



Discovering Sacred Texts

Central figures of the Baha'i Faith

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Dr Moojan Momen explores life of the founder of the Baha'i Faith, as well as the lives of his forerunner and successor. He delves into the key events concerning their beliefs and teachings and reflects on their legacy.

[The Baha'i Faith \[http://web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/an-introduction-to-the-bahai-faith\]](#) has three central figures. The most important of these is Baha'u'llah who is regarded by Baha'is as the founder of the religion. [His writings \[http://web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/bahai-sacred-texts\]](#) are regarded as the latest revelation of the Word of God and thus are the ones that are most relevant for humanity today. He was preceded by the Bab, whom Baha'is regard as having paved the way for Baha'u'llah. According to Baha'i theology both the Bab and Baha'u'llah are termed 'Manifestations of God', the intermediaries between God and humanity, who reveal God's Will for the age in which they come. These two figures are considered to be of equal station to the central figures of other religions such as [Muhammad \[http://web.archive.org/web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/prophecy-and-revelation-in-islam\]](#), [Jesus Christ, Moses, Zoroaster \[http://web.archive.org/web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/an-introduction-to-zoroastrianism\]](#), [Krishna \[http://web.archive.org/web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/hindu-deities\]](#) and [the Buddha \[http://web.archive.org/web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/the-buddha-and-buddhist-sacred-texts\]](#). The third of these central figures of the Baha'i Faith is 'Abdu'l-Baha, who was appointed by Baha'u'llah to succeed him as leader of the Baha'i community and as the sole authorised interpreter of Baha'u'llah's writings.

The Bab

The Bab began life as Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850), a merchant from Shiraz. The title 'Sayyid' at the beginning of his name denotes that he was a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, and in his early life he followed Twelver Shi'ism, the branch of Islam that is prevalent in Iran. In 1844 he experienced a series of revelatory visions after which he pronounced himself to be the *bab* (the gate) to the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam of Twelver

Shi'ism. The first book that the Bab wrote after he put forward his claim is the *Qayyūm al-asmā* [<http://web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-qayyum-al-asma-maintainer-of-the-names>].

The Qayyum al-asma' ('Maintainer of the names'), the first major work of the Bab



The *Qayyūm al-asmā*: This is the first book that the Bab wrote after he put forward his claim. Although his formal claim in this book is to be the representative of the expected Imam Mahdi, those who were able to read the book discerned that he was in fact making a far higher claim – that this book was Divine Revelation and therefore that he was a Messenger of God. 19th century.

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The Bab dispersed his leading disciples from Shiraz to various parts of Iran, India and what is now Iraq, to spread news of his movement, and thus gained many followers. This rapid spread was met with hostility from the religious leaders of Islam. Within eight months, senior Shi'i and Sunni clerics were calling for the death of the founder of the movement and anyone who was spreading it. On his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca the Bab was arrested and confined to house arrest until 1846, when he left for Isfahan. There he was befriended by a powerful governor who eventually became a follower of his. This governor died in February 1847 and the Prime Minister ordered the Bab's confinement in a fortress in the remote north-west corner of the country. As the Prime Minister found that the Bab was still able to communicate with his followers, he was transferred to another fortress after nine months.

Imprisonment and persecution

In July 1848 the Bab was brought to Tabriz and put on trial before the Crown Prince and the senior clerics of the city. At this trial, the Bab openly declared himself to be the Imam Mahdi, the one that Muslims were awaiting. After the trial, he was tortured and returned to his place of imprisonment. In September 1848, this Crown Prince became Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896) on the death of his father, the previous shah. Up until this point, the opposition to the movement was confined to religious debate and denunciations from the pulpit. However, with the accession to the throne of a new shah, and the installation of a new prime minister, the persecution intensified. It was during this period of incarceration that many of the Bab's most important books were written, in particular the Persian *Bayān*, in which are the laws and major teachings of the new religion. Also in this book are frequent references to 'Him Whom God shall make manifest', a messianic figure foretold by the Bab.

The Persian *Bayan* ('Explanation')



The *Bayān*. This book contains the laws and major teachings of the new religion. In this book are frequent references to 'Him Whom God shall make manifest', the messianic figure foretold by the Bab.

