

The Ethiopian King

By Nader Saiedi Translated by Omid Ghaemmaghami¹

Abstract

This article brings to light a number of hitherto unknown passages from the writings of the Bāb about Hajji Mubārak, the Bāb's Ethiopian servant.

'... He bestoweth a luminous countenance upon the Ethiopian servant ...'²

The eve of 23 May marks the anniversary of the declaration of the Bab, the dawn of a new revelation and a turning point in the history of human-kind. Accounts of this historic night customarily begin with Mullā Ḥusayn Bushrū'ī's encounter with the Bab at his home and proceed to describe the revelation of the first chapter of the Qayyūm al-Asmā' and Mullā Ḥusayn's declaration of faith. Yet we also know that a third person was present on that fateful eve: Mubārak, the Bab's Ethiopian servant. Until now, the significance of Mubārak has not been fully appreciated by scholars. Babi and Baha'i historians knew little about him and he has largely been ignored as a result.³ A study of the Bab's writings shows that this neglect is completely unwarranted. The Bab mentions Mubārak numerous times in his writings, where the person known as the Ethiopian servant is transformed into the Ethiopian king.

It is well-known that in the Persian Bayān and other works, the Bab adduces a sifter of wheat from Isfahan⁴ to illustrate the great revolution that the appearance of the Promised One ushered in by declaring, 'The abased amongst you, He shall exalt; and they that are exalted, He shall abase.'⁵ According to the Bab, Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī (d. 1849), the author of *Jawāhir al-kalām* and the greatest Shi'i divine of the age,⁶ fell into the abyss of the most ignorant of men through rejecting the message of the Bab delivered to him by Mullā 'Alī Baṣṭāmī,⁷ while a sifter of wheat from Isfahan who had no formal education or training attained the summit of glory through his faith in the Bab.⁸ In these passages, in expounding on the concept and meaning of true knowledge, the Bab contrasts a sifter of wheat with al-Najafī to illustrate the all-encompassing spiritual revolution caused by his revelation; yet in a different work, he illustrates the same revolutionary ideas using the concept of sovereignty. Here, the Bab explains that upon rejecting him, the king of Iran, Muḥammad Shah (d. 1848),⁹ and his prime minister, Hajji Mirza Āqāsī (d. 1849),¹⁰ descended to the lowest abyss, while Mubārak, who to outward appearance, was bereft of any power or earthly rank, ascended to the heaven of glory for 'having done good in the realm of faith' (*bi-mā aḥsana fī al-dīn*).¹¹

Keywords

The Bāb
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The other fact worthy of notice is that in most of the writings in which the Bab mentions his parents, he also remembers Mubārak. As an example, we will cite here from a hitherto unknown work of the Bab, composed of some 300–400 pages, and known as *Kitāb-i Sī Du‘ā* ('The Book of Thirty Prayers'). As the Bab approached the age of 30, he revealed 30 prayers in honour of his 30 years. These 30 prayers were revealed daily in Şafar (the second month of the Islamic calendar) and early Rabī‘ al-Awwal (the third month of the Islamic calendar) 1265 [December 1848 – January 1849]. The Bab dedicated each of these 30 prayers to one of the years of his life. The work can thus be considered a spiritual autobiography. While each prayer refers to a specific year, the overarching theme of the work is communion with God, embodying the themes of worship and devotion to the Creator that formed the essence of the Bab's life. Among these 30 prayers, prayer number 27 (apropos his 27th year) stands out. In this prayer, the Bab provides an almost complete account of his life in a section that has been cited in the published compilation, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, without the source being identified. Excerpts from this prayer follow:

Thou art aware, O My God, that since the day Thou didst call Me into being out of the water of Thy love till I reached fifteen years of age I lived in the land which witnessed My birth [Shíráz]. Then Thou didst enable Me to go to the seaport [Búshíhr] where for five years I was engaged in trading ... I proceeded therefrom to the Holy Land [Kárbilá] where I sojourned for one year. Then I returned to the place of My birth ... Then at the age of twenty-five I proceeded to thy sacred House [Mecca], and by the time I returned to the place where I was born, a year had elapsed ... Thus I departed therefrom by Thy leave, spending six months in the land of Şád [Iş fáhán] and seven months in the First Mountain [Mákú], ... Now, in My thirtieth year, Thou beholdest Me, O My God, in this Grievous Mountain [Chihríq] where I have dwelt for one whole year.¹²

