

## Messianic Concealment and Theophanic Disclosure

Notes by Professor Juan Ricardo I. Cole originally posted in a series of messages on the H-Net listserv H-Bahai in 2002

Edited with tentative additional notes (2004)

Here are some notes...having to do with [Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri] Baha'u'llah (d.1892) in the 1850s and his relationship to Subh-i Azal (d.1912). *TZH* stands for Fadil Mazandarani's *Tarikh-i Zuhur al-Haqq*<sup>1</sup>, his 9-volume massive history of the Babi-Baha'i movements.

***TZH 4:121: Subh-i Azal and Mirza Musa Kalim joined Baha'u'llah in Kirmanshah as he was preparing to depart for Baghdad. It was agreed that Subh-i Azal would go into deep cover in Baghdad, living apart from the Babis and appearing to follow some trade, in order to elude Qajar imperial agents seeking to assassinate him.***

It appears that the Nuri household sought the leadership of the Babi community as a unit. (They had probably done so since the Bab's death in 1850, but had been somewhat marginalized by Shaykh `Ali `Azim Turshizi, who emerged as the most popular leader [military] in 1850-1852). Subh-i Azal was proclaimed as the vicar of the Bab<sup>2</sup>, and his writings were put forward as authoritative and even perhaps as a form of revelation from God<sup>3</sup>. Subh-i Azal adopted the esoteric style of leadership that `Azim Turshizi had exercised before him, of being inaccessible and invisible to the body of the believers both in Baghdad and back in Iran.

He was represented, however, by his three brothers, Mirza Husayn `Ali "Baha'," Mirza Musa "Kalim," and Mirza Muhammad Quli. These brothers stood at the apex of a new vicarship of the Bab, a burgeoning little bureaucracy focused on their extended household. Within this family enterprise, Subh-i Azal provided leadership and issued authoritative encyclicals, Mirza Husayn `Ali Baha'u'llah was the finance officer as well as gradually making a place for himself as a teacher of Babi doctrine and mysticism. Mirza Musa was a manager of affairs. Mirza Muhammad Quli also appears to have bought and sold property for the Nuri.

---

<sup>1</sup> History of the Manifestation of the Truth – ed.

<sup>2</sup> Per the Bab's two testamentary tracts – ed.

<sup>3</sup> Per the Bab's statement in the second and longer testamentary tract telling him to recite what God inspires him with – ed.

**TZH 4:126:** Babi notables of Kazimayn came to see the visible Nuri household when it was set up in Baghdad. They actually met with Baha'u'llah and his two visible brothers, with Subh-i Azal maintaining his mysterious and imposing inaccessibility.

Mazandarani writes, "*Since the most great Cause and the most straight secret was behind the veil of hidden exigencies, they were as yet unaware of the secret of the matter. The Babis of Iran and Iraq were like a scattered flock without a shepherd, dispersed and anxious, and all they could speak of was the claims made by claimants. Most of them [followed] Mirza Yahya Azal, in accordance with exigencies and the divine arrangements made to safeguard the new Cause of Baha<sup>4</sup>.*" If we strip this description of its anachronisms, we may conclude that most Babis became Azalis and had no conception of Baha'u'llah as an independent leader.

Mazandarani goes on to disparage Subh-i Azal's secretiveness and to suggest that there were substantial complaints about his leadership, which everyone was afraid to voice. However, these are the comments of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Baha'i historian and cannot be proved to represent the true atmosphere in Baghdad in 1853. In fact, the esoteric leadership style was modeled popular conceptions of the Hidden Imam in Shi'ism, who, Shi'is held, was in occultation during his lifetime but represented by a series of agents or *wakils*. Popular tradition holds that there were four such agents, who passed on to the community the words of the hidden Imam. Baha'u'llah, Mirza Musa and Mirza Muhammad Quli essentially functioned as *wakils* of Subh-i Azal in the period 1853-1865.

The Babis in 1852-1853 were dispersed and had gone underground in response to the massive repression launched at them in the aftermath of the Azim-Azal assassination plot against Nasiru'd-Din Shah. The task of reinvigorating the movement and attracting its loyalty to Subh-i Azal and the Nuri household was formidable. Numerous rival claimants to some sort of authority or even to the station of "He whom God shall make manifest" emerged, including Shaykh-`Ali Mirza Shirazi, Aqa Sayyid `Abd al-Rahim Isfahani, Shaykh Sultan Karbala'i, Mirza Muhammad `Ali Tabib Zanjani, [Siyyid Basir Hindi] and others (**TZH 4:127**).

Subh-i Azal concluded that establishing his leadership would require a major doctrinal statement by him, and he set about writing the Book of Light, presumably very soon

---

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that according to *Nuqat'ul-Kaf*, *Tanbih al-Na'imin* and *Hasht Bihisht Baha'*, *Baha'u'llah* and *Baha'ul-Imkan* (the last meaning 'Splendor of the Contingent') were also preeminent titles of Azal in the early Baghdad period. For a discussion in English, see **Appendix II** of Browne's **New History** – ed.

after his arrival in Baghdad. A manuscript of this large book was finished and parts of it had begun circulating among the Babis by the fall of 1853. Baha'u'llah threw his weight behind the authoritative character of the Book of Light and behind Subh-i Azal's vicarship. The Book of Light, as French scholar Clement Huart recognized in the nineteenth century, is a key document in the evolution of Babi thought. See Huart, Clément. "Note sur trois ouvrages Bâbis." *Journal Asiatique* (Paris), 1887, 8e série, vol. 10, p. 133-144

at:

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/diglib/articles/F-J/huart/azalis/huartaz.htm>.

Despite the fact that exemplars exist in Western research libraries, it has never been studied by any academic interested in the movement. It almost certainly contains important clues to Subh-i Azal's self-conception and his conception of his relationship to his brothers.

Even though a few Babis would apparently have preferred him to be the vicar of the Bab, Baha'u'llah firmly and publicly rejected such suggestions, asking that the Babis not so much as mention him, and insisting that even if they did, it did not matter, since he had no divine Cause to assert and was not even a Mirror (a station acknowledged by Babis of Subh-i Azal). Rather, he said, it was to the Azali Lamp and to works such as the Book of Light that the Babis should turn for illumination. Later on, some Babis claimed to be early partisans of Baha'u'llah, and we know for certain that there were such partisans, but they appear to have been only a handful of persons, and Baha'u'llah openly repudiated them in the 1850s. In contrast, tens of thousands of Babis turned to Subh-i Azal as their supreme leader over time, and everything Baha'u'llah did and said in public indicated his approval of this development.

Among the most important primary sources for Babism in the 1850s and 1860s is the polemic of Mulla Muhammad Ja`far Niraqi, a Babi of Niraq who visited Baghdad in 1276 (between summer 1859 and summer 60) and 1278 (between summer 1861 and summer 62). Niraqi remained loyal to Azal when the break between the brothers took place in the Edirne period. Niraqi's book does not have a colophon, but it does not seem to me to speak of any events occurring after the late 1860s, and we know that the Azali/Baha'i controversy broke out in Baghdad early in 1867. I would therefore tentatively date it to

the late 1860s. Niraqi is an important eye-witness to some events. He retained copies of some of Baha'u'llah's correspondence of the 1850s and early 1860s, and reprints these letters in his manuscript. He was also in contact with Baghdad Babis who told him about their experiences. He is a hostile witness, but he is certainly a central primary source, and he has volumes to tell us about Babi history in the 1850s and 1860s. Much of it in retrospect actually supports elements in Baha'i historiography, ironically enough, while vigorously challenging other preconceptions. His manuscript, held in the Browne Collection, is in my view priceless for understanding the Babi movement in the 1850s. He was a contemporary of Baha'u'llah and Subh-i Azal, and met both of them and many in their circles on his trips to Baghdad. He is among the few eye-witnesses to these events who left a detailed account and who was not himself a Baha'i. Although his Azali adherence means that we historians have to read him carefully for bias, his trustworthiness seems evident to me, and can often be upheld by comparison to other sources. Just to give one example. He quotes a letter written to him from Edirne by Baha'u'llah in circa 1864-1865 during the one-year period in which Baha'u'llah had announced himself publicly as the Return of Husayn, but before he had declared himself a Manifestation of God. This letter also appears verbatim in the Rosen collection of the Tablets of the mid-1860s, which came to Rosen from Ashkhabad.

