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Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the (May 23)

The Festival of the Declaration of the Báb is one of five Bahá'í festivals, and nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is to be suspended. This holy day commemorates and celebrates the prophetic mission of the Báb, whose short-lived faith-community, the Bábí religion, was succeeded by the Bahá'í Faith, and whose doctrines—as well as several significant religious laws and observances—were taken up in the Bahá'í religion, effectively making the Báb “the martyr Prophet and co-founder of their Faith” (Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, 233) alongside its principal founder, Bahá'u'lláh.

The Báb (1819–1850), whose given name was Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz, was the precursor and herald of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), whose given name was Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí. The Báb’s relation to Bahá'u'lláh is somewhat analogous to John the Baptist’s role as the precursor and herald of Jesus Christ. By “Declaration” is meant two things: (1) the Báb’s announcement of his prophetic mission; and (2) the moment when the Báb’s first disciple, Akhúnd Mullá Ḥusayn Bushrú'í (1813–1849), recognized the Báb’s prophetic mission and became the first believer. Thus, the Declaration of the Báb took place on the evening of May 22, 1844. The signal moment was 2 hours and 11 minutes after sunset, as the Báb himself states, in *Persian Bayán* 2:7 and 6:13, and also in the *Kitáb-i Panj Sha‘n* (“Book of [the] Five Modes [of Revelation]”), revealed exactly six lunar years later, on March 19, 1850.

The Declaration of the Báb is one of the “two Most Great Festivals” which, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is “that day on which We [Bahá'u'lláh] raised up the One [the Báb] Who announced unto mankind the glad tidings of this Name [Bahá'u'lláh], through which the dead have been resurrected and all who are in the heavens and on earth have been gathered together” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 59 [brackets added]). The Declaration of the Báb actually falls on the Gregorian calendar date of May 22 in the evening (i.e., 2 hours and 11 minutes after sunset), but since the Bahá'í day begins at sunset on what would normally be regarded in the West as the evening before May 23 (i.e., on the evening before the Muslim lunar date of Friday, the fifth day of Jamá-díyu'l-Avval AH 1260 or May 23, 1844). Thus, the Declaration of the Báb is formally listed as May 23, even though it is observed on the evening of May 22.

The other “Most Great Festival” is the 12-day “Festival of Riqdán” (April 21–May 2). What the two “Most Great Festivals” have in common is that they commemorate the prophetic declarations of the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá'í Faith,

the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Of the two festivals, the Festival of Riḍván (“Paradise”) is preeminent (i.e., the “King of Festivals”), since the Báb not only declared his own prophetic mission, but heralded the imminent advent of a messianic figure referred to as “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” whose subsequent appearance, as Bahá'u'lláh, the majority of the Báb's followers (known as “Bábís”) later accepted.

Historically, the Declaration of the Báb is to be understood within the context of 19th-century Persia (now Iran). Messianic fervor had been ignited across Persia over the expected return of the Twelfth Imam, who was said to have disappeared in the Islamic year of 260 AH and who had gone into occultation for a period of 1,000 lunar years. Thus, in the Islamic year 1260 AH (1844), Persia was charged with what scholars call “eschatological tension.” The Báb declared that his appearance signaled the return of the Twelfth Imam. In each succeeding year of his short mission, the Báb advanced progressively greater prophetic claims. During the last three years of his ministry and prior to his martyrdom on July 9, 1850, the Báb declared that his real station was not only that of the (return of) the Twelfth Imam, but also a new Prophet and “Manifestation of God,” empowered to abrogate the laws of Islam and to reveal a new set of divine laws in their stead.

