



BABISM I. THE BABI MOVEMENT.

i. The Babi Movement

Babism was a 13/19th-century messianic movement in Iran and Iraq under the overall charismatic leadership of Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Širāzī, the *Bāb* (1235/1819-1266/1850). Babism was the only significant millenarian movement in Shi'ite Islam during the 13th/19th century and is of particular interest in that, unlike other Islamic messianic movements of approximately the same period, it involved, in its later stages, a wholesale break with Islam and an attempt to establish a new religious system. Although the Babi movement as such was rapidly crushed and rendered politically and religiously insignificant, the impetus towards the proclamation of a post-Islamic revelation was continued in *Bahaism* which began as a Babi sect in competition with that of the *Azalī Babism* during the 1860s. The relative success of Bahaism inside Iran (where it constitutes the largest religious minority) and in numerous other countries, where it claims the status of an independent religion, gives renewed significance to its Babi origins; indeed, Babi history and doctrine live on, albeit in a much revised form, in the literature and self-image of the modern Bahais.

The present article concerns itself with Babism up to about 1853, when the leadership of the sect moved from Iran to Iraq and internal developments began which led to the Bahai/Azalī split. For our purposes, Babism may be



divided into two main periods: 1) from 1250/1844 to 1264/1848, when the Bāb claimed to be the gate preparing the way for the return of the Hidden Imam and the movement around him was characterized by intense Islamic piety and observance of the *Šarī'a* or Islamic law; and 2) from 1264/1848 to 1269/1853, beginning with the Bāb's claim to be the Imam in person and the abrogation of the Islamic *Šarī'a*, through his assumption of the role of an independent theophany and his promulgation of a new religious law, to his execution in Tabrīz, the collapse of the leadership of the movement, the proliferation of authority claims, and the dispersal of a hard core of the sect to Baghdad. This second period also witnessed the outbreak of clashes between Babis and state in several parts of Iran and the physical defeat of the movement as a challenge to the religio-political system.

1. 1260-64/1844-48. At its inception, Babism was an intense expression of certain radical tendencies in the Shaikhi school of Shi'ism which had come to the fore during the leadership of Sayyed **Kāẓem Raštī**. During the seventeen years (1242-59/1826-44) that he acted as head of the school from its center in Karbalā', Raštī stressed the essential orthodoxy of Shaikhi belief as originally expounded by the founder, **Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī** (d. 1753/1826), while teaching an elitist doctrine of the Shaikh as the *morawweĵ* or promoter of Islam in a new cycle of inward truth (*bāṭen*) following 1200 years of outward teaching (*ẓāher*). Raštī's death on 11 Du'l-ḥejja 1259/1 January 1854 precipitated a serious internal crisis in the movement, bringing to the surface many concealed tensions, disagreements, rivalries, and ambitions within the Shaikhi community. His failure to appoint a clear successor and the absence of an agreed system for the selection of one led, inevitably, to much fragmentation, out of which two major schools emerged: that around Ḥājj Mollā Moḥammad-Karīm Khan Kermānī (1225/1810-1288/1871; q.v.) and another around Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Šīrāzī. These two factions expressed diametrically opposed tendencies within the Shaikhism of the period, the first wishing to preserve the name and identity of the school, emphasizing the continuing role of the Prophet and the imams and seeking accommodation with the Shi'ite majority by stressing its total adherence to Twelver Shi'ite orthodoxy and playing down the more unorthodox aspects of Shaikhi teaching; the second also regarding itself as wholly orthodox but adopting the name Bābīya and moving away from the outward practice of Islam towards a concentration on the expression of its inner realities and, ultimately, a new revelation of divine truth. It was some time, however, before this divergence of tendencies became quite clear and, in the earliest period, emphasis must be



placed less on specific doctrinal views and more on claims to charismatic authority within the wider context of Shi'ism as a whole. (For a detailed study of the role of charisma in early Shaikhism and Babism see MacEoin, *From Shaykhism to Babism*.)