The first excerpt I will quote here is from Baha'u'llah and from the 1850s though undated. It is of interest because it demonstrates what exactly Baha'u'llah meant by *amr* or Cause in this period. He associates it with "putting forth a claim" (*iddi`a namudan*), that is, putting forth a claim to a special station--prophethood, "he whom God shall make manifest," etc. It is not identical to being obeyed, since Azal as a Mirror was to be obeyed. **Amr** has to do with claiming messianic divine authority, not routine authority:

Source: Mulla Muhammad Ja`far Niraqi, *Tadhkirat al-Ghafilin*, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2000, p. 140.

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/arabic/vol4/niraqi/ra140.gif>

Letter of Baha'u'llah, early Baghdad period:

***"In any case, these days his good-pleasure is beloved, and all are prisoners in his powerful grasp. There is no escape for anyone. Do not think the Cause (amr) of God so easy that anyone who has an overweening ambition for it can just show it forth. No, from all sides, several souls***

*have put forward this very claim. It is early days. You will behold the tree of the independence of the king of glory and the wisdom of the beauty of himself. He is and shall ever be eternal, and all these shall be lost, nay, non-existent. It will be as though they were nothing worth mentioning. We belong to God and to him shall we return."*

-----

The second document consists of excerpts from a letter of Baha'u'llah to the Babis of Karbala, which appears to have been written in Baghdad in late summer or early fall of 1853, at a time before Azal's Book of Light had been calligraphed and published in full in manuscript. The letter had a later marginal note on it in Baha'u'llah's own hand referring to the early release of some chapters of the Book of Light. Such documents are inherently ambiguous. However, in the atmosphere of 1853 I do not see how the letter could avoid being read as that of an Azali, whatever Baha'u'llah's private commitments. The exaltation of the Azali Mirror, who comes after the Exordium to God in the same place as the usual blessings on the Prophet would come in a Muslim letter; the further reference to the Azali Lamp and the Azali King; the plea that Baha'u'llah himself not even be referred to, whether with affection or hatred; and the marginal note declaring that Azal's Book of Light "**is very necessary for the people of the Bayan**"---all of this would have been unmistakable to a contemporary audience as a signal of allegiance to Azal. I know that for a contemporary Baha'i, this letter is very difficult to digest, and I have been wrestling with it myself. Back in the 1980s I rejected a similar argument made by Denis MacEoin because I felt he was basing it on later Azali polemical works such as Hasht Bihisht and Tanbih al-Na'imin. Niraqi, however, is a different kind of source altogether. I believe the document he quotes is genuine; I believe it is clear in its implications; and it certainly changed my view of the 1850s. Taken together with the letter in the Ayat-i Bayyinat and the Book of the Tigris, I think it sheds loads of illumination on Baha'u'llah's announced self-conception in the early Baghdad period.

Source: Mulla Muhammad Ja'far Niraqi, Tadhkirat al-Ghafilin, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2000, pp. 135-140.

[**Niraqi** remarks:

*"Also, in a letter he wrote to the people of Karbala, he demonstrated his servitude with regard to his holiness [Subh-i Azal] to the utmost. This*

*letter is renowned among the companions. A copy in the hand of Mirza Javad Khurasani is now in my possession. Since the claimant's comments are written in the margins it is obvious that this copy is true to the original and contains no discrepancies with it. The letter is as follows."]*

Letter of Baha'u'llah to Babis of Karbala, circa late summer or early fall, 1853:

*The essence of praise and sanctification is appropriate to the unparalleled, unapproachable, Eternal King. For by the droplets of his overflowing grace, the oceans of his loving kindness, and the nobility of his self, he has lifted up the inner being of his creatures and the quintessences of contingent existence from the abasement of nothingness and oblivion and has seated them on the throne of glory and existence. By Israfil, angel of power and sovereignty, he breathed life into the bodies of pure essences and into visible beings, and he illuminated the mirrors of the subtle knowledge of contingent beings by the wondrous rays of the light of his own perfect compassion. He shed radiance on the precious ornaments of ideal beings from the horizon of beauty, so that every atom of his creatures will bear witness from the horizon of the exalted heavens to the earth of those over whom he rules, that he is the king of being in the thrones of his creatures, and he is the beloved monarch in the known essences . . .*

*Afterwards, the sea of the greatest kindliness began to rise; the ocean of supreme love began to billow with surging seas of grace; and the rivers of generosity ripple. Then the cloak of glory is cast off from the countenance of beauty. Immediately, the holy and eternal (azali), the everlasting and illuminated crystal Mirror--the essence of being and the abstraction of the seen world--raised the banner of existence. He unveiled the gift of the lordly light from the visage of oneness, so that it might proclaim the glad tidings of the essence of light, the aspect of manifestation, and the point of unity in the thrones of Sinai, so that all in the land should await expectantly the Cause of God and the countenance of God. Thus might the eternal (azali), holy lamp be illumined by the glass of the hearts of the servants, and the everlasting, radiant lantern be lit up in the niches of the breasts of the people. Thus might they speak of the sovereign of unknowability and thus might they be made manifest by the king of Sinai . . .*

*I swear by the essence of splendor upon the point of the inscription on the throne of fate, upon which that luminary is seated who is greater than all that is in heaven and on earth! This is a fire that was ignited by that*

*blessed soul in his own self without touching any fire. Indeed, this hidden sun did not appear for the sake of anyone among the near ones or the sincere. Just as the Supreme Point said with regard to him, "He will not be informed by the traditions nor draw his power from past thoughts. The essences of the hearts of the believers in the one true God will never arrive at the shore of his most exalted glory. The pure intellects of the holy ones will never reach the court of his most glorious sanctity. They are the pride of the phenomena, and the manifestation of the modalities from God--the creator of the heavens and the earth--and are exalted beyond disembodied specters and likenesses, and holy above idolatry and glorification." Praised be to God above lost and nonexistent imaginings and rejected and hideous utterances . . .*

*Behold the enthronement of the eternal (azali) king from the very visible power and authority, for this is the most great result, the most magnificent subtlety, the most exact precision . . .*

*Try not to be negligent of his blessed good-pleasure, and be not hindered from following the commands and prohibitions. This ephemeral servant is, I swear by God, afraid and trembling as to how I shall fulfill the requirements of servitude and raise the flag of service. At every moment in every land, I prostrate myself before his blessed countenance and beseech and hope for his compassion with every tongue. I must bear witness that I have left no land without pressing my face to it, bowing to God, the mighty, the all-praised. I have left no tongue without employing it to call out to God, and God is aware of what I say. I am nothing but an abject servant in the courtyard of his holiness. The eyes of the negligent are asleep, but the eyes of this servant are filled with fear while still expecting mercy. All are in repose, but my body is abased in the dust, anticipating his grace. This is what was in the petitions addressed to him.*

*Praise be to you, my God. You see that all with eyes are sleeping on their carpets, but the eyes of Baha' are eagerly awaiting the wonders of your compassion. All the servants are stretched out on the beds of glory, but the visage of hope is on the face of the earth, yearning for the tokens of your kindness. Praise be to God. What is a stranger compared to the existential Manifestation, that he should even be mentioned? What station does non-existence possess before the appearance of the verses of pre-eternity? What place is there to mention the ephemeral before the everlasting throne? What is a lost servant in the court of the sovereign of being? What station does a slave have before a slaveholder, or one abased before the illustrious, or a lowly one before the exalted? I take refuge in God from what has been, and whatever shall be, mentioned. All are mere non-existence and altogether lost. I do not possess for myself*

*any benefit or harm, life or resurrection. All are prisoners in the grip of power, and all are poor before pure opulence . . .*

*O people of the Bayan: I have one expectation and I beseech you. I abjure them by God-the mighty, the powerful, the exalted, the guardian, the eternal-not to make mention of me, neither with love and friendship nor with rancor and hatred. As it were, the pleasure of God lies therein. God is sufficient between me and between them in truth as a witness, and for me as a trustee."*

[Niraqi remarks: "*What the claimant (Baha'u'llah) wrote in his own hand (in the margins) is as follows.*" ]

*The Book of Light had hardly been sent before there was a great deal of affirmation and exaggeration. Do not neglect it. It is most necessary for all the people of the Bayan. Mulla Zayn al-'Abidin--blessings be upon him--must expend every effort to complete it. For, by the lord of the heavens and the earth, verily it is the Book of the Glorious, the Beloved, and the verses of the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Write it with the best of calligraphy in the most perfect manner of which you are capable. Then read it with love if you desire to ascend into the heaven of divine attraction or to soar into the invisible clouds of holiness. Peace and greetings be upon the sincere servants.*

Source: Mulla Muhammad Ja'far Niraqi, *Tadhkirat al-Ghafilin*, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2000, pp. 135-140.