Here and elsewhere, the Bab notes that he remained in Mākū for less than eight months. As mentioned earlier, the *Kitāb-i Sī Du‘ā* was revealed near the end of Şafar. The Bab says that at the time in which he is writing, he has spent one year in Chihríq. It merits noting that elsewhere in this prayer, the Bab mentions that in a few days, he will turn 30. This may appear odd at first. After all, it is well-known that the Bab was born on the first day of the first month of the Islamic calendar, 1 Muḥarram 1235 (20 October 1819), meaning that by the end of Şafar or the beginning of Rabī‘ al-Awwal, two months had passed since his birthday. The solution to this seeming puzzle lies in the words, 'Thou art aware, O My God, that since the day Thou didst call Me into being out of the water of Thy love ...' In this and other passages, the Bab calculates the beginning of his life from the moment of conception rather than the day of his birth. In this prayer, he begins not from the year of his birth, 1235 (rather than 1234), but from the day of conception, i.e. nine months and nine days (according to the lunar calendar which is equal to nine months in the solar calendar) before the first day of Muḥarram. At times in his writings, the Bab calculates his age from 1 Muḥarram 1235; at other times from 21 Rabī‘ al-Awwal 1234; and still other times from

21 Rabīʿ al-Awwal 1235. In these 30 prayers, each calculation begins from 21 Rabīʿ al-Awwal 1235 (7 January 1820). For this reason, at the end of Şafar when he is writing, there are still 3 weeks left before he reaches 30. This passage is in complete congruence with the Bab's words in other tablets. Moreover, this method of calculation is discussed by him in other works that are beyond the scope of the present article.

Let us return to the subject at hand. One of the interesting points about these thirty prayers, as well as other prayers revealed by the Bab, is the fact that he repeatedly prays first for his mother and father and then for the one who has raised him ('he who raised me'), beseeching God to bestow upon them His loving-kindness and most sublime bounties. The same can be observed in other prayers of the Bab. Previously, it had been assumed that in these prayers, the Bab is expressing his appreciation to first his parents and then the Khāl-i Aʿẓam,¹³ Hajji Mirza Sayyid ʿAlī, but such is not the case. The venerable person who raised and educated him is none other than Mubārak, his Ethiopian servant whose faith and devotion caused him to ascend to the summits of glory and might.¹⁴ The special love and kindness of the Bab for Mubārak is entirely evident from prayer number 7 which is related to when he was seven years old. After praying for his mother and father, the Bab supplicates to God for Mubārak:

Send down, then, upon me, O my God, when I was seven years old and upon him who raised me on Thy behalf, whose name is Mubārak, that which beseemeth the splendours of the sanctity of Thy loftiness and the wonders of the might of Thy revelation.¹⁵

In this passage, the name of the person for whom the Bab repeatedly prays for and who, alongside his mother and father, is remembered and honoured as the one who raised and educated, is disclosed. The Bab in fact places Mubārak on the same plane as his father. The love and tenderness for Mubārak that runs throughout the Bab's writings is the greatest manifestation of the message of peace, brotherhood, and unity that he has brought to humanity. Following this passage, the image of a moving and beautiful memory from the Bab's life is conveyed: '... and for the bow and arrow he made for Me to play with at that age, [send him] what is in Thy knowledge of Thy grace and mercy.'¹⁶

The Bab's affection for one who served him from childhood; his remembrance of Mubārak while imprisoned in the mountains of Ādharbāyjān; his prayers for him and his greetings to him in his letters to his mother, wife, and uncle;¹⁷ his praise of Mubārak as one who was to all outward appearances a servant but, in reality, the king of the righteous; all beautifully serve to demonstrate that Mubārak truly loved the Bab and that the Bab in turn had special affection and love for Mubārak. It was this mutual love that made the Bab's Ethiopian servant the pride of all the kings on earth.

Suggested citation

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Contributor details

Omid Ghaemmaghami is a PhD candidate in Islamic thought and sessional instructor of modern standard Arabic at the University of Toronto.

