Bahá'í Studies Review (2026) 23.1: e20260522
Published: 22 May 2026 | http://www.abs.bahai.org.uk/bsr-e20260522

Sounding

The Declaration of the Báb in Bahá'í Imagination: Introducing a Woman and an African into the Sacred History of the Bahá'í Community

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The academic study of Bahá'í history has developed enormously and exponentially in the past several decades. Hundreds of papers and scores of academic monographs have been published on the Bábí movement and the development of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, the West, and other parts of the world. This academic work will continue to develop and yield results,[1] building a solid base of knowledge which is an important resource for the Bahá'í world and for academia in general.[2]

Bahá'í Sacred History

In this article, I wish to draw a distinction between the academic knowledge of Bábí and Bahá'í history, on one hand, and "Bahá'í sacred history," on the other. By sacred history, I refer to the narratives which the Bahá'í community tells itself. This is history as it is told, understood, imagined, believed, and practiced by Bahá'ís. It is this sacred history that shapes the self-understanding of all Bahá'ís as well as the nature of their beliefs and their view of the world. Inevitably, this sacred history will be influenced by academic history from time to time, but it should be seen as distinct from it. It is the received tradition, the sacred story as believed, narrated, and practiced by Bahá'ís.

In this article, I wish to focus specifically on the event known as the Declaration of the Báb and its place in Bahá'í imagination. This refers to an episode in *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, translated into English from the original Persian by Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and its head from 1921 until his passing. This

[1] For academic publications on Bábí history, see especially, Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981); Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement, 1844–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 205); and Denis MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shíráz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism*, Iran Studies, 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[2] There is a considerable body of academic literature in English on the Bahá'í religion and its history, especially in the United States and in Iran. See, for example, the 30 volumes of of Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, ed. by Anthony A. Lee (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982–). See also, Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Margit Warburg, *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Bahá'ís from a Globalization Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Bahá'í Faith in the Nineteenth-century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); William Garlington, *The Bahá'í Faith in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005) and *The Bahá'í Faith in India: A Developmental Stage Approach* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2023); Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel, eds., *The Bahá'ís of Iran: Socio-historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008); Moojan Momen, *The Bahá'í Communities of Iran 1851–1921* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2015); and Robert Stockman, ed., *The World of the Bahá'í Faith* (London: Routledge, 2024). For a full discussion of the emergence of academic literature of Bábí and Bahá'í Studies, see Anthony A. Lee, *The Bahá'í Faith in Africa: Establishing a New Religious Movement, 1952–1962* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), Chapter One.

account holds an important and sacred place in Bahá'í history since it relates the story of the genesis of the Bahá'í revelation.[3]

Nabíl's Narrative: *The Dawn-Breakers*

According to Nabíl's account, as translated and shaped by Shoghi Effendi, the Báb met with Mullá Ḥusayn Bushrú'í on the evening of May 22, 1844. Mullá Ḥusayn was a disciple of Siyyid Káẓim Rashtí, the recently deceased leader of the Shaykhí school, a small sect of Shí'í Islam. His visit with the Báb lasted all night, during which time the two men shared prayers, food, tea, and refreshments. During the course of their conversation, the Báb revealed to His guest that He was the bearer of a mission from God, the one whom Siyyid Káẓim had promised would arise. He then revealed in writing and in spoken word the first chapter of a much larger book, the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', a long commentary on the Súrih of Joseph in the Qur'án. Mullá Ḥusayn perforce accepted the Báb's claims to divine revelation that night and became the first believer in the new religion.[4]

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this narrative in Bahá'í sacred history. The Báb Himself fixed the exact moment of the initiation of His new religion at two hours and eleven minutes after sunset on that very evening, the moment of Mullá Ḥusayn's acceptance of His claims.[5] For Bahá'ís, this event marks a turning point in the world's religious history: the end of the cycle of prophecy which began with the Prophet Adam, and the beginning of the cycle of fulfilment destined to last 500,000 years.

Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By*, his history of the first 100 years of Bahá'í history, has indicated the significance of this event as follows:

> *. . . that initial contact [i.e., between the Báb and Mullá Ḥusayn, the Declaration of the Báb] marked the birth, and fixed the date, of the inception of the most glorious era in the spiritual life of mankind. With this historic Declaration [of the Báb] the dawn of an Age that signalizes the consummation of all ages had broken.*[6]

Following Shoghi Effendi, all other Bahá'í sources regard this Declaration as not only the beginning of Bábism, but also the beginning of a new era in human history that would eventually lead to the unity of the human race and the Golden Age awaited by all religions.