There is evidence that a section of the Shaikhi community at this period regarded Aḥsā'ī and Raštī as “gates” (*bābān*) of the imam, presumably fulfilling functions similar to those of the four *abwāb* (plur. of *bāb* “gate”) traditionally regarded as channels of communication with the Hidden Imam during his “lesser occultation” (see *Bāb*) and possibly presaging the return of the imam himself. The development of a Bābīya school within Shaikhism may be regarded as having begun even before the announcement by Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad of his own claim to be the *bāb*. Various statements attributed to Raštī in the period just before his death suggest that chiliastic motifs were present in his teaching, and there is evidence that some of his followers expected the imminent appearance of an “affair” or “cause” (*amr*) somehow linked to the advent of the imam. It seems to have been a group of those Shaikhis most animated by messianic expectations who chose, in early Ṣafar, 1260/late February, 1844, to engage in prayerful withdrawal (*e'tekāf*) in the main mosque of Kūfa, and it was from this group that the majority of the Bāb's earliest disciples emerged.

The first to enter *e'tekāf* was *Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošrū'ī*, a young Shaikhi 'ālem or mulla who had only recently returned to Iraq from a lengthy period in Iran and who was himself regarded by a section of the school as a potential successor to Raštī. Leaving Kūfa with a brother and cousin on or just after 12 Rabī' I 1260/1 April 1844, Bošrū'ī set out for Kermān, where he planned to consult with Moḥammad Karīm Khan (for references see MacEoin, “From Shaykhism,” p. 144). En route he passed through Shiraz where he renewed an earlier acquaintance with Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Širāzī, a young merchant who had studied briefly with Raštī in Karbalā' a few years before and who had attracted some attention from a number of Shaikhis at the '*atabāt* (the Shi'ite holy shrines and cities in Iraq) at that time. In recent months, Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad had undergone a religious crisis culminating in at least two visions indicating a high spiritual station for himself. He had also begun the composition of works of a religious nature, including a commentary of sorts on the Koranic chapter (*sūra*) *al-Baqara*. After some weeks, during which Bošrū'ī seems to have read at least a part of these writings, on 5 Jomādā I/22 May, Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad announced to him that he was the successor to



Raštī and the *bāb* of the Hidden Imam. Some time after this, a second group of Shaikhis arrived in Shiraz from Karbalā'. Thirteen of these (according to one version, the entire group numbered thirteen) met the Bāb through Bošrū'ī and were converted, together with Bošrū'ī's brother and cousin (Zarandi, *Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 69-70, 80-81). Among this second group was a brother-in-law of Fāṭema Kānom Baraġānī Qazvīnī (better known as Qorrat-al-'Ayn and Janāb-e Ṭāhera; q.v.), a woman who had already won a reputation as an outstanding and radical Shaikhi cleric while herself resident in Karbalā'. Although then in Qazvīn, she was enrolled by the Bāb in the group of his first disciples, whose number was brought to eighteen by the late arrival of [Mollā Moḥammad-'Alī Bārforūšī](#), a young Shaikhi who was en route to Būšehr on a *hajj* or pilgrimage journey.

These eighteen disciples known as the “Letters of the Living” (*ḥorūf al-ḥayy*) constituted, together with the Bāb, the first “unity” (*waḥed* = 19) of a series of nineteen unities which would make up a body of three hundred and sixty-one individuals—a *kollo šay'* (= 361)—the first believers in the imam through the *bāb*. These *ḥorūf al-ḥayy* are regarded as identical with the “precursors” (*sābeqūn*) referred to in early works of the Bāb and his followers, both literally in preceding others in recognition of the Bāb and esoterically in being identified with the first group of mankind to respond to God's pre-eternal covenant, a group itself identified in Shi'ite belief with Moḥammad and the imams. It is, in fact, clear that the Bāb came to regard the *ḥorūf al-ḥayy* as incarnations of the Prophet, the twelve imams, the original four *abwāb* and Fāṭema, an identification which led to serious controversy in the early Babi community of Karbalā' (see MacEoin, “Hierarchy,” pp. 104-09).