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Endnotes

1. This article is a translation of N. Saiedi, 'Sulṭān-i ḥabashī', in *Payām-i Bahā'ī*, 366 (May 2010/167BE), 10–13. The notes that follow have been provided by the translator.
2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makātib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, *jild-i hashtum* [vol. 8], [Tehran]: Mu'assasih-yi Millī-i Maṭbū'āt-i Amrī, 134BE/1977–78, 150.
3. The exceptions being [N. Zarandī], *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932 [1996], 53–54, 62, 66, 68, 96, 129, 132–33, 148; M. H. Afnán, *Genesis of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths in Shíráz and Fárs*, trans. A. Rabbani, Leiden: Brill, 2008, index, s.v. 'Mubárák, Háji'; A. Mázandarānī, *Kitáb-i zuhūr al-ḥaqq, bakhsh-i du* [vol. 2], digitally republished, East Lansing, Michigan: H-Bahai, 2000, 29, 37, 49; A. Mázandarānī, *Kitáb-i zuhūr al-ḥaqq, jild-i sivvum* [vol. 3], Hofheim: Mu'assasih-yi Maṭbū'āt-i Bahā'ī-Ālmān, 165BE/2008, 81, 193–4; A. Afnán, *Black Pearls*, Los Angeles, Kalimat Press, 1988, 3–18 = A. Afnán, *La'ālī-i siyāh*, Canada: n.p., 1992, 27–36; N. Muḥammad-Ḥusaynī, *Ḥadrat-i Báb*, Dundas, Ontario: Mu'assasih-yi Ma'ārif-i Bahā'ī bih Lisān-i Farsī, 152BE/1995, 701–02; N. Muḥammad-Ḥusaynī, *Ḥadrat-i Tāhirih*, Dundas, Ontario: Mu'assasih-yi Ma'ārif-i Bahā'ī, 157BE/2000, 13–4; A. Afnán, *Ahd-i a'lā: Zindigānī-i ḥadrat-i Báb*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2000, 61, 64, 74, 76, 79, 130, 133, 567 (note 75), where the story of Mubárák accompanying the Báb to visit an early Arab Bábī (and later Bahā'ī) Shaykh Sulṭān during his stay in Shiraz is recounted (the source for this account is Nabíl Zarandī's history); A. Lee, 'Mubarak, Haji', *Encyclopaedia of Africa*, eds. K. A. Appiah and H. L. Gates, Jr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, vol. 1, 197, where Mubárák's year of birth is mistakenly given as 1833; A. Lee, 'Haji Mubárák', *World Religions: Belief, Culture, and Controversy*, ABC-CLIO, 2011–, available online: <http://religion2.abc-clio.com/>; A. Lee, *The Baha'i Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952–1962*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, 21–41 *passim*; A. Lee, 'Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz,' *Iranian Studies*, 45(3), 2012, 417–437 (see 432–3); N. Cacchioli, 'The Pupil of the Eye: Abolitionism, Racial Unity, and the Iconography of Enslaved Africans in Baha'i Tradition', in E. Toledano (ed.) *African Communities in Asia and the Mediterranean: Identities between Integration and Conflict*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2012, pp. 237–54, see 244–45 (my thanks to Steve Cooney for this reference). For general information about slaves and the practice of slavery in pre-modern and modern Iran, see W. Floor, 'Barda and Barda-dārī iv. From the Mongols to the abolition of slavery', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, available online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/barda-iv>.
4. This is a reference to Mullā Muḥammad Ja'far Gandum Pākkun, the first Bábī in Isfahān who had the distinction of being mentioned in both the Persian Bayān and the Kitáb-i Aqdas. The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, trans. Habib Taherzadeh with the assistance of a Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976, 83; Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Haifa: The Universal House of Justice, 1992, 79 (par. 166), 243 (note 179). See also [N. Zarandī], *The Dawn-Breakers* 99.
5. Translated in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983, 146. Cf. Matthew 5:10; Qur'an 28:5. The expression is a similar to the wording found in a number of hadiths attributed to the Shi'í Imams. See for example al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-kāfi*, ed. 'A. A. al-Ghaffārī, 8 vols., Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1362AS/1983–84, 1:369 (no. 1); A. al-Aḥsā'ī, *Kitāb al-raǰ'a*, Beirut: al-Dār al-'ālamīyya, 1414AH/1993, 131; 'A. Ḥ. Ishrāq-Khāvarī, *Qāmūs-i iqān*, 4 vols., [Tehran]: Mu'assasih-yi Millī-i Maṭbū'āt-i Amrī, 128BE/1971–72, 4:1827–29.
6. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī's magnum opus, *Jawāhir al-kalām fī sharḥ sharāyī' al-islām* (*The Jewels of Dialectic Theology in Explaining the Laws of Islam*), a work which took him 25 years to complete, is recognized as the most popular work of Shi'í jurisprudence in the 19th century. See Meir Litvak, 'Iraq XI. Shi'ite Seminaries in Iraq', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*,