The Declaration of the Báb is remembered and replayed, even in some ways reenacted, every year in Holy Day celebrations held on the anniversary of the event. The day (from sunset on May 22 to sunset on May 23)[7] holds an important place on the Bahá'í calendar. It is one of the nine Holy Days on which work is supposed to be suspended. Normally, gatherings are held at about two hours after sunset. Bahá'ís gather on that night, prayers are recited and chanted, and the story is retold, with passages of Nabíl's narrative read to the assembled believers as a sacred history.

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[3] See Anthony A. Lee, "The Bahá'í Faith in America as a Successful Synthesis of Christianity and Islam," H-Bahá'í, *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Bábí and Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (March, 2003). Available here

[4] Nabíl-i-A'ẓam, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932).

[5] *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, trans. by Habib Taherzadeh and others (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), p. 107.

[6] Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 6.

[7] Depending on the date on which the vernal equinox Naw-Ruz falls in any year, the date of the Bahá'í Holy day may be adjusted by one day in some years.

From an academic point of view, Nabíl's narrative is not the best source to consult for a history of Mullá Ḥusayn's conversion to the new Faith. There are a number of other Bábí histories which relate the story of this episode, telling a rather different story. They are unanimous in stating that the conversion was a much longer process than Nabíl relates. One source suggests, perhaps exaggerates, that Mullá Ḥusayn argued with the Báb for forty days before accepting His claim. Abbas Amanat summarizes these sources in his history of the first years of the Bábí religion, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844–1850*.[8] It would seem that Nabíl telescoped the story of Mullá Ḥusayn's conversion into one night, when instead it may well have been a longer process, in which Mullá Ḥusayn might have struggled to accept Báb's claims.

The original manuscript of Nabíl's narrative has not been made available to researchers. All that is available as a source is a translation of the original Persian made by Shoghi Effendi and published in an illustrated and footnoted edition in English in 1932. This is not a straight word-for-word translation of Nabíl's text. Will McCants has documented the substantial editorial and interpretive choices Shoghi Effendi made when translating the original of Nabíl's text into a version intended for a global, English-speaking Bahá'í audiences.[9] Ruhiyyih Khanum Rabbani (1910–2000), the wife of Shoghi Effendi, likened it to Edward Fitzgerald's literary translation of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. Khayyam's translation is recognized as a literary masterpiece, perhaps still the best translation to date, but it often strays far from the original Persian text. All sources agree that Shoghi Effendi's is a free, literary translation that sought primarily to convey the spirit and intent of the narrative.[10]

Filling the Silences

Nonetheless, this academic critique of Nabíl's account has failed to alter or influence the sacred history of the Declaration of the Báb as it is understood and performed within the Bahá'í community. The expansion and/or evolution of this sacred history is not an academic project, of course. It is a task that must be taken up by the Bahá'í community itself internally.

Recent research and publications on Bahá'í history have revealed that Nabíl's account of the meeting of the Báb with Mullá Ḥusayn contains two important and serious silences which now must be taken into account. Those are the witnesses of a woman, the Báb's wife, Khadíjih Bagum, and of

[8] Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal,* p. 166–73. Another alternate account can be found in Mirza Husayn Hamadani, *The New History (Tarikh-i Jadid) of Mirza 'Ali-Muhammad, the Bab*, trans. by Edward G. Browne (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1975; first publ. Cambridge University Press, 1893), p. 34–39.

[9] Rúḥíyyih Rabbání, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 215. See also Will McCants' Zoom presentation at the Shaykhi and Bábí-Bahá'í Studies Oxford Seminar, 2024. I myself, witnessed the Hand of the Cause Mr. 'Alí-Akbar Furútán dismiss the criticisms of some Iranian Bahá'ís that the Guardian had not followed Nabíl's original text, saying that he had taken a rough piece of wood and polished it into a work of art. (Personal communication. Haifa, Israel, 1971). Curiously, even the editions of Nabíl's narrative that have been published in Persian by the Bahá'í community are actually translated from Shoghi Effendi's English translation, *The Dawn-Breakers.*

