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BABISM II. BABI EXECUTIONS AND UPRISINGS

ii. Babi executions and uprisings.

2. 1264-69/1848-53. The situation changed radically when, in the early months of 1848, the Bāb wrote a letter in which he proclaimed himself the promised imam in person and declared the abrogation of the laws of Islam. Announcement of the *qīāma* or resurrection, interpreted as a spiritual event, spread rapidly among the Babi communities of Iraq and Iran. In July, 1848, a gathering of some eighty Babi activists, including Qorrat-al-ʿAyn and Mollā Moḥammad-ʿAlī Bārforūšī, formally proclaimed the advent of the *qīāma*. Towards the end of the same month, the Bāb himself was brought from Čahrīq to Tabrīz, where he was interrogated by a council of *ʿolamāʾ* and state officials presided over by Nāṣer-al-Dīn Mīrzā (shortly to be made king). Conflicting accounts of this examination exist, but all are agreed that the Bāb insisted on his claim to be the Hidden Imam returned—a claim whose political implications would not have been missed.

Also in July, 1848, Bošrūʾī and a large body of followers left Mašhad, possibly headed for Azarbaijan to rescue the Bāb from prison. Swelled along the route by others, this band encountered opposition as they moved into Māzandarān in September. The residents of Bārforūš (Bābol), alarmed by the arrival of a body of armed men immediately after the death of Moḥammad Shah, offered fierce resistance to their entry to the town. Forced to travel on and attacked by

a band of local horsemen, the Babis finally reached the shrine of Shaikh Abū ʿAlī Fażl Ṭabarsī, where they constructed a fort and were joined by other Babis from all parts of Iran, including Bārforūšī and seven other *ḥorūf al-ḥayy*, their numbers eventually reaching to near 500. A series of engagements soon ensued between the Babis and successive contingents of provincial and state troops until May, 1849, in the course of which all but a few of the defenders were killed. Two features of this incident stand out: the messianic overtones of the struggle, emphasized by the roles of Bošrūʾī and Bārforūšī as *qāʾem*, the carrying of a black standard, the identification of the fort with Karbalāʾ, its defenders with Ḥosayn and his followers, and their enemies with the Omayyad forces; and the related belief in the supreme authority of the Bāb and his lieutenants as against the illegitimacy of Qajar rule. Babism now clearly posed a direct threat to the established political and religious order.

Further outbreaks of mass violence followed after an interval in Neyrīz (Rajab-Šaʿbān, 1266/May-June, 1850) and Zanjān (Rajab, 1266-Rabīʿ I, 1267/May, 1850-January, 1851), although these differed from Shaikh Ṭabarsī in their distinctly urban character and in the relative absence (as far as our sources indicate) of messianic motifs. The character of these struggles in particular has suggested to some commentators that they were more of an expression of social and political discontent than of religious fervor, and there is undoubtedly a measure of truth in this, particularly in the case of Zanjān. Nevertheless, in a recent study ("The Social Basis of the Bābī Upheavals"), Momen has shown that it is difficult to reach clear conclusions as to the social composition of these outbreaks or of the Babi movement as a whole. Our emphasis must at present remain on the outwardly religious character of Babism, while recognizing the value of religious motifs as a means of socio-political expression in a society such as Qajar Iran. It should be stressed that the Babi leadership and much of the membership was drawn from the ranks of the *ʿolamāʾ* class, particularly its lower strata (for further details see ibid.).

In July, 1850, the Bāb was again brought to Tabrīz, where he was executed by firing squad on the 8th or 9th. Coupled with the debacles of Māzandarān, Neyrīz, and Zanjān, in the course of which some 2,000 to 3,000 Babis, including most of the provincial leadership, perished (on these figures see MacEoin, "From Babism to Baha'ism," p. 236), the Bāb's death spelt the end of the movement as a vital political force in Iran. That the "Mahdī" had been executed and his followers everywhere defeated seemed to most people clear evidence of the falsehood of the Bāb's claims, and the potential following