available online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iraq-xi-shiite-seminaries>. Baha'u'llah reproaches him in numerous tablets for his opposition to the Cause of the Bab. See for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Āyāt-i ilāhī jild-i duvvum: Gulchīnī az āthār-i ḥadrat-i Bahá'u'lláh*, Langenhain: Mu'assasah-yi Maṭbū'āt-i Amrī-i Ālmān, 1996, 156, where he is referred to as 'the first who opposed [God]' (*awwal man a'raḍa*).

7. On him, see M. Momen, "Alí Bastámí, Mullá (d. 1846)", in *The Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project*, available online: http://www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org/attachments/Ali_Bastami_Mulla.pdf; M. 'A. Fayḍī, *Ḥadrat-i Nuqūṭih-yi Ulā*, Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Millī-i Maṭbū'āt-i Amrī, 132BE/1975–76, 248–49. On his trial in Iraq, see N. Alkan, *Dissent and Heterodoxy in the Late Ottoman Empire: Reformers, Babis, and Baha'is*, Istanbul: The Press ISIS, 2008, 43–50.
8. 'Likewise behold this Revelation. The essences of the people have, through divinely-conceived designs, been set in motion and until the present day three hundred and thirteen disciples have been chosen. In the land of Šád [Iṣfahán], which to outward seeming is a great city, in every corner of whose seminaries are vast numbers of people regarded as divines and doctors, yet when the time came for inmost essences to be drawn forth, only its sifter of wheat donned the robe of discipleship. This is the mystery of what was uttered by the kindred of the Prophet Muḥammad – upon them be the peace of God – concerning this Revelation, saying that the abased shall be exalted and the exalted shall be abased' (The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 83). Similar statements are made by Baha'u'llah: 'Consider, how can he that faileth in the day of God's Revelation to attain unto the grace of the 'Divine Presence' and to recognize His Manifestation, be justly called learned, though he may have spent aeons in the pursuit of knowledge, and acquired all the limited and material learning of men? It is surely evident that he can in no wise be regarded as possessed of true knowledge. Whereas, the most unlettered of all men, if he be honoured with this supreme distinction, he verily is accounted as one of those divinely-learned men whose knowledge is of God; for such a man hath attained the acme of knowledge, and hath reached the furthermost summit of learning' (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 144); 'Consider how Balal, the Ethiopian, unlettered though he was, ascended into the heaven of faith and certitude, whilst Abdu'llah Ubayy, a leader among the learned, maliciously strove to oppose Him' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, 82). Baha'u'llah also speaks of this theme in a tablet about the 'mystery of the Great Reversal in the Sign of the Sovereign', similarly contrasting the oppression of al-Najafī and other ulama in Iraq and Iran with the acceptance of many of the masses. The tablet is cited in 'A. H. Ishrāq-Khāvārī, *Raḥīq-i makhtūm*, 2 vols., Hofheim: Mu'assasah-yi Maṭbū'āt-i Bahá'ī-i Ālmān, 164BE/2007, 1:423; V. Ra'fatī, *Yādnāmih-yi mišbāh-i munīr*, Hofheim: Mu'assasah-yi Maṭbū'āt-i Bahá'ī-i Ālmān, 163BE/2006, 286.
9. On him, see J. Calmard, 'Moḥammad Shah Qājār', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mohammad-shah>.
10. On him, see S. Quinn, 'Aqasi, Haji Mirza ('Abbas Iravani) (c.1783–1849)', in *The Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project*, available online: http://www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org/attachments/Aqasi_Haji_Mirza.pdf.
11. Retranslated from the original Arabic following correspondence with the author. Personal communication, 11 December 2010. Cf. Qur'an 4:125.
12. The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 180–81.
13. Literally, 'The Greatest Uncle', the maternal uncle of the Bab and one of the Seven Martyrs of Tehran. On him, see [N. Zarandī], *The Dawn-Breakers* 446–49.
14. According to Abū al-Qāsim Afnān, Mubārak was purchased by Hajji Mirza Abū al-Qāsim, the brother-in-law of the Báb, when he was 5 years old. According to the bill of sale, the Bab acquired Mubārak from his brother-in-law in 1842 when Mubārak was 19 years of age, see Afnān, *La'ālī-i siyāh* 27–28 = Afnān, *Black Pearls* 4–5. A Research Department memorandum dated 2 February 2000 states that this bill of sale is not held at the Bahá'í World Centre Archives (available online: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_servants_household_bahaulah). Presumably a copy exists at the Afnān Library in the United Kingdom. Abū al-Qāsim Afnān states that the Bab acquired Mubārak in Shiraz but according to both Mirza Ḥabīb Allāh Afnān and Asad Allāh Fāḍil-i Māzandarānī, the Bab purchased Mubārak in Bushihr (M. H. Afnān, *Genesis of the Bábī-Bahá'í Faiths in Shīrāz and Fárs* 20 (note 61), 30, 306 (my thanks to Ahang Rabbani for this reference); A. Māzandarānī, *Kitāb-i zuhūr al-ḥaqq, bakhsh-i du*, [vol. 2] 49 (available online: <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/arabic/vol4/ztzh/ztzho49.gif>). If this information is correct, Mubārak was born circa 1823 making it impossible for him to have aided in raising the Bab (who was born in 1819). It is possible

