DIVISIONS AND AUTHORITY CLAIMS IN BABISM (1850–1866)*

In a recently-published article (“Hierarchy, Authority and Eschatology in Early Bābī Thought,” in P. Smith [ed.], In Iran: Studies in Bābī and Bahaʾī History, vol. 3, Los Angeles, Kalimat Press, 1986, pp. 95–155) [see here above], I have analysed the nature of charismatic authority within the early Bābī movement (from 1844 to about 1850) and shown how this was linked to both long- and short-term eschatological expectations, both in the thought of the Bāb and in more popular notions held by some of his followers.

In this article I propose to move on from the theoretical considerations of the early period to examine in some detail the events of the period following the Bāb’s death.

The question of succession

It will, I think, be best to begin with the controversial question of whether or not the Bāb appointed a successor and, if, so, what his intention in doing so may have been. The point is controversial precisely because it lies at the heart of the Bahāʾī/Azali debate, but I have felt it better to take it, as far as possible, out of that context in order to treat it on its own merits. In order to clarify the issues involved, however, it will probably prove simplest to begin with a description of the Bahāʾī position—or, rather, positions, since there seem to be more than one—on the question of succession.

The earliest expression of the Bahāʾī attitude is, as far as I can tell, found in the writings of Mīrzā Ḥusayn ‘Ali Bahāʾ Allāh from the Edirne period (1864–68), such as the Lawḥ-i sirāj. Here, it is categorically stated that “my previous manifestation effaced the decree of succession (ḥukm-i wiṣāyat) all at once from the Book” and that the Bayān referred only to “letters” and “mirrors,” the latter being unnumbered.1


This is, of course, both the simplest and the most consistent Bahāʾī position. By ruling out from the start any possibility of a legitimate claim to *wiṣāya* on the part of HusaynʿAli’s half-brother Yahyā, it makes the former’s own claim to the position of “him whom God shall manifest” [man *yuzhiruhu* ‘llāh: the Bābī messiah] more readily defensible and the latter’s rejection of him less of a stumbling-block. It remains a standard Bahāʾī position down to the present,2 though usually presented more by implication or omission than direct affirmation.

A modified version first appeared in ʿAbbās Effendi ʿAbd al-Bahā’s *Maqāla-yi shakhsī sayyāḥ*, where it is stated that Bahāʾ Allāh and MullāʿAbd al-Karīm Qazvīnī (one of the Bāb’s secretaries) devised a plan whereby Yahyā was to be made well known so that his brother could “remain protected from the interference of all men,” an arrangement the Bāb himself is said to have approved.3 Despite obvious ethical objections, this has remained a popular explanation of the affair for Bahāʾīs.

Both the above positions are combined and sanctioned by Shoghi Effendi in his official history, *God Passes By*, where he states that “a successor or vicegerent the Bāb never named, an interpreter of His teachings He refrained from appointing,” before proceeding to accept ʿAbbās Effendi’s notion of the nomination of Azal as a figure-head.5

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2 See, for example, Sayyid Mahdī Dahajī, *Risāla-yi Sayyid Mahdī Dahajī*, MS F57, E. G. Browne Or. MSS, Cambridge University Library, pp. 97ff.


4 A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahāʾ Allāh*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1974), p. 53. The complicity of Mīrzā Mūsā and ʿAbd al-Karīm Qazvīnī may be based merely on a reference by Bahāʾ Allāh in his *Lawḥ-i Naṣīr* to the effect that these two individuals were “informed about the beginnings of this affair [or ‘cause’: *amr*]” (text in Mīrzā HusaynʿAli Nūrī Bahāʾ Allāh, *Majmūʿa-yi alwāḥ-i mubāraka* [Cairo, 1920], p. 174). See also Dahajī, *Risāla*, p. 62.

5 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, 111, 1944), pp. 28–29. Shoghi Effendi’s discussion of the question of *wiṣāya* in Babism involves a curious but important contradiction. Before the passage just referred to, he states that the Bāb’s own appearance fulfilled a “Greater Covenant” made by God “from time immemorial” regarding the Bābī revelation. He then goes on to say that this was now supplemented by a “lesser Covenant,” such as had existed in all previous religions, concerning the Bāb’s successor, identified as Bahāʾ Allāh (ibid., pp. 27–28). Normally, however, Bahāʾī doctrine refers to the “Greater Covenant” as that involving the acceptance of each successive prophet by mankind and the “Lesser Covenant” as that securing the appointment of the