

THE LIFE OF THE BÁB

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Siyyid Mírzá ‘Alí-Muḥammad-i-Shírází, known to history as the Báb (meaning ‘the Gate’), is recognized by Bahá’ís as an independent Manifestation of God, the Founder of the Bábí religion, the Forerunner of Bahá’u’lláh, and—together with Bahá’u’lláh—one of the twin Founders of the Bahá’í Faith. This chapter provides a biographical sketch of the Báb’s life. A separate chapter is dedicated to His writings and teachings.

The family and early life of the Báb

At a time of social and political upheaval, the Báb was born in the province of Fars, in the southern region of Persia (now Iran), on 1 Muḥarram 1235 (20 October 1819), though it merits noting that at times in His writings He calculates the beginning of His life from the day He was conceived rather than the day of His birth (Saiedi 2011: 182–183). The Báb was born to a family of merchants who traced their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) from the lineage of Imam Husayn (d. 680). The Báb’s father, Siyyid Muḥammad-Riḍá, died before the Báb could develop any memories of him (Afnán 2008: 9, n. 39). After the passing of His father, the Báb was reared by His mother, Fáṭimih Bagum (d. 1881) (Rouhani Ma’ani 2008: 3–25), and one of her brothers, Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí (d. 1850). An Ethiopian servant in the household, named Mubárák, is also extolled by the Báb for having contributed to training and nurturing Him in His childhood (Saiedi 2011: 182).

As attested in a number of anecdotes, the Báb was a gentle, precocious, and gifted child who displayed qualities of spiritual and intellectual excellence (Lambden 1986: 2–9; Amanat 2005: 110–121; Afnán 2000: 30–37). Owing to His acumen and wisdom, the Báb was taken out of the traditional primary school He attended (Mázindarání 1938: 193). The Báb had some consciousness of His unique station as a Manifestation of God from a young age. In the *Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’*, the first major work authored by the Báb after His declaration, He states that He was aware of the truth of His station as a child (Afnán 2008: 9 n. 38). In the

The declaration of the Báb and his pilgrimage to Mecca

The nineteenth century was a period of messianic expectation in many parts of the world. In the Shi'ih Muslim heartlands of Persia and Iraq, the year 1844 marked a thousand lunar years since the alleged disappearance of the Twelfth Imam, who is identified by Shi'ih Muslims as the Qa'im (the promised messianic deliverer of Shi'ih Islam). As such, expectations of the Imam's return in Persia and Iraq were heightened (Amanat 2005: 70–105). A few hours before sunset on 22 May 1844, the Báb encountered a religious student named Muḥammad Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í, who came to be known as Mullá Ḥusayn (d. 1849), at the Darvázih Kázirún in the south of Shiraz (Afnán 2000: 61). Mullá Ḥusayn had been a student of the recently deceased Siyyid Kázim-i-Rashtí in Karbala for some nine to eleven years. The Báb had months earlier been apprised of the passing of Siyyid Kázim-i-Rashtí: in one of His earliest writings, He states that He learned the news of the death of Siyyid Kázim-i-Rashtí in a dream in which the land of Karbala disintegrated into pieces, hovered in the air, and presented itself before the house of the Báb in Shiraz (quoted in Lawson 1987: 76; Amanat 2005: 168) (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 The house of the Báb in Shiraz, Iran, destroyed in 1979.

Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

a tablet addressed to the Shah, that others in the royal court, out of jealousy, ignorance, greed, or spite, prevented Mullá Ḥusayn from delivering the Báb's epistle to him:

I despatched a messenger and a book unto thee, that thou mightest act towards the Cause of Him Who is the Testimony of God as befitteth the station of thy sovereignty. But inasmuch as dark, dreadful and dire calamity had been irrevocably ordained by the Will of God, the book was not submitted to thy presence, through the intervention of such as regard themselves the well-wishers of the government.

