

Two Episodes from the Life of Bahá'u'lláh in Iran

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Summary

This article examines two episodes in the life of Bahá'u'lláh in Iran. The first involves an examination of the events, trajectory and timeline of Bahá'u'lláh's journeying between the end of the Conference of Badasht and His arrival at the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí. There appear to be different versions of this among three sources: Nabíl's Narrative, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This article attempts to examine these events more closely and come to a conclusion about what probably occurred. The second episode involves a close examination of a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh which is interpreted as revealing fresh information about the experience of Bahá'u'lláh while in the Siyáh Chál.

In the writing of history, it is frequently necessary to examine a number of sources about a particular event and come to a conclusion about what probably happened. This paper will focus on two episodes in the life of Bahá'u'lláh in Iran that require closer examination. In this study, use will primarily be made of passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, supported by other evidence.

A. The period between Bahá'u'lláh's departure from the Conference of Badasht until His Arrival at Shaykh Tabarsí

The first episode to be dealt with is the question of Bahá'u'lláh's activities between His departure from the Conference of Badasht until His visit to the Bábís at the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí. This period in the life of Bahá'u'lláh needs to be examined more closely because there are different accounts of events, trajectories and time-lines suggested by different sources: Nabíl's Narrative, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. We will here examine all three and make a suggestion as to which sequence of events seems the most likely.

1. Nabíl's Account

If one reads Nabíl's Narrative, one finds that Bahá'u'lláh left Badasht and travelled with other Bábís as far as the village of Niyálá. Niyálá is 115 kilometres in a straight line¹ from Badasht but must have take at least 10 days distance, given that it is through mountainous country. There the Bábís were attacked by the villagers and dispersed. Nabíl states that the incident at Niyálá occurred in the middle of Sha`ban 1264 (mid-August 1848).² From reading Nabíl's account, it would appear that after this episode, Bahá'u'lláh proceeded to Núr and it was there that orders arrived for Him to be arrested, conveyed to Tehran and there executed, orders that were then annulled the next day by the news of the death of Muhammad Sháh. The following is Nabíl's account of what happened at Niyálá and afterwards.

I have heard Bahá'u'lláh Himself describe that incident:

“We were all gathered in the village of Niyálá and were resting at the foot of a mountain, when, at the hour of dawn, we were suddenly awakened by the stones which the people of the neighbourhood were hurling upon us from the top of the mountain. The fierceness of their attack induced our companions to flee in terror and consternation. . . . None of our companions had remained in Niyálá except Táhiri and a young man from Shiraz, Mírzá 'Abdu'lláh. . . I found no one

into whose custody I could deliver Táhirih except that young man, who displayed on that occasion a courage and determination that were truly surprising. . .”

Bahá'u'lláh, accompanied by Táhirih and her attendant, proceeded to Núr. He appointed Shaykh Abu-Turab to watch over her and ensure her protection and safety. Meanwhile the mischief-makers were endeavouring to kindle the anger of Muhammad Sháh against Bahá'u'lláh, and, by representing Him as the prime mover of the disturbances of Sháh-Rud and Mazindaran, succeeded eventually in inducing the sovereign to have Him arrested. “I have hitherto,” the Sháh is reported to have angrily remarked, “refused to countenance whatever has been said against Him. My indulgence has been actuated by my recognition of the services rendered to my country by His father. This time, however, I am determined to put Him to death.”

He accordingly commanded one of his officers in Tihran to instruct his son who was residing in Mazindaran to arrest Bahá'u'lláh and to conduct Him to the capital. The son of this officer received the communication on the very day preceding the reception which he had prepared to offer to Bahá'u'lláh, to whom he was devotedly attached. He was greatly distressed and did not divulge the news to anyone. Bahá'u'lláh, however, perceived his sadness and advised him to put his trust in God. The next day, as He was being accompanied by His friend to his home, they encountered a horseman who was coming from the direction of Tihran. “Muhammad Sháh is dead!” that friend exclaimed in the Mazindarani dialect, as he hastened to rejoin Him after a brief conversation with the messenger. He drew out the imperial summons and showed it to Him. The document had lost its efficacy. That night was spent in the company of his guest in an atmosphere of undisturbed calm and gladness.³

The next time that Nabil's Narrative picks up the story of Bahá'u'lláh is His arrival at the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí shortly after Mullá Husayn and his companions had arrived there and just as they completed the task of creating some makeshift fortifications to defend themselves against the attacks that they knew were about to occur:

The work had scarcely been completed when Shaykh Abú-Turab arrived bearing the news of Bahá'u'lláh's arrival at the village of

Nazar Khán. He informed Mullá Husayn that he had been specially commanded by Bahá'u'lláh to inform them that they all were to be His guests that night and that He Himself would join them that same afternoon.⁴

Given that the last place that Nabíl had mentioned as Bahá'u'lláh's location was Núr and given that Shaykh Abu-Turab [Isthtihardi] is mentioned as having been in Núr with Bahá'u'lláh and Táhiri in the first quotation above and now appears in this second passage bringing news of Bahá'u'lláh's arrival, we are led to believe that Bahá'u'lláh must have come from Núr to be among the Bábís at Shaykh Tabarsí.

