

The Bab and the Babi Community of Iran

**A Memorial Volume on the Occasion of the Bi-
centenary of the Bab's Birth
1819-2019**

Edited by

Fereydun Vahman



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INTRODUCTION

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the Babi religion. Nevertheless, its chapters reveal the emergence of a new religion in nineteenth century Iran and its revolutionary teachings that with the passion and sacrifice of its adherents gradually penetrated Iranian society. Despite more than one and a half centuries of violent persecution, this religion not only continued to exist but also transformed and spread beyond the borders of Iran in the form of the Baha'í Faith.

The picture conveyed by historians of the Qajar era or by Babi and Baha'í historians is an astonishing narrative of the embrace of this new religion by a considerable proportion of the Iranian people. The question of how, in a time when there were no means of rapid communication, the name and the teachings of the Bab spread so rapidly throughout Iran and the sacred Shia cities of Iraq, has been answered in different ways. These explanations revolve mainly around the economic crisis in nineteenth century Iran, the corruption of the Qajar monarchy, the tyranny of the rulers, and disillusionment with the immorality and hypocrisy of the Shia religious clerics. They argue that under such circumstances, in search of hope and salvation, people turned to the Bab, especially when his prophetic claims coincided with the messianic expectations of Shia Islam.

Such an analysis is not devoid of historical truth, but it is difficult to conclude that these circumstances were the only reason why thousands followed the Bab and accepted his revolutionary messianic claim. The corruption of the political, social, and religious space in Iran was nothing new. Furthermore, in addition to the fact that the Bab did not apparently provide specific solutions to the problems plaguing Iran, his messianic claims, and his tragic execution by the authorities, did not match the popular expectations of the Shia faithful who imagined that the Promised One would appear triumphant to kill the infidels and tyrants with the sword of vengeance and restore and propagate Islam in the world. To the contrary, the Bab's new religious teachings called for moving beyond Islam and the other traditional religions. His message was one of spiritual resurrection and renewal of the divine reality of all religions; religions which with the rapid progress of the modern world were out of touch with the needs of a new age. The resurrection that the Bab inaugurated was the beginning of a new and unprecedented era in religious history and the spiritual evolution of humankind. It was this remarkable and revolutionary leap, with its roots in Iranian culture and mystical traditions, that attracted thousands of people to this movement.

Another reason for the speed with which the Babi religion spread is found in the exceptional personality of the Bab; his superior intelligence and charisma, as well as his enchanting conduct, his Christ-like innocence, and above all, his firm conviction as to his divine mission and inspired words, and an unshakeable belief that no earthly power could stand in the way of his heavenly message. Such an analysis may be unacceptable to those that do not believe in the hand of destiny or unseen spiritual powers,

but for the Bab and thousands of his followers, such a conception was a natural and obvious understanding of events. The Bab's message was also an answer to the troubles besetting the world of Islam, that because of sectarian divisions, and the rise of extremists, had strayed from its spiritual truths, stumbling from one crisis to another, stuck in a dark past instead of striving to build a brighter future.

At a time when there is an active attempt at historical revisionism by the Iranian Government in order to erase the past from the collective memory, preserving this cultural heritage and familiarization of the Iranian people with these events is especially important. This book is a contribution to this end so that enlightened thinkers might better appreciate the historical truth independent of the false and hateful narratives against the Babis and Baha'is that certain Shia clerics and their followers have spread over more than a century and half.