

Awakening : A History of the Babi and Baha’i Faiths in Nayriz

by Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman

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A review by Robert Harris, Princeton, New Jersey

Awakening is a fresh telling of a story very familiar to those who have a personal or scholarly interest in the persecutions of the Babi Faith (1844-1863) and the Baha’i Faith (1863-present). Those who have studied, even casually, the published chronicles of that “galaxy of “God-intoxicated heroes” of the Bab (1819-1850) and Baha’u’llah (1817-1892) will note that this history is not focused just on the men who suffered to establish these new religions. It goes into granular detail on the suffering and bravery of the women, young and old, the children, both boys and girls, and the teens of Nayriz. This is a much fuller picture of those who lived and died through wave after wave after wave of cruel and brutal repression and persecution.

The authors serve their readers well with compelling personal story after gripping tragic moments that focus on ALL of the victims in the major murderous eruptions in Nayriz: 1850, 1853 and 1909. Much of this luminous and moving personal detail comes from the unpublished manuscript penned by Dr. Hussein Ahdieh’s great-great grandfather, Muhammad Shafi plus other new sources. In the introduction the authors declare that history is also “her” story:

Women are largely invisible in the historical record and were given secondary status in nineteenth-century Persian society. To give the reader a more complete picture, we have included as much as we could find about the contributions and suffering of women and children during these events; this includes a perspective from the unpublished memoirs of local Baha’i women. We have attempted to humanize the people in this story by giving background information and anecdotes about them. (p4)

Indeed, **Awakening** is brimming with rich descriptions of what life was like in Nayriz. The first section of the narrative is a warm, loving, detailed portrait of nineteenth century life in rural Persia. The 13 pages of the chapter called simply “The Town of Nayriz” shows the pervasive effect of Islam on the people and the way they live their everyday lives. We hear the “Call to Prayer” in every home, in every district, on every street of Nayriz. The prose is hypnotic and magnetic as the reader is led from the homes of the rich, to the homes of the clerics, the merchants, the newly-weds, the chilly, clear night skies of the shepherds, the bazaar, the poor, the very poor, women giving birth, the gardens, the courtyards, the scenes where marriages are

being contracted, where women hid while male guests were in the house, the bakers, the women fetching water, an elderly man dying, and the throngs going to the mosque. This is a unique pen portrait of one town, but it adds luster to our understanding of how deeply ingrained was the call to prayer and the Islamic culture that had taken hold on much of Persian thought and custom in that day. That hold, of course, continues to today. This chapter could serve as an object lesson in university courses on finely crafted prose. I read it twice, simply because it is so delicious and pleasing to the ear.

But the peaceful town is headed for upheaval. When it comes to the trouble created by the introduction of the Babi Faith into this quiet, predictable town of friends and neighbors . . . well, it becomes holy war. From the moment the Babi evangelist Vahid enters Nayriz, the peace is shattered by the announcement of the coming of the Qa'im. This claim brings with it dire implications of change – and we then see what can happen when devout Muslims encounter the most crucial test possible of their Faith and the most central threat to their way of life and the balance of power.

Awakening provides the history told many times before of innocents being attacked, the victims, against steep odds, rout the well-armed and trained soldiers. The attacks on the invaders (with shocking and surprising power and effect) makes a reader's heart beat fast. But, in the end, the soldiers either trick the believers in the new Revelation into some sort of surrender that ends in sociopathic slaughter, or the government masses thousands of troops and artillery that cannot be beaten.

The heads on stakes marching into Shiraz, the bodies hanging and burning in the bazaar, the dead being dragged through town by horses, the homes and livestock burned, the orphans, the widows, the mothers who have lost their children . . . it is all here. But, on virtually every page there is some detail that has not been seen before. For instance, in 1853, in the wake of the second gory attack on the Babis of Nayriz we encounter this family, fleeing the carnage:

A fourteen-year old boy walked behind his mother with his hand tied to her waist. He asked her why he was tied to her; she told him that of the soldiers took him and killed him, she wanted to be there so she wouldn't spend the rest of her life wondering and waiting. She carried her other, much younger, son in her arms. Following the advice her husband had given to her before being killed, she had put on her plainest, coarsest clothes in anticipation of being captured by soldiers. On her younger boy, though, she had accidentally left a hat with little ornaments on it. A cavalryman rode up, leaned down and snatched it off with such violence that her boy was thrown from her arms, his small body landing on the hard ground some distance from her. She ran to him in a panic and picked him up. He was unconscious, a bald spot where his hair had been torn out by the violent grab. She cradled him in her arms, trying desperately to revive him, kneeling

on the ground—enveloping his little body just like she had at his birth—when he stopped breathing. (p 164-165)

This passage and countless others from the unpublished memoirs of Muhammad Shafi gives us an eyewitness to events where average people, every day people, humble people became heroes. But in this history some of the heroes wear dresses and cook, suffer poverty and take care of children after their husbands or fathers or brothers are mercilessly killed. Ahdieh and Chapman take great pains to research and present with throbbing passion the fate of so many women and children. These are the stories that are seldom told with such power.

In one particularly deft piece of writing, (Chapter 20 – The Temple Sacrifice) the authors create a synchronized tapestry of three epic stories from three continents, three heroic and passionate events, all happening at the same moment in time. It is March 21st of 1909, the Vernal Equinox, the Naw Ruz in Persia. The authors jolt the reader back and forth, from Chicago, Illinois where Baha'is from North America are forming the corporation that will build one of the architectural wonders of the Western world - - the stunning Baha'i House of Worship on the shores of Lake Michigan. You then fly to the Middle East, to what we call Israel today, for the moving and ceremonial burial of the remains of the Prophet of Shiraz, the young, martyred founder of the Babi Faith. After 59 years of being hidden, the remains of the Bab (shot to death in Tabriz in 1850) are finally being entombed by Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, in the heart of Mt. Carmel, the "nest of the prophets." That gold-domed building today attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to the incredible Baha'i gardens and fountains that stretch from the foot of Carmel to its peak, overlooking the Bay of Haifa. Quickly, you are transported to the orchards and foothills and caves and dusty streets of Nayriz, where Baha'is are being hunted like animals and brought to the bazaar, into the presence of the cruel Shaykh Dhakariyya. He orders a group of seven men to instantly recant their faith. They all refuse. One by one, with a look from the Shaykh, a nod of his head, a gesture of his finger - - each one is stabbed, or struck with swords, shot again and again, has his throat cut. These peaceful people, lovers of mankind, stood firm in their faith and each of them, and many, many more had their lives end in the town's bazaar.

These three historical events, documented meticulously from many reliable sources, all happening at the same time, creates a powerful picture of the many faces of a worldwide faith community, growing, in spite of the excesses of its cruel and intractable enemies. The authors create a vivid tapestry (or a fine Persian carpet, you might say) of that 1909 Naw Ruz. The raw authenticity that can only come from someone who has stood in all three of those places, hearing the history repeated to him, perhaps as a young boy, lovingly, through the ages.

Awakening is a book that is creating a stir in the English language among people who never set foot in Iran. It should have an even deeper meaning to Iranians who know the darkness of the

1800's and 1900's in that land, and are able to compare those dark times in Nayriz to the great days of that wondrous, civilized spot, once called Persia.

In very moving descriptions, ***Awakening*** shows us a revolution's beginning that would spread around the world. It was the revolution of how women were treated, how they found faith and courage that allowed them to boldly standing up to soldiers, clerical leaders, political leaders, all the way to Tehran. These women did not shrink from the powerful spirit of the age that had come into their lives. Their menfolk had been murdered, treacherously by the cowardly and corrupt leadership of the Qajar dynasty in the middle of the 1800s – and these women simply had to go on. These women in 1850 and 1853 steadfastly carried on to raise the generation of believers from Nayriz that suffered in the next wave of violent persecution and murder in 1909.

We owe Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman a great debt for producing such a readable book, with chapter after chapter of people we wish we knew. The people they describe are like the Baha'is we might meet today in Shiraz or Tehran or Nayriz. These people want to raise their children in peace, educate them so that they can serve their fellow Iranians, make their own livelihood, and enjoy the blessings of a great nation with a priceless heritage. For Baha'is in Iran and other places, these simple human desires have always been tragically difficult to attain.

In addition to the tragic and heroic events in Nayriz, the authors have produced valuable appendices, over 400 footnotes, a valuable bibliography and a very handy index. But more than that, in just nine pages they have given us pithy, concise and clear descriptions of: the twin Manifestations revered in the Baha'i Faith, the Bab and Baha'u'llah, an overview of Muhammad and Islam, a picture of Shi'ite Islam, the historic use of violence in religion, plus that very vivid picture of the town of Nayriz before the Revelation of The Bab.

History, especially history written like this, always sheds new light on the past - - and light leads to deeper understanding. Perhaps a greater understanding of the teachings and ethics of the Baha'i Faith may convince some authorities that Baha'is are trying to be good, loyal citizens. Certainly, if any human being with even one ounce of love or compassion in them would meet the characters that populate the pages of ***Awakening***, they may be loath to repeat the excesses perpetrated in Nayriz during the Qajar Dynasty.