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Between 1848 and 1850 there were three major episodes of armed conflict between military forces and the Babis. In July 1850, the Bab was brought from his confinement and publicly executed in Tabriz. Two years later in August 1852, a small group of Babis who had been meeting in Tehran tried to assassinate the shah. The attempt was poorly planned and failed, but it unleashed a further wave of persecutions throughout Iran. After this, the Babi movement was suppressed and went underground.

Baha'u'llah

Baha'u'llah ('the Glory of God') was the title taken by Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), who is regarded as the founder and central figure of the Baha'i Faith. He was born in Tehran and was a member of a family of important government and court officials. His father was a minister to one of the royal provincial prince governors.

Album of Baha'i calligraphy

[Album of Baha'i calligraphy](#)

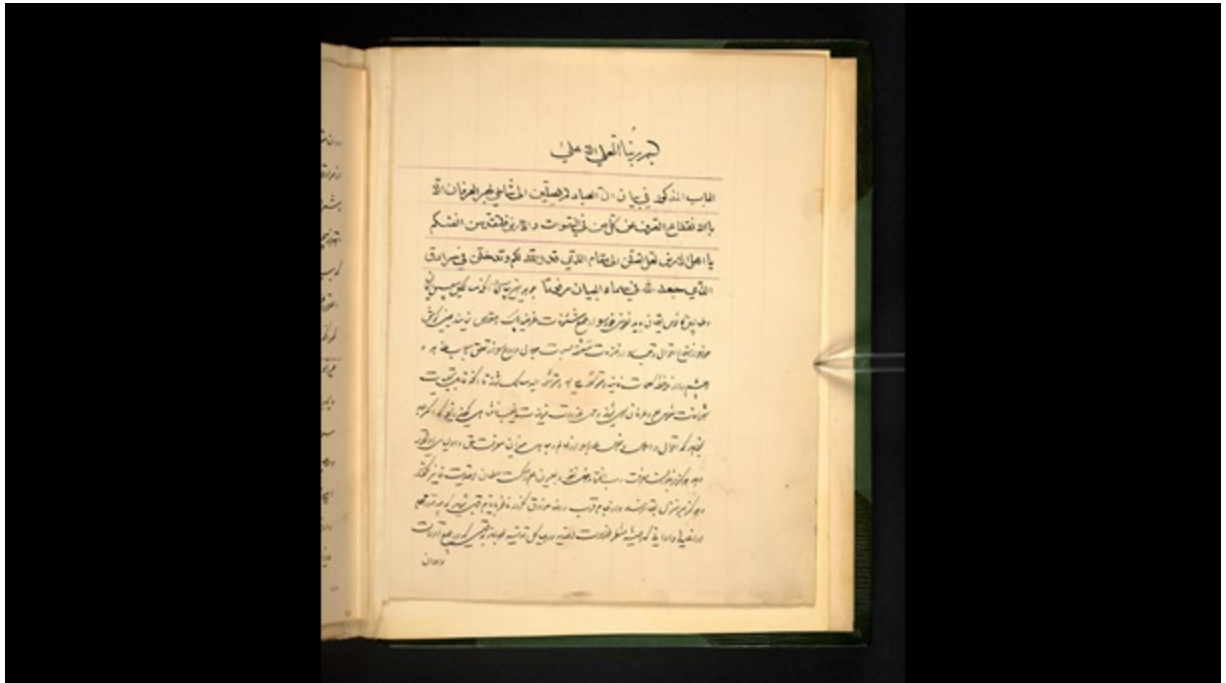
Calligraphic exercises done by Baha'u'llah as a child. 19th century.