(The Báb, *Selections* 13)

Upon receiving a report from Mullá Ḥusayn about his travels, in the fall of 1844, the Báb, accompanied by Quddús and Mubárák, His Ethiopian servant,² embarked on a journey to Arabia to undertake the hajj. In Mecca, the Báb by one account publicly announced that He was the promised one of Islam (other accounts suggest He only told selected people) and addressed a letter to the custodian of the Kaaba. Throughout the journey, the Báb dictated numerous treatises and sermons. On the return trip to Persia, from the port of Makhá (Mocha in present-day Yemen) He addressed a letter to His uncle and a tablet to His followers, in which He exhorted them to proclaim His Cause (Afnán 2013: 182–183, 192–193). He subsequently sojourned in Masqaṭ (Muscat in present-day Oman) for approximately six weeks as a guest of the Sultan. During this time, He addressed numerous tablets to ecclesiastical leaders in Iraq, Persia, and Masqaṭ.

To fulfill Shi'ih messianic prophecies about the appearance of the Qa'im, the Báb had originally intended to travel from Mecca to Karbila in order to proclaim His Cause. During His pilgrimage to Mecca, word reached the Báb that Mullá 'Alí-i-Bastámí (the second person to profess belief in Him)—whom the Báb had sent to Iraq with a copy of the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá' to deliver a proclamatory message from the Báb, without divulging His identity, to the foremost Shi'ih cleric of the time and to share His writings with the students of the deceased Siyyid Kázim-i-Rashtí—had been rebuked, arrested, tried, condemned, and banished to Istanbul by a joint tribunal of Sunni and Shi'ih 'ulamá. The tribunal's edict denounced the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá' as a heretical text and charged that its author deserved to be killed because He claimed to have the ability to reveal divine verses. The Báb's desire that no further sadness, conflict, or dissension ensue, and His concern that His followers not be harmed as a result of injustice and tyranny, motivated Him to change His plan and return to Persia. From Masqaṭ, He instructed His followers who had gathered in Karbala to proceed to Isfahan (Afnán 2000: 183–186; Amanat 2005: 252; Momen 2018: 5). Returning to Bushehr in early June 1845 on the last leg of His journey home, He instructed Quddús to travel to Shiraz ahead of Him and begin sharing His message in that city. The first person—after the Letters of the Living—to embrace the Cause of the Báb in Shiraz was the Báb's aforementioned uncle Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí, who was later executed for his adherence to the message of his nephew ([Zarandí] 1932: 75). Quddús and another prominent early believer named Mullá Šádiq-i-Khurásání were subsequently arrested, tortured, and expelled

from the city by order of the Governor of Fars, Ḥusayn Khán, who summoned the Báb from Bushehr to answer for the commotion and excitement His message had aroused in Shiraz.

The return of the Báb to Shiraz and his stay in Isfahan

Upon the Báb's arrival in Shiraz in the summer of 1845, He was detained and brought before Ḥusayn Khán. The governor reproached the Báb and released Him to the custody of His uncle Ḥájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí, but not before commanding his attendant to strike the Báb in the face. In His writings, the Báb laments the abuse He suffered at the hands of Ḥusayn Khán and his numerous attempts to suppress His message: 'While I was in Shíráz the indignities which befell Me at the hands of its wicked and depraved Governor waxed so grievous that if thou wert acquainted with but a tithe thereof, thou wouldst deal him retributive justice' (The Báb, *Selections* 13). The Báb was subsequently asked to visit one of the central mosques of the city to clarify His position and calm the excitement of the masses. Thus, during Friday prayers, the Báb publicly affirmed His faith in God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Imams and disavowed any claim to being the gate, representative, or intermediary of the Hidden Imam ([Zarandí] 1932: 154). In doing so, the Báb was not only implicitly rejecting superstitions associated with the Hidden Imam—an imaginary figure believed to have entered occultation in the ninth century—but also hinting that His station was far greater than that of an Imam or a representative to the Imam. This clarification of His position had the opposite effect of what the governor intended. His tone, conduct, behaviour, and calm demeanour before a partly hostile audience impressed many of those in attendance and encouraged others in Shiraz to inquire further about His position and become adherents (Faydí 1987: 160–169).