After a short period of instruction ending in early July, 1844, the Bāb instructed sixteen of the *ḥorūf al-ḥayy* to disperse in various directions, carrying transcriptions of parts of his early writings, notably his commentary on the Koranic chapter *Yūsof*, the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*. They were not to reveal his name or identity but merely to announce that the gate or agent (*nā'eb*) of the Hidden Imam had appeared. Through these disciples and the men they met and converted—almost all, like themselves, '*olamā'* or Muslim divines—the claims of the Bāb were rapidly disseminated, principally to the Shaikhi communities in the areas they visited. In this way, a growing section of the Shaikhi school followed the Bāb in the period of his earliest claims. The unity of Shaikhism was irretrievably shattered and a core of convinced Babis brought into existence, eager to put into practice the radical changes implicit



in the Bāb's claims.

The most immediate impact made by the dissemination of Babi propaganda on the Shi'ite world occurred at its heart in Karbalā'. The Bāb's message was brought to the region of the shrines in Iraq in the first instance by Mollā 'Alī Beṣṭāmī, whose preaching there precipitated a major uproar among both Shaikhis and non-Shaikhis, leading to his arrest, trial and eventual dispatch to Istanbul. During his stay in Iraq, however, as is attested by contemporary diplomatic reports, Beṣṭāmī and other Babis awakened a widespread chiliastic fervor among the Shaikhis of the area (see Momen, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, pp. 83-89). The *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, portions of which now began to circulate there, indicated that the Bāb had appeared on earth to prepare men for the imminent arrival of the imam and the waging of the final *jehād* or holy war against unbelief (which was widely interpreted to include not only Sunnism but non-Babi Shi'ism as well). News also arrived from Shiraz that the Bāb had left the town in September in order to perform the *ḥajj* and that, on his departure, he had said that he would reveal his cause in Mecca, after which he would enter Kūfa and Karbalā' and fulfill the prophecies. In various letters of this period, he called on his growing body of followers to assemble in Karbalā' in order to aid the imam on his appearance. A number of Babis appear to have traveled to Karbalā' with this hope and, following instructions in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, to have purchased arms in readiness for the *jehād* that would follow the Bāb's appearance and the advent of the imam. In the end, the Bāb failed to reach Karbalā' as promised, returning instead to Shiraz via Būšeher in the summer of 1261/1845. His arrest en route to his home town by agents of the governor of Shiraz considerably restricted his freedom of action and prevented even a late arrival in Iraq. As a result, a number of the newly-converted abandoned their allegiance, leaving only a small core of believers, who were forced to begin the work of proselytization once more (al-Qatīl b. al-Karbalā'ī, letter in Māzandarānī, *Zohūr al-ḥaqq* III, p. 503).

Although the Bāb remained at the heart of the movement, his personal activities were now restricted. He remained under house arrest in Shiraz until September, 1262/1846, when he escaped to Isfahan following an outbreak of cholera. There, with the support of the governor, Manūčehr Khan Mo'tamad-al-Dawla, he had greater freedom to write and meet disciples, but this interlude ended abruptly with the governor's death in February, 1847. The Bāb was summoned by Moḥammad Shah to Tehran but en route diverted to Mākū in Azarbaijan, where he remained in confinement until his transfer in May,



1848 to the fortress of Čahrīq, his place of imprisonment until shortly before his execution in 1266/1850. Although communications between him and his followers were never entirely severed, they were, at times, difficult, and it was, in any case, impossible to refer to him all questions for elucidation or arbitration.