Before I go on to the next document from Baha'u'llah on the 1850s, I want to pause and consider some passages from Mirza Yahya's *Quds al-Azal (Pre-Eternal Holiness)*. This work is dated 7th of Jumada al-Thaniyah 1281 A.H or 7 November 1864 according to the contemporary Azali community, although it would be possible to date it ten years earlier if we take the date not as *hijri* (begins 622 A.D.) but as from the beginning of the Prophet's mission (612 A.D.). I personally think that on a content basis the 1864 date makes more sense, and that "**mission**" (*bi'thah*) can sometimes be read as just a parallelism for "**dispensation**". In any case, the book was clearly written for a Babi woman, and indeed, for a whole group of women, though their identities are not clear to me. The Arabic grammar is to say the least idiosyncratic, as is common in Babi works



by Iranians of this period.

The important thing is that the conception Subh-i Azal demonstrates here of the structure of authority in the Babi community probably holds for the entire Baghdad/early Edirne period. A manuscript of this work has only recently been made available to the scholarly world, and was until recently unstudied and not mentioned in, e.g., the works of Denis MacEoin.

On p. 3, Azal claims to be that "*Light*" that illumines all light.

The first phrase that struck me was, p. 74: "*O people of the kaaba of God: Verily, this is the House of Justice that was founded by the permission of God in truth.*"

74: *Ya ahl ka`bati Allah: Inna hadha lahuwa al-bayt al-`adl alladhi ussisa bi idhni Allah bi'l-haqq.*

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/azal/M-R/Q/quds/qd074.jpg>

This is the first time I have noticed the phrase "House of Justice" in Babi writing, and here it is identified with the foremost Mirror, the vicar of the Bab.

Then we have this, on p. 121: "*Verily, this is the Quddus of Truth, whom God has made manifest in truth. Know that I have not mentioned anything with regard to myself save the word of servitude to God.*"

121: *Inna hadha la huwa al-Quddus al-Haqq qad azharahu Allahu bi'l-haqq. I`lamu bi`anni ma dhakartu fi sha`ni illa kalimat al-`ubudiyah li'llah*

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/azal/M-R/Q/quds/qd121.jpg>

Azal appears to be claiming to be the Return of Quddus, the disciple of the Bab, as an underpinning to his vicarship.

Very important, we find on page 143: "*O people: In truth, I have made my brothers to be for you Witnesses in that Cause. What is wrong with you, that you prefer the servant over your lord, and know not the command of God, and confuse the weak among you, and were to God opposed?*"

143: *Ya ayyuha al-nas: Inni ja`altu lakum ikhwati shuhada'an li fi dhalika al-amr. Ma lakum tarjahuna al-`abda `ala mawlakum wa la ta`lamuna hukma Allahi wa tushabbihuna `ala al-du`afa' minkum wa kuntum `ala Allahi mu`ridan.*

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/azal/M-R/Q/quds/qd143.jpg>

This passage shows that Azal thought of the Nuri household in Baghdad and early Edirne as a hierarchy. He, as the Mirror, stood at the apex, and his brothers (Mirza Husayn `Ali Baha'u'llah, Mirza Musa Kalim, and Muhammad Quli) were "Witnesses." Denis MacEoin in "***Hierarchy, Authority, and Eschatology***," (Studies in Babi and Baha'i History vol. 3) has discussed the various ranks of believers in Babi writings, which Azal appears to have attempted to systematize. The Mirrors were below the Letters of the Living, and the Witnesses were the next rank below the Mirrors. Azal is disturbed by the handful of partisans of Baha'u'llah who had grown up by 1864, saying they "prefer the servant (Baha'u'llah) over your lord (*mawlakum*, i.e. Azal)." As will be shown later, it is in 1281/1864-5 that Baha'u'llah makes his first public claim, to be the Return of Husayn, before issuing the Sura of the Companions and fully declaring himself in 1282/1865-66.

On p. 170, we find "*if some appear among you who call you to themselves, they will lead you astray in the religion, and you shall not be able to seize the reins of your affairs, and you will cry out, wailing, and you will regret what you have done.*"

*170 fa in zahara fikum ba`dan yad`una li anfusihim sawfa yaftanunakum fi al-Din wa la taqdiruna an ta`khudhu zimama umurikum wa sa ta`jjuna `ajjan wa sa tandimuna `ama fa`altum.*

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/azal/M-R/Q/quds/qd170.jpg>

This work of Azal claims a central station for him as the Light of God and the Return of Qudus. He is careful to subordinate himself to the prophets, and to stress his humanity and servitude. But he also speaks with divine authority. He is the Mirror, and his brothers are his Witnesses. He demonstrates anxiety more than once that the Babis are heedless, and some are exalting one of the Witnesses over the Mirror, and predicts that they will come to regret this surrender to an attractive charismatic personality, since it ultimately will leave them helpless before him.

Now let us turn to another letter of Baha'u'llah, probably also of 1853 in Baghdad. We have already seen that Baha'u'llah endorsed Subh-i Azal's leadership of the community as its most prominent Mirror, and that he considered Azal's Book of Light, c. 1853, as "***very necessary for the people of the Bayan***" and as being the "***verses of God***." Although Azal was considered a Mirror rather than a Prophet, apparently his works were

accorded special status as revelatory.

The Book of Light referred to Baha'u'llah, as a "**warner**," a "**witness**" and one of the learned of the Bayan, to whom the Babis should give some authority, even though he remained in the station of "servitude" and had a lesser station (Witness) than Azal and some others, who were Mirrors.

Given the messianic miasma enveloping the hard-pressed and persecuted Babis of Iran, and given esoteric traditions, this sort of language appears to have provoked speculation that Baha'u'llah was secretly more than a Witness. Baha'u'llah attempted to dispel any such notions.

I refer to esoteric traditions because the *batini* sects of Islam [such as the Nizari Isma'ilis or the Hurufiyya] often engaged in mythic reversal as a trope. Thus, the Nusayris of Syria believe that `Ali was a Manifestation of God, and Muhammad was his mere servant, a front man for the secret true leader. Such beliefs are common in esoteric Shi'ism, and easily emerged in Babism.

If the Quds al-Azal really dates to 1271/25 February 1855 rather than to 1864, because of being dated to Muhammad's mission rather than to his emigration to Medina, then the phrase cautioning believers not to exalt one of the Witnesses over the Mirror must refer to the same sort of speculation that Baha'u'llah bats down in the following letter. At this point, Baha'u'llah and Azal agree publicly that Baha'u'llah is a Witness, a servant, and merely one of the learned of the Bayan, but nothing more. Moreover, Baha'u'llah appears to feel that there are political reasons for which it is urgent that there not be speculation about him, since he refers obliquely to his imprisonment in the shah's dungeon as a reason for which his companions should not attribute to him a higher station.

This letter in Ayat-i Bayyinah to the Qazvini family importantly corroborates the letter I quoted...from Niraqi, since it has a similar style and contains similar statements (though its praise of and acknowledgment of Azal is implied rather than explicit). The letter below, however, appears to me to have been written a bit later, after the Book of Light had been fully calligraphed and released to the community in its entirety.

What exactly Baha'u'llah means by "*dhikr*" or "*mention*" below, is not completely clear

to me, since he appears to be using it as a Babi technical term. But it is clear that he means to deny having any "amr" or Cause, in the sense of "*making a claim*" to messianic authority.

The language in the Book of Light about Baha'u'llah being only a "Warner" recalls **Qur'an 35:23** ("*You are but a warner [nadhir]*") of the Mecca period, a time when Muhammad was proclaiming his monotheistic message but had not been given any practical authority by God. Only when he went to Medina was Muhammad transformed from Warner into Messenger-with-Authority. Those who want to push the messianic secret thesis back to the early 1850s could use this phrase to suggest that Baha'u'llah viewed Baghdad as his Mecca period (Warner without authority) whereas Edirne and Akka were his Medina, on the model of the Prophet Muhammad. However, the difference is that he publicly acknowledged Azal in Baghdad as something more than a warner, as the preeminent Mirror.

