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The Bab

The Bab (Arabic for "Gate") was the founder of the Babi faith, a religious movement that shook Iran in the mid-19th century. The Bab claimed to be the *mahdi* expected by all Muslims and the inaugurator of a new religious dispensation. His religion eventually formed the foundation of the Baha'i Faith.

The Bab was born Hajji Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi in 1819 in Shiraz, Iran (then called Persia) to a merchant family that traced its descent from the Prophet Muhammad. His father died when he was young and he was raised by his mother and maternal uncle. After a perfunctory primary education, he began to work as a merchant in the businesses of his maternal uncles. In 1841, he traveled to Karbala, where he attended for a short time the lectures of Sayyid Kazim Rashti, the leader of the Shaykhi school. After six months in Karbala, the Bab returned to Shiraz and was married to Khadijih Begum. The couple had one child who died shortly after birth.

In 1844, several students of the recently deceased Sayyid Kazim Rashti, including Mulla Husayn Bushru'i and Ruh al-Quddus, came to Shiraz in search of a successor to their teacher. Eighteen of them met the Bab and accepted his claim, thus becoming what he called the "Letters of the Living" (they included Tahirih, who had not met the Bab but accepted him through correspondence). The Bab sent these Letters of the Living out to all parts of Iran and beyond to announce his claim. He himself set off for a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he proclaimed his mission, but without any response.

Upon the Bab's return from pilgrimage in 1845, he was arrested by the governor of Shiraz and kept under house arrest. In 1846, the Bab went to Isfahan, Iran, where he managed to gain the support of Manuchihr Khan, the governor. During this time, the number of his followers was growing throughout Iran (the number may have reached 100,000 adherents, out of a probable Iranian population of 5–7 million), and the Islamic religious leaders were becoming alarmed, not least because the Bab severely criticized them in his writings.

After the death of Manuchihr Khan in 1847, the prime minister, fearful of the Bab's growing influence, prevented a meeting between the Bab and the shah and tried to isolate the Bab by imprisoning him, first in the fortress of Maku and then (because the Bab had won over his wardens there) in Chihriq, both in northwestern Iran. The prime minister tried to discredit him by putting him on trial in Tabriz, the provincial capital, in April 1848. The trial was a mockery, but the Bab used it to proclaim openly for the first time his claim to be the *mahdi* expected by both Shiite and Sunni Muslims (prior to this he had worded his writings in such a way that many thought he was only claiming to be a representative of the *mahdi*).

After this open proclamation, events moved quickly: a conference of the Bab's followers (called Babis) gathered at Badasht in northeastern Iran in July 1848 and proclaimed the inauguration of a new religious dispensation. The old shah died in September and a new shah came to the throne—his new prime minister proving to be just as antagonistic to the Bab as his predecessor had been; some of the Babis, under Mulla Husayn and Quddus, were besieged and eventually massacred at Shaykh Tabarsi between October 1848 and May 1849. Clashes between the royal forces and the Babis at Nayriz in southern Iran in May–June 1850 and in Zanjan in May 1850–January

1851 ended in the massacre of large numbers of Babis; and in other places, including Tehran, leading Babis were executed.

In the end, the prime minister decided to try to put an end to the upheaval caused by the Babi movement by executing the Bab in Tabriz on July 9, 1850. However, even this attempt to quash the Babi movement backfired by giving the Bab, at the hour of his death, an aura of the miraculous. The British minister in Iran reported: "He was killed by a volley of musketry, and his death was on the point of giving his religion a lustre which would have largely increased its proselytes. When the smoke and dust cleared away after the volley, Bab was not to be seen, and the populace proclaimed that he had ascended to the skies. The balls had broken the ropes by which he was bound." He was found completing a dictation to his secretary and was then shot by a second volley.

The Bab was mild-mannered and had a very attractive and engaging personality that captivated many of those who met him. The only firsthand account by a westerner was given by Dr. Cormick, an Anglo-Irish physician: "He was a very mild and delicate looking man, rather small in stature and very fair for a Persian, with a melodious soft voice, which struck me much. . . . In fact his whole look and deportment went far to dispose one in his favour."

One of the most convincing proofs of his station was the rapidity with which he produced his writings. One evening in Isfahan, before a roomful of high-ranking Muslim clerics, he was asked to write a commentary on a chapter of the Koran. He immediately proceeded to write a work of some 80–100 pages (depending on which manuscript one consults) rapidly and without pausing or correcting anything.

In addition, in all of his writings his style was remarkable—according to some, "miraculous"—in that he was able to draw together, in new and striking ways, themes and motifs particularly germane to Islamic messianic expectations, enchanting and emboldening the reader through a unique combination of the symbols and sacred vocabulary of the Islamic religious tradition. One of his most important works, the *Qayyúm al-asma* (Maintainer of the Divine Names), was received as nothing less than the "true Koran" thought by Shiites to be held in safekeeping by the hidden imam, who, upon his return, would promulgate it to the faithful. The Bab's writings had a very powerful effect on those who were attuned to their themes and arguments. His holiness may be thought to reside, in large measure, in the very charismatic quality of these texts. Unfortunately, a large proportion of his writings fell into the hands of his enemies, and most of this has probably been destroyed. What remains, however, is still extensive and comprises some 30 major works and numerous letters and other writings.

The Bab wrote of his claims that God had sent him with a mission and message in the same way that he had sent Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad in the past and would send others in the future. He stated that his coming was the Day of Judgment mentioned in all the scriptures of the past. The prophecies concerning that day were to be understood as having been fulfilled spiritually and figuratively—not necessarily only literally. For example, the return of Jesus (prophesied in both the Bible and Koran) meant the appearance of a figure who had the same spiritual reality as Jesus—and fulfilled the same function of being the representative of God on earth (that is, the Bab himself). The Bab also gave new laws that his followers were to obey, especially in his book the *Bayan* (Exposition). Above all, the Bab, especially in his later writings such as the *Bayan*, frequently referred to the future advent of "He whom God will make manifest."

Bab's religion survived despite the intense persecution it suffered and the thousands of its followers who were killed. In 1863–1868, Baha'u'llah claimed to be "He whom God will make manifest," and most of the Babis accepted this claim and became Baha'is.

Moojan Momen and B. Todd Lawson**Further Reading**

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