The exposition of Babi doctrine (to the extent that we can speak of this in a period of considerable confusion) in a number of provincial centers fell increasingly to the leading followers of the Bāb, both *ḥorūf al-ḥayy* and other *'olamā'* in those areas: in Mašhad, Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošrū'ī, who was expressly appointed by the Bāb to answer questions on his behalf for the community as a whole; in Borūjerd, Kurdistan, Tehran, Qazvīn, Isfahan, Qom, and elsewhere, the peripatetic [Sayyed Yaḥyā Dārābī](#) (Waḥīd); in Tehran and, later, Zanjān, Mollā Moḥammad-'Alī Zanjānī (Ḥojjat) (q.v.); in Qazvīn, Mollā Jalīl Orūmī; and, perhaps the most important, in Karbalā' and, for a time, Baghdad, Qorrat-al-'Ayn. The role of these and a few other individuals must be stressed. Bošrū'ī, Dārābī, and Zanjānī were to lead the Babi insurrections in Māzandarān, Neyrīz, and Zanjān, while Qorrat-al-'Ayn was perhaps the guiding spirit behind the events at the enclave of [Badašt](#) in 1848, when a group of Babis proclaimed the abrogation of the Islamic *Šarī'a*. More importantly, the main figures of the Babi hierarchy formed what Berger calls a “charismatic field,” playing roles of messianic significance (“From Sect to Church,” pp. 161-62). Thus Bošrū'ī and Mollā Moḥammad-'Alī Bārforūšī Qoddūs were regarded by their followers at Ṭabarsī shrine as the “Qā'em-e Korāsānī” and “Qā'em-e Jīlānī” respectively, while quasi-divine honors were paid to the latter (such as the circumambulation of his house and the direction of prayers towards him as the *qebla*). While in Karbalā', Qorrat-al-'Ayn claimed to be an incarnation of Fāṭema, whereas some regarded her as “the point of divine knowledge” after Raštī. Unfortunately, with the exception of some interesting treatises by Qorrat-al-'Ayn and a few fragments by Qoddūs, works penned by these individuals have been lost, and it is almost impossible to reconstruct the details of Babi doctrine as actually taught by them or to determine how far this may have coincided with or differed from the doctrine taught by the Bāb and carefully preserved in his writings.

The role played by Qorrat-al-'Ayn in Karbalā' was, as we have noted above, particularly significant. Residing in Raštī's home there, she assumed supreme control of the Shaikhi-Babi community of the region, stressing her authority as one of the *ḥorūf al-ḥayy* and the incarnation of Fāṭema. This led to the first



serious crisis of authority in the movement, when her position was challenged by Mollā Aḥmad Ḳorāsānī and his followers who were particularly opposed to the leadership role of the *ḥorūf al-ḥayy*. The rift produced in the Babi community of Iraq by this conflict was further deepened by Qorrat-al-ʿAyn’s increasingly radical and unconventional behavior. In his early writings, the Bāb stressed the necessity for his followers to observe the laws of Islam and, indeed, to perform acts of supererogatory piety, and there is some evidence that the Babis of this period were as noted for the zeal of their adherence to tradition as they were later to be known for their rejection of it (for details see MacEoin, “From Shaykhism,” pp. 208-10). There were, however, elements inherent in the claim of the Bāb to an authority direct from God which threatened to conflict with this more conservative position. Qorrat-al-ʿAyn seems to have been particularly conscious of this and to have linked the concept of the Bāb’s overriding authority in religious matters with ideas originating in Shaikhism, to which we have referred earlier—the advent of an age of inner truth succeeding that of outer observance. She seems to have made this link before the Bāb himself and by 1262/1846 had begun to stress the importance of inner realities at the expense of outward practice. In her classes attended by Babi men, she appeared unveiled, and on one occasion chose to celebrate the birth of the Bāb during the early days of Moḥarram. Mīrzā Moḥammad-ʿAlī Zonūzī states that, with the Bāb’s permission, Qorrat-al-ʿAyn “rendered all the previous laws and observances null and void” (letter in Māzandarānī, *Ẓohūr al-ḥaqq* III, p. 35). In a statement written after Rajab, 1262/June-July, 1846, she herself records that she began to call on her followers to “enter the gate of innovation” following the receipt of a letter from the Bāb in that month, which she interpreted to mean that Islam was to be abrogated (letter *ibid.*, p. 349; for details, see MacEoin, “From Shaykhism,” pp. 210-16).