which would certainly have accrued to the movement had even a measure of success attended its struggle with the state was drastically diminished. In a final act of desperation, on 15 August 1852, a small group of Babis attempted to assassinate Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah. A plot led by Shaikh Mollā ʿAlī Toršīzī was uncovered, large numbers of Babis in the capital and elsewhere arrested, and some fifty put to death. Among those arrested was Mīrzā Ḥosayn-ʿAlī Nūrī Bahāʾ-Allāh, a Babi from a wealthy family connected with the Qajar court. Ḥosayn Nūrī's father, Mīrzā ʿAbbās Nūrī, had held various government posts (see Bāmdād, *Rejāl* VI, pp. 126-29), and he was distantly related to the prime minister, Mīrzā Āqā Khan Nūrī (Balyuzi, *Bahāʾuʾllāh*, p. 13). Released on the intervention of the Russian Minister in January, 1853 (Zarandi, *Dawn-Breakers*, p. 636), he was instructed to leave the country and chose to go to Baghdad, accompanied by members of his family and other Babis. Before long, he was followed by his younger half-brother, Mīrzā Yaḥyā Ṣobḥ-e Azal, appointed by the Bāb his successor and regarded by most of the surviving Babis as their leader. During the next decade, Baghdad became firmly established as the main center of Babism, giving refuge to a small community of Iranian émigrés who sought to perpetuate the movement. There was considerable doctrinal confusion, in part due to the idiosyncratic teachings and legal prescriptions expounded by the Bāb in his later works, notably the Persian *Bayān*, in which he attempted to codify a religious system destined to supplant Islam, with himself as the latest in a line of divine revelators. The system propounded by the Bāb depended for its implementation on the establishment of a Babi state, which was now only a very remote possibility. There was, moreover, a lack of certainty over the question of leadership. Although the consensus seemed to favor the acceptance of Ṣobḥ-e Azal as head of the faith, he appears to have lacked the qualities of a good leader and to have adopted a retiring mode of life. The concept of theophanies, already apparent in the roles ascribed to Bāb al-Bāb, Qoddūs, and Qorrat-al-ʿAyn, led to a succession of at least twenty-four claimants to supreme authority in the movement, few of whom obtained a substantial following. A growing section of the Baghdad community, however, was willing to grant a measure of authority to Ṣobḥ-e Azal's elder half-brother, Bahāʾ-Allāh, a more experienced man of much less retiring temperament with a leaning towards Sufism and political quietism. Sometime in the 1860s, he claimed the status of *man yoẓheroho'llāh* (he whom God shall make manifest), a messianic figure referred to frequently in the Persian *Bayān*. The ensuing quarrel between him and Ṣobḥ-e Azal resulted in the splitting of the movement into the Bahai and Azalī factions, with the majority belonging to the former. Azalī Babism has

remained essentially conservative, basing its tenets on the works of the Bāb and Ṣobḥ-e Azal, whereas Bahaism represents a radical solution to the problem of continuing the Babi movement (see MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha’ism”). The harsher and less practical teachings of the *Bayān* are either abolished or toned down, immediate pressure to create a Babi theocracy is transformed into a future Bahai world state to be created through peaceful conversion and indefinitely postponable, and the Babi legal system is extensively modified to suit “modern” conditions.

Babism is of considerable interest for the light it sheds on a number of problems in the sociology of religion, notably that of charismatic breakthrough. We can observe a process whereby an initial development of traditional charismatic roles is rapidly intensified by a more radical breakthrough still expressed in terms of traditional motifs but involving a sharp move away from established religious modes, leading finally to a wholesale charismatic renewal in which the norms of the religious environment are replaced by a fresh set of doctrines and practices deriving their authority wholly from the charismatic authority of the prophet-figure. Within the overall spectrum from Shiʿism through Shaikhism and Babism to Bahaism, Berger (“Motif messianique”) has delineated a process of messianic expectation—fulfillment—renewed expectation, which indicates the importance of Babism as a case study in millenarianism. Within the context of modern Shiʿism, Babism provides valuable evidence of extreme tendencies in the religious establishment of mid-13th/19th-century Iran. To see Babism as an aberration or side issue in Qajar Shiʿism (as does Algar, *Religion and State*, p. 151) is to ignore its original orthodoxy and the role within it of religious motifs central to the Shiʿite tradition. Careful retrospection will show not only that Babism came close to upsetting the balance of Qajar political life but that it owed its ability to shake the foundations of society so forcefully and in such a short period less to a chance concatenation of events and more to its character as a vital response to deep-rooted expectations and needs of the Iranian people of the time. Far from having been a maverick or aberrant outgrowth of post-Safavid Shiʿism, Babism—especially when its early, semi-orthodox phase is taken fully into consideration—may be regarded not only as a highly typical expression of certain strands of Shiʿite thought, but as particularly relevant to the social and religious circumstances of many Iranians at the time of its inception. It may, indeed, be argued that many later developments within the orthodox establishment (including the wide rejection of reformism) were reactions against Babism and the dangers it showed to be inherent in an

extreme insistence on charismatic authority, in a situation where the religious hierarchy was engaged in a process of intensifying such authority (see further MacEoin, “Changes in Charismatic Authority”). Although extremist movements in other parts of the Muslim world in the nineteenth century (Tejānīya, Sudanese Mahdīya, even the Aḥmadīya) represented serious departures from orthodox norms and involved considerable *beḍʿa*, or innovation, only Babism and its offshoot Bahaism present us with the phenomenon of outright severance from Islam and an attempt to introduce a new religious synthesis.