[10] Moojan Momen has argued that the purpose of Shoghi Effendi's translation of Nabíl's narrative was to create an heroic past that would inspire the Bahá'ís of North America to relocate and sacrifice to propagate the Bahá'í Faith. His intent, according to Momen, was to write a history of the Bábí movement that would allow American Bahá'ís to imagine themselves as the inheritors and descendants of Bábí history. (Moojan Momen, "The Re-Visioning of a Chain of Memory: Shoghi Effendi and Bahá'í History," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam,* 54 (2023). Denis MacEoin has criticized Shoghi Effendi's translation of Nabíl's narrative and questioned the value of *The Dawn-Breakers* as an historical source. (MacEoin, "From Babism to Bahá'ísm: problems of militancy, quietism, and conflation in the construction of a religion," *Religion,* 13 (1983), p. 219–55*;* MacEoin, "The Bábí concept of Holy War," *Religion,* 12 (1982), p. 93–129.

the Báb's African servant, Haji Mubarak. Both were present in the Báb's house on the night of the Declaration, and both were witnesses to the Báb's announcement.[11] It is understandable that Nabíl's narrative, written in the late 1880s, would not have taken these two observers seriously. Nabíl himself was not an eyewitness to the event. He relies on the account of Mírzá Aḥmad Qazvíní, the martyr, whom he says heard the story from Mullá Ḥusayn himself. It is not clear whether Nabíl was quoting a written manuscript or recounting a testimony he had heard from Qazvíní some years before he composed his narrative.[12] Both men were Iranians, immersed in the culture and ethos of the time, and would not have given any importance to the presence of women or slaves in their histories. Such an attitude is to be expected from a nineteenth-century Iranian chronicle. It is understandable, and perhaps even forgivable, that Nabíl would have overlooked the presence of these actors.

However, the Bahá'í community is now well into the 21st century. As values have evolved, both in the academic community and more generally, it may be time for the Bahá'í sacred history to evolve as well. It has only been forty or fifty years since academic scholars have shown a more widespread understanding and appreciation the value and importance of women's history and the histories of black people and other subaltern groups. Before that time, mainstream history in the United States, at least, simply assumed that women and blacks had no place in history. Even if they were present on important occasions, they had no role as actors and did not influence the course of events, it was thought. Contemporary academic historians have gradually understood the narrowness of this approach. They have started to uncover and write more rich histories of groups and individuals previously regarded as absent, unimportant, or at best simply bystanders to history. They have realized, for example, that wherever one looks for women in history, no matter what the occasion, they can be found as participants and actors in that history.

Khadíjih Bagum and the Declaration

In 1981, the Hand of the Cause Hasan M. Balyuzi's small book, *Khadíjih Bagum,* was published posthumously.[13] The volume includes a short biography of the Báb's wife, much of it gleaned from Balyuzi's own family memories and traditions. After the martyrdom of the Báb in 1850, the House of the Báb in Shíráz became a destination of pilgrimage for Bábís and Bahá'ís. Khadíjih Bagum continued to live in the house and received the pilgrims there until her passing on November 15, 1881. During these visits, the Báb's wife would recount her memories of her husband and of early Bábí history. She also passed on her memories to the younger members of her extended family. Balyuzi relates some of these stories. His source is a manuscript created by Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, who had interviewed Khadíjih Bagum's niece, Maryam Sulṭán Bagum, and collected the stories she had heard from her aunt as a child many years before.[14]

It seems that Khadíjih Bagum claimed to have accidentally seen the Báb in an illumined state of transfiguration some time before the arrival of Mullá Ḥusayn in Shíráz. She says that the Báb disclosed to her His station as the promised Qa'im the next morning and that she believed in His divine mission from that point on. Balyuzi follows, in his book, with a warning that this is an oral

[11] I have made this argument previously in *The Declaration of the Bab: A Compilation* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1992), p. ix–xiv.
[12] Nabíl, The Dawn-Breakers, p. 52.
[13] H. M. Balyuzi, *Khadíjih Bagum: The Wife of the Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981).
[14] Foreword to Khadíjih Bagum by Robert Balyuzi, p. vii–xii.

account written down many decades after the event. He does not want Khadíjih Bagum's experience to be confused with the Prophet's formal declaration to Mullá Ḥusayn, who holds the station of the first believer.[15] However, it seems fairly clear from her words that Khadíjih Bagum was claiming that her belief in the Báb's divine station preceded His declaration on May 22, 1844. Whilst her stories and remarks are only partially preserved in Balyuzi's book, they may have been part of an alternative woman's narrative concerning the Declaration that was recounted long before Nabíl's history was compiled. This seems to mirror Islamic traditions that relate that the Prophet Muhammad's wife, also named Khadíjih, was the first to believe in him.

