

B

Báb, Festival of the Birth of the (October 20)

The Festival of the Birth of the Báb is one of five Bahá'í festivals and one of the nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is to be suspended. Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad of Shiraz, known by his spiritual title as “the Báb” (“the Gate”), was born on October 20, 1819, in Shíráz, Persia (now Iran). The Báb was the founder of a 19th-century new religious movement generally known as Bábism, the substance of which was transformed into what is now known as the Bahá'í Faith.

The Báb declared himself to be the long-awaited Qá'im (“Ariser”/“Resurrector”), the expected eschatological deliverer (known in Sunni Islam as the “Mahdí”), who, according to Islamic tradition, would come to revive Islam when it is at its lowest ebb. While proclaiming himself to be an independent “Manifestation of God,” the Báb also spoke of the imminent advent of the Promised One, or “Him whom God shall make manifest.” One of the Báb's followers, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), would later receive revelations confirming that he was that Promised One heralded by the Báb.

According to Armin Eschraghi, the Báb established a new Faith that fulfilled all the criteria of an independent religion: a new founder, newly revealed scriptures, a new set of metaphysical and theological teachings distinct from those of Islam, and new religious laws and principles. In revealing his new code of laws (called the *Bayán*), the Báb pursued three major goals: (1) paving the way for the advent of the Promised One; (2) provoking the clerical establishment and shattering the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority; and (3) proving the independence of his own religion as distinct from Islam.

Soon after the Báb publicly proclaimed his prophetic mission beginning on the evening of May 22, 1844, the Persian government began to suppress the movement, and violence ensued. The Báb was arrested and executed by a firing squad of 750 musketeers on July 9, 1850, in Tabríz, Persia. Subsequent to an unauthorized and ill-fated attempt on the life of the Sháh of Persia in 1852, the Sháh ordered the most brutal tortures and deaths of a great number of Bábís, with estimates ranging from around 5,000 to 20,000 martyrs, who, as Browne described it, were subjected to “[t]errible . . . modes of inflicting death. . . . Of the unfortunate Bábís, some were hewn in pieces, some were sawn asunder, some were flayed with whips, some were blown from the mouths of mortars” (Browne, “Bábíism,” in *Religious Systems of the World*, 348).

In the fall of 1852, arrested in the wake of this brutal persecution, Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the notorious Siyáh-Chál (“Black Pit”), during which time he experienced a series of visions that awakened him to his prophetic destiny. He was released but banished, exiled successively to Baghdad (1853–1863), Constantinople/Istanbul (1863), Adrianople/Edirne (1863–1868), and thence to the prison-city of ‘Akká, the vilest penal colony of the Ottoman Empire. In 1892, Bahá'u'lláh passed away in Bahjí, near ‘Akká in Palestine (now Israel).

In his article on “Bábíism” published that same year, Browne wrote: “I say nothing of the mighty influence which, as I believe, the Bábí faith will exert in the future, nor of the new life it may perchance breathe into a dead people; for, whether it succeed or fail, the splendid heroism of the Bábí martyrs is a thing eternal and indestructible.” The “Bábí faith” that Browne spoke of was succeeded by the Bahá'í Faith, which has since spread worldwide to become the most widely diffused world religion next to Christianity, according to the 2001 *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

Today, Bahá'ís accept the Báb as a John the Baptist figure, whose words and actions heralded the arrival of Bahá'u'lláh, but also as the cofounder of the Bahá'í Faith. Unlike John the Baptist in relation to Jesus Christ, the Báb revealed much in substance, both in terms of doctrine and religious laws, that was subsequently revoiced and reenacted, with certain revisions, by Bahá'u'lláh.

Although the Báb did not instruct his followers to formally observe the day of his birth, for that occasion, Bahá'u'lláh had revealed the Lawḥ-i Mawlúd, which awaits an authorized translation. Today, Bahá'ís worldwide annually celebrate the Birth of the Báb on October 20 as a holy day, with work and school suspended for the day. There being no required observances, Bahá'ís are free to creatively organize commemorative activities, which, although attended mostly by Bahá'ís, are open to people of all faiths and persuasions.

Christopher Buck and J. Gordon Melton

See also ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Ascension of; Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days); Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Fast; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Riḍván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

References

- Bahá'u'lláh et al. *Twin Holy Days: Birthday of Bahá'u'lláh, Birthday of the Báb: A Compilation*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1995.
- Browne, Edward G. “Bábíism.” In *Religious Systems of the World: A Contribution to the Study of Comparative Religion*, edited by William Sheovring and Conrad W. Thies, 333–53. London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1892.
- Eschraghi, Armin. “‘Undermining the Foundations of Orthodoxy’: Some Notes on the Báb’s Sharí‘ah (Sacred Law).” In *A Most Noble Pattern: Essays in the Study of the Writings of the Báb*, edited by Todd Lawson. Oxford: George Ronald, 2011.

Keil, Gerald. *Time and the Bahá'í Era: A Study of the Badí' Calendar*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2008.

Walbridge, John. "The Birthday of the Báb." *Sacred Acts, Sacred Space, Sacred Time*, 217–18. Oxford: George Ronald, 1996.

Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the (May 23)

The Festival of the Declaration of the Báb is one of five Bahá'í festivals, and nine Bahá'í holy days on which work is to be suspended. This holy day commemorates and celebrates the prophetic mission of the Báb, whose short-lived faith-community, the Bábí religion, was succeeded by the Bahá'í Faith, and whose doctrines—as well as several significant religious laws and observances—were taken up in the Bahá'í religion, effectively making the Báb “the martyr Prophet and co-founder of their Faith” (Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, 233) alongside its principal founder, Bahá'u'lláh.

The Báb (1819–1850), whose given name was Sayyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad of Shiraz, was the precursor and herald of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), whose given name was Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí. The Báb’s relation to Bahá'u'lláh is somewhat analogous to John the Baptist’s role as the precursor and herald of Jesus Christ. By “Declaration” is meant two things: (1) the Báb’s announcement of his prophetic mission; and (2) the moment when the Báb’s first disciple, Akhúnd Mullá Ḥusayn Bushrú’í (1813–1849), recognized the Báb’s prophetic mission and became the first believer. Thus, the Declaration of the Báb took place on the evening of May 22, 1844. The signal moment was 2 hours and 11 minutes after sunset, as the Báb himself states, in *Persian Bayán* 2:7 and 6:13, and also in the *Kitáb-i Panj Sha‘n* (“Book of [the] Five Modes [of Revelation]”), revealed exactly six lunar years later, on March 19, 1850.

The Declaration of the Báb is one of the “two Most Great Festivals” which, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is “that day on which We [Bahá'u'lláh] raised up the One [the Báb] Who announced unto mankind the glad tidings of this Name [Bahá'u'lláh], through which the dead have been resurrected and all who are in the heavens and on earth have been gathered together” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 59 [brackets added]). The Declaration of the Báb actually falls on the Gregorian calendar date of May 22 in the evening (i.e., 2 hours and 11 minutes after sunset), but since the Bahá'í day begins at sunset on what would normally be regarded in the West as the evening before May 23 (i.e., on the evening before the Muslim lunar date of Friday, the fifth day of Jamá-díyu'l-Avval AH 1260 or May 23, 1844). Thus, the Declaration of the Báb is formally listed as May 23, even though it is observed on the evening of May 22.

The other “Most Great Festival” is the 12-day “Festival of Riqdán” (April 21–May 2). What the two “Most Great Festivals” have in common is that they commemorate the prophetic declarations of the “Twin Founders” of the Bahá'í Faith,