Selected Stories from the Life of the Bab prior to His Declaration

Introduction

The Manifestations of God show signs of Their Greatness from early childhood, long before they openly declare Their Holy Mission. When His father passed away, His maternal uncle, Hájí Mírzá Siyyid 'Alí became His custodian. When the Báb declared His Mission, His uncle accepted the new Faith without requiring any evidence or any proof. His uncle had seen so many remarkable things that there was no doubt in his mind that the Báb was the Promised One. This bears a testimony to the “superhuman wisdom” that the Báb had long before He declared.

As an Infant

*From the moment of birth, it was evident that, unlike other children, He was not rapacious in drinking milk. Normally, He was serene and made no noise. During the twenty-four hour period, He would desire milk only four times. While nursing he would be most gentle, and no movement was discerned from His mouth. Often I would become anxious and ask myself, “Why is this Child not like other children? Perhaps He has some illness that prevents His desiring milk.” Then I would console myself, saying, “If He really had some unknown illness, He would manifest signs of agitation and restlessness.” Unlike other children, He did not complain or behave in an unseemly manner during the weaning period. I was most thankful that now that the Exalted Lord had granted me this one Child, He was gentle and agreeable. (Accounts of Mírzá Habíbu’lláh Afnán)*

Childhood

During the days of the childhood of the Báb, if someone wished their son to be taught by Shaykh Adib at his Quranic school, they had to meet with him in person. Usually, they would ask for a place at the school in person or through someone distinguished. Shaykh Adib was not keen on taking on students of just any person (for instance, he was reluctant to take on students whose parents were shopkeepers as he considered them to be ill mannered) and therefore, a personal meeting or “letter of recommendation” was required. Siyyid Muhammad Rida, father of the Báb, met with Shaykh Adib, whom he knew from before, to enrol the Báb in his Quranic school. During this meeting, he (father of the Báb) recounted some stories from the early years of the Báb’s life that distinguish him.

"After forty years, the Exalted Lord has graced me with a Child who has caused me to wonder over His behavior.” The Shaykh asked him to explain further, but he only replied, “It is hard to say.” [The Shaykh] insisted, to which [the father] offered:

“O venerable Shaykh! Which of His amazing conditions should I recount? Such peculiar characteristics are manifest in Him that the people are astonished. ... Were I to recount all that I have observed from the time of His birth until the present, it would make a thick
book.”

“At such a [young] age, He tells whether an unborn child is a boy or a girl, for the whole clan. After the birth, it is as He foretold.

“And again, some time ago, together with His maternal uncle, the esteemed Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí, we were at the bathhouse of Bazaar Murgh quarter. This Child was sleeping between His uncle and me, when suddenly He rose and stated, ‘The vaulted roof of the Garm-Kháníh [steam chamber] of Mírzá Hádí’s bathhouse, which was for women, has just caved in, and five women and one child have been [killed] under the rubble.’ His uncle said to Him, ‘Áqá, please sleep and refrain from saying such things. What manner of talk is this!’ He responded, ‘It is as I said.’ It was not long after that we heard a tumult of voice from the direction of the bathhouse, saying that Mírzá Hádí’s bathhouse was wrecked and a number of women were under the rubble. One person said twenty women [were killed]; another said thirty or forty; but later it was determined that five women and a child had been killed. The truth was just as He had said. (Accounts of Mírzá Habíbu’lláh Afnán)

Devotional Attitude

His father recounts;

Now, when He is five years old, He sometimes raises His hands to the threshold of the One God, and recites prayers. He wakes in the middle of the night and stands to offer His obligatory prayers, in the midst of which He weeps. (Accounts of Mírzá Habíbu’lláh Afnán)

A certain book-binder of Shiraz named Siyyid Muhammad, whose house neighboured that of the Báb’s, but who in later years removed to Saray-i-Amir[1] in Tihran to ply his trade, had heard Shaykh ‘Abid relate that it was customary, when the season was clement, for the boys to invite their teacher and their fellow-pupils on Fridays (the day of rest) to an outing in one of the numerous gardens which bordered the city of Shiraz. At times they would find that the Báb had betaken Himself to a shaded, secluded spot in a corner of the orchard to pray and meditate. (H.M. Baluzi, The Báb, Chapter 2)

Hájí Siyyid Javad-i-Karbila’í had himself encountered the Báb in the years of His childhood. ... One of his journeys took him to Shiraz, at a time when the Báb was about nine years old. Being well acquainted with Hájí Siyyid Muhammad (one of the Báb’s maternal uncles), Hájí Siyyid Javad visited him occasionally. Decades later he recalled that on one of these visits he could hear the intonations of a melodious, enraptured voice, coming from the direction of the alcove reserved for devotions. Before long a boy stepped out of the recess and Hájí Mirza Siyyid Muhammad introduced Him as his nephew who was orphaned. (H.M. Baluzi, The Báb, Chapter 2)

Once the uncle of the Báb (Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí) discussed the claim of the Báb, with his younger brother Hájí Mírzá Hasan-‘Alí. During this discussion, the younger brother accused his older brother of having departed from their ancestral religion and chosen to follow their nephew. Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí (the older brother) then responded;

“You should know well that God Most High has fulfilled the proof before me. After what I saw with my own eyes in His childhood and what I know with complete confidence about him since His adulthood, there is no room for doubt for anyone, especially for me.” Have you forgotten our journey to Sabz-Púshán when He was a child aged nine years old? There was a group of us, and He came along as well. When we arrived, being completely
exhausted, we performed our ablutions, offered our late afternoon and the evening obligatory prayers, paid our homage of visitation, ate dinner, and went to bed.