2. The decree for the arrest of Bahá'u'lláh

Problems begin to arise when we set the above account by Nabíl against statements made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in one of His Tablets. The following is a provisional translation:

*And so the Blessed Beauty (may my soul be a sacrifice to His loved ones) went to Bandar Jaz and the notables of Jaz showed Him the utmost respect and deference. Then Muhammad Sháh issued, through Hájí Mírzá Áqásí, the decree (farmán) for the execution of the Blessed Beauty. News of this arrived confidentially in Bandar Jaz. As it happened, on the next day, Bahá'u'lláh was invited to one of the villages of a local notable. The Russian officials and some of the local notables were insisting that Bahá'u'lláh should go to the Russian vessel [that was anchored in the port]. However much they urged and insisted, He would not agree. Then on the next day, He proceeded with a large crowd to that village. On the way, a rider came up and gave a paper to the adjutant of the Russian admiral (daryá-bigí). When he opened it, he shouted out with the utmost joy and said in the Mazandarani language "Mardí bimurd", which meant that Muhammad Sháh is dead. And so, on that day, when the local notables and the others present learned that Muhammad Sháh had issued a decree for the execution of the Blessed Beauty, they held a great feast and were in the utmost joy until late at night.*⁵

Jaz or Gaz is a town at the far eastern end of Mazandaran and Bandar Jaz or Bandar Gaz is the port of that town. From the above, it is clear that this is the same episode (of Muhammad Sháh's decree for the execution of Bahá'u'lláh and its annulment caused by his death) that Nabíl is describing in the first passage from Nabíl quoted above. It cannot be a decree of Muhammad Sháh given on a different occasion since both accounts describe how the decree was nullified by Muhammad Sháh's death. But instead of happening in Núr as the context in Nabíl would seem to indicate, in this account it happened in Bandar Jaz. Both places are in what was then considered to be Mazandaran but they are at the opposite ends of Mazandaran, 200 kilometres apart.

In fact Jaz and Bandar Jaz are situated a distance of about 40 kilometres to the north-east of the village of Niyálá. It therefore seems much more likely that Bahá'u'lláh went to Bandar Jaz immediately after the Niyálá episode. This would make sense of the fact that Nabíl records that Bahá'u'lláh entrusted Táhirih's safety to Mírzá 'Abdu'lláh Shírází, as mentioned in the passage from Nabíl above. He would not have needed to entrust Táhirih's safety to anyone if He had been accompanying her back to Núr Himself. He entrusted her safety to Mírzá 'Abdu'lláh because, after the attack at Niyálá, He was going to go towards Bandar Jaz and He needed someone to accompany Táhirih to Núr.

3. Arrival of Bahá'u'lláh at Shaykh Tabarsí

The death of a king in Iran, as indeed in most countries, was a major event and most people would accurately remember where they were when they first heard of it. Muhammad Sháh died in Tehran on 4 September 1848. News of it would have gone out by couriers (*chapar*) who rode from station to station only stopping briefly to change horses. It would have reached Bandar Jaz within three or four days. We can therefore place Bahá'u'lláh at Bandar Jaz on about 7th or 8th of September 1848.

We also know that Mullá Husayn Bushrú'í raised the black standard, signaling according to a well-known Islamic Tradition the advent of the Mahdí, just outside Mashhad on 19 Sha'bán 1264 (21 July 1848) and marched westwards with a band of Bábis. News of the

death of Muhammad Sháh reached Mullá Husayn when he and his companions had reached Chishmih-`Alí, about 60 kilometres north-west of Damghán.⁶ Chishmih `Ali is situated about 56 kilometres almost due south of Bandar Jaz and both are about equidistant from Tehran. News of Muhammad Sháh's death would have reached Mullá Husayn at about the same time as it reached Bahá'u'lláh. Thus we know where both Bahá'u'lláh and Mullá Husayn were on about the same date of 7th or 8th September 1848. From these two locations and this point in time, both were travelling westwards (Bahá'u'lláh almost due west towards Núr, Mullá Husayn in a west north-westerly direction, probably heading for Barfurush, Quddús's hometown, to try to find him).

Bahá'u'lláh would however have spent at a few more days in Bandar Jaz after the news of the death of Muhammad Sháh reached there. Then as He travelled, being a member of one of the notable families in Mazandaran, at each town and village that He came to, custom would dictate that the leading notable of that place would have invited Bahá'u'lláh to remain a few days and at the very least to remain for a substantial feast that would be given in His honour. Bahá'u'lláh's dignity and position in society would have demanded that He remain in each location a requisite length of time to show due honour to His host. Thus Bahá'u'lláh would have travelled slowly. In one Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to this when He says that He came to that region heading for Núr (provisional translation):

*This Wronged One came from the direction of Sháhrúd [near which Badasht is located] until we entered Gaz and visited that area. And from there we went on to Ashraf [the next town west of Gaz, now called Behshahr] and before reaching there to the district of Hizár Jaríb, village by village, town by town.*⁷

The phrase "village by village, town by town" indicates the slow nature of His progress. Mullá Husayn was however travelling with no such considerations. He did not need to stay in any place for longer than for a night's rest. He was therefore travelling westwards much more rapidly.

