

I Knew the Báb
His Early Life through the Remembrances of Those Who Knew Him
A Dramatic Reading in Commemoration of His Birthday

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Cast

Fátimih Bagum
The mother of the Báb

Jináb-i Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí, known as Khál-i-A‘zam
The uncle of the Báb

Shaykh ‘Abid
The teacher of the Báb

Khadíjih Bagum
The wife of the Báb

Narrator

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Fátimih Bagum

I am the mother of Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad. My family descended from the lineage of the Imám Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The family of my husband, Siyyid Muhammad-Ridá, also descended from the Prophet, and Nabil who chronicled the history of the Bábí Faith later wrote that our house was renowned for its nobility. We lived in the city of Shíráz in Persia.

No one paid attention to the women of my society, so in future, no one will know where or when I was born nor how I was raised. These details are of no importance today. Suffice to say, I was married young – likely in my early teens – but my first children died in infancy. My husband and I prayed fervently for the birth of a healthy child, and our prayers were answered. On the twentieth day of October, 1819, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy. We named him Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad. You can imagine how joyful we were but we never guessed our infant was born to follow a divine destiny.

Jináb-i Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí, known as Khál-i-A‘zam

I am the uncle of Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad and the brother of Fátimih Bagum. It was a terrible blow when her husband died so suddenly, leaving her a young single mother with an infant son. As is our custom, a male relative takes over to act as the legal guardian of under-aged fatherless children, and so I took responsibility for my nephew who was barely past infancy.

When he turned six, I enrolled the boy in the school of Shaykh ‘Abid where he remained for some five or six years. He was taught the curriculum of the era, especially reciting from the Holy Qur’án, and the rudiments of the Persian language, arithmetic and handwriting.

Since I was a merchant by profession, I intended to take him into business with me as soon as he finished his studies. Did I notice that he exhibited extraordinary promise as a little boy? No, not really. Men of my time paid little attention to youngsters; it was the women who raised the children. However, I did love him as if he were my own son.

Shaykh ‘Abid

I am Shaykh ‘Abid and I followed the Shaykhí movement, led by Shaykh Ahmad and later by Siyyid Kázim. I owned a school for youngsters and also taught theology to some older students. Khál-i-A‘zam asked me to tutor his nephew in my small school.

One day ‘Alí-Muhammad astonished me with an insightful explanation of the opening words of the Qur’án. The beauty and power of his words made me realize there was nothing I could teach this child. I took ‘Alí-Muhammad home and committed him to his uncle’s vigilant protection. I explained the boy stood in no need of teachers such as I. Khál-i-A‘zam was annoyed by this. He instructed his nephew to return to my school, to observe silence and to listen attentively to every word spoken by his teacher. While ‘Alí-Muhammad was always courteous and humble, I knew he possessed an extraordinary wisdom and knowledge gained neither from books nor human teachers.

Fátimih Bagum

The first sixteen years of my boy’s life were the very most precious years in all my life. My brother, Khál-i-A‘zam, was good to us, taking us into his own home, and of course I doted on my son. He and I had an extraordinarily strong bond. He was always so loving, considerate and dutiful towards me. He was such a pure and sweet child, so courteous to everyone. But he had a solemn streak that sometimes amused me. And he was astonishingly devout in his prayers and meditations, far beyond his years. Of course every mother thinks her first-born is the apple of her

eye, and I surely adored my incomparable child. But I had not yet come to comprehend the unique man he would become.

Shaykh ‘Abid

‘Alí-Muhammad came late to school one day. When I asked him why, he said he had been in the house of his ‘Grandfather’. The Siyyids, the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, refer to the Prophet as their ‘Grandfather’. I told ‘Alí-Muhammad he was only a child and that he need not spend so much of his time in prayer. He replied quietly, “I wish to be like my Grandfather.”

With his innate knowledge of our Holy Book, and this latest spoken desire, I marveled to think what his future might hold. Despite following the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kázim, it’s ironic I didn’t make the connection between my own student and the coming Promised One. My only excuse is that one does not readily expect such a tiny child to be the Qá’im or Promised One!

