u'llāh's emerging globalist ideology that allowed him victory over the more closed, esoteric, and sectarian Azalī movement.

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