The route of Mullá Husayn took him to Bárfurúsh (now called Babol). He probably thought that he would find Quddús there in his

hometown. But Quddús had been arrested at Sári on his way back to Bárfurúsh from Badasht. After a clash with the mob that had been stirred up by Sa'ídu'l-'Ulamá, the religious leader of that town, Mullá Husayn and his companions proceeded to the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí where they arrived on 14 Dhu'l-Qad'ih 1268 (11 October 1848).⁸

The route that Bahá'u'lláh was taking westwards from Bandar Gaz and Ashraf would take Him through Sári and then 'Aliyábád. Near 'Aliyábád is the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí. Thus Bahá'u'lláh, travelling much more slowly than Mullá Husayn's party, would have arrived in the vicinity of Shaykh Tabarsí a couple of weeks after Mullá Husayn and his companions first arrived there and would have heard of the presence of the Bábís at Shaykh Tabarsí from the local inhabitants. Bahá'u'lláh would moreover have passed through Sári on His way and was able to give Mullá Husayn news of Quddús's whereabouts. And so a party was sent to Sari to rescue Quddús.⁹ Thus it seems very likely that when Bahá'u'lláh arrived at Shaykh Tabarsí, He was returning from the Conference of Badasht, coming from an easterly direction and not arriving from Núr to the west of Shaykh Tabarsí.

This sequence of events then makes better sense of why Bahá'u'lláh left Shaykh Tabarsí shortly after His arrival there. Nabil has Bahá'u'lláh arriving in Shaykh Tabarsí from Núr. Firstly, it is a long way from Núr to Shaykh Tabarsí, more than 70 kilometres. It is not clear how news of the arrival of Mullá Husayn at Shaykh Tabarsí could have reached Bahá'u'lláh in Núr so quickly. Second, if Bahá'u'lláh had come from Núr upon hearing of the arrival of Mullá Husayn and his companions in Shaykh Tabarsí, why did He leave again after so short a time, only to try to return again a few weeks later? If Bahá'u'lláh was coming from the east, returning from Badasht to Núr, however, this makes a great deal more sense. Firstly, His route would have taken Him very close to Shaykh Tabarsí, so it is likely that He heard of the Bábís at Shaykh Tabarsí from the villagers and townspeople of that area. Secondly, since He was returning from Badasht, He would have depleted all of the money that He had taken with Him. For the conference of Badasht, Bahá'u'lláh not only rented the gardens where the 81 Bábís attending the conference stayed but He also paid for their food for the twenty-two days of the conference. By the time he arrived at Shaykh Tabarsí on His way

back, He must have used up all of the money that He had taken with Him. Seeing the Bábís gathered at Shaykh Tabarsí, requiring provisions that needed to be bought in the surrounding villages, Bahá'u'lláh determined to return to Núr, where He could refurbish His supply of money and provisions. That is why He left Shaykh Tabarsí so soon after arriving. His intention to return was however thwarted when He was arrested with His companions, imprisoned and bastinadoed at Amul on His way back.¹⁰

4. Further details about Bahá'u'lláh's activities at Bandar Jaz

There are two other points that need to be cleared up about this period of time concerning a certain Mírzá Masíh Núrí who died while Bahá'u'lláh was at Bandar Jaz. Mr Hasan Balyuzi assumed that Mírzá Masíh lived in Bandar Jaz and died during Bahá'u'lláh's visit to that town and this is how he describes it at the beginning of Chapter Nine of his book *Bahá'u'lláh, the King of Glory* (p. 48). Mírzá Masíh Núrí was the nephew (sister's son) of Mírzá Áqá Khán Núrí who at this time was the minister of the army (*vazír lashkar*) and was later Prime Minister.¹¹ This family were distantly related both by blood and marriage to Bahá'u'lláh and their hometown was Baladih which was close to Bahá'u'lláh's home village of Tákur, in Núr, Mázandarán. Mírzá Masíh became a Bábí through Bahá'u'lláh and frequented Bahá'u'lláh's home in Tehran.¹²

The research for all of the above points of history was done at the time that I was assisting Mr Balyuzi with the research for his book *Bahá'u'lláh, the King of Glory*. I suggested on the basis of this research that the episode of Bandar Jaz be placed at the beginning of Chapter Nine (p. 48, where it now is) on Bahá'u'lláh's way back from Shaykh Tabarsí rather than at the end of Chapter Eleven after Bahá'u'lláh's detention at Amul as Mr Balyuzi had originally placed it and as the above Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to suggest.¹³

There is, however, further information about Mírzá Masíh in other Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh. In one Tablet written by Bahá'u'lláh in the voice of Mírzá Áqá Ján, He replies to a person who had asked about a phrase "Masíh in Rayy" which appears in another Tablet (provisional translation):

This refers to His Honour Hájí Mírzá Masíh Núrí (may the glory and mercy of God be upon him). I have on many occasions heard of him from the lips of the Ancient [Beauty]. On a journey which the Desire of the World undertook in the direction of Khurásán, he was in attendance and later he died and is buried between His Holiness [Sháh] 'Abdu'l-'Azím and Imámzádh Hamzih.¹⁴

The Bab had directed His followers to proceed to Khurásán to assist Quddús and Mullá Husayn there. Consequently Bahá'u'lláh, Táhirih and a number of other Bábís set off towards Khurásán. They then met Quddús who was coming from Mashhad at Badasht and the Conference of Badasht occurred. Thus the phrase “journey which the Desire of the World undertook in the direction of Khurásán” is a reference to the journey to Badasht and indicates that Mírzá Masíh accompanied Bahá'u'lláh from Tehran to the Conference of Badasht. Thus when he died in Bandar Jaz, he was not resident there (as is stated in *Bahá'u'lláh King of Glory*, p. 48), but had just arrived accompanying Bahá'u'lláh. Indeed as Mr Balyuzi states, Bahá'u'lláh fell ill after arriving at Bandar Jaz and it is likely that Mírzá Masíh suffered from the same infectious disease but he died of it.

