



WOMEN IV. IN THE WORKS OF THE BAB AND IN THE BABI MOVEMENT

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The Bab elevated the status of women in his writings and confirmed this in his actions. The Babi community reflected this change in the actions of the Babi women.

(1) *Women in the works of the Bab.*

(2) *Women in the Babi movement.*

(1) *Women in the works of the Bab.* Theologically, the Bab regarded God as utterly beyond the reach and knowledge of humanity and he characterised the Primal Will as the locus of the primal manifestation of the Godhead and the fashioner of the creation. This Primal Will is represented by the Maid of Heaven who descends to earth. And in describing this figure, the Bab writes: "I am the Maid of Heaven begotten by the Spirit of Bahā'" (*Qayyum al-asmā'*, p. 52; Saeidi, pp. 152-53). Thus the Bab created a female symbol for the highest spiritual aspect of himself (see also Lawson).



In general, the Bab treats women and men equally in the laws that he gives. In a number of places, the Bab specifically ameliorates some of the burdens that Islamic law had laid upon women; and so for example, divorce is made more difficult by the imposition of a twelve-month delay (Persian *Bayān* 6:12), the severe restrictions on their social intercourse is relaxed (Persian *Bayān* 8:10), and men are ordered not to harm women (*Ṣaḥīfa Bayn al-Ḥaramayn*, p. 82). He orders men to treat women with the utmost love (*Ṣaḥīfa-ye 'Adliya*, pp. 32, 38; Saeidi, p. 236). On occasions, the Bab even gives women preference over men; for example, he sets a penalty for anyone who causes grief to another person, which he equates to causing grief to God, but he says that the penalty for causing grief to women is doubled (Persian *Bayān* 7:18); also, having laid down the duty of pilgrimage for whoever can afford it, he exempts women from this obligation unless they live nearby, so that no hardship should come upon them on the way (Persian *Bayān* 4:18).

In many places in his writings, the Bab refers to women as the “possessors of circles” (*ulā al-dawā'er*; see for example Persian *Bayān* 4:5, 7:18, 8:6). This refers to the Bab’s injunction that women carry on them a piece of paper on which is drawn six concentric circles, between which are five lines of Babi scripture. The two numbers, five and six, signifying *Howa* (He, i.e. God). Other instructions are also given regarding these circles, but the overall intention is that the circle symbolizes the Sun of Truth (or the Manifestation of God, the term used by the Bab for the figures such as Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and himself) and so the woman carrying it is constantly reminded to look for the next Manifestation of God “He whom God shall make manifest” (Persian *Bayān* 5:10; Saeidi, pp. 329-31).

(2) *Women in the Babi movement.* Most contemporary accounts agree that one of the main social impacts of the Babi movement was the amelioration of the position of women (see, e.g., Momen, pp. 27, 75). Quite apart from what is in his writings, the Bab signalled that his religion would lead to an improvement in the position of women by the support that he gave to his leading female disciple, Qorrat-al-'Ayn. Her radicalism in pushing forward the implications of the claims of the Bab to the point of infracting the precepts of Shi'ism while she was in Karbalā' led another senior Babi, Shaikh Aḥmad Mo'alle-m-e Ḥeṣāri to complain about her to the Bab in 1846. The Bab wrote back praising Qorrat-al-'Ayn and absolving her of any guilt by giving her the title of Ṭāhera (q.v.; “the pure one”; quoted in Fāẓel Māzandarāni, p. 332). She was also regarded by the Babis as the return of Fātema, the Prophet’s daughter, on the basis of



what the Bab had written (Persian *Bayān* 1:4). She was later to push forward her radicalism and even to appear unveiled at the conference of Badašt (1848), all with the evident approval of the Bab (Nabil, pp. 292-98).

During the Babi upheaval at Zanjān, the British consul, Abbott, visited the scene of the operations and reported to Shiel, the British minister: "They [the Babis] fight in the most obstinate and spirited manner, the women even, of whom several have been killed, engaging in the strife" (quoted in Momen, p. 11; cf. Nabil, p. 563). During this episode, a latter-day Joan of Arc arose in the person of Zaynab, a young Babi girl, who dressed as a man and participated in the fighting with such courage and success that she became the terror of the royal troops and was put in command of one section of the Babi defences (Nabil, pp. 549-52; Walbridge, pp. 355-56).

During the Babi upheaval in Nayriz (1850), the women also played an important part; Nabil (p. 487) records: "The uproar caused by their [the Babis'] womenfolk, their amazing audacity and self-confidence, utterly demoralized their opponents and paralysed their efforts." It may even be that in the second Neyriz upheaval (1853), the Babi women outnumbered the men, many of whom had been killed in the first episode.

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