

Commentary

History, Theology, and the Declaration of the Báb in Bahá'í Thought: A Response to Anthony Lee

Omid Ghaemmaghami

Abstract

This commentary responds to Anthony A. Lee's sounding, "The Declaration of the Báb in Bahá'í Imagination" (*Bahá'í Studies Review*, 2026). Lee contends that Khadíjih Bagum, the wife of the Báb, and Hájí Mubárák, His Ethiopian servant, have been erased from the Bahá'í memory of the Declaration of the Báb, and that they should be restored to it as witnesses and participants. While affirming the value of recovering the histories of both figures, this response argues that Lee's sounding rests on problematic conceptual and methodological foundations. First, it does not consider the implications of many statements in the Writings of the Báb, which consistently frame the Declaration around Mullá Husayn's recognition of the Báb and identify him as the first believer. Second, it conflates distinct claims (physical presence, overhearing, comprehension, and acceptance) that rest on evidence of widely varying strength, and it substitutes conjectural language for documentation. Third, it reads omission from Nabíl-i-A'zam's narrative as exclusion without considering the spiritual and theological purposes that shaped his account. Drawing on the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this response argues that the Bahá'í Writings frame the Declaration as the start of a new spiritual creation, realised through recognition of the Manifestation of God. The recovery of neglected voices, while valuable, should proceed with historical restraint, maintain a distinction between evidence and possibility, and not attempt to redefine the meaning of events whose significance is articulated in earlier and more authoritative sources.

Commentary on Anthony A. Lee, "The Declaration of the Báb in Bahá'í Imagination: Introducing a Woman and an African into the Sacred History of the Bahá'í Community," Bahá'í Studies Review, 23.1 (2026): e20260522

Anthony Lee's article "The Declaration of the Báb in Bahá'í Imagination: Introducing a Woman and an African into the Sacred History of the Bahá'í Community" raises questions about memory, omission, and representation.¹ It draws attention to two figures from the early history of the Bahá'í Faith: the wife of the Báb, Khadíjih Bagum, and His Ethiopian servant, Hájí Mubárák. Lee argues that the Bahá'í community should expand its retelling of the Declaration of the Báb to explicitly include Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárák as witnesses and participants in the event, if not believers, contending that they have been erased, and that this their erasure reflects social biases and neglect. Yet, Lee's article ultimately rests on a series of conceptual and methodological moves that require closer examination and ultimately prove to be wanting.

¹ Anthony A. Lee, "The Declaration of the Báb in Bahá'í Imagination: Introducing a Woman and an African into the Sacred History of the Bahá'í Community", *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 23.1 (2026), e20260522 (doi.org/10.67743/e20260522).

The Declaration of the Báb

Lee considers the Declaration of the Báb primarily through the prism of the historical narrative of Nabíl-i-A'zam. Yet, the event is directly discussed in an earlier and far more important primary source: the Writings of the Báb, most notably, the Báb's most important doctrinal work, the Persian Bayán, where the Báb not only defines the precise moment of His manifestation to Mullá Ḥusayn² (a point Lee himself mentions), but also affirms that after His Declaration, for forty days, only Mullá Ḥusayn (alluded to as the letter Sín) believed in Him.³ Indeed, the Báb's Writings repeatedly identify Mullá Ḥusayn as His first believer—or simply as the first⁴—among the earliest group of His followers, identified in His earliest Writings as those who preceded others in faith (*sábiquín*) and in later Writings as the Letters of the Living.⁵ And the Declaration is consistently framed in the Báb's Writings around Mullá Ḥusayn's arrival, recognition, and belief, rather than around the physical presence of individuals who were also in the House of the Báb on that evening. This does not diminish the importance of *Khadíjih Bagum* or *Hájí Mubárak*; rather, it reflects the particular spiritual and theological significance that the Báb Himself attached to the event and places *Khadíjih Bagum* and *Hájí Mubárak* in proper perspective as set forth by the Báb Himself.