The above point is confirmed by Nabíl who writes that when Bahá'u'lláh left Tehran in the direction of Khurasan, Mírzá Masíh could not bear the separation and hurried after Him. However this account by Nabíl creates another historical problem. As it is published in books by both Fadil Mázándarání and 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí, this quotation from Nabíl goes on to say that Mírzá Masíh accompanied Bahá'u'lláh as far as Darrih Gaz and died there.¹⁵ Darrih Gaz is situated in the remote north-western corner of Iran, close to the present-day border with Turkmenistan. In those days it was an extremely dangerous area to visit. There were frequent Turkomen raids into that area from the north which resulted in deaths, looting and the carrying off of prisoners to be sold as slaves in the markets of Central Asia. No-one would visit Darrih Gaz unless there was a pressing reason to do so and then only as part of a military convoy. There is no reason to suppose that Bahá'u'lláh visited Darrih-Gaz. It would appear that both Israq-Khavari and Mazandarani had a manuscript of Nabíl's Narrative where there was scribal error. “Darrih Gaz” was written instead of “dar Gaz” (in Gaz),

a difference of one letter in the Persian text. Indeed in another work, Ishraq Khavari correctly quotes Nabíl and says that Mírzá Masíh died “dar Gaz” – in Gaz.¹⁶

5. The Evidence Against

Having presented the evidence for the version of events that I favour, it is necessary to also necessary to present the evidence against it.

First, there is a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that has been referred to above. This Tablet, written to the Bahá’ís of Bandar Jaz, seems to suggest the following sequence of events: Bahá’u’lláh was heading towards Shaykh Tabarsí when His party was surrounded and attacked near Shaykh Tabarasí at Niyála, by Mírzá Taqí, the governor of Amul. Bahá’u’lláh was arrested and taken to Ámul. On the intervention of ‘Abbas Qulí Khán, He was released from there, but prevented from going to Shaykh Tabarasí. So Bahá’u’lláh proceeded to Bandar Jaz. While there, the decree of Muhammad Sháh for Bahá’u’lláh's arrest and execution arrived. Bahá’u’lláh was pressed to board the Russian ship that was in the harbour but refused. The next day, the news arrived that Muhammad Sháh had died and the decree was therefore void.¹⁷

Most of the description of events in this Tablet concurs with the rest of the historical evidence that we have and, indeed, I have quoted from this Tablet in the account given above. However the sequence of events presents problems. The attempt by Bahá’u’lláh to reach Shaykh Tabarsí and His imprisonment in Amul, which other accounts place as having occurred in late October 1850, over a month after the death of Muhammad Shah, is here placed before the death of Muhammad Sháh, the news of which only reaches Bahá’u’lláh after He has left Amul and arrived in Jaz. It is for this reason that preference has been given to the sequence of events suggested by the Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh that His visit to Bandar Jaz occurred on His way back to Núr from the Conference of Badasht.

A second piece of evidence that does not fit the sequence of events that we have suggested is Nabíl’s account that Mírzá Masíh was present in the house of Bahá’u’lláh when Hujjat-i Zanjani reported on his delivery of the Bab’s tablet *Khutbih-yi Qahriyyih* (the

Sermon of Wrath) to Hájí Mírzá Áqásí.¹⁸ This Tablet dates from immediately after the Bab's return to Chihriq after His trial in Tabriz, which would have been about the first week in August 1848. Thus this places Bahá'u'lláh and Mírzá Masíh Núrí in Tehran at a date in mid-August 1848 and certainly after the conclusion of the Conference of Badasht (early July 1848) and before Muhammad Sháh's death (4 September 1848). According to the sequence of events we have suggested, at this time in mid-August 1848, Bahá'u'lláh would still have been journeying back from Badasht and may have reached Bandar Jaz. In any case, Mírzá Masíh never returned to Tehran after the Conference of Badasht as he died in Bandar Jaz on his way back. It is just possible that Bahá'u'lláh travelled with Mírzá Masíh to Tehran immediately after the episode of Niyálá and there Hujjat came to His house in about mid-August. Then they travelled all the way back to Bandar Jaz, which is close to Niyálá, in about the end of August. It is not immediately clear however why Bahá'u'lláh should have zigzagged backwards and forwards in this manner over a distance of some 400 kilometres. The only possibility that presents itself is that, according to one unverified account,¹⁹ the person with whom Bahá'u'lláh was with His brother-in-law Mírzá Majíd Áhí, who was the Persian secretary at the Russian Legation in Tehran, when the *farmán* (decree) of Muhammad Sháh for Bahá'u'lláh's arrest and execution arrived but was subsequently annulled as a result of the death of Muhammad Sháh. It could be that Mírzá Majíd Áhí was sent to Bandar Jaz in order to translate for a Russian admiral who had arrived there aboard a Russian warship (as 'Abdu'l-Baha's tablet seems to suggest) and that Bahá'u'lláh had decided to accompany him together with Mírzá Masíh Núrí, who then died in Jaz. This would then mean that after Shaykh Tabarsi, Bahá'u'lláh's itinerary was: Badasht, Núr, Tehran (where He met with Hujjat); He then set out for Jaz (with Mírzá Masíh Núrí and Mirza Majíd Áhí); in Jaz, Mírzá Masíh Núrí died and Muhammad Sháh's decree arrived, then Baha'u'llah set out for Núr, visiting the Bábís at Shaykh Tabarsí on the way. There would just about have been enough time for this sequence of events to occur but it seems contrary to Baha'u'llah's statement that He came to Jaz from Shahrúd (i.e. Badasht), unless we assume two visits to Jaz (one on the way from Badasht and then one coming from Tehran with Mírzá Masíh).

