

THE CONVERSION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES TO THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN IRAN

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Susan Maneck's ground-breaking article opens a new chapter for the student of early Bábí and Bahá'í history. While I am neither an expert nor endowed (any longer) with the abundance of time to become one, the subject continues to hold my interest. I share the importance Maneck attaches to Fischel's analysis of the reasons for the Jewish conversions and am happy to see that she has placed on record a viewpoint not well known or easily accessed.

My own investigations years ago on this subject were rewarded with perhaps some rare material that was not to be found in Maneck's bibliography and which may be of interest to others, as well as an encouragement for further research. Robin E. Waterfield's *Christians in Persia*¹ uses the tracts, reports, and published accounts of the Christian missions and missionaries in Iran as its main sources. Not surprisingly, given the time and place (but interestingly, in the light of their admissions to their failure and Bahá'í successes), these accounts contain references to the Bábí and Bahá'í converts from Judaism. For example:

Such was the situation of the Jewish and Christian minorities during the early years of the Qajar dynasty. . . . Such a small beleaguered community was not likely to be willing to listen to a message [i.e., Christian] which called them out of the security, such as it was, of their own community [i.e., Jewish] into the doubtful status of members of another despised community. They did, however, take refuge in some numbers in Bahaism. . . .²

In 1888 a young Jewish convert from Tehran, Mirza Nurullah, whose father had been physician to the Shah and whose family was one of the most prominent Jewish families in Tehran, came to England to be trained as a missionary. . . . After . . . he returned in 1889 to work in Tehran . . . he moved to Isfahan where he felt he could be more useful.

His arrival coincided with a severe persecution of the Jews. . . .

. . . It was during one of these persecutions that Mirza Nurullah sheltered twenty-five Bahais, who were probably converts from Judaism, in his own house, at great personal risk to himself.³

If Waterfield's sources can be trusted, then several new insights into the early history of Bahá'í converts from among the Jews in Shiraz can be discerned, such as the following citation that suggests such conversions may well have occurred even earlier than heretofore suspected.

1. Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973.

2. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* 113.

3. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* 117–18.

In 1844 . . . [H.A.] Stern and [P.H.] Sternschuss made two visits to Persia, first visiting Kermanshah and Hamadan . . . and then in November they made a second trip to Basra, Bushire and Shiraz. . . In Shiraz they found that there were about 350 Jewish families, 25 or 30 of which had become Babis. . . He [Stern] also visited Kashan and Barforoush. He found many who were Babis and some who remembered Dr. Wolff.⁴

Waterfield's work also contains references to Hakim Aga Jan, whose conversion Maneck cites from the moving account in the "Masabih-i Hidayat":

Thanks to the extensive intineration [*sic*] of such men as Stern, Bruhl and Sternschuss, Christian literature had been widely disseminated in Persia and eagerly accepted by Jews and Muslims. One of the most remarkable results of this work was the spontaneous formation of a little group of Jewish-Christian believers in the town of Hamadan. For the most part they were young men of well-to-do Jewish families known and respected in the town. In 1878 four of them were baptised by the American missionary, James Bassett, then stationed in Tehran. Those baptised were Hezkiel Haym, Dr. Rahamin, Dr. Moosa and Dr. Aga Jan. Two years later their numbers had risen to forty men and fifteen women and they were suffering great persecution at the hands of the Jewish hierarchy. . . This . . . caused these fifty-five Christians to appeal to the CMJ in London; the message was relayed by Dr. Bruce. As a result Joseph Lotka . . . was sent for a three-year tour to Hamadan to see what could be done to sustain and encourage the little Hebrew-Christian community. In 1883 Bruhl was attached to the Hamadan mission. . .⁵

Hakim Aga Jan and his brother Hakim Ali were among the most interesting personalities of their times. According to the family, at the time of his death, Hakim Aga Jan is reported to have sat up in bed and recited the prayer Moses had said upon beholding the Burning Bush. Soon after this event, a tablet is said to have been received from Bahá'u'lláh assuring the family that Bahá'u'lláh had been present in the room at that moment. These and other accounts of this family have not as yet been adequately researched or published. Perhaps someone reading this commentary may find it within their scope of scholarship and interest to do so.

Waterfield's account presents an immediate discrepancy for the alert scholar. The date of baptism, 1878 (assuming it is correct, which it may not be), is one year after Hakim Aga Jan became a Bahá'í. How was this possible if he remained a Bahá'í to his death? The family explains this fact by pointing out that as a Bahá'í he would have now believed in Jesus and therefore would have felt no compunction in admitting this belief to a missionary, whatever the latter's understanding of this admission may have been.

Further research will no doubt be useful in resolving such discrepancies, but there is an even more interesting point suggested here, which Maneck's

4. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* 113-14.

5. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* 115-16.

excellent article did not cover. The Bahá'í Faith may well have indirectly advanced the cause of the minority religions—Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian—in Iran, which previously would not have found a sympathetic ear among their rival communities.

Waterfield's sources can be traced in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. One such source, James Bassett,⁶ did not shed any light on the conversion of Hakim Aga Jan in 1878—suggesting that from Bassett's vantage point in Tehran, the incident may not have been as important as Waterfield makes it out to be. This, however, needs further research in the extant letters, diary, or other tracts (of Bassett as well as others such as Joseph Lotka).

Another source, the missionary tracts of H. A. Stern,⁷ contained additional references, which raise other issues, even if they were not pertinent to Hakim Aga Jan's baptism. Stern's account of that first trip in 1844 to Hamadan contains references to meetings with the chief rabbi and his son. I am not absolutely sure but think these may well refer to Hakim Aqa Jan and his father. Further research along the lines suggested in the passage below, showing early Jewish contentions and lines of argument used against such Christian missionaries as Stern, will shed light on the theological and even intellectual basis for Hakim Aga Jan's acceptance of the Bahá'í teachings:

March 7th—After sunrise I left my gloomy abode, and through a labyrinth of streets and lanes, pent up with snow, pursued my way to the Jewish quarter. I went direct to the house of Chacham Eliyahu, the chief rabbi, a man of considerable learning and great influence. . . .

Early the next morning, Mullah Eliyahu, Mullah Eliezer, and others, called on me.

March 9th—At sunrise a messenger from the chief rabbi came to invite me to breakfast. We repaired together to the house of the rabbi, where, from himself and others, I met with the kindest and most respectful reception. Whilst tea was in preparation (a beverage in which the respectable Persians usually indulge in the morning) our conversation reverted to the subject of the Christian verity; the rabbi's son, a clever Talmudist, pointed out . . . and exultingly exclaimed. . . . I reminded him. . . . He shook his head. . . .⁸

These few and cursory comments are offered in the hope that they will be seen as grounds by others to delve deeper into this subject and further the discussion Maneck has opened.

FOAD KATIRAI

6. James Bassett, *Persia: Eastern Mission: A Narrative of the Founding and Fortunes of the Eastern Persia Mission* (Philadelphia, 1890. Bodleian Shelfmark 2061.e.1).

7. H. A. Stern, *Dawnings of Light in the East with Biblical, Historical, and Statistical Notices of Persons and Places Visited during a Mission to the Jews in Persia, Coordistan, and Mesopotamia* (London: Charles H. Purday, 1854. Bodleian Shelfmark 203.a.232).

8. Stern, *Dawnings* 241–43.