In my own view, the period 1850-1852, from the execution of the Bab until the arrests after the attempted assassination of Nasiru'd-Din Shah and the attempted uprising in Nur province, should be called "The `Azim Era."

I think the period 1853-circa 1866 should be called "Early Azalism." It was out of Early Azalism that the Baha'i and Later Azali movements developed in the mid-1860s.

The early Azali period...has not been studied in detail save for two articles by Denis MacEoin, which I now think excellent though I was once critical of them. The difference is that he had read more primary sources than I, and I was still under the influence of 20th century Iranian Baha'i traditionalism.

But I think we can already conclude some things. Baha'u'llah promoted Azal as first among equals among the Mirrors. Baha'u'llah praised Azal's Book of Light as necessary for the people of the Bayan and saw it as containing verses that had divine authorization. Baha'u'llah adopted for himself the lesser status of Witness rather than Mirror, and denied he had any Cause of his own. Azal concurred in all this, seeing himself as the Mirror and his brothers as his Witnesses.

We can already contrast Baha'u'llah's attitude to Azal with his attitude to other claimants to authority, such as Basir-i Hindi, whom Baha'u'llah took down a notch in

1851, according to the Nuqtat al-Kaf. That is, it is obvious that Baha'u'llah did not hesitate to attack claimants like Basir, and the passage I translated from Niraqi makes clear his contempt for them. He said they would leave no trace on history. Both Baha'u'llah and

Azal took various stances toward claimants, in some cases denouncing them and in others attempting to cultivate them. After all, Nabil Zarandi was a claimant at one point, and Baha'u'llah managed to bring him into the Early Azali consensus. I think Baha'u'llah hoped to do the same thing with Dayyan, who had also claimed a Cause, and regretted that Azal's intemperance and the rashness of one of his followers forestalled this possibility.

We do not have any evidence that Azal deliberately had Dayyan killed. Azal denounced Dayyan in his circa 1855 *The Awake[ned] (al-Mustayqiz)*. In response, a fanatical Azali assassinated Dayyan. One could blame Azal for using intemperate language, but he never said "Go kill Dayyan." It should be noted that in the Most Holy Book, Baha'u'llah says that if someone makes a claim to a Cause before the passage of a thousand years, God would send someone to deal with him. Some have argued that this could be taken as an incitement to murder, but it clearly was not Baha'u'llah's intent. What we might call "committed" Baha'is have for so long maintained a monopoly on discourses about such matters that the Azali side has been deprived of any voice and many unsubstantiated charges have come to be accepted as simple fact.

I recognize that behind the scenes, even during the period of the Early Azali consensus in the Nuri household, there were conflicts between Azal and Baha'u'llah. Azal at some point began claiming to be the Vasi or Vicar of the Bab. Baha'u'llah appears never to have called him that, and to have limited himself to calling him a Mirror<sup>5</sup>. This

---

<sup>5</sup> The point which seems not to be highlighted in this argument is the Bab's specific use of the word "sirat" (path), as well as numerous other high distinctions, in referring to Azal in both the shorter testamentary appointment translated by Browne (See **New History**, Appendix IV, p.426-7) and in the longer definitive testamentary appointment. Cole nor MacEoin seem to discuss at any length, first, that the usage of any locutionary appellation by the Bab already presupposes and assumes the understanding of high Imamological glosses upon such words. Thus, when the Bab uses the word 'sirat' in '*fa-innaka as-sirat haqq azim*' (for verily thou art a mighty path of truth) in referring to Azal, his understanding of this word is the same as his predecessors in that the word is a very specific, not to mention deliberate, cipher referring to the Imams and hence *a fortiori* referring to their '*wisaya*' as well. Moreover, in Quran 1:6, "Guide us upon the straight path (sirat)," almost all commentators in the tradition of high Imamology are unanimous that the path being referred to, first and foremost, refers to the vicegerency of Ali and the house of Muhammad, i.e. Fatima and the next eleven (or six) Imams succeeding Ali, but specifically to the Imams. *Sirat*, above all, denotes a preeminent function. The Bab's use of that word is exactly in that sense. Therefore Azal's claim to '*wisaya*' (vicarship) rests on the firm foundation of the Bab's own usages of Arabic high Shi'ite scriptural terminology and what is already presupposed in such locutions. To deny this,

controversy has been discussed by Denis MacEoin, but the evidence for Baha'u'llah's stance on all this is late, from the late 1860s. However, it is true that in the handful of works and letters we currently have access to from Baha'u'llah in the 1850s, the word he uses for Azal is Mirror, not *Vasi/Vicar*. And it is also true that in the *Sahifih-i Shattiyyih* (Book of the Tigris) he speaks of Mirrors in the plural. This point seems to me relatively unimportant, since it is nevertheless clear that Baha'u'llah during the 1850s did not speak of Azal as just any old Mirror, but as the central one, the one possessing legitimate authority in Babism. Baha'u'llah later said that Javad-i Karbala'i was another such mirror in the 1850s, but I am unaware that Javad was given any significant authority by any group of Babis.

I know of no evidence that Baha'u'llah spoke of other claimants in anything like the glowing terms we have seen him use for Azal. We know of instances to the contrary, where he shot down claimants or argued them out of their claims.

The following scenario is what I can piece together from hints in the sources: Apparently, as well, there was some question in the mind of Azal and/or his chief supporters in Baghdad as to whether a mere Witness had a right to have his own voice. As we all know, in conservative Iranian culture there is an assumption that only the leader may speak, and all others must remain silent in his presence. But Baha'u'llah thought of himself as one of the Learned in the Bayan, i.e. one of the Babi ulama, and ulama write treatises. So his Tablet of All Food of late 1853 became very controversial because some read it as an affront to Azal, who had just issued the authoritative Book of Light, which some Babis felt should have held a monopoly on theological discourse. Baha'u'llah was only willing to be Azal's Witness if he could actually express himself, so he withdrew to Kurdistan. Dahaji said he did so to get away from Azal. He said he had no intent of ever coming back. He only came back when all the leading Babis, including

---

is to overlook high Imamology which birthed Babism as well as the unique internal logic of almost the entire corpus of the Bab *tout court*, beginning with the *Qayyum al-Asma*, where he did this quite deliberately and consistently, and which was immediately recognizable to his learned audience who were, with rare exceptions, indeed all well trained high Imamologists who knew exactly what to read for and implicitly knew the multilayered meaning of a single word and the tradition informed by it. Given this, Baha'u'llah's trepidation in acknowledging Azal's '*wisaya*' would seem to be irrelevant and betrays either his poor understanding of the issue or demonstrates that such trepidation was calculated and expressed for a specific, future, purpose on his part. Kulayni's *Usul min al-Kafi* and Rajab Bursi's *Mashariq al-Anwar*, to name but two centrepiece works of high Shi'ite Imamology, could quite possibly serve as a very useful arbiter in this regard – ed.

Azal, found him and begged him to<sup>6</sup>. Azal needed Baha'u'llah's support and talents, and this became quite apparent to him in 1854-1856, and he accepted him back as Witness, and acquiesced in his writing independent treatises and letters.

I do not think it is an accident that most of the works of Baha'u'llah from the 1850s that became popular among the later Baha'is and were published by them were ones that did not mention Azal for one reason or another. Thus, Seven Valleys was written for a Muslim audience and so Muhammad is praised in the Exordium, not Azal. Works like the 1853 Letter to Karbala, which spoke explicitly of Azal, fell out of favor from 1866 and were not circulated or published, though the likelihood is that it exists in full in some Baha'i archive or in private hands. Some works, like the 1864 Commentary on "Whoso Knows Himself Knows His Lord," that refer in passing to Azal, could by the 20th century be read ahistorically, so that phrases like *siraj-i azali* just mean "Eternal Lamp." These works were thus admitted to the canon.

I think everyone recognized Baha'u'llah's claim in 1864-65 to be the Return of Husayn as an upgrade from being merely a Witness. In fact, the Return of Husayn was what was expected by many Babis [and Shi'ites for that matter] before *Qiyamat* or End-Time (when, according to Babis, He whom God would Make Manifest would appear). This claim only lasted for one year, according to Niraqi. During that time apparently the Early Azali consensus was under strain but had not yet fallen apart, since it wasn't clear that the preeminent Mirror/Return-of-Quddus and the Return-of-Husayn could not co-exist. Interestingly, this whole episode fell out of later Baha'i historiography.

