



Meditation on the Occasion of the Birth of the Báb

ON THE NIGHT OF OCTOBER 20, 1819, on the first day of Muharram in the year 1235 A.H., (1) slumbering humanity slept on, and few were the souls that rose to greet the birth of Siyyid 'Alí Muhammad, the Báb, in the home of Áqá Mírzá 'Alí, His mother's uncle, in the fabled city of Shíráz.

Shíráz, fortunate city! Well did the celebrated E.G. Browne speak of you as "the home of Persian culture, the mother of Persian genius, the sanctuary of poetry and philosophy, Shiraz". (2) A thousand times over was Háfiz's supplication granted, when he cried out in his love for you: "Sweet is Shíráz and its incomparable site! O God, preserve it from decline!" (3)

For on that sacred night, unbeknown to your sleeping children, you attained to your greatest accolade, becoming the dayspring of revelation and birthplace of the One Whom the Tongue of Grandeur designated as King of the Messengers. (4) Today you are honoured among His lovers, who long to kiss your blessed dust, set apart by the Most Great Name as a site of pilgrimage unto the people of Bahá.

And yet, Shíráz notwithstanding such bestowals, incarceration and martyrdom were the only welcome forthcoming from the majority of your dwellers and their compatriots to One whose name they had for a thousand years invoked. On the anniversary of His own birth, ensconced within a fortress, buried like a seed fertile under the oppressive soil, the Primal Point recalled, in a supplication to the All-Merciful, the night Shíráz attained to its heart's desire:

"Through the revelation of Thy grace, O Lord, Thou didst call Me into being on a night such as this, and lo, I am now lonely and forsaken in a mountain. Praise and thanksgiving be unto Thee for whatever conformeth to Thy pleasure within the empire of heaven and earth. And all sovereignty is Thine, extending beyond the uttermost range of the kingdoms of Revelation and Creation. Thou didst create Me, O Lord, through Thy gracious favour and didst protect Me through Thy bounty in the darkness of the womb and didst nourish Me, through Thy loving-kindness, with life-giving blood. After having fashioned Me in a most comely form, through Thy tender providence, and having perfected My creation through Thine ex-cellent handiwork and breathed Thy Spirit into My body through Thine infinite mercy and by the revelation of Thy transcendent unity, Thou didst cause Me to issue forth from the world of concealment into the visible world, naked, ignorant of all things, and powerless to achieve aught. Thou didst then

The House of the Báb



Dawn over the House of the Báb. Photograph taken by Mihdí Samími, courtesy of George Ronald

nourish Me with refreshing milk and didst rear Me in the arms of My parents with manifest compassion, until Thou didst graciously acquaint Me with the realities of Thy Revelation and apprised Me of the straight path of Thy Faith as set forth in Thy Book.”
(5)

And so in a Shírází merchant’s home the Báb was born “from the world of concealment into the visible world”, twenty-five years, four months, and four days before the birth of His Revelation, the promised Day of God yet unseen and pulsating within the soul of a newly born Child.

A touching evocation of His earliest days and months comes from the words of His fortunate mother, the noble Fátimih Bagum, who was frequently heard to recount:

“Often He was serene and made no noise. During the twenty-four hour period, He would desire milk only four times and while nursing would be most gentle and no movement was discerned from His mouth. Many a time I would be disturbed as to why this Child was not like others and thought that perhaps He suffered some internal ailment which made Him not desire milk. Then I would console myself that if indeed He experienced some unknown illness, He would manifest signs of agitation and restlessness. Unlike other children, during the weaning period, He did not complain nor behaved in any unseemly manner. I was most thankful that now that the Exalted Lord had granted me this one Child, He is gentle and agreeable.” (6)

How dimly the world suspected the significance of the birth of that Unique One, to outward seeming an ordinary Child, yet Bearer of an extraordinary destiny: an Infant “naked, ignorant and powerless” yet with all the mysteries of creation and revelation latent within His rarified Soul!

Indeed, far from celebrating, the chosen land of Persia was dressed in mourning. For the night of the Promised One’s birth coincided with the first of ten days of ritual lamentation for the third Imam’s martyrdom, the sublime Huseyn, killed at the hands of the Umayyad armies of the caliph Yazid on the plains of Karbilá, some eleven centuries earlier. This melancholy occasion undoubtedly constitutes the most important, and most tragic commemoration in the Shí’ah sacred calendar, and so it was amidst the mourning and loud weeping of the masses that the very stones of Shíráz cried out in the sheer joy of reunion. Lost in their lamentation were the weeping crowds, “bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes or hear His melodies with their own ears”. (7) And thus bereft, those eyes shed a river of tears for the Imam Huseyn on the day when he himself surely rejoiced at the birth of His glorious Kinsman – yet remained dry on the day 750 muskets pierced the breast of the Báb. (8)

Thus, as the earth rejoiced and the tears of the people rained down on the sacred night the Báb was born, pathos and joy embraced as long-parted lovers clinging the one to the other like candle and flame, reconciled henceforth.