The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá also discuss the Declaration of the Báb.⁶ Like the Writings of the Báb, these sources consistently centre on the encounter between the Báb and Mullá Ḥusayn and affirm Mullá Ḥusayn's station as His first believer,⁷ whom the Báb identified as

² The Báb, *Bayán-i-Fársí* (INBA 62), no. 2:7; *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, comp. by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice and trans. by Habib Taherzadeh with the assistance of a Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), p. 107. INBA = Iranian National Bahá'í Archives. Publications of the National Committee for the Preservation of Bahá'í Writings and Archives of Iran (Intishárát-i-Lajniy-i-Milliy-i-Mahfaziyy-i-Áthár va Árshív-i-Amr). Digitally reprinted by the Afnan Library. afnanlibrary.org/inba [accessed 22 June 2026].

³ The Báb, *Bayán-i-Fársí* (INBA 62), no. 8:15.

⁴ See, e.g., *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, pp. 9, 10; the Báb, quoted in INBA 58:132 (beseeching God's blessings upon the first who believed); see also Muḥammad Afnán, *Majmú'iy-i-Maqálát*, vol. 1, (Dundas: Intishárát-i-Andalíb, 2013), pp. 536–40; Denis MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), p. 210 (listing the contents of a manuscript of the Báb's Writings from the Iranian National Bahá'í Archives that includes numerous prayers for His first believer, Mullá Ḥusayn).

⁵ The Báb, quoted in Abu'l-Qásim Afnán, *'Abd-i-A'lá* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), pp. 89, 110; see Nader Saiedi, 'The Writings and Teachings of the Báb', in *The World of the Bahá'í Faith*, ed. by Robert H. Stockman (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 31. Táhírih, the most prominent female believer of the Báb, similarly refers to Mullá Ḥusayn as he who preceded all those who preceded others (*asbaqa man sabaqa*). Táhírih, quoted in Fádíl-i-Mázindarání, *Kitáb-i-Zuhúru'l-Haqq*, vol. 3 (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2008), p. 391.

⁶ E.g., Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), para. 110 (identifying the Declaration of the Báb, together with the Festival of Riḍván, as 'the two Most Great Festivals').

⁷ See Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, trans. by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 223 ('...Mullá Ḥusayn, who became the recipient of the effulgent glory of the Sun of divine Revelation. But for him, God would not have been established upon the seat of His mercy, nor ascended the throne of eternal glory.'). Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library, bahai.org/r/772959127 [accessed 22 June 2026] (beseeching God's glory upon Mullá Ḥusayn as 'the first to believe' in the Báb and 'a throne for the ascendancy of Thy most sublime Word, a focal-point for the manifestation of Thy most excellent names, a dayspring of the radiance of the Sun of Thy providence, a dawning-place for the appearance of Thy names and attributes, and a treasury of the pearls of Thy wisdom and Thy commandments'); Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Badí'* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2008), p. 72; Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet*

the return of Muḥammad.⁸ They stress that the revelation of verses by the Báb on that night “led to his [Mullá Ḥusayn’s] awakening and allegiance.”⁹ And they uphold the Declaration as the precise moment when the Bahá’í cycle—which is to “remain in effect for five hundred thousand years”—commenced.¹⁰ Whether one approaches these texts as scripture or historical sources or both, they form an indispensable part of the discussion and must therefore be grappled with directly for their evidentiary and interpretive significance.

The Problem of Conflated Claims

A central problem of Lee’s article is its tendency to conflate several distinct propositions. That Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárak were present in the House of the Báb on the night of 23 May 1844 is one claim. That they overheard portions of the conversation between the Báb and Mullá Ḥusayn is another. That they understood its revelatory significance is a third. That they accepted the Báb’s claim at that time is a fourth. That they should therefore be regarded as participants in the Declaration and “be added to the sacred story of the Declaration of the Báb” is the conclusion Lee tenuously reaches based on these four propositions. These propositions are not equivalent, and the evidence, or lack thereof, supporting them varies considerably.

The evidence for the physical presence of Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárak in the House of the Báb is strong. The evidence that they heard portions of the conversation is plausible. The evidence for their spiritual comprehension, acceptance, or participation, however, is substantially weaker and rests almost entirely on inference rather than documentation. But Lee’s article repeatedly moves from one category to another without sufficiently acknowledging the distinction.