Although several accounts present different versions of the event, the one that is the most widely accepted is, briefly, as follows: In Persia, two influential theologians, Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsá'í (d. 1826) and his successor, Sayyid Kázim Rashtí, proclaimed the imminent return of the Imam Mahdí. (“Mahdí” is a religious term identical to the “Qá'im” in Shi'i Islamic eschatology.) Before Sayyid Kázim died in 1843, he instructed his disciples to scatter in search of the promised Mahdí, who would soon be revealed. One of the more impressive young Shaykhís, Mullá Ḥusayn, had traveled to the Persian city of Shíráz and was mysteriously drawn to a young merchant, Sayyid 'Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz, who invited Mullá Ḥusayn to his home that night, May 22, 1844. Of that momentous experience, Mullá Ḥusayn recounts:

When I first started upon my quest, I determined to regard the two following standards as those whereby I could ascertain the truth of whosoever might claim to be the promised Qá'im. The first was a treatise which I had myself composed, bearing upon the abstruse and hidden teachings propounded by Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kázim. Whoever seemed to me capable of unravelling the mysterious allusions made in that treatise, to him I would next submit my second request, and would ask him to reveal, without the least hesitation or reflection, a commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, in a style and language entirely different from the prevailing standards of the time. . . .

I was revolving these things in my mind, when my distinguished Host again remarked: “Observe attentively. Might not the Person intended by Sayyid Kázim be none other than I?” I thereupon felt impelled to present to Him a copy of the treatise which I had with me. “Will you,” I asked Him, “read this book of mine and look at its pages with indulgent eyes? I pray you to overlook my weaknesses and failings.” He graciously complied with

my wish. He opened the book, glanced at certain passages, closed it, and began to address me. Within a few minutes He had, with characteristic vigour and charm, unravelled all its mysteries and resolved all its problems. Having to my entire satisfaction accomplished, within so short a time, the task I had expected Him to perform, He further expounded to me certain truths which could be found neither in the reported sayings of the imáms of the Faith nor in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kázim. These truths, which I had never heard before, seemed to be endowed with refreshing vividness and power. . . .

He then proceeded to say: “Now is the time to reveal the commentary on the Súrih of Joseph.” He took up His pen and with incredible rapidity revealed the entire Súrih of Mulk, the first chapter of His commentary on the Súrih of Joseph. The overpowering effect of the manner in which He wrote was heightened by the gentle intonation of His voice which accompanied His writing. Not for one moment did He interrupt the flow of the verses which streamed from His pen. Not once did He pause till the Súrih of Mulk was finished. I sat enraptured by the magic of His voice and the sweeping force of His revelation. At last I reluctantly arose from my seat and begged leave to depart. He smilingly bade me be seated, and said: “If you leave in such a state, whoever sees you will assuredly say: ‘This poor youth has lost his mind.’” At that moment the clock registered two hours and eleven minutes after sunset. . . .

“This night,” He declared, “this very hour will, in the days to come, be celebrated as one of the greatest and most significant of all festivals.” (Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 57–61)

The preceding eyewitness account by Mullá Ḥusayn narrates the event of the Báb’s Declaration, but not its substance. What did the Báb announce? What did the Báb proclaim? The Báb called upon the kings and rulers of the earth to recognize the truth of his prophetic mission and to follow his religion. The Súrah of Mulk (“Chapter on Sovereignty”) states, in part:

O concourse of kings and of the sons of kings! Lay aside, one and all, your dominion which belongeth unto God.

O King of Islam! Aid thou, with the truth, . . . Him Who is Our Most Great Remembrance . . . and . . . subdue, with the truth and by His leave, the countries, for in this world thou hast been mercifully invested with sovereignty, and wilt, in the next, dwell, nigh unto the Seat of Holiness, with the inmates of the Paradise of His good-pleasure. (The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 41–42)

“Verily, the essence of religion is none other than submission unto This Remembrance [the Báb]. Thus whoso seeketh Islam (submission to God), let him submit unto this Remembrance [the Báb]. For God will inscribe his

name in the Book of the Righteous as a true Muslim, and he will be praised as one who is faithful. Whoso rejecteth this true Islam, God shall not accept, on the Day of Resurrection, any of his deeds. . . .