The problem for a Mirror is that his station was below that of the Letters of the Living. But if the Mirror was the "return" (*raj`at*) of a revered Letter of the Living, then he could claim the highest status in Babism.

There was a question about correspondence between the Bab and Azal. This has been republished at H-Bahai and has been discussed by Denis MacEoin at some length:

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/bab/M-R/majmuih1/athar.htm>

Sayyid `Ali Muhammad "the Bab" Shirazi. *Majmu`ih-`i az athar-i Nuqtih-`i Ula va Subh-i Azal*

---

<sup>6</sup> Internal evidence from the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Certitude (*Kitab-i Iqan*) actually suggest otherwise and that Baha'u'llah acceded to the 'summons' of the 'lord of hosts', viz. Azal, to return – ed.

First published Tehran, n.d. (1950?). Digitally reprinted here. (Lansing, MI: H-Bahai, 1999). References: MacEoin, *Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History*, pp. 131-133. Denis MacEoin, "Divisions and Authority Claims in Babism (1850-1866)," *Studia Iranica* 18:1 (1989), pp. 92-129.

and

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/bab/M-R/qismati/qismati.htm>

Sayyid `Ali Muhammad "the Bab" Shirazi. *Qismati az Alvah-i Khatt-i Nuqtih-i Ula va Aqa Sayyid Husayn Katib* First published Tehran, n.d. (1950?). Digitally reprinted here. (East Lansing, MI: H-Bahai, 2002).  
References: MacEoin, *Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History*, pp. 96-97. Denis MacEoin, "Divisions and Authority Claims in Babism (1850-1866)," *Studia Iranica* 18:1 (1989), pp. 92-129. In *Sources*, MacEoin writes: "Nine important letters from this period have been published (along with facsimiles of the originals) in an Azali compilation entitled *Qismati az alwah-i khatt-i Nuqta-yi Ula wa Aqa Sayyid Husayn-i Katib*. They are a short letter to Subh-i Azal . . . a very short letter to Mulla `Abd al-Karim Qazvini . . . an elaborately calligraphed letter to Subh-i Azal . . . A letter to `Abd al-Karim Qazvini, in which the Bab asks him to take care of Subh-i Azal and to preserve his writings and those he himself (the Bab) has written . . . A letter to Mirza Asad Allah Khu'i Dayyan, in which the Bab tells him to relate to others whatever Subh-i Azal reveals and to protect him . . . A letter to Mulla Shaykh `Ali Turshizi, in which the Bab lays claim to the station of qa'imiyya . . . This is the critical letter referred to in the *Nuqtat al-Kaf* (p. 209), which was copied and sent out to the Bab's followers, making public for the first time his claim to that status . . . [etc.]

See also the Bab's Will and Testament:

<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/areprint/bab/S-Z/vasaya/vasaya.htm>

Sayyid `Ali Muhammad "the Bab" Shirazi. *Lawh-i Vasaya. (Will and Testament)* Ms. in private hands; reprinted, East Lansing, MI: H-Bahai, 2001).



References: MacEoin, Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History, pp. 96, 131.

Notes: Will and Testament of the Bab, for Subh-i Azal (Hadrat-i Thamarih). Also found on pp. 95-102 of Majmu'ih-i Athar-i Hadrat-i A'la ("Collected Letters of the Bab"). Volume 64. Iran National Baha'i Archives Private Printing: Tehran, c. 1977.

There is also relevant material in the Nuqtat al-Kaf.

No claim by Baha'u'llah to be the Return of Husayn can be textually documented in the 1850s, as far as I can tell. Nor is it clear that Mirza Yahya's problem was with this claim itself; it was with any claim to a status higher than Witness, which was what Baha'u'llah asserted of himself publicly all through the 1850s. That is, the 'public' claim to be Husayn in 1864-65 threatened to alter the status quo, a status quo to which Subh-i Azal was wedded and which he believed the correct situation.

The documents cited on the correspondence between the Bab and Azal are mostly manuscript facsimiles, and have been authenticated by Denis MacEoin, the foremost scholar of this period. Some of them, like the Bab's Will and Testament, are also found in the Baha'i manuscript collections such as the National Baha'i Archives in Iran.

There are also large numbers of manuscripts from the Cyprus Azali archive both in the British Library and at Princeton. One of the daughters of Mirza Yahya Dawlatabadi also went back and forth to Cyprus from Tehran in the early twentieth century, collecting exemplars of the works of the Bab and Azal that had survived there and archiving them in Tehran. There is no lack of manuscript evidence for the 1850s and 1860s.

The scholars working in the field are the ones who authenticate such sources. Trained academics have no more reason to distrust **MSS** from Azali collections than those from Baha'i collections, and, indeed, MacEoin has pointed out that the distrust of the two communities for the material each holds is unsubstantiated by any proof of actual widespread distortion. There are lots of exemplars of Nuqtat al-Kaf in Baha'i hands, for instance. And, the Baha'i World Centre's edition of excerpts from the writings of the Bab was largely based on Azali editions. One senior official in the Research Department remarked, "They believe in the Bab, why would they alter the text?"

Nuqtat al-Kaf was produced before the split between Baha'is and Azalis.

That Azal was in occultation did not prevent him from governing the early Azali Babi community, which he did through correspondence. Couriers carried hundreds if not thousands of letters from him back to the Babis throughout Iran, the vast majority of whom viewed Azal as the Vicar of the Bab. Mirza Aqa Jan Kashani was one of the couriers. So was Aqa Munib (Munir). After all, only a limited number of the estimated 40,000 Azalis could hope to see him face to face, anyway. Azal's occultation later became an arrow in the Baha'i bow of polemics, but there is not much evidence that most Azalis viewed it negatively in the 1850s. Shi`ites were used to Hidden Imams. Many of the rank and file Babis were in hiding or underground in some way, as well, after all.

Being a very public Babi leader in the 1850s was most unwise, and even Baha'u'llah disclaimed such a position, in part because he did not want any more calamities like his imprisonment in the Shah's dungeon to befall him. He is explicit about this. The Baha'i traditionalist position, that Baha'u'llah essentially displaced danger onto Azal by having him be the outward leader, seems to me ethically fraught. But if it were true, it would be the height of hypocrisy to put Azal in extreme danger for 12 years and then complain bitterly that he tried to avoid being assassinated during that period. What is the difference between staying undercover as Azal did, and staying undercover the way Baha'u'llah is said to have done (by making Azal the fall guy)?

Here is another passage from a letter of Baha'u'llah in the 1850s. It is written to a Hajji Sayyid Muhammad, another Witness of Azal who was later martyred.

***"O sacrifice to the blessed being of the Leader (sarkar): Verily, your servant, who is in your shadow, calls you with the lips of inadequacy and desires your wondrous grace, for you are the intimate friend of the despondent. . . Blessed may you be, insofar as you have quaffed from the cup of the near ones, and blessed may the holy servants be, who are with you." (Niraqi p. 135)***

The word "*sarkar*:" or leader is not the sort of term any Babi would use to refer to the Bab, and it must be a reference to Azal, the then recognized community leader. Baha'u'llah thinks it is a good thing for someone to be a "sacrifice to" (*fiday-yi*) Azal. He

addresses his fellow Witness as "your servant" (*'abduka*) and says he is in Hajji Sayyid Muhammad's "shadow." He asks for the man's kindness or grace (*fadl*). Niraqi notes that his copy of this letter came to him from a partisan of Baha'u'llah. The passage is unremarkable, but it does reinforce the sense given by the other documents I have cited from the early 1850s, of a Baha'u'llah who asserts publicly his servitude (*'ubdiyyah*), who defers to Azal as Mirror and Leader (*sarkar*), and whose demeanor and public persona is of someone who has no claim to authority.

**Niraqi**, p. 141: alleges, *that it says in that book [the Book of Light] of Azal, "You are the light referred to wherever in the Qur'an light is mentioned."*

**Niraqi** 134 : [Azal wrote in *Khutbih-i Salavat*, 1850s:] *"I am, with these words, as nothing before one letter of the Book of God, the Mighty, the Wise. Then how could it be incumbent on anyone to claim a Cause [amr]? No, by my Lord! . . ."*

This latter quote seems to me to suggest that Azal was trying to appeal to the Bayanis<sup>7</sup> at that point (Bayanis were Babis who rejected any human leaders after the Bab, insisting that the Bayan and the Bab's other writings were enough of an authority). The Bayanis would have been a powerful constituency in seeking leaders who were willing to renounce any claim to an **amr**/Cause.