Khál-i-A‘zam

When ‘Alí-Muhammad turned thirteen years of age, he joined my business. I patiently trained him for three years and he learned quickly. At sixteen, he was more than ready to move to Búshihr to manage our commercial interests in that city. He lived there for about five years and worked very hard in building up our trading house. ‘Alí-Muhammad gained an enviable reputation for nothing but scrupulous honesty in every business dealing. I was so proud of him.

However dutiful my nephew was in his work, however, I had long sensed that his true vocation lay not in business and commerce. And then in the spring of 1841, he fulfilled a personal dream in setting off to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbilá in Iraq. He drew to a close all our business affairs in Búshihr, gave the keys to a trusted friend in the bazaar with instructions to turn them over to me or one of his

other uncles, and he set off. In retrospect, I realize this was a tangible beginning of the spiritual journey that would take him far from his origins as a merchant in a family business.

Fátimih Bagum

I missed my son so much during his years in Búshihir. It was out of the question for me to visit him there because women simply didn't travel in those days, what with no good means of transport except by mules over very bad roads. And safety on the road could be very insecure. But 'Alí-Muhammad was a faithful correspondent, thank God, and he did return to Shíráz on occasion. But it wasn't enough for me. I had a premonition that his impending travels to the holy cities might take him away from me permanently.

Khál-i-A'zam

His mother and I shared the same misgivings over 'Alí-Muhammad's travels. His sojourn in Iraq stretched into nearly seven months. Fátimih wanted nothing more than for my nephew to return to Shíráz, marry and settle down. She begged me to go to Iraq and convince him to return. When I arrived, 'Alí-Muhammad was reluctant to leave the holy places, but at last he consented to comply with his mother's wishes. I am certain only his desire to ameliorate the sadness of his beloved mother could have moved him to accompany me back to Shíráz. And then after just a few months at home, he began to talk about returning to Iraq.

Khadíjih Bagum

I am Khadíjih Bagum and I became the wife of Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad. My father, Háji Mírzá 'Alí, was Fátimih Bagum's paternal uncle, meaning the two of us were first cousins, although she was older than I. And my older half-sister was married to 'Alí-Muhammad's uncle, the one who had been his guardian. There were many marriages between our two families. As well, our homes were side by side and as young children, 'Alí-Muhammad and I were playmates, although I was three years younger than he was.

After he moved to Búshihir, I began to have dreams about him. In one of them, 'Alí-Muhammad was in a verdant plain, with flowers in profusion. He faced towards the Qiblih in an attitude of prayer. His outer coat was embroidered with verses of the Qur'án with threads of gold. His face was radiant. In this particular dream 'Alí-Muhammad was only about sixteen years old, and would be in Búshihir

five more years before his pilgrimage to the holy cities in Iraq.

Fátimih Bagum

I realized I had to move quickly to forestall my son's return to Iraq. Our families had an informal agreement that he and Khadíjih might marry when the time came. The time was now. I went to her home and followed all the protocols of proposing the marriage. When that sweet young woman entered the room, I kissed her on the forehead and gave her my most loving embrace. Within mere days the families had agreed to the engagement and we delivered gifts to formalize the arrangements. She was twenty years old. Some girls in those days were married as young as nine years old, but I had always hoped they would marry and so it came to pass.

Khadíjih Bagum

I was so happy to be engaged to Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad. We married in August of 1842. Before the wedding, I had another dream vision. I dreamed it was our wedding night. He was wearing a green cloak, again embroidered with verses from the Qur'án. Light was shining from his body. The intensity of my happiness at seeing him in this dream woke me up. I knew then he was not just a man but a great personage. My gratitude that he wanted me for his wife increased my love for him, although it hardly seems possible that I could love him more. After our marriage, from his behaviour, his words, his tranquillity and dignity, I realized even more that he was different than every other man. But I never imagined that he was the Promised One.