The proclamation efforts of the Báb's disciples throughout Persia excited further interest in the Báb. It was at this time that two notable Muslim scholars embraced His message: Siyyid Yaḥyáy-i-Dárábí (d. 1850) and Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí-i-Zanjání (d. 1851). The former, associated with the Qájár royal court, was sent by Muḥammad Sháh to investigate the claims of the Báb. In the course of three interviews, the Báb answered the questions the proud scholar posed to Him and, in response to a wish Dárábí held in his heart but had not voiced, the Báb wrote a voluminous commentary on the shortest Súrih of the Qur'an. Astonished by the interpretations, the speed at which the Báb wrote, the force of His style, and His mellifluous voice as He chanted the verses, Dárábí resigned his post at the royal court and embraced the Cause of the Báb. The Báb surnamed him Vahíd (meaning 'unique') (Mázindarání 2008: 231, 361–375; Mázindarání n.d.: 87–90; Rabbani 2006: 17–41; Ahdieh and Chapman 2013: 53–57).

The second Muslim scholar, Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí-i-Zanjání, was a highly erudite cleric and skilled orator who served as one of the foremost religious authorities in the northwest city of Zanjan. Upon hearing about the Báb, he sent a representative to Shiraz to investigate

the matter and receive a copy of the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá' or a letter from the Báb. Witnessing the Báb's 'overwhelming authority and knowledge' (Walbridge 1996: 345), Zanjání embraced His message and was surnamed Ḥujjat (meaning 'proof') (Mázindarání 2008: 142–148; Walbridge 1996: 345–350).

The unabated animosity of Ḥusayn Khán and a cholera outbreak in Shiraz caused the eventual transfer of the Báb from Shiraz to Isfahan in September 1846. Upon arriving in Isfahan, the Báb stayed for forty days at the home of one of the main prelates of the city. During this time, the governor, Manúchíhr Khán, the Mu'tamidu'd-Dawlih (d. 1847), investigated and embraced the Cause of the Báb and offered Him his protection. When a number of clerics issued an edict condemning the Báb to death, Manúchíhr Khán surreptitiously concealed the Báb in his home, until his death in March 1847. In His writings, the Báb noted that

the Mu'tamidu'd-Dawlih ... became aware of the truth of the Cause and manifested exemplary servitude and devotion to His chosen ones. When some of the ignorant people in his city arose to stir up sedition, he defended the divine Truth by affording Me protection for a while in the privacy of the Governor's residence.

(The Báb, *Selections* 14–15)

The Shah of Persia, now curious about the youth who had converted one of his most trusted governors and one of the most respected clerics associated with his court, desired to meet the Báb and ordered that He be brought to the capital.

The Báb in Azerbaijan

Fearful that a meeting with Muḥammad Sháh might influence the monarch and thus diminish the influence he exerted over the Shah as his spiritual guide, the grand vizier, Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí (d. 1849), convinced the Shah not to bring the Báb to the capital but rather to assign Him to a fortress reserved for criminals in Mákú in the mountains of Azerbaijan near Persia's border with the Ottoman Empire. The death of Manúchíhr Khán in March 1847, therefore, precipitated the transfer of the Báb, a month later, from Isfahan to the northwestern reaches of Persia. After stops in Kashan and Kulayn, the Báb travelled via Tabriz and arrived in Mákú in the summer of 1847 (Figure 2.2).