Regarding Hájí Mubárak, for example, Lee writes that he was “positioned to witness the conversation” and that “it is possible to imagine” that he was present in the room itself. Such statements constitute conjecture, and conjecture is not evidence. Historical reconstruction necessarily involves inference, yet responsible historical method requires careful differentiation between what is documented, what is probable, and what remains speculative. The article blurs these categories.

The Question of Recognition

Lee’s discussion of Khadíjih Bagum raises other questions. He asserts that—prior to the Declaration of His Mission to Mullá Ḥusayn—the Báb “disclosed to her His station as the promised Qa’im [sic] ... and that she believed in His divine mission from that point on.” But the

of visitation for Mullá Ḥusayn and Quddús, in *Additional Tablets and Extracts from Tablets Revealed by Bahá’u’lláh*, www.bahai.org/r/262760797 [accessed 22 June 2026] (referring to Mullá Ḥusayn as ‘the first to arrive’, a term the Báb Himself used to refer to Mullá Ḥusayn).

⁸ The Báb, quoted in Fádíl-i-Mázindarání, *Kitáb-i-Zuhúru’l-Haqq*, vol. 3, p. 132 (‘*Tawqí’-i-Qá’imíyyat*) (affirming that the first to pay homage and pledge allegiance to the Báb was Muḥammad); see Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice and trans. by Habib Taherzadeh with the assistance of a Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), pp. 184–5 (‘Consider thou the Revelation of the Point of the Bayán—exalted is His glory. He pronounced the First One [Mullá Ḥusayn] to believe in Him to be Muḥammad, the Messenger of God.’).

⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘Twelve Table Talks Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in ‘Akká’, no. 10, para. 10, www.bahai.org/r/324188349 [accessed 22 June 2026].

¹⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Light of the World* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 2021), no. 76, para. 7.

evidence for this conclusion is tenuous. The assertion derives from recollections transmitted decades later and preserved through multiple layers of oral transmission. Even Hasan Balyuzi, who records the account in his biography of *Khadíjih Bagum*, cautions that these recollections were “recalled by *Khadíjih Bagum* in later years, and recorded decades after, and should not be taken as His (the Báb’s) exact words.”¹¹

The available evidence suggests an important distinction between perceiving extraordinary spiritual qualities and recognizing the Báb’s specific station and Mission. Bahá’í sources preserve several accounts of individuals who discerned unusual attributes in the Báb prior to His Declaration.¹² Such perceptions, however, are not equivalent to recognizing His claim to be a new Manifestation of God. As noted above, the significance and weight of the Declaration in the Bahá’í Sacred Writings centres on the occasion when the Báb’s station was explicitly disclosed or manifested and consciously recognised by an individual, who became His first believer. The Báb formulated His Declaration in terms of Twelver *Shí’ih* and, particularly, *Shaykhí* expectations.¹³ Even if *Khadíjih Bagum*, *Hájí Mubárak*, or others perceived signs of spiritual greatness before that night, they did not possess the knowledge of the *Shaykhí* doctrines that would have enabled them to recognise the full nature of the Báb’s mission and station before Mullá Husayn.

Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárak in the Writings of the Báb

The Báb’s Writings contain numerous references to *Khadíjih Bagum* and *Hájí Mubárak*. In the *Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’*, *Khadíjih Bagum* is addressed in these words:

O well-beloved! Value highly the grace of the Great Remembrance [the Báb], for it cometh from God, the Loved One. Thou shalt not be a woman, like other women, if thou obeyest God in the Cause of Truth, the greatest Truth. Know thou the great bounty conferred upon thee by the Ancient of Days, and take pride in being the consort of the Well-Beloved, Who is loved by God, the Greatest. Sufficient unto thee is this glory which cometh unto thee from God, the All-Wise, the All-Praised. Be patient in all that God hath ordained concerning the Báb and His Family. Verily, thy son, Aḥmad is with Fátimih, the Sublime, in the sanctified Paradise.¹⁴

¹¹ H.M. Balyuzi, *Khadíjih Bagum: The Wife of the Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), pp. 13–14.