Fátimih Bagum

All my hopes were fulfilled. Khadíjih proved to be the perfect daughter-in-law. She would often say that no words could every convey her feelings of good fortune. Of my son, she told me that his kindness towards her and his care for her were indescribable, and she was overwhelmed with gratitude at the love and consideration that my son and I showered on her. They started their married life with such serenity and adoration. I truly believed ‘Alí-Muhammad’s life was now complete with this felicitous marriage. And soon Khadíjih was expecting her first baby! You can well imagine how joyfully we embraced this news. I couldn’t wait to be a grandmother.

Khadíjih Bagum

But then I had a terrifying dream. A fearsome lion was standing in the courtyard of our house and I had my arms around its neck. This beast dragged me around the whole perimeter of the courtyard two and a half times. I awoke thoroughly frightened and related the dream to my husband. He told me the dream foretold that our life together would not last for more than two and a half years. That compounded my distress! But his affection and words of comfort consoled me and prepared me to accept every adversity in the path of God.

Fátimih Bagum

Alas, such woe was soon visited upon us. Khadíjih had a very difficult and dangerous pregnancy and on the fateful night of her delivery, I rushed to my son to tell him that his beloved wife was on the point of death. ‘Alí-Muhammad took up a mirror and wrote a prayer on it. He instructed me to hold the mirror in front of his wife. The child was safely delivered – a son! – and Khadíjih recovered too. However, our gladness turned to piercing grief as little Ahmad, for that is what they named him, died soon thereafter. All of us were devastated by the tragic loss of the infant.

I am not proud of what I did next – I berated my son, telling him if he could save the life of his wife, why couldn’t he also have saved his own son, and spared his wife and his mother such pain. He told me he was destined to leave no children, an

answer that left me even more upset. It took many a year before I began to finally understand his purpose and his station.

Khadíjih Bagum

I had always sensed that my husband, ‘Alí-Muhammad, had a profound spiritual nature. My dreams and his words to me and the events that began to crowd our lives – our too short two-and-a-half years together – all seemed to be a part of the destiny he was to fulfil. Here’s how I finally came to know his station.

One night I awoke at midnight to find ‘Alí-Muhammad was not in our chamber. I went to look for him and found him in an upper guest room of our house. It was immersed in light but seemed brighter than mere lamps could provide. I saw him standing in the middle of the room with his hands raised heavenward, with the dazzling light emanating from his very being. I wanted to withdraw unseen, but was frozen in awe and fear. Then he said to me “Go back” and I retreated to our bedroom. I did not sleep for the rest of the night but prayed to God, saying, “O my God, what power and grandeur! What greatness and glory! What is the wisdom in your revealing to me that effulgent Sun? Is He my Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad? Will I henceforth be able to live with that luminous Sun? Nay, nay, the rays of this Resplendent Sun will consume me, and will reduce me to ashes. I possess not the power to withstand it.”

When I joined him for breakfast the next morning, I was trembling and could not lift my head. The Exalted Being poured tea and offered it to me. He enquired, “What is the matter with you?” I replied, “What was the condition I saw you in?” He said, “Know thou that the Almighty God is manifested in Me. I am the One whose advent the people of Islam have expected for over a thousand years. God has created Me for a great Cause and you witnessed the divine revelation. Although I had not wished that you see Me in that state, yet God had so willed that there may not be any place in your heart for doubt and hesitation.” I came to know that His mission was to fulfil the prophecies concerning the return of the Qá’im and to proclaim the near advent of ‘He Whom God shall manifest’. My Beloved

also told me not to share the news of this revelation with his mother, Fátimih Bagum.

Fátimih Bagum

When my husband died and Khál-i-A‘zam assumed guardianship of my son, we moved into his house. But once ‘Alí-Muhammad and Khadíjih were married, the three of us moved back into my family home. It was a spacious home with several rooms on the lower and upper floors and a small courtyard. My room was on the lower floor, quite near the front door. Khadíjih and my son usually took their meals with me in my room. Those first couple years of their marriage were idyllic.

From my vantage point near the front door, I enjoyed watching the comings and goings of the household and the visitors to our home. I couldn’t help but notice that after about the third week of May 1844, more and more visitors were coming to see my beloved son, often at night. But ‘Alí-Muhammad was silent as to the purpose of those visits. I felt something momentous might be happening but had no idea of what it was. Then a fresh worry for me – at the end of September, ‘Alí-Muhammad decided to take his pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. He didn’t return until July of 1845, but at least I did get letters from him.