One hundred and eighty-two years later one wonders how often, for lack of discernment, we weep for yesteryear when jubilation beckons in seemingly ordinary births, if only we had eyes to see. How often do the revelations of His grace “issue forth from the world of concealment into the visible world” in modest garb, hidden in the mountain of material life and sight awaiting recognition in the realm of insight and discernment, and within that realm, awaiting celebration. The realm of insight where within the ordinary the extraordinary is grasped, and in the captive seed the luscious fruit is intuited and even tasted before the youngest shoot springs forth.

For the prayer revealed by the Báb on the anniversary of His birth, tracing His journey from conception to maturity, might speak also for every one of His lovers in our community of broken winged birds, and for the metaphorical children born of our servitude in His path. The prayer gives praise for each stage of development, from existence in the darkness of the womb, through birth into powerlessness and dependence, to ultimate arrival at the gate of God’s good pleasure. Might this trajectory not be observed, in its own way, in relation to the many instruments of our servitude and

worship, be it study circles or Local Spiritual Assemblies; scholarship or the arts; devotional meetings or children's classes; firesides and nineteen day feasts; or quiet acts of hospitality like those of Jináb-i-Mírzá Muhammad-Qulí, that faithful brother of the Blessed Beauty who would simply "pass around the tea", "always silent", holding fast to the Covenant of "Am I not your Lord?"

It is the eye of discernment alone that makes it possible to look upon nascent institutions and infant instruments of service, "naked, ignorant of all things, and powerless to achieve aught", and yield praise for the revelation of His transcendent unity in the simple fact of their existence; their having issued forth, powerless and fragile, "from the world of concealment into the visible world". It is spiritual discernment, again, that gives us the joy and patience to nourish such infant creatures "with refreshing milk" and rear them in our arms "with manifest compassion", till they become acquainted, in the fullness of time, "with the realities of Thy Revelation" and apprised "of the straight path of Thy Faith as set forth in Thy Book".

How great the temptation, as we nurture our communities and our own souls amidst the conspicuous signs of our relative immaturity, "to be disturbed", like the mother of the Báb, "as to why this Child was not like others" and think that "perhaps He suffered some internal ailment which made Him not desire milk". Whereas the eye of discernment might perceive, amidst the fissiparous forces of a distracted and distracting world, amidst the materialism and indifference and strife that tear apart the society to which we all belong, that which might, with Fátimih Bagum, make us "most thankful that now that the Exalted Lord had granted me this one Child, He is gentle and agreeable".

The Birth of the Báb is a call to celebration then, but also a call to spiritual discernment. So that, should a night arrive like unto the night in which we were born and find us prisoned in a forbidding mountain, be it built of heart's fragments or of cold stone, we might with the Báb exclaim to God:

"Praise and thanksgiving be unto Thee for whatever conformeth to Thy pleasure within the empire of heaven and earth. And all sovereignty is Thine, extending beyond the uttermost range of the kingdoms of Revelation and Creation." (9)

Glad tidings!

Ismael Velasco

1. See, Nabil-i Azam, The Dawnbreakers, (trans. Shoghi Effendi) p. 73, BPT, Wilmette, 1970
2. EG Browne, A Year Amongst the Persians (1893), p. 283, Century Publishing edition, London, 1984
3. Cited in *ibid.* p. 287
4. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of Ahmad, Arabic, Bahá'í Prayers, BPT, UK
5. Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 173-74, Bahá'í World Centre, 1982
6. Cited in Mirza Habibu'llah Afnan's account of the Báb in Shiráz, translated by Ahang Rabbani, Translations of Shaykhi, Bábí and Bahá'í Texts, No. 11, Dec 1997, H-Bahá'í
7. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of Ahmad, Arabic
8. Cf. The Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', cited in SWB, p. 49
9. Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 173, Bahá'í World Centre, 1982.

*Drop't as if from God's own
Hand
Built as by God's command
Precious stone on Carmel's side
With terraces like ripples
Which in time
Will spread their 'fluence
Worldwide.
Evidential. plain to see*



*Indeed,
The Promised Day is here.*

William J Swain–Nisbet