Controversy ensued within the Babi community. Many were scandalized by Qorrat-al-ʿAyn’s behavior, particularly that of appearing before men without a veil, and wrote to the Bāb seeking support (which he would not give). Others, however, began to follow her example, and the controversy soon spread beyond the confines of the Babi community proper. In the end, Qorrat-al-ʿAyn was arrested in Karbalāʾ, forced to leave the city for Baghdad in 1263/1847, kept there for several months in the home of the Mufti, Shaikh Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī, and finally expelled from Iraq on orders sent from Istanbul. Traveling through Hamadān and Kermānšāh, where she carried on an extensive campaign of proselytization, she returned in Qazvīn in the late summer of



1263/1847.

The controversy surrounding Qorrat-al-‘Ayn and the growing challenge presented by Babi missionaries in all the major provinces of Iran, where the number of converts was growing rapidly, led to a hardening of attitudes towards the sect. In Kermān, Moḥammad Karīm Khan Kermānī, who had been acquainted with the Bāb’s claims from an early date, was engaged in laying claim to the leadership of the Shaikhi school for himself. Among his activities in this respect was the composition of several works refuting the Bāb and his claims. Not only was the Bāb a threat to Kermānī’s position within the school itself, but the obvious heterodoxy of his doctrines and the activities of his followers threatened, because of their close association with the school he purported to represent, to further damage Shaikhism in the eyes of the Shi‘ite ‘*olamā*’ at large. Kermānī’s efforts, reinforced by the Bāb’s own rejection of “orthodox” Shaikhism, led to a growing sense of an absolute split between the two movements and a greater sense of independent identity for Babism, together with a hardening of attitudes on both sides. An analysis of later Babi membership indicates that the original Shaikhi dominance within the sect began to decline and that Babism came to have a much wider appeal among the general Shi‘ite public. The motives for conversion seem to have become less doctrinal and more social or economic as fewer ‘*olamā*’ and greater numbers of the public at large entered the movement. This in itself, however, led to a growing attack on the sect from non-Shaikhi clergy confronted by the challenge of the Babi missionary enterprise.

Matters began to come to a head in *Ḍu’l-qa’da*, 1263/October, 1847. Until then, violence directed against the Babis had been limited and no one had died. The Babis, for their part, despite exhortations to *jehād* in several works of the Bāb, still awaited the appearance of the Mahdī before commencing the holy war (a possible indication in itself of doctrinal rather than social motivation) and, in the meantime, contented themselves with issuing challenges to *mobāhala* or mutual cursing (for the development of the themes of *mobāhala* and *jehād* in the movement and the escalation of violence against and on behalf of the sect see MacEoin, “Bābī Concept of Holy War,” pp. 109-11). Some months after Qorrat-al-‘Ayn’s return to Qazvīn in the late summer of 1263/1847, a group of three Babis attacked her uncle, [Ḥājī Mollā Moḥammad-Taqī Baraḡānī](#), the leading cleric of the town; he died of his wounds three days later, on 16 *Ḍu’l-qa’da*/27 October. There had already been a build-up of tension in Qazvīn, much aggravated by Baraḡānī’s preaching against both Shaikhis and Babis.



Now, large numbers of Babis were arrested, houses were broken into and looted, and several individuals were eventually put to death in retaliation for what was held to be a general Babi plot. At about the same time, relations between Babis and the civil authorities in Mašhad became strained, particularly after two incidents in which members of the movement tried to rescue two of their arrested coreligionists by force.