Another resolution of the anomaly presented by Nabíl's account that can be suggested is that the Bab wrote several Tablets to Hájí Mírzá Áqásí and Muhammad Sháh and this episode of Hujjat coming to Bahá'u'lláh's house and reporting on his giving a Tablet of the Bab to Hájí Mírzá Áqásí refers to one of the Tablets that the Bab wrote before the Khutbih-yi Qahriyyih.

B. Bahá'u'lláh's experience in the Siyah Chal

What Shoghi Effendi describes as the "the birth of the Mission of Bahá'u'lláh" was a spiritual experience that Bahá'u'lláh had while He was imprisoned in the Siyáh Chál.²⁰ The attempt on the life of the Nasiru'd-Din Sháh by three Bábís occurred on 15 August 1852. Following this, all the known Bábís in Tehran were arrested and thrown into an underground dungeon that had formerly been a cistern, the Siyah Chal. At the beginning of the summer when it was customary for the notables of the town to retire to country estates to the north of Tehran in the cooler foothills of the Alborz mountains, the Prime Minister, Mírzá Áqá Khán Núrí, had ordered Bahá'u'lláh to go to his (the Prime Minister's) estate at Afchih to the north-east of Tehran. Bahá'u'lláh was there when the attempt on the life of the shah occurred. The Prime Minister's brother, Ja'far-Quli Khan, who was acting as His host, urged Him to flee to the Caspian coast and catch a ship to Russian territory, but Bahá'u'lláh refused. Instead He set off towards Tehran. On the way, He stopped off at Zargandih to visit His sister who was married to Mírzá Majíd Áhí, the Persian secretary of the Russian Legation in Tehran. He was seen entering the Legation and the Iranian government demanded His being handed over to them as He was a known Bábí. The Russian minister in Tehran agreed to this but asked however that he be shown any evidence that was found against Bahá'u'lláh. This was reported in the official government newspaper, *Rúznámih-yi Vaqáyi'-i Ittifáqiyyih* of 10 Dhu'l-Qa'dih 1268 (26 August 1852, p. 2, column 2) – this being probably the first published reference to Bahá'u'lláh in the world:

One of these [Bábís], named Mírzá Husayn `Alí Núrí, fled to Zargandih where the honoured Minister Plenipotentiary of the Russian Government was. The latter, as soon as he realized that [the fugitive] was from this wretched people, he

acted in accordance with the dictates of the accord that exists between the two governments. With the utmost wisdom, he forbade this and the servants of the embassy sent Him to the officials of the exalted [Iranian] government.

Once in the custody of Persian officials, Bahá'u'lláh was taken on foot to Tehran and thrown into the Siyáh Chál along with the other Bábí prisoners. The same issue of the same newspaper records the execution of thirty-five Bábís. According to the evidence in the reports of the British Minister in Tehran, Justin Sheil, ten of these were executed by the shah's executioners on about 21 August. Then on about 25 August, the remaining Bábís were handed over one by one to the members of various departments of the government and sections of society, each group vying with the other to find ever more gruesome ways of killing their prisoner on the streets of Tehran.²¹ The same issue of this newspaper (p. 2, col. 2) also reports that Bahá'u'lláh was condemned to imprisonment:

[As for] Mírzá Husayn `Alí Núrí, Mírzá Sulayman-Qulí, Mírzá Mahmúd and his nephew, Áqá `Abdu'lláh, the son of Áqá Muhammad Ja`far, and Mírzá Javád Khurázání, since investigations did not show that they were involved with the others in this corrupt and evil action, His Majesty the Shah ordered that they be imprisoned perpetually.

The exact date that Bahá'u'lláh entered the Siyáh Chál is not known but from the date of the attempt on the life of the shah and the above reports, we can surmise that it must have been on 16 or 17 August 1852. It was while Bahá'u'lláh was in the Siyah Chal that he had a spiritual experience that, as with all spiritual experiences, is very difficult to describes in this-worldly language. Bahá'u'lláh therefore uses various images, similes and metaphors to describe it in various passages of His writings. In the Súrih-yi Haykal, He describes it thus:

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden – the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord – suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul that her countenance shone

with the ornament of the good pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God's honoured servants.

*Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: By God! This is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, and yet ye comprehend not. This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could ye but understand.*²² [SLH 6]

In the Tablet to Násiru'd-Dín Sháh, the episode is described thus:

*O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing. And He bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven, and for this there befell Me what hath caused the tears of every man of understanding to flow.*²³ [SLH 95]

In the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: "Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Erelong will God raise up the treasures of the earth – men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him. [ESW 21]

And again in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

During the days I lay in the prison of Tihran, though the galling weight of the chains and the stench-filled air allowed Me but little sleep, still in those infrequent moments of

slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent that precipitateth itself upon the earth from the summit of a lofty mountain. Every limb of My body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear. [ESW 22]

Bahá'u'lláh was released from the Siyáh Chál and spent about a month at the home of His half-brother Mírzá Ridá-Qulí and his wife Maryam (Bahá'u'lláh's cousin), recuperating. Since the date of His departure from Tehran for exile in Iraq is stated to be 1 Rabi' II 1269 (12 January 1853), it appears that he left the Siyah Chal on about 13 December 1852. Thus Baha'u'llah's Siyah-Chal spiritual experience must have been between about 16 August and about 13 December 1852.

It is suggested by this writer that some extra information about Bahá'u'lláh's Siyah Chal experience can be obtained from the close examination of a Tablet that He wrote in the 'Akka period. The following is a provisional translation of a short passage from this Tablet. After writing about how in the Holy Scriptures of some religions there is mention of the burning of books and the killing of people, He writes about how, in His childhood, He saw an account of the killing of the tribe of Banú Qurayza. This was an episode in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Banú Qurayza was a tribe of Medina that had been allies of the Muslims but had then betrayed them in battle. After the battle, the Muslims returned to Medina to deal with Banú Qurayza, who surrendered to them. Muhammad had given the judgement of their fate to the leader of another Medinan tribe who had always been allies of the Banú Qurayza. This man sentenced all the men of the tribe to death and the women and children to be sold into slavery. This is a provisional translation of the passage that I wish to focus on:

- *When this Wronged One was a child, He read about the attack on the Banú Qurayzah, in a book attributed to Mullá Báqir Majlisí, and immediately became so grieved and saddened that the Pen is unable to recount it, even though what occurred was the command of God and had no purpose except the rooting out of the oppressors. Despite this, with the ocean of forgiveness and boundless mercy before His eyes, He*

beseeked the One True God, exalted be His glory, at that time for that which would be the cause of universal love, fellowship, and the unity of all the peoples of the earth.

- *Until (tá án kih) before sunrise on the second day of the month of [His] birth, all His comportment, speech and thought were thrown into turmoil, a tumult that gave glad tidings of exaltation (urúj). This tumult was sent down and manifest repeatedly, without interruption, for twelve days, after which the waves of the ocean of utterance became manifest and the effulgences (tajalliyyat) of the sun of certitude dawned,*
- *Until (ilá an) it culminated in the moment of Manifestation. Thus I attained unto that which God hath made the source of joy to all mankind and the dawning-place of His bounty to all who are in heaven and on earth.*
- *And after that (va ba`d), by means of an ineluctable and irrevocable decree of the Most Exalted Pen, we eliminated whatever had been the cause of suffering, distress, and discord, and rained down the instruments of unity and fellowship.²⁴*

The original is given here for those who read Persian and wish to check the translation:

- این مظلوم در طفولیت در کتابیکه نسبتش بمرحوم ملا باقر مجلسی بوده غزوه اهل قریظه را مشاهده نمود و از آن حین مهموم و محزون بود بشأنیکه قلم از ذکرش عاجز اگر چه آنچه واقع شده امرالله بوده و مقصود جز قطع دابر ظالمین نبوده ولکن چون دریای عفو و فضل بیکران مشاهده میشد لذا در آن ایام از حقّ جلّ جلاله میطلبید آنچه را که سبب محبت و الفت و اتحاد کلّ من علی الارض بوده
- تا آنکه در دویم ماه مولود قبل از طلوع جمیع اطوار و ذکر و فکر منقلب شد انقلابی که بشارت عروج میداد این انقلاب تا دوازده یوم متتابع و متوالی نازل و ظاهر بعد امواج بحر بیان مشهود و تجلیات نیر اطمینان مشرق و موجود
- الی ان انتهى الامر الی حین الظهور اذا فزت بما جعله الله مبدء فرح العالمین و مشرق العطاء لمن فی السموات و الارضین
- و بعد از قلم اعلی آنچه سبب زحمت و مشقت و اختلاف بوده بامر مبرم محتوم برداشتیم و آنچه علت اتفاق و اتحاد نازل و جاری

It is the hypothesis of this article that this passage records how, after learning of the killing of the Banú Qurayzah, a desire formed in the mind of Bahá'u'lláh as a child to be the instrument of bringing unity and harmony to the world and His description of how this desire was realized through the rest of His life. In describing this life-long process, Bahá'u'lláh has laid out four stages in the realization of His desire. These four stages are separated by three expressions each of which express the passing of a period of time, that may be short or long: “*tá án kih*”, “*ilá an*”, and “*va ba'd*”. The above translation has been laid out so as to emphasize and clarify these four stages.