For many decades, Khadíjih Bagum told her own version of the Declaration of the Báb to the Bábí, and then Bahá'í, pilgrims who were able to visit the house of the Báb, where she continued to live. She would tell of the events of her life with the Báb, which was tragically ended after only two and one-half years, after which the Báb was arrested, never to return home. He was eventually executed in the city of Tabríz on July 9, 1850.[16]

One of the Bahá'í pilgrims who visited the Báb's wife was Munírih Khánum (1848–1938), who was traveling to the Holy Land, destined to become the wife of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), the son of Bahá'u'lláh. She heard Khadíjih Bagum's story and was able to preserve fragments of it in her own memoirs.[17] Concerning the night of the Declaration, she records that Khadíjih Bagum said to her:

> *What an extraordinary night that was! The Báb said to me: "Tonight we will entertain a dear guest." His whole being was ablaze. I was most eager to hear what He had to say, but He turned to me and told me: "It is better if you go and sleep." I did not wish to disobey Him, but I remained awake all night and could hear His blessed voice until the morning, conversing with the Bábu'l-Báb [the Gate to the Gate, a title given by the Báb to Mullá Ḥusayn], chanting verses, and presenting proofs and arguments.*[18]

The Báb's wife claims that she remained awake during her husband's entire audience with Mullá Ḥusayn and heard everything that was said. She accepted the Báb's station as the Promised One along with His first disciple, or perhaps, as she claimed, before him.

Haji Mubarak and the Declaration

The house of the Báb was very small. It seems that conversations in one part of the house could be heard in all other parts. On the night of the Declaration, there were four persons in the house: the Báb Himself, Mullá Ḥusayn, Khadíjih Bagum, and Haji Mubarak, the Báb's African servant.[19]

Similarly to wider mainstream histories in Iran and the West, early Bahá'í histories have tended to focus on the stories of more dominant members of society, whilst omitting important

[15] Balyuzi, Khadíjih Bagum, p. 13–14.
[16] It is not clear whether or not Khadíjih Bagum's narrative was ever written down in full. As stated above, Abu'l-Qasim Afnan was able to record some of it, at least, from the memories of her niece, Maryam Sulṭán Bagum.
[17] Munírih Khánum, *Munírih Khánum: Memoirs and Letters*, trans. Samirih Anwar Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986).
[18] Munírih Khánum, Memoirs and Letters, p. 34.
[19] Haji Mubarak had been purchased by the Báb at the time of his marriage in 1842, and became a part of the house at that time. Fizzih Khánum, another enslaved African servant in the house, was a child of about nine years old at this time. The Báb's mother, Fáṭimih Bagum, was also a part of his household. But she is not mentioned in any of the sources as being present on this night.

contributions made by black people and women. The only book that gives attention to the Africans present in the early days of the Bábí movement, for example, is *Black Pearls* by Abu'l-Qasim Afnan.[20] Nabíl's narrative in translation, *The Dawn-Breakers*, mentions Mubarak a few times, especially in relation to the Declaration of the Báb and the events that followed. However, the narrative does not give him a name, referring to him repeatedly as only "the Ethiopian servant" of the Báb, nor does it ever mention his enslaved status, always referring to him as a "servant." Nabíl attaches no significance to this African presence at the genesis of the Báb's religion. He praises Haji Mubarak as a loyal "servant" of his master, but attributes to him no inner thoughts or independent presence.

According to Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, Mubarak was brought into the Báb's household at the time of His marriage, purchased from His wife's brother, along with a seven-year-old African girl named Fizzih. Haji Mubarak had been transported from East Africa as a young child, bought from slave traders at perhaps five years old[21], and trained to assist with the business affairs of the family. His duties also included domestic service in the household of the Báb's future brother-in-law. His education is said to have been "exemplary."[22] Whilst not mentioned in any sources, the nature of Mubarak's service in the household of the Báb and later in Karbilá as the attendant of the women of the household means it is likely that he was a eunuch. He was skilled at commerce, and the Báb entrusted him with the task of settling his outstanding accounts and winding up his business affairs in Shíráz. This suggests that Mubarak was trained in the language and mathematics of the traditional accounting system (*síyáq*). It is also obvious that Mubarak was literate, had become a Muslim,[23] and was fully capable of understanding the Báb's claim to be divinely inspired.

