



## NABIL-E AKBAR

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**NABIL-E AKBAR**, title of Āqā Moḥammad Qā'eni, a prominent Bahai author and apologist (b. Now Ferest [Razmara, *Farhang* IX, p. 428], a village near Qā'en, 23 Ramaḍān 1244/29 March 1829; d. Bukhara, 13 Du'l-ḥejja 1309/6 July 1892).

Mohammad Qā'eni, also known as Fāzel-e Qā'eni, received the title Nabil-e Akbar from **Bahā'-Allāh**. He was the son of an influential and popular cleric, Mollā Aḥmad, from a family of *mojtaheds*. He studied traditional Islamic sciences with his father before going to Sabzavār, where he studied theology and the philosophy of **illuminationism** (*ḥekmat-e ešrāq*) with the foremost philosopher of the time in Persia, Ḥājj Mollā Hādi Sabzavāri (q.v.) for five years. On his way to Najaf in 1852 for further studies, he met Sayyed Ya'qub, a Bābi convert, in Tehran, who gave him the writings of the **Bāb**, which led to his conversion to the Bābi movement (Solaymāni, pp. 435-42). In Najaf, he studied Islamic jurisprudence with eminent *mojtaheds* of the 'Oṣuli School, in particular with **Shaikh Mortazā Anṣāri**, from whom, upon submitting a *resāla*, he received the license of *ejtehād* after six years, despite being suspected of being a Bābi. His mastery of both the illuminationist philosophy and Islamic jurisprudence made him a notable scholar of religion ('Abd-al-Bahā', tr., pp. 1-5; Solaymāni, pp. 428-29; Rafati, p. 110; Balyuzi, pp. 112-15).

Shortly before leaving for Persia in 1859, Shaikh Ḥasan Rašti, a Bābi convert, persuaded Nabil to visit Bahā'-Allāh in Baghdad. He stayed in Baghdad as a guest of Bahā'-Allāh and seems to have been one of the few to acknowledge Bahā'-Allāh's mission before it was declared in 1863. Upon Bahā'-Allāh's



instruction, he returned to Persia to promulgate the Bābi religion. He is reported to have been initially received in Persia with respect, and the governor of Qā'en, Hešmat-al-Molk Amir 'Alam Khan, admired him and valued his company. This aroused the resentment of local ulema, who arranged a debate between him and Mollā Ebrāhim, a learned cleric of Qā'en (Solaymāni, p. 452; Rafati, p. 111). The debate revealed Nabil's mastery of Islamic sciences, and from then on he was invited to preach from the pulpit (*menbar*). Preaching in mosques, however, did not prevent him from promoting the Bābi movement privately, and some inhabitants of the region embraced Babism. His missionary activities eventually antagonized the local ulema, who persuaded the governor to have him arrested (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, forthcoming; Solaymāni, pp. 454-55). He was imprisoned and tortured for two months in nearby Birjand and then returned to Qā'en, where he remained under house arrest for two years before being banished to Mašhad. The governor of Mašhad, Solṭān Morād Mirzā Ḥosām-al-Salṭana, respected Nabil and offered him protection, and after one year he returned to Qā'en as a free man.

During the year that he was in Mašhad, Mollā Moḥammad-'Ali Zarandi (Nabil-e A'zam) informed him of Bahā'-Allāh's public declaration of his mission. Nabil wrote a letter to all Bābis in the region, encouraging them to accept Bahā'-Allāh's claim. Local ulema, in particular Sayyed Abu Trāleb, a cleric in Qā'en, wrote letters to eminent ulema lobbying for a death sentence. Finally Nabil was sent in exile to Tehran in 1870 by the royal order (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, forthcoming; Solaymāni, p. 456).

Nabil could no longer wear the turban denoting his profession and had to wear layman's hat instead, but this did not stop him promulgating the Bahai religion in Tehran for the next three and half years. He left Tehran for Qazvin in 1874 (Samandar, 1976, p. 325) and shortly afterwards visited Bahā'-Allāh in Acre and received from him the title of Nabil-e Akbar. In his honor, Bahā'-Allāh also penned the *Lawḥ-e ḥekmat*, a philosophical text that forms the central part of Bahā'-Allāh's writings (Shoghi Effendi, p. 219).