We verily have moved the mountains upon the earth, and the stars upon the Throne, by the power of the one true God, around the Fire which burneth in the centre of Water, as ordained by this Remembrance. (Provisional translation by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 142 and 68 [brackets added])

The Báb claimed to fulfill the long-awaited return of the Twelfth Imam—who Shi‘i Muslims identified as the “Mahdí” expected by Sunni Muslims. This messianic figure, also known as the Qá’im (“Ariser”/“Resurrector”) would appear at the end of the time, thereby marking the end of the Islamic dispensation. The Báb, at first, attracted a handful of disciples whose religion, in turn, rapidly attracted numerous followers across Persia, although the Bábí religion itself was quite short-lived. The Bábí movement thus emerged in the middle of the 19th century as the latest and most dramatic example of chiliastic/millenarian aspirations in modern Islam. The Báb’s claim of divine authority, and its ideological underpinnings, naturally challenged the finality of the Islam and hence aroused the opposition of the religious establishment.

The Báb had a cyclical view of history. Religions are divine in origin, yet, like spring and winter, seasonably have their rise and decline. Divinely revealed religions are, in their pure form, quintessentially harmonious and one in essence. In their heyday, religions are each suited to the needs of society in their particular day and age. When, in the course of social evolution, a religion becomes obsolete, it must be renewed and replaced by a new expression of divine Reality. Islam had run its course, and a new religion was on the horizon, with the Báb as the new messenger of God. These ideas, along with the Báb’s metaphorical interpretation of the Islamic Resurrection (*Qiyámat*), presaged the Bahá’í doctrine of “progressive revelation.”

Although, at first, the Báb’s claims and doctrines were couched in pious Islamic language, what the Báb went on to do was quite revolutionary. The Báb, according to Armin Eschraghi, established a new, post-Islamic faith that fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion: a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, and new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws as the *Persian Bayán* (1848), the Báb pursued three major goals: (1) paving the way for the advent of the Promised One; (2) provoking the clerical establishment and shattering the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and (3) proving the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

The Bábí movement spread like wildfire across Persia during the period from 1845 to 1847. The Báb was imprisoned and, in the summer of 1848, a farcical trial took place that, by all accounts, was intended to humiliate the Báb. The Báb was bastinadoed and his imprisonment prolonged. Shi‘i clerics stirred up popular sentiment against the Bábís, who were attacked across Persia by various mobs. The

Bábís grouped to defend themselves in the fortress-shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí, and in Zanján and Nayríz. Clerics finally issued a death warrant, and the Báb was executed by a firing squad of 750 musketeers on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia.

After an ill-fated attempt on the life of the Sháh of Persia on August 15, 1852, by two aggrieved Bábí youths, the Sháh ordered the most brutal tortures and deaths of Bábís (and, subsequently, Bahá'ís), with estimates ranging from around 5,000 to 20,000 martyrs, who, as Browne described it, were subjected to “[t]errible . . . modes of inflicting death. . . . Of the unfortunate Bábís, some were hewn in pieces, some were sawn asunder, some were flayed with whips, some were blown from the mouths of mortars” (Browne, “Bábíism,” in *Religious Systems of the World*, 348).

The Declaration of the Báb inaugurated a process whereby a clear break from Islam was publicly taking place in Persian society, posing an immediate threat to the authority of the religious establishment, thereby unleashing the fury of the clerics and the rage of the state, plunging the Bábí (and, later the Bahá'í) community into a cauldron of unrelenting torture and horrific death. This period of intense persecution and martyrdom steeled the resolve of the faithful believers and was noised far and wide, such that the religion, far from being extirpated, attracted broadcast interest and spread far beyond the borders of Persia to emerge—in its final form as the Bahá'í Faith—as the second-most widespread religion in the world today in terms of global diffusion (in all countries except North Korea and the Vatican, surpassed only by Christianity).