With regard to the dating of *Quds al-Azal*, I inquired again with the Bayanis (that is what the Azalis now call themselves) and this is what one reported back: "The passage you have referred to does refer to "*men ba'th al-forqaniah*". Stopping here and not going any further, it does create the impression that the origin is based on 'Bethat'. However, if we read on, it qualifies it by saying "ay al-hijra" (namely hijra). [Note: This phrase in the posted page is difficult to read and almost seems to have a mark through it, but apparently that is just a stray mark and not a cross-out.] It does refer to Bathat but qualifies it being really the Hijrat. The date mentioned can't be both. The explanation that I got was that as the text suggests, the origin used here is really the Hijrat and where it says "*men ba'th al-forqaniah*", it is not referring to the origin of the Islamic calendar as such, it is referring to the origin of the Islamic dispensation. In other words it literally means (since the rise of Islam). Also, the subject of the book confirms does

---

<sup>7</sup> This should, rather, refer to the proto-Kullu' Shay'i Babis of Shiraz and not Bayanis properly so called [editor, NH].

support the fact that it could not have been written in 1271 when Baha still was still holding his allegiance (at least in public) to Subh-i-Azal."

It is now time to move beyond the early 1850s in this discussion and look at passages about later periods in Niraqi. First, let us consider a couple of reports that seem to me to concern the period circa 1856-1858:

**Niraqi 142-143 Web:**

*I heard this from a trustworthy individual. He said, "One of the reliable is now dead. I had seen that in the beginning, he showed himself very favorable toward the claimant. Later, he turned away from him. I asked him the reason.*

*"He said, 'One day I was sitting among others with the claimant when one of the greatest of the Witnesses of the Bayan arrived. Mirza Husayn `Ali showed exaggerated respect to him. After a while, he got up to leave, and he treated him with great politeness, heaping praise on him. After he was gone, Mirza Husayn `Ali began so severely criticizing that individual that I was astonished. I said to myself, the path of the truth and the people of truth was never thus. From that day on, I turned away from him.'"*

*Another person, an Iranian, came on visitation to see the claimant in Baghdad. He went back to Iran, having turned away from him. He explained, "In the first gathering with him that I attended, he read a few words, consisting of a sermon directed at the children of Adam. It also had moral advice and counsel, which he himself had composed. These were holy sayings [ahadith qudsi]. Among them were passages condemning backbiting and severely criticizing whoever gossiped against any of the people of the Bayan, especially those who lived in that land, in which case the prohibition is even stronger. On the second occasion that I joined his gathering, Mirza Husayn `Ali himself began criticizing one of the Witnesses of the Bayan toward whom I entertained sincere feelings, and who, I felt, did not merit this criticism. During that very gathering, I turned away from him, concluding that he moves according to the dictates of base desires, not according to God."*

The second of these anecdotes clearly concerns a teaching session where Baha'u'llah was discoursing on the newly released Hidden Words. It is a window into Babi society in Baghdad of the late 1850s. The contemporary perception that the Hidden Words

were a form of *hadith qudsi* is also very suggestive. There are some sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that are in the voice of God. They have a mystical slant, and are called holy sayings.

Both anecdotes rely on the same trope, of "backbiting" and an obvious difference over its meaning. Among religious conservatives in the Middle East, as Talal Asad has shown in *\*Genealogies of Religion,\** the ban on "backbiting" is often employed to reinforce authoritarianism and make politics impossible. Thus, any criticism of a leader is "backbiting." Baha'u'llah was a man of the world, the son of a former provincial governor in the Qajar Empire, and he distinguished (as any reasonable person would) between idle gossip as a character fault and ***the critique of an official for poor performance of his duties.*** In both cases above, Baha'u'llah critiqued not just any Babi but other *\*Witnesses\**. A Witness to the Bayan was clearly a recognized, formal status at the time. It appears to have been something like the position of the ulema in Islam, a learned class. Baha'u'llah felt that these two Witnesses (or perhaps it was only one, the same in each anecdote) were falling down on the job *as a Witness*. (There are persistent allegations that some Babis in the 1850s in Baghdad and the shrine cities were corrupt and engaged in frankly criminal activities, though whether this Witness was a mafioso is impossible to tell from these accounts). Those in the Babi community who were partisans of that Witness so critiqued were upset at the critique, and coded it as "backbiting." They also charging hypocrisy because of Baha'u'llah's preaching against idle gossip. I would argue, however, that these disputes arose out of a conflict between reason and authoritarianism. Baha'u'llah's vision of a reasoning community had to make a place for critique of officials, whereas his opponents wanted to impose a corporate solidarity that disallowed any criticism of any Babi Witness.

Also, at another point Niraqi presents a list of what he felt were outrageous claims made at various points by Baha'u'llah's partisans. Among them is this:

Niraqi 143: "*Aqa Jamal heard Mirza Javad Khurasani say that he [Baha'u'llah] was on exactly the same level and had the same station as the Bab, Quddus and Azal, upon whom be peace, and if anyone distinguishes between him and them in the least, that person is an idolater and will perish.*"

This sentiment seems to me to be relatively early, and most likely to date from the late 1850s, since it only asserts an equivalence of Baha'u'llah with Azal, not a superiority.

Khurasani obviously had **ghulah** [extremist] tendencies, since he identified Azal with the Bab himself, not just with Quddus (the return of whom Azal claimed to be), and then put Baha'u'llah on the same *martabah* or level! Azal would clearly have been appalled at this equivalence of the Mirror with the Prophet, and would have rejected it.

This set of anecdotes from Niraqi are among the more valuable in his account, and despite the language in which they are couched, which will offend anyone who admires Baha'u'llah, they are nevertheless very valuable eyewitness narratives that shed great illumination on the situation among the Babis in Baghdad in the period roughly late 1859-1863. I present them in chronological order, since the memoir itself is somewhat scattered, but I think when cannily read in this order a clear picture of the situation emerges. Niraqi makes it clear that to any perceptive visitor, it was obvious that Baha'u'llah by 1859 had some sort of claim that he was pressing with his close disciples, and of which Azal deeply disapproved. It is also clear that some of the disciples were theological extremists or ghulat, who went so far as to say things like that Baha'u'llah created He whom God shall Make Manifest by his command (i.e. Baha'u'llah is God). This belief reminds one of the ironic verses of Nabil Zarandi, which Alessandro Bausani once quoted to me, in response to complaints that Baha'u'llah had claimed divinity. Nabil hyperbolically asked that this "stain of divinity" be removed from Baha'u'llah, who was far exalted above it!

However, it is important to keep in mind that at this point in time Baha'u'llah's partisans numbered only a handful, and the vast majority of Babis were Azalis. Even Baha'u'llah spoke publicly as though he were an Azali.

Note that with regard to the charges of dissimulation, that we cannot judge them without knowing the precise terminology. In 19th century Iranian society dissimulation or *taqiyya*, which Babis tended to call "wisdom" (*hikmat*)<sup>8</sup>, was not only allowed but actually a positive social value that was expected of believers under certain conditions. Thus, if you had an exchange like this:

**Niraqi: "Are you making an independent Claim, as your partisans assert?"**

**Baha'u'llah: "I am merely a servant of \*this\* Cause. They are wrong to speak this way."**

---

<sup>8</sup> The Babis used the traditional term *taqiyya* to refer to dissimulation, not *Hikmat* which in that sense is of Baha'i provenance. In the *Qayyum al-Asma*, *Sahifa Bayn al-Haramayn* and several letters the Bab accounts it as a pillar of religion.

Then a partisan of Baha'u'llah could point out that nothing he said was incorrect or a lie, whereas Niraqi could come away feeling that Baha'u'llah had not been entirely honest with him. That is, there are ways to read Azali and Baha'i narratives that do justice to both sides, as Peter Smith taught me when I was young.