¹² See the sources cited in Omid Ghaemmaghami, ‘The Life of the Báb’, in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. by Robert H. Stockman (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 17. The Báb Himself affirms that ‘His behaviour prior to the declaration of His Mission is clearly evident unto those who knew Him’. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 96.

¹³ See Todd Lawson, *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam: Qur’an, Exegesis, Messianism, and the Literary Origins of the Babi Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 83 (‘The frequent, incessant, perhaps hypnotic, reference [in the *Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’*] to such words as *nuqta*, *qutb*, and *markaz*, however allusively employed, would quite naturally evoke in the minds of such persons as Mulla Husayn Bushru’i, and other Shaykhis or Shi’i gnostics, the figure of the Imam, specifically the twelfth Imam.’); Vahid Rafati, ‘The Development of *Shaykhí* Thought in *Shí’í* Islam’, in *The Bahá’í Faith and Islam: Proceedings of a Symposium, McGill University, March 23–25, 1984*, ed. by Heshmat Moayyad (Ottawa: Association for Bahá’í Studies, 1990), pp. 93–109.

¹⁴ The Báb, quoted in Balyuzi, *Khadíjih Bagum: The Wife of the Báb*, pp. 8–9 (provisional translation). Shoghi Effendi quoted A.L.M. Nicolas’s French translation of this passage in *The Dawn-Breakers*. Nabíl-i-A’zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, trans. and ed. by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1999), p. 76, n. 3.

The Báb subsequently addressed many Tablets to Khadíjih Bagum. To cite but a few examples, writing from Búshíhr, two days after His arrival in that city and before His journey to Mecca, the Báb expresses His affection for Khadíjih Bagum and His eagerness to return to Shiraz and be reunited with her.¹⁵ Elsewhere, He speaks of His awareness that His life is approaching its end and exhorts Khadíjih Bagum to be patient, adding that His own condition does not grieve Him; only the sorrow of His family brings Him sadness.¹⁶ And in another Tablet, He counsels Khadíjih Bagum to not allow, under any circumstance, grief to overcome her, but rather to be patient under all conditions and place her trust in the grace of God.¹⁷

The Báb also mentioned or alluded to Hájí Mubárak in several Writings. In a Tablet to His mother from the port city of Mukhá, for example, He states, “Mubárak continues to find life in service.”¹⁸ Alluding to Hájí Mubárak in His Kitáb-i-Jazá’ (the Book of Recompense), the Báb juxtaposes Muḥammad Sháh (d. 1848), the king of Persia, who rejected the Báb and descended into the lowest abyss for the deeds wrought by his own hands, with Hájí Mubárak, an enslaved person bereft of any earthly power, who was recompensed by God and ascended to the summit of glory for having done good in the Faith of God (*bi-má qad aḥsana fī dīni’lláh*).¹⁹

As important as these Writings are, none of them point to the presence of Khadíjih Bagum or Hájí Mubárak at the time of the Báb’s Declaration or to any recognition on their part of the Báb’s claims on or before the night of 23 May 1844. This is the more important given that, as we have seen, there is no shortage of references in the Writings of the Báb to the night of His Declaration and Mullá Ḥusayn’s response to His claims.

Academic History and the Limits of Reconstruction

A further issue in Lee’s article concerns the distinction between what he calls “academic history” and what he speaks of somewhat pejoratively as “Bahá’í sacred history.” First, it is important to note that the Bahá’í Faith does not possess a “sacred history” or “sacred story.” What does exist is the Bahá’í community’s memory of sacred events, which is shaped first and foremost by the authoritative Bahá’í Texts.

The article then shifts from description to prescription. The concluding assertion that “the silences in Bahá’í sacred history can and must be overcome” moves beyond academic historical analysis into a normative claim regarding how the Bahá’í community ought to remember its past. Such a claim raises important questions that the article leaves unexplored. By what criteria should the memory of sacred events be revised? Who possesses the authority to redefine the theological significance of the Declaration of the Báb? What is the relationship between academic reconstruction and memories of events that derive their significance in part from authoritative Texts and interpretations, including the Writings of the Báb Himself?