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Baha'u'llah, however, rejected the life of a courtier and instead joined the Babi movement shortly after its commencement. He played a leading role in the movement, converting a large number of people in his home district of Nur in Mazandaran, as well as in Tehran. His home in Tehran was a centre of activity and he himself helped to finance the movement. With the attempt on the life of the shah in 1852 and the persecutions of the Babis that followed, Baha'u'llah was thrown into the *Siyah Chal* (Black Pit), the shah's underground dungeon in Tehran. Most of the Babis who were captured at this time were handed over to sections of the government and population and put to death on the streets of Tehran. It was while in this dungeon that Baha'u'llah had the spiritual experience that is regarded as the birth of his prophetic mission. Because no evidence could be found of his involvement in the assassination attempt, he was released but sent into exile. He chose Baghdad, which was at that time part of the Ottoman Empire, as his place of exile. After a year he left that city and spent two years living as a religious ascetic in the mountains of Kurdistan. He then returned to Baghdad, where he set about reviving the Babi community. It was during this period of residence in Baghdad that Baha'u'llah wrote a number of important works on mysticism and ethics (such as the *Seven Valleys* and the *Hidden Words* [[/web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-hidden-words-bahaulahs-mystical-sayings/](http://web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-hidden-words-bahaulahs-mystical-sayings/)]) as well as his major book of proofs, the *Kitāb-i Iqān* [[/web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/kitab-i-iqan-book-of-certitude-a-major-bahai-work/](http://web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/kitab-i-iqan-book-of-certitude-a-major-bahai-work/)] (the *Book of Certitude*).

***Kitab-i Iqan* ('Book of Certitude'), a major Baha'i work by Baha'u'llah**



The *Kitāb-i Īqān* (*The Book of Certitude*) is Baha'u'llah's book of proofs. In this book, Baha'u'llah explains how the prophecies regarding the Day of Judgement and the Day of Resurrection have been fulfilled spiritually, not literally. 19th century.

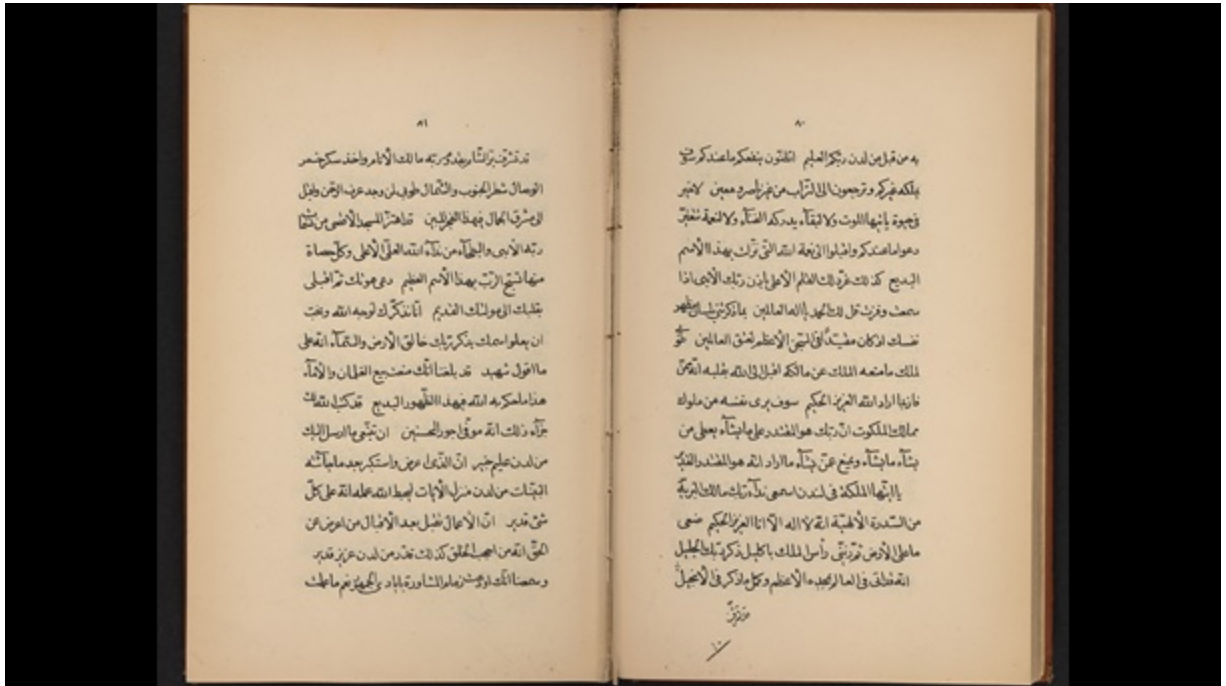
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Exile and the founding of the Baha'i Faith

Although Baha'u'llah advocated peace and reconciliation, the Iranian government still perceived a threat. At the insistence of the government, he was summoned to Istanbul. Just as he was leaving Baghdad, he made a private declaration to a small group of Babis that he was the figure of 'Him whom God shall make manifest' that the Bab had promised. After three months in Istanbul, during which he refused to pander to the officials of the Ottoman court, he was further exiled to Edirne. In 1866 he openly announced his claim to be not only the one promised by the Bab, but also the promised one of all religions. He wrote to a number of major world rulers and leaders to declare his mission and called for the establishment of world peace.