**Niraqi 132-133 [Web]:**

*In the letters issuing from the holy court of Azal there were some nicknames and allusions about the corrupt doctrines of the claimant [Baha'u'llah] and his claim. Before meeting the claimant I was not aware that the object of these hints and complaints was Mirza Husayn `Ali and his followers.*

*Then I made my first trip, heading for Arabia from Kashan, in 1276 [31 July 1859 - 20 July 1860]. In Kirmanshah I petitioned the Proof of the Age [Azal] (to proceed to Baghdad). A Persian letter was issued in response by him, saying, "If it is possible, return to your city of birth and remain where you are now living. If that is not possible, go wherever you like. But it is unwise for you to come to Arabia.*

*This letter, however, arrived when we were within a stage of Baghdad, and it was too late to go back. When we arrived at Kazimayn, and then met with the claimant, I understood during the session where we met what I had earlier not comprehended, including the wisdom of his holiness forbidding me to come. I also knew that it was only to preserve me from the harm that might be inflicted by the claimant.*

*The claimant showed great interest in verbally demonstrating with complete sincerity his servanthood with regard to his holiness Azal. But any wise person skilled in reading internal character from external features could see that the tongue of his speech differed greatly from the tongue of his inner condition. Everyone I asked about his particulars related many details concerning his sayings about the station of showing forth servitude with regard to his holiness Azal. He demonstrated such servitude to the utmost in a plethora of prayers and letters that he wrote to near and far. But I could see nothing but hatred, stubbornness, and aversion in him.*

**Niraqi 109-110 [Web]:**

*In the year 1278 (9 July 1861 - 28 June 1862) when I was living in the land of Nun (Niraq), one of the prominent believers in the claimant came to missionize on his behalf. In response, I said that if a Manifestation had*

appeared in him, then he must of course, announce it and make himself known to the people. Quite aside from the fact that in none of his discourse had I discerned any claim, I could moreover discover in his words nothing but a demonstration of servitude toward his holiness Azal. (I told the missionary that) in 1276 (31 July 1859 - 20 July 1860), when I had gone to Arabia [Iraq], I met with him [Baha'u'llah] and orally reported "some of what the companions say about you." After he heard what I had to say, he complained a great deal about the one who spoke these words, and completely rejected such claims.

When the missionary heard this response from me, he said, "I share with you words from him, for he has made manifest his claim there." Since I had no interest in understanding him, I said, "I will write to him about this statement." Then I wrote him.

Very shortly thereafter [second half of 1861 or first half of 1862], we returned to Arabia in the company of Ghulam-Shahi. After we arrived at Kazimayn, the claimant had us greeted with all the usual formalities. Mirza Ahmad Yazdi insisted that we stay the night at Kazimayn, "so that in the morning when they come to Baghdad you can accompany them."

In the morning when we set out, Mirza Ahmad said to me on the way, "I signaled him with my hand that I don't know anyone."

I said, "What do you know?"

He replied, "I consider him the One Whom God shall make Manifest."

I said, "Very good, it is understood."

Then he said, "I consider him thusly, that he creates 'He whom God shall make manifest' by his command."

I was a little angry at his words, and wanted to return, right there in the middle of the street. But I got hold of myself.

Then he said, "But he is not pleased to have these stations of his mentioned in front of anyone, and completely forbids all his companions from revealing them. But since I am sincere with you, I have told you. There is a big group that believes as I do, such as Mulla Muhammad Rida Yazdi.

When I met with [Baha'u'llah], as soon as I related these words he



*completely denied them all. More than before, he affirmed his servitude to his holiness Azal. But in the view of experts in reading character from features, it was clear from his countenance that Mirza Ahmad Yazdi had accurately described the matter and that his denials were motivated by wisdom and expediency.*

Niraqi, p. 133

*On our second trip to Arabia [late 1861 or early 1862], he was still preserving an even more complete assertion of his servitude, although it appeared that if they had the opportunity, that gentleman and his friends would in the twinkling of an eye ruin everything. And, slowly, slowly there gradually appeared from him what appeared.*

p. 145-146 [Web]

*In sum, from 1276 to 1279 when the claimant set out for Istanbul, if one put together everything heard from trusted persons and untrusted persons and amassed pieces of contextual evidence, and by just saw the situation of the claimant, it was clear to anyone who could read character that he had a claim. But he mentioned it to each person according to the way that was suited to his hearer's understanding. Until the time he set out for Istanbul, whenever he was in my presence, and we asked him about these assertions of a claim, he denied them and showed only servitude toward his holiness Azal.*

Niraqi's account also has value for our understanding of the 1860s. He makes two interesting remarks about *Ridvan*, though the first quoted below seems contradictory to his other statements and also obviously received by him at second or third hand. Here, the accounts of Salmani and other companions of Baha'u'llah have more weight.

The second remark, however, concerns Niraqi himself. Read cannily, it seems to indicate that Niraqi was suspected of having a claim of his own. Although the persona he adopts throughout his book is that of a supporter of Azal, it may well be that he resents Baha'u'llah in part because the latter's claims forestalled his own messianic career.

He then reveals that Baha'u'llah's public self-declaration had two stages. The first was

a claim to be the return of Husayn in 1280/1865-1865, which did *not* necessarily imply a claim to be He Whom God shall Make Manifest. The return of Husayn was a separate, messianic station, which would signal the near advent of the Bab's promised one. Baha'u'llah being the return of Husayn would not in and of itself have invalidated Azal's own leadership of the community as preeminent Mirror and the Return of Quddus. It would have the effect of raising Baha'u'llah's profile and giving him more authority of his own. Clearly many Babis who were loyal to Azal resented this claim.

The "Husayniyyah" period of Baha'u'llah's career has to my knowledge dropped out of later Baha'i historiography. It makes sense of a large number of Baha'u'llah's Tablets from the early Edirne period, however. These still do not directly challenge Azal. They do claim some sort of divine guidance for Baha'u'llah. The *Surat al-Dam* or Tablet of Blood, in which Baha'u'llah adopts the dramatic voice of Imam Husayn and identifies himself with martyred holy figures through history, seems to me almost certainly to belong to the Husayniyyah period. Likewise, the Tablet of Ahmad, which clearly claims some sort of authority for Baha'u'llah but which ends in the Arabic original with an expression of hope that He Whom God shall Make Manifest will soon appear, is from this period. Although later Baha'i accounts say that its recipient undertook an immediate missionary journey for Baha'u'llah, it now seems clear to me that the kerygma or proclamation he was making in 1280 was of the return of Husayn, not of HWGSMM.

Ridvan:

**Niraqi**, p. 144-145

*One of the prominent followers of the claimant said that for some time the manifestation of 'he whom God shall make manifest' had appeared in the claimant, but he did not make it known except to some of his close companions near the time he was to leave for Istanbul, at a gathering of about 100 persons. He said, "I am the promised one who will be made manifest." A few days later he left for Istanbul.*

**Niraqi**, p. 146 Web

*At the beginning of his journey when he had moved to a garden, he hinted to some of his companions, and to another group he openly said, "Someone [i.e.*

*Muhammad Ja'far Niraqi, the author], after we have left, will make a claim and will summon the people to himself in the name of God. But on the inside, he is Samiri." He fully forbade all of his companions from associating with me. He feared that if they did associate with me, they would discover his corrupt deeds.*

But after he left, his writings would continually arrive to me.

1864-1865

Niraqi p. 145 (Web)

*The present writer says that it is not hidden that the open claim of the claimant to be the Return of Husayn was announced in 1280 [summer 1864-summer 1865]. For with regard to this claim, he issued a letter from Edirne and for the sake of proselytizing, he sent it to the author. I will write out a copy of it below, God willing. His claim to be He whom God shall make Manifest was in 1281 [summer 1865 - summer 1866]. He had left for Istanbul in 1279. The severe disputes that broke out are a decisive proof that he is not of God.*

Niraqi, p. 146

*Then in the year 80, when he was in Edirne, he claimed to be the return of Husayn. In order to proselytize, he sent a letter to the author with Salman with his doctrine and his glad tidings. In that letter, after setting forth his claim, he appealed to three proofs for the truth of his claim. All three were incomplete.*

p. 147:

*We shall first copy out the letter, and then shall alert the reader to its imperfections. What he wrote to the author is as follows:*

[The entire letter, Baha'u'llah's declaration of Husayniyyah, is printed in the Rosen collection of Baha'u'llah's Edirne Tablets, St. Petersburg, 1908,, p. 24, #15; the parts in brackets below are the parts that Niraqi did not quote.]