Although the significance of his African origins is ignored in the account, Nabíl's narrative records that Mubarak acted as the doorman at the Báb's house on the evening of Mullá Ḥusayn's conversion. As such, he greeted both Master and guest as they arrived at the house, as Nabíl pointedly observes.[24] Beyond this, he attended to the other needs of the two men, bringing water for the evening ablutions before prayer, serving tea, serving the dinner, and so forth. The Báb's conversation continued all night in the upper chambers of the house, as He sought to convince Mullá Ḥusayn of His divine mission and related His new religious message.

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[20] Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *Black Pearls: Servants in the Households of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988). Even so, Mr. Afnan steadfastly refused to accept that these African participants in early Bábí history were actually Babis. I have discussed this in my article, "Half the Household Was African: Recovering the Histories of Two African Slaves in Iran, Haji Mubarak and Fizzih Khánum," UCLA Historical Journal, 26.1 (2016), p. 17–37.

[21] There are some historical questions concerning Mubarak's identity that have not been resolved. According to Afnan, there is a bill of sale that exists that records Mubarak's age in 1842 at the time of his purchase by the Báb as 19. (Afnan, Black Pearls, p. 5). More recently, Nader Saiedi has disputed this conclusion, suggesting that Mubarak was much older and had known the Báb as a child (Nader Saiedi, "Sultan-i Habashi" in *Payam-i Bahá'í (France), May 2010, p. 10–13)*. Dr. Saiedi has been able to read the entire corpus of the Bab's writings housed in the International Bahá'í Archives, Haifa, Israel, and bases his conclusions on that research. His article has been translated into English: Nader Saiedi (trans. and annotated by Omid Ghaemmaghami), "The Ethiopian King," *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 17 (2011), 181–86. I draw no conclusions here concerning Mubarak's age or identity. The narrative of Mubarak's witness to the Declaration is not challenged by Saiedi's research.

[22] Afnan, Black Pearls, p. 5.

[23] On their pilgrimage to Makkah, after the Declaration, the Báb sacrificed three sheep on Mubarak's behalf to insure him the full rites of a Muslim pilgrim. (Nabíl, The Dawn-Breakers, p. 133.)

[24] Nabíl, The Dawn-Breakers, p. 53. It should be noted that the greeting "Enter therein in peace, secure" (Qur'an 15:46), which is sometimes attributed to Haji Mubarak, was uttered by the Báb Himself upon entering the house.

Naturally, it would have been unthinkable for Mubarak to retire for the night, or even to remain inattentive while his master was entertaining a guest. So, just as did Khadíjih Bagum, the "Ethiopian servant" most likely remained awake through the night and heard the Báb's Great Announcement. Of course, it would have been similarly unthinkable for the Báb's wife to have been in the room with her Husband and His guest that evening. Iranian society was strictly segregated by gender, and women were required to remain in the private section of the house (*andarún*) when male visitors entered.

These social conventions of nineteenth-century Iran could not be avoided. They rendered women and slaves invisible to history and kept them out of Nabíl's sacred story. Nonetheless, we know that Khadíjih Bagum heard the Báb's historic and sacred Declaration because her oral testimony was eventually written down and preserved for posterity.

No one recorded the memoirs of the Báb's African slave. The chroniclers of Bahá'í history were men of their time and simply paid no attention to him. That does not mean, however, that he was not there. We cannot say that he was not present or that he can be erased from the sacred history. Clearly, he was also positioned to witness the conversation and hear the Declaration. It is possible to imagine that Haji Mubarak was even in the room when the conversation took place.

Conclusion

If Khadíjih Bagum and Haji Mubarak can be added to the sacred story of the Declaration of the Báb, the narrative is not changed in substance but is profoundly changed in significance. The Báb's encounter with Mullá Ḥusayn now includes a woman and an enslaved African as witnesses. It can no longer be considered an exclusively patriarchal meeting of learned men. It is an event that now includes women and can include all of humanity, even the enslaved, as witnesses and participants in the dawn of a New Age.

The silences in Bahá'í sacred history can and must be overcome as new research allows us to fill in the blanks. The widening of the story does not threaten the sanctity of the narrative or the sacred significance of the events. It will allow the Bahá'í community to become more comfortable with the story as they contemplate its wider implications. The Declaration of the Báb can be observed, not only as the Holy Day that marks the beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith, but can be celebrated now as a prelude to the unity of humanity.

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