Baha'u'llah's letter to Queen Victoria



Baha'u'llah's letter to Queen Victoria, in which he commends her for having acted against the slave trade and also for the system of parliamentary democracy in Britain. He urges elected representatives in every land to look only to what benefits the whole of humanity when they consult together. He calls on the monarchs and rulers of the world to turn to peace and reduce the armaments that they have amassed, thus relieving the burden of taxes they have laid on their peoples.

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While in Edirne, his younger half-brother, Mirza Yahya, who had the title Azal, challenged Baha'u'llah with the claim that he had been appointed leader of the Babis. However, Baha'u'llah was not claiming leadership of the Babis, but the founding of a new religion. By the 1870s an estimated 95% of Babis had become Baha'is and soon there were many conversions from other groups such the Shi'is, Jews and Zoroastrians of Iran.

When did he write his most important social teachings?

In 1868, Baha'u'llah was exiled by the Ottoman government to the walled city of Akka (then part of Ottoman Syria, now Acre in Israel), where he was at first imprisoned in the citadel of the city and then, after two years, kept in the city under house arrest. During this time he handed over much of the task of organising the movement to his son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and focussed on his writing and meeting Baha'i pilgrims. At this time, he produced what would be his most important work: the *Kitāb-i Aqdas* [web/20201023090707/https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/kitab-al-aqdas-and-other-tablets-by-bahauallah] (the Most Holy Book).

Kitab al-aqdas and other Tablets by Baha'u'llah

o_15729, folio 1 verso. Manuscript copy of Baha'u'llah's most important book, the Kitāb-i Aqdas (The Most Holy Book)

19th-century manuscript of the *Kitāb al-aqdas*: Baha'u'llah's most important work containing the laws and some of the most important new social teachings of the Baha'i Faith.

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In 1877, Baha'u'llah moved outside the walls of Akka and after two years he took up residence in a mansion called Bahji, near Akka. During this time, he produced a series of major writings in which he expanded on his social teachings and centred on the need for a new social structure that would be conducive to peace and harmony in society and in the world as a whole. He directed the expansion of his religion by instructing his followers to spread the religion in areas such as Egypt, the Caucasus, Central Asia and India.

Baha'u'llah died in Bahji in 1892. His shrine at Bahji is considered the holiest place in the world by Baha'is. It has become a shrine for pilgrims and is the direction of prayer for Baha'is. The remains of the Bab were rescued and after being secretly kept in Iran for fifty years, they were transferred to Akka. Eventually in 1909, they were interred in a shrine on the slopes of Mount Carmel in the city of Haifa across the bay from Akka.