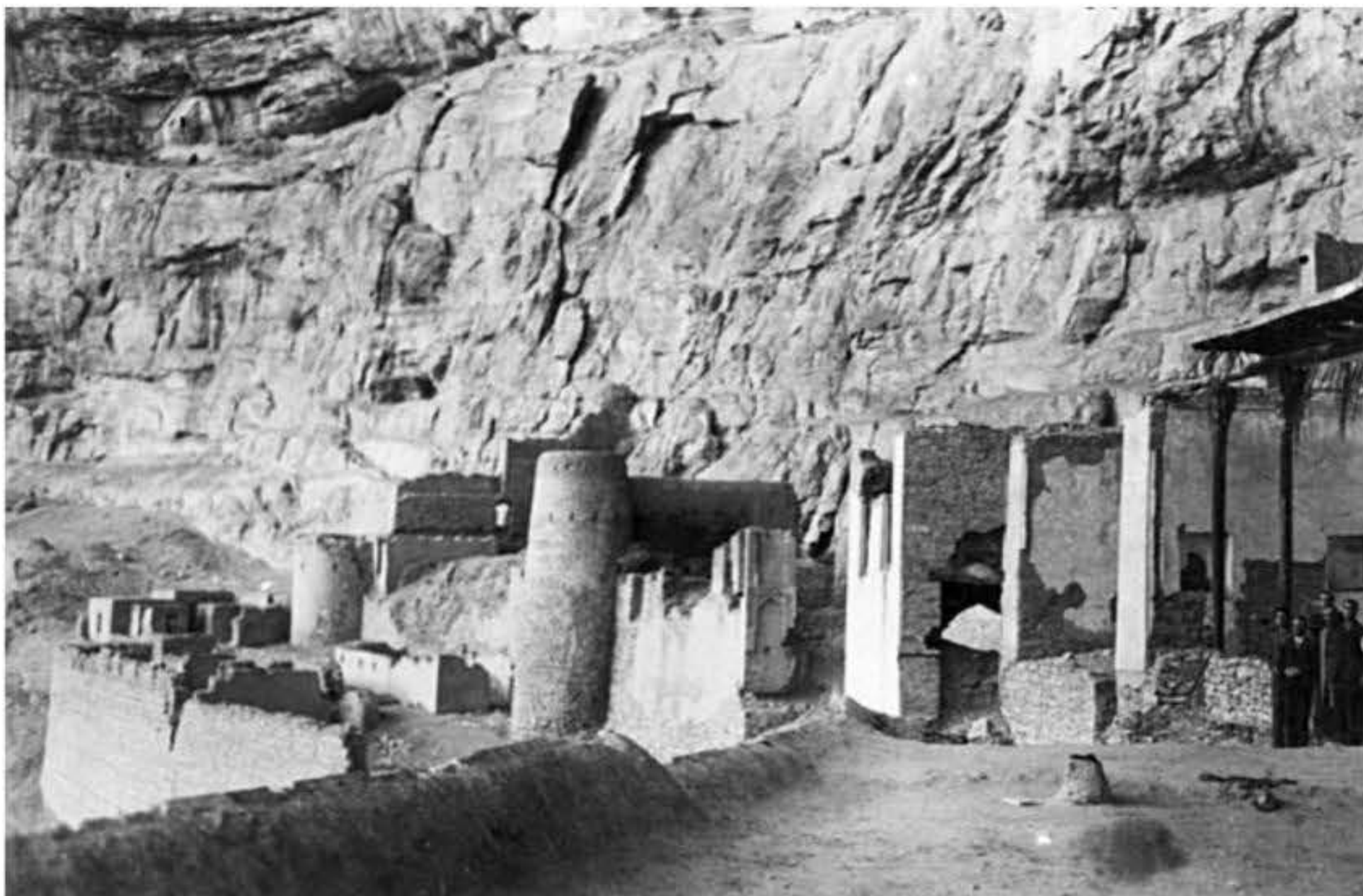


Figure 2.2 The fortress of Má-Kú.

Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

The conditions of the fortress were described by the Báb in a letter addressed to Muḥammad Sháh:

I swear by the Most Great Lord! Wert thou to be told in what place I dwell, the first person to have mercy on Me would be thyself. In the heart of a mountain is a fortress [Mákú] ... the inmates of which are confined to two guards and four dogs. Picture, then, My plight ... I swear by the truth of God! Were he who hath been willing to treat Me in such a manner to know Who it is Whom he hath so treated, he, verily, would never in his life be happy. Nay—I, verily, acquaint thee with the truth of the matter—it is as if he hath imprisoned all the Prophets, and all the men of truth and all the chosen ones.