¹⁵ The Báb, quoted in INBA 58: pp. 164–5.

¹⁶ The Báb, quoted in INBA 58: p.183.

¹⁷ The Báb, quoted in Afnán, *‘Abd-i-A’lá*, p. 152.

¹⁸ The Báb, quoted in Baharieh Rouhani Ma’ani, *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees: An In-Depth Study of the Lives of Women Closely Related to the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2008), p. 10 (provisional translation).

¹⁹ Nader Saiedi, “The Ethiopian King”, trans. and annotated by Omid Ghaemmghami, *Bahá’í Studies Review*, 17 (2011), p. 181 (the original-language text of the transliterated phrase and its source were provided to the author by Nader Saiedi in an email dated 11 February 2019).

A related methodological tension appears in the article's treatment of narrative construction. Lee notes that historical narratives are shaped by selection, emphasis, and interpretation. He proceeds to draw attention to criticisms of Nabíl's narrative²⁰ and its English translation, *The Dawn-Breakers*²¹—contending that they in part are responsible for creating “silences in Bahá'í sacred history” through rendering Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárah “erased” or “overlooked.” Yet, Lee's alternative proposed narrative relies heavily on its own acts of reconstruction that go well beyond what the evidence supports. Phrases as “naturally,” “most likely,” “clearly,” “it would have been unthinkable,” “it would have been similarly unthinkable,” “it is possible to imagine,” and “it seems” (three times), constitute key structural elements of Lee's article. The result is a narrative reconstruction directed by conjectural historiography and driven by speculative language or interpretive assumptions.

Present Concerns, Authorial Intent, and Historical Context

A further concern is the article's reliance on contemporary frameworks of inclusion, representation, race, and gender. Such perspectives have undoubtedly enriched historical scholarship and helped recover neglected voices. Nevertheless, they must be applied carefully when studying nineteenth-century Iranian religious history. Historians remain attentive to the danger of anachronism, particularly when contemporary concerns become the primary lens through which historical actors are interpreted.

The question is not whether women, enslaved peoples, or other socially marginal figures deserve scholarly attention today; they plainly do. Rather, it is whether the relative absence of such figures from particular historical narratives should automatically be understood as evidence of erasure, exclusion, or marginalization in the modern sense. A careful historian first asks why the Báb Himself omitted reference to these two persons in recounting His Declaration, and further considers why a nineteenth-century author may have chosen to emphasise certain actors and not others within his own spiritual, theological, and intellectual framework, before assuming that omissions necessarily reflect the kinds of racial or gender-based exclusions that contemporary readers may perceive.

Lee treats the absence of Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárah from the story of the Declaration of the Báb as a problem requiring correction. Yet, this assumes that the purpose of Nabíl's narrative was to provide a comprehensive account of all persons present in the House of the Báb on the night of His Declaration, rather than to commemorate the moment through which the Báb's Mission was first manifested and consciously recognised by a representative of the human race. As mentioned, in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, the Declaration of the Báb is

²⁰ This, despite the fact that Nabíl records in his narrative, *The Dawn-Breakers*, that his account of the Declaration of the Báb was ‘related’ to him directly by the Báb's intimate disciple and scribe, Mullá ‘Abdu'l-Karím-i-Qazvíní (known as Mírzá Aḥmad-i-Kátib), after the latter heard Mullá Ḥusayn ‘repeatedly’ recount the story. Nabíl-i-A‘ẓam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 52.

²¹ Lee appears to suggest that Shoghi Effendi, in translating Nabíl's narrative, may have distorted the original-language text. He approvingly cites Denis MacEoin—the author of many works attacking the Bahá'í Faith and its administration—as an authority for having ‘criticized Shoghi Effendi's translation of Nabíl's narrative and questioned the value of *The Dawn-Breakers* as an historical source’. (On MacEoin's publications inimical to the Bahá'í Faith, see Moojan Momen, ‘Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community’, *Religion*, 37 (2007), pp. 187–209 (p. 194).) And Lee invites readers to watch a Zoom presentation by Will McCants on the topic, without providing a link or source by which they can do so. As stated in the front matter to *The Dawn-Breakers*, the book was ‘translated from the original and edited by Shoghi Effendi’.

fundamentally a story about manifestation, recognition, faith, and the inauguration of a new Dispensation. Nabíl's focus in his narrative is in line with the focus in the Writings of the Báb (not to mention Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá). His narrative consistently centres on Mullá Ḥusayn, not because other individuals present that night were unimportant, but because he was the first person to accept the Báb's claim and thereby became the first member of the new religious community. Whether one agrees with that focus or not, its organizing principle is spiritual and theological.