that the Bab was raised by another servant of African descent also named Mubārak, a common name for household servants in Iran at that time (my thanks to Mina Yazdani for this clue) as affirmed by Dihkhudā in his *Lughatnāmih*, s.v. ‘mubārak’ (available online: <http://topurl.in/Mubarak>). A. Afnān, ‘*Ahd-i a’lā* 31, includes an eyewitness account about the Bab’s first day of school as a child that explicitly mentions that he was accompanied by a servant (*ghulām*). It is not clear however if this is a reference to Mubārak or someone else. New sources need to come to light before these questions can be answered.

15. *fa-anzil allāhumma ‘alayya fī hīn alladhī kuntu ‘indaka ḥarf al-wāw wa-man rabbānī yawma’idhin min ‘indika alladhī kāna ismuhu mubārak mā yanbaghī li-jalāl quds irtifā’ika wa-badāyī’i zuhūrātika*. The original for ‘7 years old’ is *ḥarf al-wāw* (lit., the letter *wāw*). The numerical value of the letter *wāw* is 6 but as the author has pointed out, in this tablet, the Bab gives the number 0 (represented in Persian and Arabic by a point) the numerical value of 1 and thus the letter *wāw* in this tablet has a numerical value of 7. This and the following passage can be found in a manuscript of the first section of the *Kitāb-i Sī Du‘ā* found in the William McElwee Miller Collection of Bābī Writings and Other Iranian Texts, Princeton University’s Islamic Manuscripts, Third Series, no. 30, folio 23b (available online: http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/Babi/listing.html), with some minor differences (my thanks to Steven Phelps for pointing out this manuscript to me).
16. *wa-bimā qad šana’a hunālika lī al-sahm wa-l-qaws li-mā ashtaghilanna bihi mā anta ta’lam min faḍlika wa-raḥmatika*.
17. There are also indirect references to Mubārak in other letters. For example, in a letter from the Bab to his mother dated Thursday, 28 Sha’bān [1265 / 19 July 1849], cited in *Khūshih-hā’ī az kharman-i adab va hunar*, 6, *dawrih-yi bayān*, Darmstadt: Reyhani, 152BE/1995, 14, the Bab remembers those who have sought her presence (*mustadrikāt-i fayḍ-i ḥudūr*), which must certainly have included Mubārak. See also an earlier letter from the Bab to his wife in which he expresses concern for and sends greetings to all of the residents of his home (*sukkān-i bayt...hamigī*), INBA (Iran National Baha’i Archives), vol. 58, reprinted, East Lansing, MI.: H-Bahai, 2004, available online <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/bab/G-L/1/inba58/INBA58.pdf>, p. 183.