

On an Episode in the
Childhood of the Bāb

William Collins

In his essay on "An Episode in the Childhood of Siyyid Ali Muhammad the Bab" Stephen Lambden has made an excellent comparison of the stories of the Báb's experience in school, with the stories related of Jesus's first day in school by Christians and Muslims. From what appear to be obvious parallels and even borrowings, Lambden concludes that "it seems likely that the accounts of the Báb's first day in the school of Shaykh ^CÁbid [sic] ...are highly hagiographic reworkings of elements contained in the Islāmic versions of Jesus' first day at school. It may be the case that the Báb was an intelligent and unusual youth and that his teacher felt compelled to take him home in light of this. Yet the elaborate accounts in the Tārīkh-i-Jadīd and the Tārīkh-i-Nabīl doubtless owe not a little to the speculative piety of Bābī-Bahā'í historians who were active before the 1880's." While it is certainly true that there are clear similarities in the Islamic stories of Jesus's childhood, and the Bābī-Bahā'í versions of the Báb's, the conclusion which Stephen Lambden has reached is not the only one possible under the circumstances.

One of the problems of any historical-textual research is the sifting of fact from humanly transmitted accounts, humans being inherently subjective and interpretive in their observations. Part of any scholar's deductions must involve the determination of the probable veracity of any transmitter of historical data. In the case of the Báb's first day at school, we have at present no other way to check the accuracy of Shaykh ^CÁbid's statement, except for the corroborative testimony of Aqá Muhammad Ibrāhīm-i-Isfāhānī Bag, which Balyuzi summarizes in his biography of the Báb.¹ But in the case of both of these men, they claim to have been eye-witnesses to the events—a quite different case than with the line of transmission of apocryphal stories told by Muslims and Christians about the first day Jesus attended school. It also seems clear that, in the case of Shaykh ^CÁbid, Nabīl felt him to be a reliable reporter of events, and that Bahá'u'lláh (who reviewed the manuscript of Nabīl's narrative) accepted ^CÁbid's testimony as true.

We may of course question whether the Báb's teacher was not influenced by the effect of his own conversion to the Bābī Faith. It is indeed also possible that legendary tales of Jesus may have become commingled with the story told by Shaykh ^CÁbid in the minds of other Bābīs and Bahā'ís; but it seems doubtful that Shaykh ^CÁbid, in his own reporting, would have become so deluded as to have forgotten exactly how he experienced the Báb

in his school. Time and conversion may have colored his reporting, but it would seem more logical to accept this eye-witness as having the best claim to be a reporter of a substantially correct account.

The curious closeness of the story told of the Báb, and the legendary stories of Jesus's first day in school, juxtaposed with the probable veracity of Shaykh ^CÁbid's account, may lead us to another reassessment. Could it be that there is something true in the legendary stories of the childhood of Jesus and of other Prophets? Even if we were to remove the various miracles and wonders which have appeared in some of the apocryphal stories, there still remains an indication that these were children of unusual ability, intelligence and perception. That Jesus Christ and Mirzá ^CAlī Muhammad the Báb became, as adults, claimants to religious callings which have captured the imaginations and influenced the lives of millions, would certainly point to their having been extraordinary as children. We might thus accept that the 'legends' of superhuman childhood intelligence of the various Founders of religions may actually be quite accurate in this detail, though the specific historical 'facts' may become mixed with other elements.

The specific historical detail aside, we must also raise the question of how 'myth' and 'legend' embody truth. Even if we were to admit that the stories of the precocious childhoods of the Prophets were mere fanciful inventions in terms of their factual accuracy, we would have to pose the question of whether or not the historical truth or falsehood of the reported events is in itself adequate to the meaning of the stories. Catholic theologian Hans Küng writes:

The poem, the parable or legend has its own rationality. It underlines, stresses, brings out, gives concrete shape; the truth announced can be more relevant than that which is contained in a historical account.... [The main interest is not in what really happened...but in the practical question of what it means for us....] (emphasis in original)

Therefore, though we may speculate on possible influences of legendary accounts of Jesus's childhood, the probable veracity of Shaykh ^CÁbid's statement—based upon his having been an eye-witness, as well as based upon a traditional authority shown in trust placed in his account by Bahá'u'lláh and Nabīl—would lead us to a re-examination of Lambden's conclusion. We also must review our understanding of such stories as that of the Báb's first day at school to come to terms with the meaning, which arises from, yet transcends, the question of their historical truth.

NOTES

1. H. M. Balyuzi, The Báb: the Herald of the Day of Days (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973), pp. 34-5.
 2. Hans Küng, On Being a Christian (London: Collins, 1974), p. 416.
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A Brief Reply to William Collins' Remarks on "An Episode in the Childhood.."