Bahá'u'lláh has revealed several Tablets commemorating the Declaration of the Báb. One of the most well known is the “Tablet of the Eternal Youth” (*Lawh-i Ghulámu'l Khuld*), which is composed partly in Arabic—in rhythmic, rhymed prose, with short verses alternating with refrains—and partly in Persian. Revealed during the Baghdad period of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry (1853–1863), this Tablet explicitly commemorates the Declaration of the Báb. According to Walbridge's description, the gates of Paradise open wide to reveal a Youth of Paradise, who symbolizes the Báb. Standing before the gaze of the concourse of heaven, all are dazzled by the beauty of this Youth. The gates of Paradise then open a second time, wherein a luminous Maiden of Heaven appears, who is the personification of the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The denizens of heaven are awed by her beauty, by her song and by the lock of hair that slips from beneath her veil. She then stands before the Youth and lifts the veil from his face, whereupon the pillars of God's throne quake and tremble, and all creatures are struck dead. A celestial voice proclaims that the eyes of the ancients had longed to behold this Youth. The Youth then raises his eyes. With one word, he revives the spirits of the heavenly host. And by a single glance, the Youth restores the people of the earth—and then returns to Paradise. The Tablet closes in allegorical Persian, proclaiming to the peoples of the earth that the true morning of spiritual renewal has dawned, that the fire on Sinai is aflame once again, and that the celestial wine is flowing, for all to quaff. Ecstatic in tone, this Tablet appeals to all peoples to heed the call of the Báb, and hints of Bahá'u'lláh's own prophetic station as well. (Bahá'u'lláh

had not yet publicly declared that he was the Promised One foretold by the Báb.) The “Tablet of the Youth of Paradise” is melodically chanted at commemorations of the Declaration of the Báb and at other joyous occasions as well (Walbridge, *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time*, 161–63).

The Declaration of the Báb, as previously mentioned, is observed in the evening of May 22, typically with readings and prayers as befit the occasion. Where Persian- and Arabic-speaking believers are gathered, the “Tablet of the Eternal Youth” (or another Bahá’í scripture revealed for this occasion) will be chanted. In a great many, if not most Bahá’í gatherings, Mullá Ḥusayn’s account, as recorded in Nabíl’s narrative, translated as *The Dawn-Breakers*, will be read, not as sacred scripture, but as sacred history. Prayers and readings are usually followed by refreshments and fellowship, and the rest of the holy day is observed as a day of rest from work during the day of May 23.

The two “Most Great Festivals” of the Bahá’í Faith are commemorations of the prophetic declarations of the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá’í Faith, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. Concomitant with the growth and development of the Bahá’í community worldwide, the Declaration of the Báb will likely emerge, in time, as one of the great religious festivals of the world’s religions.

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See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá’í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá’í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá’í Faith; Bahá’í Fast; Bahá’u’lláh, Ascension of; Bahá’u’lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá’í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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Báb, Martyrdom of the (July 9)

The yearly commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Báb is one of the nine major Bahá’í holy days on which work is suspended. Observed by Bahá’ís in the Middle East on 28 Sha‘bán—in accordance with the Islamic lunar calendar—the occasion is annually observed on July 9 throughout the rest of the Bahá’í world. For many participants, it is a deeply moving experience.

Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz (1819–1850)—known by his spiritual title as “the Báb” (“the Gate”) and regarded as the precursor and herald of Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí, known as Bahá’u’lláh (the “Splendor” or “Glory of God,” 1817–1892)—was martyred on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia (now Iran). The circumstances of the Báb’s martyrdom, and its subsequent commemoration as a Bahá’í holy day, will be discussed below.

The Báb founded the 19th-century movement generally known as Bábism, an independent (albeit short-lived) religion that clearly broke from its parent religion, Persian (i.e., Twelver Shi‘i) Islam. As Orientalist Edward G. Browne observed regarding the Bábí phenomenon, “whatever its actual destiny may be, is of that stuff whereof world-religions are made.” As Browne predicted, the Bábí religion emerged as a “new world-religion” through its eventual transformation into what is now known as the Bahá’í Faith.

While the Bábí and Bahá’í religions are distinct, they are intimately related both historically and doctrinally. The writings of the Báb, for instance, are considered sacred scripture by all Bahá’ís. A number of the Báb’s religious laws were adopted and adapted by Bahá’u’lláh, as was the Bábí calendar (a solar calendar of