Historical narratives ordinarily organise significance around causation and relevance to the event being narrated. The question is not simply who happened to be present, but who materially shaped the event and its outcome. Khadíjih Bagum and Ḥájí Mubárak were present in the House of the Báb. But presence alone does not necessarily establish participation, nor does the omission from a narrative automatically indicate exclusion or marginalization.

Furthermore, every historical account requires a focus. It would be unfair to compare Nabíl's narrative with secular historical accounts written by today's academics. Nabíl's narrative considers significances that are ignored (or absent) in academic historical accounts. It would not be fair to criticise him because his concerns were different from the concerns of today's academic historians, and because he was writing for a Bahá'í audience. Lee takes the scarcity of references in Nabíl's narrative to Khadíjih Bagum and Ḥájí Mubárak as evidence of Nabíl's biases, and then claims that his biases were shaped by his milieu. But he fails to consider that Nabíl's focus is on the spiritual significance of the Báb's Declaration, which fully accords with the Writings of the Bab.

Has the Narrative Changed Only in Significance?

Finally, the article's conclusion contains an unresolved tension. Lee writes that incorporating Khadíjih Bagum and Ḥájí Mubárak into the story of the Declaration of the Báb does not change the narrative "in substance"; rather, it changes it in significance. However, if the Declaration is transformed from a foundational encounter between the Báb and Mullá Ḥusayn into a broader event involving additional witnesses and participants, then the substance of the narrative has changed in meaningful ways. The distinction between substance and significance becomes difficult to sustain.

Lee further claims that the event can now include "all of humanity." Yet, focusing on some specific human characteristics implicitly excludes people who do not share those characteristics. For example, if someone looks at the racial background of the individuals present, they do not represent "all of humanity," even if Ḥájí Mubárak is included. Similarly, Lee's claim that unless we include Khadíjih Bagum and Ḥájí Mubárak, the event would be considered "an exclusively patriarchal meeting of learned men" seems intended to pressure the reader. It is rather through a focus on the spiritual character of the event that the entire human race is included—generations of women and men of all ethnic backgrounds who have lived since that event or will live in the future.

The spiritual and theological significance of the Declaration of the Báb explored earlier is further illuminated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Commenting on John 3:7 ("ye must be born again") and discussing the meaning of creation and genesis in the Sacred Scriptures, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that references in Scriptures to the beginning of creation do not primarily concern the genesis of physical existence but rather a process of spiritual rebirth inaugurated by each Manifestation of

God.²² The significance of this and related passages in the Bahá'í Writings is that they locate the origin of each Revelation in the act of recognition, through which a new spiritual creation comes into being.²³

This conception is reinforced by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His commentary on the *Ḥadīth* of the Hidden Treasure. There He explains that the central purpose of the *Ḥadīth* is to describe the stages of God's concealment and self-disclosure within the Manifestations of God. He concludes that when souls reach the station of "recognizing the Manifestation and are able to witness the splendour of God's Most Great Sign in their hearts, then will the purpose of creation, which is the knowledge of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, become manifest."²⁴ The Declaration of the Báb is therefore not merely the beginning of a religious movement in the historical sense. It marks the moment at which the purpose of creation itself, understood as recognition of God's Manifestation, begins to be realised in a new Dispensation. It is for this reason that the Bahá'í Writings consistently organise the narrative of the Declaration of the Báb around Mullá Ḥusayn's recognition of the Báb, rather than around the physical presence of others who happened to be in the household that evening.