Stephen Lambden

May I at the outset express my thanks to William Collins for taking the trouble to make some interesting remarks on my article "An Episode.." (see above). While it is not my intention to respond to his remarks in detail I should like to make the following few points.

Mr Collins notes that "historical-textual research" involves the sifting of "fact" from "humanly transmitted accounts" which may contain interpretive or subjective elements. In line with Muslim hadith criticism he holds that the scholar should bear in mind the "probable veracity" of "any transmitter of historical data". With this I do not disagree though it is important to realize, given the milieu within which Bābī-Bahā'ī historical narratives originated, that the personal veracity, piety or Bābī-Bahā'ī status of transmitters is not in itself a guarantee of historical reliability. Devoted and pious religionists, especially when relating stories about the object of their devotion— or indeed their bitter enemies— frequently embellish or supplement (with "myth") even personally experienced historical events. The saintly characters from whom certain narratives contained in Bābī-Bahā'ī historical sources originate were, despite and as a result of their piety, given to 'myth-making' for 'myth' is an important vehicle for the expression of meta-historical religious perspectives. 19th century Bābī-Bahā'ī history writing is not modern historico-critical research and is often informed by apologetic and polemical considerations. What 'took place' is sometimes mixed with what 'ought to have taken place' or what cannot possibly have occurred. The piety of Bābī-Bahā'ī writers is, in other words, no certain guarantee that historical narratives— sometimes indirectly attributed to them— allegedly transmitted by them are historically accurate. Certain documents and texts which purport to give eye-witness accounts by leading Bābis or Bahā'īs are known to be inconsistent or inaccurate.

The recognition of the above observations is not, I believe, a departure from 'Bahā'ī orthodoxy' but a necessary appreciation of the non-historical but crucially important religious dimension of Bābī-Bahā'ī historiography. That Bābī-Bahā'ī narratives at certain points 'go beyond what took place' enhances rather than lowers their interest to all but the naively 'fundamentalist historian'. Whether or not (for example) the Bāb or Bahā'u'llāh actually did 'X' or 'Y' or whatever is not unimportant but certain narratives related by their pious devotees are most meaningful in the light of the religious message conveyed by their alleged doing of 'X' or 'Y'.

Determining whether or not a given Bābī-Bahā'ī historical narrative is 'historically accurate' involves much more than merely assessing the "probable veracity" of narrators. Parallel and divergent accounts must be carefully examined. Possible apologetic or polemical intentions must be taken into account in the light of the (more or less pre-critical) 'religious and ideological milieu' in which narrators lived. The critical examination (to use Muslim terms) of both isnāds (chains of transmission) and matn (the content, what is transmitted) is in certain connections necessary. It must be remembered that Bābī-Bahā'ī historical sources contain pericopes that must have been orally circulating for several decades and which were subject to additions, omissions and alterations.

Though it would be a gross exaggeration to assert that Bābī-Bahā'ī historical sources stand in need of wholesale 'demythologization' the recognition that 'mythical elements' exist and the appreciation—and not mere condemnation—of their meaning is important. For the mature Christian believer the recognition of the 'mythic element' in the Gospels does not devalue these writings. Similarly, it seems to me, mature Bahā'īs need not be troubled by the meaningful 'mythic element' in Bābī-Bahā'ī historical narratives. Theologically speaking, religious truth goes beyond what 'actually took place'.

As Collins notes the story of the Bāb's 'first day at school' is, in both the Tārīkh-i Jadīd and Tārīkh-i Nabīl, attributed to his one-time teacher Shaykh 'Abid. In the former source it is stated that this was one of the "anecdotes" which he "used to relate" and in the latter that "he related" it. The details of what Shaykh 'Abid is said to have related in these two sources however, diverge at several points. Shaykh 'Abid cannot have been responsible for both these versions in all their details. Indeed, Shaykh 'Abid died around 1846-7 about 35 years before the Tārīkh-i Jadīd was written and almost 45 years before Nabīl-i Zarandī completed his Bābī-Bahā'ī history. The authors of neither the Tārīkh-i Jadīd nor Tārīkh-i Nabīl had, it is very likely, ever met Shaykh 'Abid—Nabīl-i Zarandī became a Bābī about two years after he died. They are thus not relating direct from the Bāb's teacher and provide no chain for the transmission of the story of the Bāb's 'first day at his school.' The story contained in the Tārīkh-i Jadīd and Tārīkh-i Nabīl is not then a direct eye-witness testimony but a narrative attributed to an eye-witness (Shaykh 'Abid) by others. If we assume that it originated with Shaykh 'Abid (and this remains uncertain) it must have been orally circulating for between 35 and 45 years before being written down. In this light it is not unreasonable to assume that the story in question is largely a pious though meaningful invention which probably originated in the 1850's (?) and which was inspired by

the Christian-Islāmic apocryphal accounts of 'Jesus and the alphabet'. The story is not, as Collins asserts, corroborated by the testimony of Āqā Muhammad Ibrahim Ismā'īl Bag (reported in the Tārīkh-i Amrī-yi Shiraz) for, though inspired by similar motives, it is an independent and basically different narration. It is also obvious that the differing accounts in the Tārīkh-i Jadīd and Tārīkh-i Nabīl as compared with that attributed to Āqā Muhammad Ibrahim Ismā'īl Bag cannot both represent the Bāb's 'first day' at school.