(The Báb, *Selections* 14)

The decision to incarcerate the Báb in Mákú was, after His declaration, the most critical turning point in His life. During the approximately nine months He was imprisoned in Mákú, the Báb declared His true station as the promised Qa'im and abrogated the social laws of Islam. He affirmed that out of compassion, God had decreed that the Báb enjoin the observance of the laws of the Qur'an in His earlier writings—this, so that the people might not be seized with perturbation by a new book and a new revelation and might regard His Faith as similar to their own. He further stated that earlier in His ministry, He did not wish His identity to be divulged and gave instructions that His name and true station be deliberately concealed behind a veil of ambiguity on account of the inability of the masses to understand the independent nature of His message and the potency of His Cause. Even

His use of the title 'Gate' was meant to lessen the impact of His otherwise unequivocal claim to be a Manifestation of God. He wrote:

Consider the manifold favours vouchsafed by the Promised One, and the effusions of His bounty which have pervaded the concourse of the followers of Islam to enable them to attain unto salvation. Indeed observe how He Who representeth the origin of creation, He Who is the Exponent of the verse, 'I, in very truth, am God', identified Himself as the Gate [Báb] for the advent of the promised Qá'im, a descendant of Muḥammad, and in His first Book enjoined the observance of the laws of the Qur'án, so that the people might not be seized with perturbation by reason of a new Book and a new Revelation and might regard His Faith as similar to their own, perchance they would not turn away from the Truth and ignore the thing for which they had been called into being.

(The Báb, *Selections* 119)

In Mákú, the Báb laid down the fundamental laws and precepts of His dispensation in His most important works: the Persian Bayán and the shorter Arabic Bayán. Throughout His writings in this final phase of His ministry, the Báb prophesied the imminent appearance of a figure He had previously referred to in His writings using Islamic terminology, as, among other things, 'the Remnant of God,' but He now began to call 'Him Whom God shall make manifest.' Notably, the Báb did not appoint an interpreter to His writings or a successor; rather, He conditioned His laws and teachings on their acceptance by Him Whom God shall make manifest. The Persian Bayán, in fact, can be considered a eulogy of Him Whom God shall make manifest, rather than a code of laws designed to be implemented by societies and institutions in the future (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 25).

In March 1848, Mullá Ḥusayn visited the Báb for nine days. The Báb instructed Mullá Ḥusayn to travel and visit the Bábís throughout northwest Persia and then proceed to Mazandaran to find 'the Hidden Treasure,' an allusion to Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-'Alí-i-Núrí, whom Mullá Ḥusayn subsequently met. The next month, Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí, pressured by the Russian Minister in Tehran (Momen 1981: 72) and alarmed by the growing popularity of the Báb and the access He enjoyed to the outside world, ordered that the Báb be transferred from the fortress of Mákú to the bleak and lonely mountain fortress of Chihríq some two hundred kilometres to the south. In Chihríq, to which the Báb refers in His writings as the 'Grievous Mountain,' the Báb was subjected for over two years to a confinement that was even harsher than that which He experienced in Mákú.

In June 1848, a few months after the Báb arrived in Chihríq, some of His followers, at the direction of Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-'Alí-i-Núrí, convened a historic conference in the hamlet of Badasht in northern Persia to implement the Bayán, announce the abrogation of Islamic law and a formal break from the traditions of the past, and proclaim the inauguration of a new religious dispensation, symbolized famously by the dramatic act of Ṭáhirih's public unveiling. The conference was of momentous importance because it marked the conscious

break that many Bábís made with past traditions. At approximately the same time, the Báb was taken from Chihríq to Tabriz to face trial for apostasy before a group of high-ranking clerics. En route to Tabriz, the Báb sojourned for ten days in Urmia, where the only known portrait of Him was sketched by a local artist.³ At the trial in Tabriz, when asked about His station in the presence of the Crown Prince and before the prominent clerics of the city, the Báb declared that He was the promised one of Islam, thus stating openly and publicly what up until then He had stated implicitly—though at times also explicitly—in writing to His disciples and detractors: namely, that His station was that of a new, independent Manifestation of God with the ability to write verses and establish laws, to abrogate the laws of Islam, and to begin a new religious cycle. In support of His claims, the Báb calmly began to utter verses yet was interrupted with demeaning and unrelated questions that derived from traditional conceptions of knowledge. He refused to dignify the insolence of the clerics (MacEoin 2009: 409–450; Kashsháfi 2021). At the conclusion of the trial, the Báb was condemned to suffer corporal punishment and sustained wounds on His feet and face. Before being taken back to Chihríq, the Báb was treated by a physician of Irish origin named William Cormick (d. 1877), the only Westerner to meet the Báb, who recorded his impressions ([Zarandí] 1932: xxxii; Balyuzi 1973: 145; Momen 1981: 74; Amanat 2005: 391–392). Cormick described the Báb as

a very mild and delicate-looking man, rather small in stature and very fair for a Persian, with a melodious soft voice, which struck me much.... In fact his whole look and deportment went far to dispose one in his favor.