After a year in Acre, he returned to Persia and, despite the danger, continued preaching the Bahai religion privately and publicly. He traveled to major cities, including Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kerman, Mashad, Zanjan, and Qazvin, meeting with local ulema and other notables. Some converted to the Bahai religion through him, such as Mirzā Ḥasan Adib, a prominent early Bahai. The threat to his life and the lives of those associated with him continued, and the Bahais felt unable to protect him ('Abd-al-Bahā',



tr., p. 3; Solaymāni, p. 480). So, in 1890, he left for [Ashkabad](#), in the company of his nephew [Shaikh Moḥammad-‘Ali](#). He was arrested in Sabzavār on the way to Ashkabad, but the governor of the city was so impressed with him that he helped him escape. Nabil settled in Ashkabad, continued his missionary activities, and contributed to the establishment of a large, resourceful Bahai community there (Solaymāni, pp. 480-85; Meḥrāb-kāni, p. 226; Momen, pp. 286-87). In 1890-91, he and [Mirzā Abu’l-Faḥl Golpāyegāni](#) assisted in the establishment of Bahai communities in Bukhara and Samarqand (Shoghi Effendi, p. 195). Shortly afterwards, Nabil died in Bukhara and was buried there.

‘Abd-al-Bahā’, Bahā’-Allā’s son and the leader of the religion since 1892, wrote a *ziārat-nāma* (prayer recited at the time of entering a shrine) for Nabil and instructed the local Bahais of Ashkabad to send an annual delegation of nine believers on his behalf to visit Nabil’s grave and recite this text. Twenty years later, ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ instructed Shaikh Moḥammad-‘Ali, Nabil’s nephew, to transfer his remains to the Bahai cemetery in Ashkabad, where they remain. He also instructed Moḥammad-‘Ali Zarandi to compose a versified biography of Nabil, which he did in the form of a *matnawi* (Rafati, pp. 107-19).

Nabil has been described by ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ as a man “of wide learning, at once a *mojtahed*, a philosopher, a mystic, and gifted with intuitive sight, he was also an accomplished man of letters and an orator without a peer” (tr., p. 5; Balyuzi, pp. 112-15; Samandar, pp. 317-27; Taherzadeh, pp. 91-95). In recognition of his contributions to the Bahai cause, he was posthumously given the title of “Hand of the Cause” (see [AYĀDI-E AMR-ALLĀH](#)), an honorific title given to eight Bahais during Bahā’-Allāh’s lifetime, and referred to as one of the nineteen “Apostles of Bahā’-Allāh” by Shoghi Effendi (Balyuzi, p. 261).

*Works.* His major work is his *Resāla* (1858) a versified treatise in Arabic on the fundamental tenets of Islam, for which he received the license to practice *ejtehād* (Solaymāni, pp. 444-45; Eṣrāq Kāvāri, pp. 133-50); copies exist in private collections. *Qaṣida-ye ṭā’iyya* is a poem in 445 Arabic verses emulating *al-Ṭā’iya al-kobrā*, the classic mystical masterpiece of Ebn al-Fāreḥ. It was composed in Iraq in 1859, probably influenced by Bahā’-Allāh’s *Qaṣida-ye warqā’iya*. It is a description of Nabil’s mystical search for truth and his eventual belief in Bahā’-Allāh (publ. in photocopies of Nabil’s own handwriting; see Eṣrāq Kāvāri, pp.133-50; Roḥāni, pp. 73-106). Other works include: an incomplete *qaṣida* in 65 Arabic verses, discussing Islamic eschatology, in particular the Bahai proofs for the causes of Bāb and Bahā’-



Allāh (Āyati, I, pp. 421-26); *Šab o ruz*, a Persian poem in couplet form of 378 lines (partly publ. in *Dokā'i Bayzā'i*, pp. 279-83); a versified letter of 31 distiches in Persian addressed to a certain 'Ali-Moḥammad Varqā (Solaymāni, pp. 539-42); and a collection of mainly apologetic letters, written in Persian and Arabic to government officials, religious leaders, and friends (Solaymāni, pp. 464-78, 501-42).

In addition, Nabil edited Mirzā Ḥosayn Hamadāni's *Tāriḳ-e Badi'-e bayāni* (1883-84), on the history of the Bābi faith, at the behest of Bahā'-Allāh. Based on the noticeable stylistic variation, it is thought that the later sections dealing with the proofs of Babism were written by Nabil (Forqāni, pp. 56-72); a copy is held in the International Bahai Archives, Haifa. Other, unpublished works by Nabil remain in private collections, such as a *resāla* in Persian titled *Tohfa-ye Nāšeriya*, a Bahai apologetic (rFo'ādi Bošru'i, forthcoming; Solaymāni, pp. 494).

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(No non-Baha’i sources are available on Nabil-e Akbar)