Furthermore, the concerns and milieu within which pious 19th century Bābī-Bahā'ī narrators lived was not, it seems to me, that different from the sitz-im-leben that inspired pious Christian "inventors" of apocryphal and hagiographically oriented Gospels. While I am not suggesting that the authors of the Tārīkh-i Jadīd and Tārīkh-i Nabīl were mere "myth-makers" it cannot be ruled out that they drew on narratives which contain mythic elements or which were embellished in the process of oral transmission. That this was the case, is, it appears, illustrated by the very story of the Bāb's 'first day at school'.

Nabīl-i Zarandī, not one of those two persons Bahā'u'llāh alone considered aware of the origins of the Bābī-Bahā'ī Faith (= Mirzā Mūsā [Bahā'u'llāh's brother] and Mullā 'Abd al-Karīm Qazwīnī also known as Mirza Ahmad [see Lah-i Nasīr in Majmū'a-yi Alwāh Mubāraka, Cairo 1920, p.174) was not, as indicated, in a position to judge the accuracy of Shaykh 'Abid's alleged narration of the Bāb's 'first day at school'. He may have considered Shaykh 'Abid to have been a "reliable reporter" (so Collins) but this does not in itself prove the historicity of the narrative attributed to him. In all likelihood he considered the story of the Bāb's 'first day at school' to be an impressive testimony to the remarkable youth of the Bāb and therefore included it in his narrative without worrying unduly about its historicity.

As Collins notes, it is known that Nabīl had the assistance of Mirzā Mūsā (cf. above) in compiling his chronicle and that "parts of the manuscripts were reviewed and approved, some by Bahā'u'llāh, and others by 'Abdu'l-Bahā" (see The Dawnbreakers, trans. Shoghi Effendi [London 1953], p. xxxiv). That this was the case need not be taken to indicate that the narrative attributed to Shaykh 'Abid is, in all its details, 'historical fact' or that (to quote Collins) "Bahā'u'llāh (who reviewed the manuscript of Nabīl's narrative) accepted 'Abid's testimony as true". Firstly, we do not know which "parts of the manuscripts" (note the plural manuscripts) or which manuscript (see ibid) was reviewed by Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā; or, in other words, whether they considered Shaykh 'Abid's narration to

be historically accurate. Such may or may not have been the case. Secondly, that Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā "reviewed" parts of the manuscripts of Nabīl's narrative does not necessarily mean that they were operating like modern reviewers who might be particularly concerned with empirical historical accuracy. If a given narrative, such as that attributed to Shaykh 'Ābid, expressed a 'spiritual truth' Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā might have regarded it as acceptable whether or not is represented 'historical fact' in all its details. In this light it is worth bearing in mind that 'Abdu'l-Bahā "reviewed" many of the writings of early Western Bahā'īs, praised them and gave them permission to publish. A good many of them however, contain— as 'Abdu'l-Bahā was doubtless well aware— ideas which are not in accordance with Bahā'ī teaching. His generous doctrinal liberality designed to encourage and foster unity outweighed a rigid imposition of doctrinal orthodoxy in secondary matters. It is not then enough to assert that Bahā'u'llāh and/ or 'Abdu'l-Bahā reviewed Nabīl's narrative in order to maintain the historicity of Shaykh 'Ābid's narrative of the Bāb's 'first day at school'.

That the narrative of the Bāb's 'first day at school' embodies meaning, as Collins asserts and as I have indicated above, is important. In my original article I do not deny this. I do not mean to suggest that the story is a "meaningless fabrication" or that Nabīl's narrative is not an extremely important and generally reliable historical chronicle.

Finally, I should like to point out that Bahā'ī status or 'orthodoxy' is neither enhanced by nor dependent upon an uncritical acceptance of the narratives reported by Bahā'ī historians. They are neither "infallible" nor part of authoritative Bahā'ī scripture. Any Bahā'ī intellectual who has made a thorough study of the many Bābī-Bahā'ī historical writings will be only too aware of the detailed work that needs to be done in order to sift 'historical fact' from 'error' and 'myth'. Bahā'ī historiography is in its infancy. Numerous and conflicting accounts of certain episodes exist in Muslim, Bābī, Aza'ī and Bahā'ī sources that have, on the whole, never been critically examined. As Shoghi Effendi himself indicated in his letters, much work needs to be done by future Bahā'ī historians.