Viewed in this light, the Bahá'í focus on the encounter between the Báb and Mullá Ḥusayn reflects a cosmic conception of the Declaration itself. This emphasis does not imply that others present that night lacked importance. Rather, it reflects the spiritual logic through which the Bahá'í Writings themselves understand the dawn of a new Day.

Lee assumes that the Declaration should be interpreted as merely a historical event. The Bahá'í Writings themselves interpret it as the beginning of a new spiritual creation. Once one adopts the latter framework, the consistent emphasis on Mullá Ḥusayn's recognition is not accidental or socially conditioned but flows from the theological meaning of the event itself.

Conclusion: Historical Recovery and Historical Restraint

None of the above observations diminish the importance of recovering the histories of *Khadíjih Bagum* and *Ḥájí Mubárak* to the extent possible. Their lives deserve greater scholarly attention, and the study of their roles in early Bahá'í history remains an important undertaking, one that Shoghi Effendi himself anticipated: "The authentic record of the lives of the first believers of the primitive period of our Faith, together with the assiduous research which competent Bahá'í historians will in the future undertake, will combine to transmit to posterity such masterly

²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Muntakhabátí az Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 3 (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1992), pp. 7–8 (adding that in every age, the Manifestation of God is analogous to Adam and His first believer to Eve; all subsequent believers are spiritually born through them and constitute their progeny).

²³ E.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Muntakhabátí az Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 6 (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2005), pp. 181–2 (stating, in commenting on Qur'an 17:70 ('we honored the children of Adam'), that, in each Dispensation, Adam constitutes the first to believe, for he is the first creation; and the children of Adam are souls who enter beneath the shadow of the Word of God and are counted as his progeny and descendants); see Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawḥ-i-Hirtík*, Bahá'í Reference Library, www.bahai.org/r/569970643, [accessed 30 August 2024] ('The first one to believe [Peter] in Him Who was the Spirit [Jesus] was so enraptured by the Word of God that, in his eagerness to embrace its truth, he detached himself from everything that men possess. Such is the condition of all who would be leviathans in the Most Mighty Ocean.').

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 'Notes', no. 23.

exposition of the history of that age as my own efforts can never hope to accomplish.”²⁵ The question, however, is not whether Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárak were significant figures; the question is what is the spiritual and theological significance of the Declaration of the Báb.

The historical record permits us to say with confidence that Khadíjih Bagum and Hájí Mubárak were present in the House of the Báb on the night of 23 May 1844. It may even permit the inference that they had some awareness that an important event was unfolding in the House.²⁶ Yet, the Declaration of the Báb is ultimately about the moment “a new Day dawned and a wondrous light shone forth.”²⁷ According to the testimony of the Báb Himself, Mullá Ḥusayn was the only person that night, and indeed for the next forty days that followed it, who grasped its weight and import.

The recovery of neglected voices is among the most valuable contributions of contemporary scholarship. The desire to include previously overlooked actors should not, however, lead to blurring the distinction between evidence and possibility. And recovery need not require redefining the meaning of events whose significance is already articulated in the earliest and most authoritative sources available to us.

Author biography

Omid Ghaemmaghami is Professor of Middle East Studies at Binghamton University, the State University of New York (SUNY). He is the author of studies on the history and literature of Islam and the Bahá'í Faith, including *Encounters with the Hidden Imam in Early and Pre-Modern Twelver Shi'í Islam* (Brill, 2020) and, with Shahin Vafai, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury Academic, 2025) (www.exploringthebook.com).

Email: omid@binghamton.EDU.

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 98. Bahá'í scholarship in these and related areas has made great strides in recent years. Nader Saiedi's research article on references to Hájí Mubárak in the Writings of the Báb (referenced by Lee); the extensive chapter (pp. 22–60) on Khadíjih Bagum in Rouhani Ma'ani's *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees* (surprisingly absent from Lee's article); and Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam's article, 'The Báb on the Rights of Women', *Religions*, 14.6 (2023), are sure to be followed by further studies in these critical areas.

²⁶ Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1999), p. 5 (stating that the Báb was 'alone with His guest' and 'the sleeping city' was not 'remotely aware of the import of the conversation they held with each other').

²⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Light of the World*, no. 76, para. 7.