The first stage is easy enough to identify since Bahá'u'lláh states that it was in His childhood. The other three stages have to be assessed according to Bahá'u'lláh's description of them. In the last stage He states that He “*eliminated whatever had been the cause of suffering, distress, and discord, and rained down the instruments of unity and fellowship*”. From among His writings, this description most closely resembles the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the Tablets that He revealed in Akka after the Kitáb-i Aqdas in which he outlined His social teachings; Tablets such as Ishráqát, Tajalliyyát, the Tablet of the World and the Book of the Covenant. In these Tablets Bahá'u'lláh writes about those things which human beings must do to bring about peace and unity. The most important of these Tablets have been published in a volume called *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

The most difficult of these four phases to identify is the second stage. With the mention of twelve days in this passage, it is tempting to think of the Declaration by Bahá'u'lláh of His mission in the Garden of Ridván in 1863. However, a specific date is given for the first of these twelve days: the “second of the month of birth”. It is most likely that “birth” here refers to Bahá'u'lláh's own birth and would thus be a reference to the month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar. However, the twelve days of Ridván did not fall in Muharram in 1863. There is a slight possibility that it refers to the month of the birth of Prophet Muhammad. Although the term *mevlid* is used in Turkish to designate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and the celebrations associated with it, the word *mawlúd* by itself does not specifically refer to the birth of Muhammad in the Persian usage, according to the dictionaries consulted by the present writer.

It is usual to say *mawlúd-i nabí*. Occasionally the month of the Prophet's birth is called Rabi` al-Mawlúd, but the writer was unable to find "Máh-i Mawlúd" referring to the month of the Prophet's birth, except in Kurdish. But in any case the twelve days of Ridván also did not fall during the month of the Prophet Muhammad's birth (Rabi` al-Avval) in the year 1863. So this reference to "twelve days" in this Tablet cannot be a reference to the twelve days of Ridván.

If one turns to the description of what occurred during and after these twelve days, one finds that what happened during the twelve days is described as having three features. First, it was of a sufficiently important nature as to throw Bahá'u'lláh's "comportment, speech and thought" into turmoil. Indeed the author is unable to find any other occasion when Bahá'u'lláh expresses Himself so strongly about His inner turmoil. Second, it gave tidings of exaltation (*urúj*). The word *urúj* may be significant in that it does not just signify exaltation as a description of an elevated emotive state but rather points to an elevation of a person's state. It is from the same root as the word *mi`ráj* (the night ascent of the Prophet Muhammad). In all it connotes a elevation in Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual state. Third, following this event, the "ocean of utterance" (*bahr-i bayán*) surged forth and "the effulgences (*tajalliyyát*) of the sun of certitude dawned". Both of these expressions "ocean of utterance" (*bahr-i bayán*)" and "effulgences (*tajalliyyát*)" are used repeatedly in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh to refer to His Manifestation and Revelation.²⁵ Thus this passage states that some episode occurred which caused a great tumult within the self of Bahá'u'lláh, which caused an elevation in His state and after which He began to reveal verses. All of these point to Bahá'u'lláh's Siyáh Chál experience as being the episode that is being referred to here. This experience which He variously describes as quoted above led to a tumult within Him, it led to an elevation of His spiritual state – He was wakened to His role as the Manifestation of God (as 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this²⁶); and after this, He began to reveal verses – the Rashh-i `Amá poem in the Siyáh Chál and all of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh during the Baghdad period.

This then leaves the third stage in this passage to be studied. The explanation seems clear from the first words of this passage. The words say: "Until (*ilá an*) it culminated in the moment (or time) of

Manifestation (*hín-i zuhúr*)." The moment or time of Revelation appears to be a reference to the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh at the Garden of Ridván in 1863. This is confirmed in the next sentence where the phrase "that which God hath made the source of joy to all mankind and the dawning-place of His bounty to all who are in heaven and on earth" could well refer to the Manifestation of God and the whole sentence says that Bahá'u'lláh attained to this state at this point, which would again point to the events of the Garden of Ridván.

We could therefore paraphrase this whole passage from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh thus:

Bahá'u'lláh writes that reading the story of the sufferings and killing of the Banú Qurayza filled Him with such sorrow that He beseeched God to bring about what would be the cause of love and harmony among the people for the world. Then in the Siyáh Chál, He had an experience that caused great turmoil with Him and elevated His spiritual state. After this He began to reveal verses. Later He openly manifested Himself in the Garden of Ridván. Finally he revealed the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and then a series of Tablets in which he gave all of the guidance necessary to eliminate the causes of suffering, distress, and discord and to bring about unity and fellowship, thus fulfilling what He had longed for in His childhood.

If this interpretation of this passage of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh is correct, then it gives us valuable new information about the birth of the Mission of Bahá'u'lláh in the Siyáh Chál. We can now say that the spiritual events that Bahá'u'lláh describes in the passages quoted above as the appearance of the Maid of Heaven, the breezes of the All-Glorious wafting over Him, or something flowing from the crown of His head over His breast like a mighty torrent, which signalled the birth of His Prophetic Mission, the beginning of His mission as a Manifestation of God, occurred repeatedly over a twelve day period from 2 Muharram to 13 Muharram 1269, which equates to 16 October to 27 October 1852 A.D. or 1 'Ilm to 12 'Ilm 9 B.E.

There are a number of things to note with regard to this finding. First, we can eliminate the slight possibility that the word *mah-i*

mawlúd (month of the birth) refers to the month of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Whether taking the Shí'í date of 17 Rabí` I or the Sunní date of 12 Rabí` I, neither of these dates falls within the period that Bahá'u'lláh was in the Siyáh Chál. Second, this event is placed just after the start of the Islamic year 1269, thus fulfilling the words of Shaykh Ahmad that the mystery of this Cause would be revealed after the year 1268:

The Mystery of this Cause must needs be made manifest, and the Secret of this Message must needs be divulged. I can say no more, I can appoint no time. His Cause will be made known after Hin (68) (i.e., after a while). [GPB 97]

And the references by the Báb to “after Hin” and to the “Year Nine”:

“In the year nine,” He, referring to the date of the advent of the promised Revelation, has explicitly written, “ye shall attain unto all good.” “In the year nine, ye will attain unto the presence of God.” And again: “After Hin (68) a Cause shall be given unto you which ye shall come to know.” “Ere nine will have elapsed from the inception of this Cause,” He more particularly has stated, “the realities of the created things will not be made manifest. All that thou hast as yet seen is but the stage from the moist germ until We clothed it with flesh. Be patient, until thou beholdest a new creation. Say: 'Blessed, therefore, be God, the most excellent of Makers!’” “Wait thou,” is His statement to Azim, “until nine will have elapsed from the time of the Bayan. Then exclaim: 'Blessed, therefore, be God, the most excellent of Makers!’” [GPB 29]

It is also of significance that, although Baha'u'llah was in the Siyáh Chál from late August 1852, Shoghi Effendi began the Holy Year to commemorate the centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's experience in the Siyáh Chál in October 1952 and closed the Holy Year in October 1953 (which corresponds to the centenary of the “Year Nine”, the Islamic year 1269).²⁷

NOTES

- ¹ All distances in this article are given as the straight line between the two places. The actual distance travelled would be more, sometimes much more. I am grateful to Bijan Masumian for his comments on this paper.
- ² Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 301.
- ³ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 298-300.
- ⁴ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 347-8.
- ⁵ 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí (ed.), *Má'idih-yi Ásmání* (9 vols., Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millí-yi Matbú'at-i Amrí, 106 BE/1950) vol. 5, pp. 170-71.
- ⁶ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 326.
- ⁷ Asadu'lláh Fádíl Mázandarání, *Asrár al-Áthár*, (5 vols., Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millí-yi Matbú'at-i Amrí, 124-29 B.E), vol. 1, pp.140-41; Asadu'lláh Fádíl Mázandarání, *Zuhúr al-Haqq*, vol. 3 ([Tehran]: n.p., n.d.), p. 112.
- ⁸ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 345.
- ⁹ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 349-53.
- ¹⁰ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 369-72.
- ¹¹ Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 7, p. 127.
- ¹² Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 323.
- ¹³ Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 5, pp. 169-71.
- ¹⁴ Mázandarání, *Zuhúr al-Haqq*, vol. 3, p. 217.
- ¹⁵ Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 7, pp. 126-7; 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí, *Qamus-i Iqan*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millí-yi Matbú'at-i Amrí, 128 BE/1971), pp. 812-3; Mázandarání, *Zuhúr al-Haqq*, vol. 3, pp. 216-7.
- ¹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí, *Aqdáh al-Faláh* (2 vols. 130-132 B.E./1974-1976) vol. 1, p. 40.
- ¹⁷ Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 5, pp. 169-71.
- ¹⁸ Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 323.
- ¹⁹ Dr Iraj Ayman informed me (in a telephone conversation on 1 January 2019) that Mr. Abu'l-Qásim Afnán, when he had just returned from a pilgrimage visit to the Holy Land, informed him that he had an opportunity to read the manuscript of the materials that Nabil had written for the second volume of his Narratives. He had photocopied and brought for Dr Ayman some pages in which was an account of the friendly relationship between Bahá'u'lláh and Mírzá Majíd Áhí; that they

had gone horseback riding together and, while they were riding, one of their people reached them on horseback to give them the news that was received from Tehran. He called on them and in Mazandarani dialogue said “*Mardi bemardeh*” i.e. Mohammad Shah has passed away. I have not however seen this text.

²⁰ MBW 124

²¹ Moojan Momen, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), pp. 134-36.

²² SLH para. 1.6-1.7. It is not immediately obvious from the context of this passage that it relates to Bahá'u'lláh's experience in the Siyah Chal, but Shoghi Effendi describes it as such in *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, rev. ed. 1995), pp.101-2.

²³ GPB 102.

²⁴ Fádil Mázandarání, *Asrár al-Áthár* vol. 2, pp. 17-18; Ishráq-Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 7, pp. 136.

²⁵ The occurrences of these two expressions with this meaning are too numerous to list here comprehensively. A few examples of each will be given here: “Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), v. 182, p. 85). “O Shaykh! I swear by God! The River of Mercy floweth, and the Ocean of Utterance surgeth, and the Sun of Revelation shineth forth resplendent.” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 142). For “*tajallí*”, there is the whole of the Tablet known as *Tajalliyát*, where each of the sections of the Tablet is described as a “*tajallí*” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), pp. 47-55). See also: Briefly, there hath been revealed in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Book of Certitude) concerning the Presence and Revelation (*tajallí*) of God that which will suffice the fair-minded. (ESW 118).

²⁶ SAQ 95-6.

²⁷ MBW 40, 52