Khál-i-A‘zam

According to one of the traditions of our faith, when the Qá’im or Promised One appeared, He would announce Himself at the Kabba, or Point of Adoration, in the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Mecca. This is what my beloved nephew did. He declared His station as the Promised One at the Kabba.

One of my bothers was living in Búshihr. He welcomed the arrival of Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad who tarried in Búshihr on His return from Mecca. My brother wrote to the family in Shíráz to update them on the news. His letter gave the family further intimation of the station of Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad, whom the world would come to know by the title ‘the Gate’ or the Báb. The letter said, in part, “You must have perused all our previous letters and felt elated that in truth His Self, the source of munificence, is the light of the eye of this world and the next. He is our pride. Praised be God, praised be God!”

Sadly, the family was split by the declaration of my nephew. Only his wife, Khadíjih, and I unreservedly accepted His claim. My dear sister, Fátimih, could not accept His claim. To her, He simply remained her beloved son.

Fátimih Bagum

When my son finally returned to Shíráz, word of his claim to be the Qá'im had preceded him and the city's religious leaders interrogated him and passed a verdict of death on him. My son! The death sentence just needed the signature of the Imám-Jum'ih. He happened to be an old family friend, and had presided at the marriage of my son and Khadíjih. Two of the other ladies of the family joined me, and we persuaded Imám-Jum'ih to stay the order. My son was given house arrest in the home of his uncle, Khál-i-A'zam. My daughter-in-law and I also removed ourselves to Khál-i-A'zam's home, and the four of us lived a quiet life. No visitors were permitted.

My son continued to be so loving and tender to his wife and me. He cheered our hearts and I for one felt my apprehensions melt away. Then at Naw-Rúz he gave us unexpected gifts. 'Ali-Muhammad bequeathed all his possessions, including his property, to Khadíjih and me. He must have had some intuitive feeling about his immediate future because soon after he was arrested and taken away. He was released again but was informed he must leave Shíráz. I wept and wept.

Khadíjih Bagum

One day, to our indescribable joy, my husband came home and stayed two or three days. But these were the last days of my life with Him. Shortly before the month of Ramadán, in the last days of September 1846, He announced that His sojourn in Shíráz were no longer advisable and that He would leave the city that very night. I, who had known how much He had suffered in Shíráz, was actually happy and contented that He could now reach a place of safety. Two hours after sunset, all alone, He left the house. His clothes and the necessities for the journey had been sent out of the city earlier. Accompanied by one of the believers, He took the road to Isfahán.

Fátimih Bagum

Again I was deprived of the presence of my son, but I consoled myself with the remembrance that he had always returned to Shíráz from his previous journeys. At first we did receive letters from family members who knew his whereabouts, and sometimes we even received letters directly from him. Then several months passed with no news, until we heard that he had been imprisoned in the north of the country not far from the Russian border. I begged my brother, Khál-i-A‘zam, to travel to that far-off prison. I never saw my son again, and my beloved brother never came home again either. It wasn't until 1851 that I was finally told both were dead.

Nearly all the rest of the family blamed me for the death of my brother, who would not have gone away if I had not begged him to travel to my son's prison. And most of them openly scoffed at the claim of prophethood by my son, and, presumably in fear of the authorities, they actively avoided me. They were spiteful and bitterly hostile toward me. I could no longer sustain the enormous weight of the loss of Khál-i-A‘zam and my cherished son. I decided to move to Najaf and Karbilá, the twin holy cities in Iraq, and devote the rest of my life to meditation and prayer.

Khadíjih Bagum

These days of desolation burdened me with indescribable grief. My beloved husband was gone from this earthly plane. And then Fátimih Bagum departed from Shíráz. Her absence greatly added to my sorrow. Over the years, my dear mother-in-law had sustained me with her comfort, love, sympathy and care. No longer would she be by my side. How I missed her.

My only solace was letters my Lord had written to me. One letter said: “O well-beloved! Value highly the grace of the Great Remembrance for it cometh from God, the Loved One. Thou shalt not be a woman, like other women, if thou obeyest God in the Cause of Truth, the greatest Truth. Know thou the great bounty conferred upon thee by the Ancient of Days, and take pride in being the consort of the Well-Beloved, Who is loved by God, the Greatest. Sufficient unto thee is this glory which cometh unto thee from God, the All-Wise, the All-Praised. Be patient in all that God hath ordained concerning the Báb and His Family. Verily, thy son, Ahmad, is with Fátimih, the Sublime, in the sanctified Paradise.”

Another time He confided to me the secret of His future sufferings and unfolded to my eyes the significance of the events that were to transpire in His Day. He counseled me to be patient and resigned to the will of God. He revealed a special prayer for me, the reading of which, He assured me, would remove my difficulties and lighten the burden of my woes. My Beloved told me to recite this prayer before going to sleep and He Himself would appear to me and banish my anxiety.

“Is there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants and all abide by His bidding!”

NARRATOR

Jináb-i Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí, known as Khál-i-A‘zam, was the brother of Fátimih Bagum. He raised her son, his nephew, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad, later known as the Báb. Khál-i-A‘zam was the second member of the Afnán family, after Khadíjih Bagum, to accept the station of the Báb. After visiting his nephew in the mountain prison of Chihríq, he travelled to Tihrán where he was executed with six other Bábís. These seven martyrs were known thereafter as the Seven Goats, referencing an hadith or tradition in Islám that they would walk in front of their True Shepherd, the Qá’im, and their deaths would precede the martyrdom of the Qá’im. Khál-i-A‘zam was martyred in 1850.

Khadíjih Bagum was the wife of Siyyid ‘Alí-Muhammad. She had the distinction of being the first to recognize the Sun of Reality that shone through His Person. One of her greatest gifts was the capacity to understand and accept things others could not bear to hear. Her steadfastness, courage, purity of heart, unswerving obedience, patience and resignation to God’s Will were characteristics that she wore like gems in a crown.

Khadíjih continued to live in Shíráz after the Martyrdom of the Báb. Some years later Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed Himself ‘He Whom God shall manifest’ or the next Promised One Who had been foretold by the Báb. Nábíl himself was the one who travelled to Shíráz and shared the news of Bahá’u’lláh’s station with the Bábís in that city. Khadíjih recounted that she laid her forehead on the ground in adoration and thanksgiving, and whispered, “Offer at His sacred threshold my most humble devotion.” Not hesitating for a moment to recognize Bahá’u’lláh, her submission was instantaneous and total.

After Khadíjih died, Bahá’u’lláh revealed a Tablet in her honour that confirmed ‘before the creation of the world of being’, she had ‘found the fragrance of the garment of the Merciful’. Bahá’u’lláh also referred to her as ‘the immaculate virgin’, ‘the consort of the Most High’, ‘the most chaste’ and ‘Leaf of Eternity’. Khadíjih Bagum was the only female member of the Báb’s family honoured by

Bahá'u'lláh with the station of a martyr. She died in 1882 and lies at rest in Shíráz.

Fátimih Bagum was the mother of Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad. After His Declaration, she suffered unendurable sorrows at the hands of most of her family. She moved to Najaf which is not far distant from Baghdád. Bahá'u'lláh sent two friends to teach Fátimih the truth of her beloved son's station. For many years she had failed to recognize the significance of His Mission but as she neared the end of her life, she finally perceived the inestimable quality of that Treasure, her son, whom she had given to the world. She accepted His claim and was eventually fully aware of the bountiful gifts which the Almighty had chosen to confer upon her.

Bahá'u'lláh bestowed on Fátimih Bagum the distinction of the title 'Most Virtuous of All Women'. He wrote, "This is that which hath been now sent down from the Highest Realm of Glory: O people! Know ye that We have singled out for special favour the mother of the Primal Point, who hath been mentioned before the Throne as the most virtuous of all handmaids." Fátimih Bagum's greatest and most lasting glory is that she bore and raised the martyred Herald of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and that she recognized the station of her son and of the one whose advent He heralded.