(Amanat 2005: 109)

The last two years of the Báb's incarceration in Chihríq witnessed the large-scale persecution of His followers and a series of confrontations between the Báb's supporters and the state in 1848 and 1849. In an attempt to quell further upheavals and impede the advancement of the new faith, the chief minister to the newly crowned Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, Mírzá Taqí Khán, better known as Amir Kabír (d. 1852), condemned the Báb to death. On his orders, the Báb was transferred yet again from Chihríq to Tabriz. Anticipating this move, the Báb had entrusted His last tablets and seals to one of His amanuenses to deliver to Jináb-i-Bahá in Tehran.

The Báb arrived in Tabriz in late June 1850. Divested of His green turban, cloak, and sash—symbols of His noble lineage as a *siyyid*—he was taken barefoot to the barracks in Tabriz. One of His ardent disciples, Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí-i-Zunúzí, surnamed Anís (meaning ‘companion’), threw himself at the Báb's feet and begged the guards to allow him to accompany the Báb. Members of Anís's family attempted to persuade him to return home, even going so far as to bring his two-year-old child into the barracks in order to plead with him to abandon his belief in the Báb, but he maintained his unwavering allegiance and devotion to Him and refused to recant his faith or leave the Báb's side (Mehrabkhani 2011: 80–83).

The life of the Báb ended with His execution—together with Anís—by a military firing squad in Tabriz on 9 July 1850; He was thirty-one years of age. The public nature of the execution appears to have been designed so as to demonstrate to the masses the full control of the government (Amanat 2005: 402) and perhaps reduce the possibility of later speculation that He was still alive. A regiment of 750 soldiers under the authority of Colonel Sâm Khán of the Christian regiment of Urmia ranged itself in three files and was ordered to discharge a volley of bullets. When the cloud of smoke cleared, the great throng of onlookers was astonished; the Báb had vanished. The bullets had severed the ropes by which the Báb was suspended but had not harmed Him. The Báb was eventually found in His prison cell concluding a private conversation with His amanuensis that had earlier been interrupted. A second regiment under the authority of its commander, Áqá Ján Khán-i-Khamsih, was called in, and this time, the volley tore the bodies of the Báb and Anís to pieces. The firing squads of both regiments consisted of 750 men, though several sources indicate even higher numbers of riflemen (Nicolas 1905: 375; Kazemzadeh 1973: 14). Hájí Mu'ínu's-Saltānih, for example—who, in researching his account of the martyrdom of the Báb, personally interviewed over one hundred individuals in Tabriz who were present on that day—writes that Sâm Khán ranged his regiment of one thousand soldiers into three files and ordered them to open fire at the Báb one after the other (Mu'ínu's-Saltānih n.d.: fols. 308, 318–319).

The remains of the Báb and Anís, which were so intermingled as the result of the force of the bullets that they could not be separated, were secretly removed from the edge of the moat outside the city, in which they had been cast, and transferred in secrecy to Tehran. After years of concealment, the Báb's remains were quietly moved under the direction of Bahá'u'lláh and then 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Ottoman Palestine, where they were interred in a Shrine built by 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the slopes of Mount Carmel in the port city of Haifa in March 1909. Over forty years later, as the Bahá'í community expanded under the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His successor, Shoghi Effendi, its members were able to contribute funds for the building of a superstructure to the Shrine, which was completed in 1953 (Figure 2.3).

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Although shorter than Balyuzi 1980, this book uses a number of sources not used in that book.

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This book written by the head of the Bahá'í Faith may be regarded as the official sacred history of the Bahá'í community.