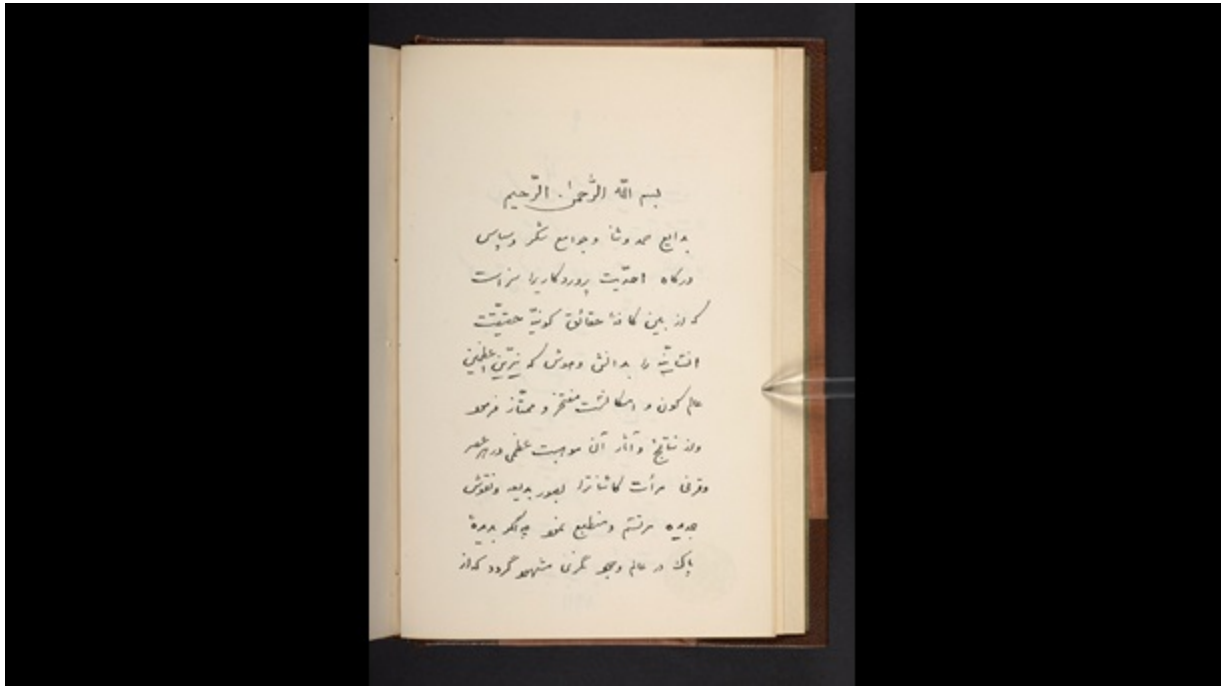
‘Abdu’l-Baha

‘Abdu’l-Baha (‘the servant of the Glory’, 1844–1921) was the title taken by ‘Abbas Effendi, the eldest son of Baha'u'llah. He was born in Tehran and was eight years old when he went into exile with his father and family to Baghdad, and then to Istanbul, Edirne and Akka. From an early age, he showed a remarkable degree of wisdom and intelligence. Although after they left Tehran he ceased to attend school, at the age of eighteen he composed a treatise in commentary on an Islamic Tradition for an Ottoman official, in which he showed himself to have mastery of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. When he was twenty-seven years of age, an English missionary doctor, Dr Thomas Chaplin, wrote in *The Times* newspaper (of 5 October 1871, p. 5) that ‘Abdu’l-Baha ‘showed a minute and accurate knowledge of the Old and New Testaments.’ In Akka, ‘Abdu’l-Baha took care of the relations of the exiles with the local government and population, leaving Baha'u'llah free to concentrate on meeting with pilgrims and composition of books and letters.

How did ‘Abdu’l-Baha add to the faith?

Baha'u'llah made ‘Abdu’l-Baha his successor and the sole authorised interpreter of his writings. Baha'is also regard him as the perfect exemplar of the Baha'i ethical teachings. During ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s leadership, the Baha'i Faith spread to North America, Europe, Australia, China, Japan and many other countries. ‘Abdu’l-Baha himself played a major role in this expansion by travelling to North America and Europe in 1911–1913, during which he attracted large numbers to his addresses in halls, universities, churches, mosques and synagogues and was given, particularly in North America, a great deal of attention by newspapers.

‘Abdu’l-Baha’s treatise on the establishment of a just, progressive and divinely-based government



'Abdu'l-Baha's book *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (*Asrār al-Ghaybīyah fī Asbāb al-Madaniyah*). This is a work written by 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1875 in response to the reforms initiated in Iran by Mirza Husayn Khan Mushir al-Dawleh Sipahsalar. However, the general principles that it propounds are considered by Baha'is to have universal relevance. It was distributed anonymously (so as to avoid the prejudice that would face a Baha'i work in Iran) and contributed to the debate about reform. It was the second Baha'i book to be printed. This manuscript is dated 1911.

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Dr. Moojan Momen was born in Iran, but was raised and educated in England, attending the University of Cambridge. He has a special interest in the study of Shi'i Islam, the Baha'i Faith, and more recently the study of the phenomenon of religion. His principal publications in these fields include: *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*; *The Phenomenon of Religion* (republished as *Understanding Religion*); *Understanding the Baha'i Faith*; and *The Baha'i Communities of Iran (1851–1921)*. He has contributed articles to encyclopaedias such as *Encyclopedia Iranica* and *Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* as well as papers to many academic journals.

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