She died in 1882, the same year as her beloved daughter-in-law. At some point in the future, according to Shoghi Effendi's wishes expressed as a goal of the Ten Year Crusade, her remains will be transferred to the Bahá'í cemetery in Baghdád.

This ends the stories of the early life of the Báb through the memories of those who associated with Him most closely in His formative years. Let us now recite the Tablet of Visitation which is frequently used in commemorating His Birth. As a mark of respect, let us rise and face the Qiblih.

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Tablet of Visitation

The praise which hath dawned from Thy most august Self, and the glory which hath shone forth from Thy most effulgent Beauty, rest upon Thee, O Thou Who art the Manifestation of Grandeur, and the King of Eternity, and the Lord of all who are in heaven and on earth! I testify that through Thee the sovereignty of God and His dominion, and the majesty of God and His grandeur, were revealed, and the Daystars of ancient splendor have shed their radiance in the heaven of Thine irrevocable decree, and the Beauty of the Unseen hath shone forth above the horizon of creation. I testify, moreover, that with but a movement of Thy Pen Thine injunction “Be Thou” hath been enforced, and God’s hidden Secret hath been divulged, and all created things have been called into being, and all the Revelations have been sent down.

I bear witness, moreover, that through Thy beauty the beauty of the Adored One hath been unveiled, and through Thy face the face of the Desired One hath shone forth, and that through a word from Thee Thou hast decided between all created things, caused them who are devoted to Thee to ascend unto the summit of glory, and the infidels to fall into the lowest abyss.

I bear witness that he who hath known Thee hath known God, and he who hath attained unto Thy presence hath attained unto the presence of God. Great, therefore, is the blessedness of him who hath believed in Thee, and in Thy signs, and hath humbled himself before Thy sovereignty, and hath been honored with meeting Thee, and hath attained the good pleasure of Thy will, and circled around Thee, and stood before Thy throne. Woe betide him that hath transgressed against Thee, and hath denied Thee, and repudiated Thy signs, and gainsaid Thy sovereignty, and risen up against Thee, and waxed proud before Thy face, and hath disputed Thy testimonies, and fled from Thy rule and Thy dominion, and been numbered with the infidels whose names have been inscribed by the fingers of Thy behest upon Thy holy Tablets.

Waft, then, unto me, O my God and my Beloved, from the right hand of Thy mercy and Thy loving-kindness, the holy breaths of Thy favors, that they may draw me away from myself and from the world unto the courts of Thy nearness and Thy presence. Potent art Thou to do what pleaseth Thee. Thou, truly, hast been supreme over all things.

The remembrance of God and His praise, and the glory of God and His splendor, rest upon Thee, O Thou Who art His Beauty! I bear witness that the eye of creation hath never gazed upon one wronged like Thee. Thou wast immersed all the days of Thy life beneath an ocean of tribulations. At one time Thou wast in chains and fetters; at another Thou wast threatened by the sword of Thine enemies. Yet, despite all this, Thou didst enjoin upon all men to observe what had been prescribed unto Thee by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

May my spirit be a sacrifice to the wrongs Thou didst suffer, and my soul be a ransom for the adversities Thou didst sustain. I beseech God, by Thee and by them whose faces have been illumined with the splendors of the light of Thy countenance, and who, for love of Thee, have observed all whereunto they were bidden, to remove the veils that have come in between Thee and Thy creatures, and to supply me with the good of this world and the world to come. Thou art, in truth, the Almighty, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Compassionate.

Bless Thou, O Lord my God, the Divine Lote-Tree and its leaves, and its boughs, and its branches, and its stems, and its offshoots, as long as Thy most excellent titles will endure and Thy most august attributes will last. Protect it, then, from the mischief of the aggressor and the hosts of tyranny. Thou art, in truth, the Almighty, the Most Powerful. Bless Thou, also, O Lord my God, Thy servants and Thy handmaidens who have attained unto Thee. Thou, truly, art the All-Bountiful, Whose grace is infinite. No God is there save Thee, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous.

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Script taken primarily from *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees, An In-Depth Study of the Lives of Women Closely Related to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* by Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, George Ronald, Oxford, 2008.