*[He is the Mighty, the Knowing, the Everlasting, the Generous]*

*This is a book from God, the exalted, the mighty, the generous, to God, the august, the sovereign, the inaccessible, the invulnerable. Herein is mention of what befell us at the hands of the community of the Bayan, so that it might serve as a reminder to those who exist today, and as guidance and mercy to another people. Thus might it mention my troubles in the presence of God on that day when the first and last creation are resurrected. O community of the Bayan, did God not give you the good tidings, in the book, of this manifestation with the lips of truth? This was at a time when a tablet was revealed to `Azim, who had asked about the hidden name of God. He received the response in truth, that, he is the son of `Ali, the true and certain leader. This Tablet was the last to be revealed in this mighty, unchallengeable, exalted and powerful Cause. The tablets of God were filled with mention of this youth if you could but see it, and, in addition, with this proof whereby the revealer of the Bayan and what appeared from him were vindicated. You and all who are in the heavens and on the earth bear witness to it.*

*[In the face of all this, how have you turned away from these verses, which have filled the east and the west of the earth, if you but knew? Say: O people, if you do not believe in these verses, by what proof have you believed in God aforetime? Produce it, without delay!]*

*Say, O people: Am I not the son of `Ali in truth? Was I not named Husayn in the realm of God, the guardian, the mighty, the generous?*

*[Have I not recited to you every day verses that could not be reckoned by hearts, nor even by the intellects of the near ones. And you, O community of the Bayan, have rejected me and branded me a purveyor of falsehoods without any evidence and in the absence of any illumined book. Every time I provide more proof, you increased your opposition, insofar as the flame of envy had been ignited in your breasts. Assembly of hatred: Do you desire to block this breeze from wafting, or to stop this spirit from ascending to God, the king, the sovereign, the glorious, the pre-existent? No, by my Lord, you shall never do so, just as people like you have proven unable to do so in the past. Assembly of the negligent: Say, by God, other than whom there is no deity, no one's faith is complete without the recognition of this Cause. This is from the wrath of God upon the idolaters and his mercy upon the believers in his unity.*

*O people of the Bayan: Do you believe in some of the book but reject the book of the revealer, the generous, the trusted? O people: Fear God and do not follow your base passions. Follow piety toward God, and do not flee this great announcement. Will flight benefit you? No, by the lord of the*

*worlds! Will rejection enrich you? No, by the might of God, the king, the great. If you have forgotten what adherents of the past religions did, then the party of the Qur'an is not so distant from you. Remember how `Ali [the Bab] came to them with manifest sovereignty, with a complete proof in his hand from his lord, the bestower, the ennobler, the generous. He sent to the leaders of the people messengers of the Cause with an illumined book, and they entered upon them with the tablet of one mighty and inaccessible. Among them were those who declined and did not take the tablet. Among them were those who took it and perused it while wearing a blindfold, and said, "These are the myths of the ancients." Among them were those who took the tablet with one hand and turned their attention to it for a moment so short that it cannot be reckoned, then left it on the ground, showing haughtiness toward God, who had created and fashioned them. Thus do we share with you news of the haters.*

*Community of the Bayan: Struggle within yourselves to avoid behaving as those idolaters did. When the youth of spirit enters in upon you with the book of God, rise from your seats without delay. Then take the book of holiness in your hands. Kiss it, then revere the youth, with generosity and dignity. By God, this is what benefits your souls in everything you do. If you transgress, in truth, God is self-sufficient above what has gone before and what is yet to come, and what is appearing in these few days.*

*Spirit, greetings and glory be upon you, people of the Bayan, if you follow what the dove has cooed in this gloaming.]*

Below I share...three...response[s] to the letter he received from Baha'u'llah announcing himself as the Return of the Imam Husayn. Niraqi says the letter presents three proofs for this claim, and he rejects them all. I was before this unaware that Mirza `Abbas "Buzurg" Nuri (d. 1839), Baha'u'llah's father and a major courtier of Fath-`Ali Shah, had `Ali as one of his names. I would be interested if anyone knows more about this.

The second brief section are some of the rumors Niraqi heard about the beliefs of Baha'u'llah's partisans. These claims seem to me later than the ones I reported earlier in this discussion, but Niraqi does not date them. A couple must come from 1865 or after. Remember that these sorts of beliefs were shared only by a tiny number of persons before about 1865, mainly friends of Baha'u'llah resident in Baghdad, but they show the rhetorical strategies whereby early Baha'is explained the anomalous situation of Baha'u'llah having openly supported Azal, called him in letters "his Holiness," and

instructed the Babis to obey him.

The final anecdote purports to come from Mirza Husayn Khan Sipahsalar, the Iranian official who served as ambassador to Istanbul in the 1860s and later became the first minister. It alleges that in his youth, Baha'u'llah and Mirza Husayn Khan had been drinking buddies. I believe that many of Mirza Husayn Khan's private papers may survive in Iran, and I hope that eventually it may be possible to confirm or disconfirm this allegation from them. I know that the allegation will be distressing to many believing Baha'is, but it does not seem odd to me that a young noble at the Qajar court may have behaved this way when young and I am not willing to rule the possibility out in the absence of more evidence. Although much must exist, I have seen virtually no documentary evidence for Baha'u'llah's life before 1844, except some indication that he frequented Ni`matu'llahi Sufi circles. Incidentally, in these pages Niraqi defines what Babis of his era thought `is.mat or moral immaculacy meant--the avoiding of minor and major sins. This discussion gives further evidence that `is.mat is incorrectly translated as 'infallibility' in the Roman Catholic sense of the announcement of binding dogma from the Holy See. It should be something like 'guarded from sin.'

**Niraqi 147:**

The author says: *To an informed and insightful scholar it is hardly a secret that in this letter he has made a claim to be the return of Husayn. He appeals to three proofs. The first is the Bab's response to a question about the hidden name of God, that is, "the son of `Ali." Any keen observer knows that this statement is no proof that Mirza Husayn `Ali is the return of Husayn. If "the son of `Ali" is an appropriate epithet for the claimant, how much more appropriate is it to his holiness Azal! For there is no doubt that he and the claimant are from a single father. There are many other pieces of evidence for his holiness Azal being the return of Husayn, instead . . .*

**Niraqi 148:** *The second proof is that his name is Husayn. The reply to this point is as follows. No intelligent person is unaware that in the matter of Return, a correspondence of the name of the returned with that of the person in whom he returns is irrelevant. In addition, the name Husayn-`Ali is not the same as Husayn, insofar as there is a difference between a simple name and a compound one.*

*The third proof depends on clinging to the verses he has produced.* [Niraqi insists that if such verses produce conflict, then they are proven false, citing Qur'an verses.]

**Niraqi 143-44:** "*Implausible claims*" Niraqi heard (after Baha'u'llah's claims became known?). Close paraphrase:

*... A number of persons have related this one: The divine manifestation (zuhur) that appeared in his holiness Azal, however glorious it was, was withdrawn from him in 1269 and bestowed on Mirza Husayn `Ali. Now, whatever happens is in the service of the latter, and Azal has nothing. If so, then all this time that Mirza Husayn `Ali has been showing and declaring his servitude toward Azal, he has been engaged in nothing but hypocrisy, lies and deception.*

*... Qahir and others related that a number of his followers maintained that the Bab saw a utility in naming someone else as his vicar but in having Baha'u'llah be the real vicar behind the scenes. Thus, for all this time, the verses and letters seemingly written by his holiness Azal were in fact issued through his [Baha'u'llah's] teaching and with his oversight. Otherwise, Azal in and of himself was nothing.*

*... Mulla Zayn al-`Abidin in a public debate with Qahir denied the very appointment of Azal as the vicar of the Bab<sup>9</sup>.*

**Niraqi p. 118:**

*Mirza Husayn Khan, the excellent minister of Iran who was the head of the embassy in the Ottoman Empire said, "What story is this, that Mirza Husayn `Ali claims the imamate? But I many times drank with him and gambled with him!" Many have said such things or close to them, who associated with him.*

**Niraqi** argues pp. 117-118 that `ismat-purity or 'infallibility'-i.e. avoiding both minor and major sins throughout one's life is a prerequisite for having God give one a covenant. Muhammad, the Imams, the Bab, and Azal, he alleges, all had this quality of sinlessness, but he insists that Baha'u'llah did not. He instances the following piece of information,

which almost certainly derives from the later Edirne period, 1866-68, when Baha'u'llah's claims became known and the Iranian ambassador to Istanbul was

---

attempting to curb his influence and have him exiled to someplace more remote.

[End of Postings]

Juan R.I. Cole  
History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor