

Browne's Mirza Yahya, before and after his Second Visit

New History vs. Materials

by

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Edward Granville Browne, the outstanding Orientalist and recognized scholar on Babism, visited Mirza Yahya Azal in 1890 and 1896. He learned of Babism and of Mirza Yahya from Comte de Gobineau's book *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale* (Paris, MCMXXVIII, pp.115-296 and 396-474). This book was based on official histories, personal investigation and communication with two in-laws of Mirza Yahya that worked for him. The impact of this book on Browne was extraordinary; so much so, that he visited the "Successor" in Cypress and his "Rival" in Akka.

Browne's meeting with Mirza Yahya was expected and prepared for a long time and for a good reason, since he had read that Yahya was the "Successor of the Bab", the "Fourth Letter of the First Unity", practically a new Saint Peter, a new Imam 'Ali, one who "held undisputed and absolute sway over the Babi Church." (Browne, E. G. tr., *The Tarikh-i-Jadid or New History* (NH), Introduction p. xx) Between both men has been much correspondence, including Browne's petition to visit him. So, the description of the first meeting was highly respectful.

On the other hand, Browne never had any correspondence with Baha'u'llah; besides, he went to Akka where lived, as he was told, a Usurper, a "man of much more resolute and ambitious character" (NH p. xxi). The actual meeting with Baha'u'llah in Akka, was unexpected, as he wrote: "Though I dimly suspected whither I was going and whom I was to behold (for no distinct intimation had been given to me) ..." (Browne E. G. tr., *A Traveler's Narrative of The Bab*, Introduction p. xxxix). The impact of meeting the Manifestation, however, changed him into a sincere seeker after the truth, as Baha'u'llah commented, "We received him on several occasions, portents of sincerity could be discerned on his visage" (Balyuzi, H.). Due to the impact of this meeting, Browne went back to England to renew his studies on the subject but, the Azali book *Hasht Bihisht* by Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ruhi and Mirza Aqa Khan (both sons-in-law of Mirza Yahya) conveniently written and sent to him in 1890, just after his visit to the Holy Land, as well as, the *Nuqat 'ul-Kaf* placed at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, once again confounded him.

He published the *New History* in 1893. which contained his extraordinary moral assessment of Mirza Yahya; after that, he felt the need to visit him a second time, what he did in 1896. There he was provided with more manuscripts and notes, and soon began his disenchantment; he left, and their correspondence ceased altogether, despite of Mirza Yahya request: “Please God you will... under no circumstances expunge this pilgrim...but ever remember him with letters.” Now, Browne had time to read and evaluate Yahya conduct and writings, as well as, those of his few followers. Before this second meeting, Browne considered Mirza Yahya (or “Subh-i-Azal”, as titled by him), besides of being the “Successor”, the “Fourth Letter”, etc., as “the incarnation of all purity, virtue, and heavenly wisdom”, with a “perfectly blameless character (NH p. xiv).” Browne trusted Yahya Azal and his few partisans, beyond normal credibility. Regarding several Babi manuscripts, he affirmed that their “authenticity is certified...in Subh-i-Azal endorsement”, even when the latter did not have the Mss. with him. Also, Browne sent him some Mss. of The Bab, that he knew Yahya did not have, and he returned them with corrections and interpolations (*JRAS*, 1892, p. 447)

After this second visit, highly disillusioned, Browne busied himself with Persian literature and politics but, suddenly, as in a hurry, published the *Kitab-i-Nuqtat’ul-Kaf* (Gibb Memorial Series, vol. 15) in 1910, surprisingly no less than eighteen years after he encountered the manuscript of which, he said: “...it was interesting, profoundly and intensely interesting; the most interesting book, perhaps, in the whole range of Babi literature.” (NH, Introduction p. xxviii). It appears that he had no time enough to see its flaws, or more importantly, to translate it into English. He even needed the collaboration of Mirza Muhammad Qasvini, a friend with Azali proclivities to write the Introduction. Meanwhile the Babi A.L.M. Nicolas was gaining ground as the foremost western scholar on Babism; in 1903 he published a note on the *Nuqtat’ul-Kaf*; already in 1902 translated The Seven Proofs, in 1905 the Arabic Bayan and, published his important History of the Bab in 1905, soon to be followed by his works on Shaykhism, and then the full translation of the Persian Bayan in four volumes (1911-1914).

When Browne requested again the copy of the NK from the *Bibliothèque*, he found that Nicolas had borrowed it. Browne was losing the opportunity of a life, to write a comprehensive history of the religion he much admired, and the translation of the major works of the Bab, whom he really loved. Soon the *Nuqtat’ul’-Kaf* was losing impact due to the several critiques it received, particularly that of Siyyid Mahdi Dahaji, (*Materials*, p. 231-2) and several others, including from Azali quarters, like that of Hajji Mirza Mahdi, other son-in-law of Mirza Yahya (*A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental Mss belonging to late E.G. Browne*, p. 81), E.G. Browne had a great appreciation of Gobineau and his work and noticed that, nothing escapes him due to his keen insight; however, the Count did not use the NK in his history of the Babis; Browne also had a very keen insight but, kept silent on this issue. He also read the *Miftah Bab al-Abwab* by Dr. Mahdi Khan, in which he says that his copy of the NK has no reference to Yahya Azal or any successor. Dr. Said Khan, good friend of Browne, also wrote that the NK of the Gibb Series is no better than his own corrupted copy of the same work (MacEoin, D., 1992, *The Sources of Early*

Babi Doctrine and History, p. 146). Other copies were showing up, like the one sent by Abu'l-Fazl to Alexander Toumanski (Russian translation of *al-Kitab al-Aqdas*, Introduction, p. v, note 1), that Browne received but, on all of these he kept silent.

It is very interesting that Browne in his Introduction of the NK (1910) writes: “Now, Mirza Jani History contains, **besides the portions which it was desired to suppress or alter**, a mass of historical matter...” (*Nuqtat'ul-Kaf*, p. xxxv)

The title page of the *Nuqtat'ul Kaf* says: “Compiled by Hajji Mirza Jani of Kashan between the years A.D. **1850 and 1852.**” Finally, in his last book *Materials* p. 232, Browne had to admit that “...my edition of Haji Mirza Jani's history of the Bab, composed in 1853, only three years after the Bab's martyrdom.”, that is, after the supposed author was dead; this is no small admission.

Little by little, Browne began realizing how he was being deceived by his Azali friends. Twenty-five years after giving that extraordinary assessment of Mirza Yahya in his Introduction to the New History, Browne produced his last book on the subject: “*Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*, Cambridge 1918.” Even though (for other reasons), Balyuzi considered that “The less said about this book the better”; still, the Yahya that emerges there, is quite different. Without any comment, Browne presents there many convincing facts about Mirza Yahya and of his Azali friends. He found out that the *Hasht Bihisht*, that for him was “the most important book...in the entire range on Babi literature” (NH p. xxviii), was not authored by the famous Siyyid Javad-i-Karbila'i, as told by the astute Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ruhi, who sent him the manuscript but, by the sender himself. Later, to save face, the Azalis sent him another copy attributing it to Mirza Javad and not to Siyyid Javad but, Browne already knew the real authorship, and of its contents noticed that the work has a “number of ideas peculiar to himself [Ruhi] and foreign to the Bab's thought.” (*Materials*, p.226). The same author attributed his “*Faslu'l-Khitab fi Tarjumati Ahwali'l-Bab*” to the Italian Luigi Bonelli (*idem*. p. 226). Besides, EGB had also positive evidence that the *Surih-i-Haykal* was revealed by Baha'u'llah and not by Subh-i-Azal, as entered in the British Library (Ms. Or. 6679). Browne himself thought that it was by Yahya Azal. Baron Rosen corrected that in *Colletion Scientifiques*, (Saint-Petersburg, 1877). Browne corrects his error in “Some Remarks on the Babi Texts”, p. 270. There is also there, a book of Mirza Yahya attributed to the Bab. Who was interested in doing all these misattributes? (Unrelated, maybe, but the Library of Congress (BP360.B11317) has the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* attributed to the Bab, 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi).

The Azali *Risala-i-'Amma* (The “Aunt's Epistle”) ascribed to Shah Sultan Khanum ('Izziyyih) , paternal aunt of 'Abdu'l-Baha, is really her's? Jelal Azal gives the date of composition between 1892 and 1904, what suggests that she passed away in 1904; however, Browne writes that the lady “was still living in Tehran in 1913” (A Descriptive Catalogue of Oriental Mss belonging to E.G. Browne, p. 80); he received the Ms. in 1912. At any rate, she was very old, when supposedly, wrote this epistle that has detailed information of what had happened half a century before; quite a remarkable memory, as remarkable is (according to Browne) her knowledge of history and theology of various religions, as well as, her vigorous and potent attack to her

Brother. The epistle is followed by a refutation of Bahai claims by the ubiquitous Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ruhi. It is interesting that EGB was impressed by the Aunt “knowledge of...even Hindu beliefs...”, something that correlates well with Browne’s previous reference to the “Indian Sacred History” by the same Ruhi. Later, EGB received another copy “much corrected and emended”, of the Aunt’s Epistle, “in which whole paragraphs have been cut out or replaced by others”, and without “the last 47 pp.” (*ibid*, p. 80). Later, Badiyyih Nuri in her history of Takur and Nur, written to oppose Khusravi, based it on what she heard from two old family ladies, who heard it from ‘Izziyyih Khanum. M. Khusravi notes that the real author of the Epistle was Mirza Ahmad Aminu’l-Atibbay-i-Rarashti (Rouhani Ma’ani, 2008, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, p. 283) This is not unusual from the ill-wishers.

The memory of this lady appears to be even more surprising, when considered against what Baha’u’llah wrote: “This sister had never lived with Us.” and after Iraq “never saw Mirza Yahya and remained unaware of Our Cause” (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p.169)

The documents sent to Browne by the Babi Nicolas (*Materials* p. 276 to 287), showed that Mirza Yahya was unnoticed for the governments of Persia and the Ottomans. Nicolas himself, lived about two years in Cyprus and visited Yahya many times; however, he showed only interest in The Bab and, nothing of his “successor.” Even his son-in-law Mirza Aqa Khan, co-author of the *Hasht Bihisht*, in a later work, speaks something of Baha’u’llah, “while of Subh-i-Azal he makes no mention” (*Materials*, p. 223) His exile to Cyprus shows Yahya (Subh-i-Azal) dark side. Browne has in the Island many friends and collaborators that provided him with many official documents, including those of the Ottoman archives. Browne read the charge of sodomy against Yahya (Subhi) but, he glossed over it; later Momen dismissed it as, “presumably an unfortunate error.” (Momen, M. 1981, *The Babi and Baha’i Religions – 1844-1944*, George Ronald, p.308 and note *). In a letter from the Ottoman Ministry of Justice to the British Legation, on January 16, 1880, in part, this is found: Persian Subhi Kemal: Accused of sodomism; Persian Miskin Cassim Effendi: Accused of heresy (*ibid.*, p.308). And in letter from the Ministry of Police to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Persian Subhi Kial: Condemned for sodomism; Persian Miskim Cassim: Condemned for heresy (*ibid.*, p.310) and in Note*: “Browne has left a blank at this point.”

He knew from his son Rizvan-Ali, of his large number of wives, 11 or 12 (Abdul-Ahad; E.G. Browne (translator), *Personal Reminiscences of the Babi Insurrection at Zanjan 1850* in JRAS vol. 27, p. 767). Other sources give a larger number (see Momen, *The Cypress Exiles*, 1991, BSB 5.3-6.1, pp 84- 113). The scandalous judicial procedure between Mirza Yahya and Ahmad (his own son and successor), regarding the paternity of a child, must have left Browne really depressed. (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 233, 4th printing 1957),

Yahya Azal was a very prolific writer and Browne received, before his second visit, many manuscripts, including precious ones, like autograph Mss of The Bab, Quddus, Tahirih, etc. Later,

he received more but, took only note of their existence. Also, the British Library has a great number of them but, he did not read them, instead, asked his friend and former colleague Dr. Ahmad Khan to briefly describe them and give an opinion, what he did, and Browne published them in his *Materials*. In his friend's opinion, Yahya Azal's writings were "full of vain repetitions and grammatical errors" and continued saying that: "...it does not appear why, or in what sense, by what standard, or by what title...should [Yahya Azal] name his absurdities: 'scriptures revealed from heaven'" (*Materials*. p. 214.) Then he quotes very interesting autobiographical information of Mirza Yahya like: "I was of all my family the meanest and most illiterate" (*Materials* p. 218) and "I first read the [Bab's] tablets in 1266 when I was 19 years of age" (*ibid.* p.212), i.e. the year of the martyrdom of the Bab. Dr. Khan also noticed the coarse and inflammatory language Yahya used for Dayyan, practically calling for his assassination (*Mustayqiz* in *Materials*, p. 218). Mirza Yahya's "purity, virtue, and heavenly wisdom", as well as, his "perfectly blameless character" (NH Introduction, p. xiv) were no more, and never were. Browne did not have to comment anything, any further, and let his readers to assess.

After Mirza Yahya's solitary death, his son Rizvan-'Ali, who abandoned him and his teachings, offered Browne nine manuscripts of his father for a price (*Materials* p. 315), but he declined the offer, something that he would have paid any price, twenty-five years earlier.