It was not long after, at midnight, that I awoke and noticed that He was not in bed. Deeply perturbed, I was overtaken with anxiety that perhaps He had fallen from the mountain. Finally, after searching extensively, I heard a voice raised in the obligatory prayer and prayers of glorification to the Lord, coming from the lower extremities [of the mountain]. When I followed the melody of that chant, I found the Child, standing alone and in private, in consummate rapture voicing prayers and supplications to the One Who transcends all mention, on the deserted mountainside and at that late hour of the night.

My beloved brother, I ask: After observing such things, is there any room for doubt? With a knowledge born of certainty, with truth that stands most manifest, and with my own unimpeachable observations, it is thoroughly evident that the Promised One whom we had anticipated has now appeared after twelve hundred and sixty years. (Accounts of Mírzá Habíbú’lláh Afnán)

Schooling

Shaykh Abid, the Báb’s teacher, who became a believer later on, recounts;

“One day,” he related, “I asked the Báb to recite the opening words of the Qur’án: ‘Bismi’lláhi’r-Rahmáni’r-Rahím.’ He hesitated, pleading that unless He were told what these words signified, He would in no wise attempt to pronounce them. I pretended not to know their meaning. ‘I know what these words signify,’ observed my pupil; ‘by your leave, I will explain them.’ He spoke with such knowledge and fluency that I was struck with amazement. He expounded the meaning of ‘Alláh,’ of ‘Rahmán,’ and ‘Rahím,’ in terms such as I had neither read nor heard. The sweetness of His utterance still lingers in my memory.

I felt impelled to take Him back to His uncle and to deliver into his hands the Trust he had committed to my care. I determined to tell him how unworthy I felt to teach so remarkable a child. I found His uncle alone in his office. ‘I have brought Him back to you,’ I said, ‘and commit Him to your vigilant protection. He is not to be treated as a mere child, for in Him I can already discern evidences of that mysterious power which the Revelation of the Sáhibu’z-Zamán alone can reveal. It is incumbent upon you to surround Him with your most loving care. Keep Him in your house, for He, verily, stands in no need of teachers such as I.

Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí sternly rebuked the Báb. ‘Have You forgotten my instructions?’ he said. ‘Have I not already admonished You to follow the example of Your fellow-pupils, to observe silence, and to listen attentively to every word spoken by Your teacher?’ Having obtained His promise to abide faithfully by his instructions, he bade the Báb return to His school. The soul of that child could not, however, be restrained by the stern admonitions of His uncle. No discipline could repress the flow of His intuitive knowledge. Day after day He continued to manifest such remarkable evidences of superhuman wisdom as I am powerless to recount.” (Nabíl’s Narrative)

... Shaykh ‘Abid had a regular class for theological students. On one occasion some of these students posed a question, which after a long period of discussion remained unresolved. Shaykh ‘Abid told them that he would consult some authoritative works that same night and on the morrow present them with the solution. Just then the Báb, who had been
listening, spoke and with sound reasoning propounded the answer, which they sought. They were wonder-struck, for they had no recollection of discussing that particular subject within earshot of the Báb, who might then have looked up references in books and memorized them to repeat parrot-wise. Shaykh 'Abid asked Him where He had gained that knowledge. The boy replied smilingly with a couplet from Hafiz:

Should the grace of the Holy Spirit once again deign to assist,
Others will also do what Christ could perform.

(H.M. Baluzi, The Báb, Chapter 2)

Commerce

It seems to be unclear when the Báb left school to join his uncles as a merchant. According to Nabil (The Dawn Breakers), the Báb showed "superhuman wisdom" until His uncle "was induced to take Him away from the school of Shaykh Abid, and to associate Him with himself in his own profession." He remained in Shiraz for a short while before moving to the city of Būshihr. The Báb continued to show signs of His "superhuman wisdom". He associated with all kind of people, from ‘ulamá to shopkeepers in such manner that caused all to praise His qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá once recounted the following story of the Báb when in Būshihr (as conveyed by Mirzá Habíb’ulláh Afnán);

During His stay in Būshihr, the Báb achieved extraordinary things and thoroughly demolished the foundation of people's corrupt practices. The merchants of Būshihr had a custom that after a deal had been concluded they would renegotiate and barter to receive a considerable discount.

Some of them came to His Holiness, negotiated purchase of indigo dye, and bought a very large quantity. After they had sealed the bargain and moved the lots of indigo to their own office, they returned to renegotiate and bargain. His Holiness did not accept and said, "You made a bargain, signed papers, and the transaction has been completed. I will not give a discount and will not renegotiate." They insisted. He replied, "What I said is final." They pleaded, "It is the custom of the country." He responded, "Many of these customs are wrong and will soon be abolished." No matter how much they insisted, He would not agree. The merchants were obstinate, and at last He said, "[If] the price is high, return the merchandise as I will not barter." They insisted, "It is the custom here." He replied, "I wish to put an end to this custom." They insisted, "If a merchant has bought commodities and moved them to his warehouse, and then returns them, he will forfeit his standing with merchants." "It is your choice," He told them, "accept the terms and refrain from renegotiation." Again they insisted, "But this is the custom of the realm." Yet again, He reminded them, "I am ending this custom." Eventually, He [the Báb] ordered the merchandise brought back to His shop and did not yield to their efforts at bargaining. He changed many of their unseemly practices during the period He was a merchant in Būshihr.

Soon thereafter, one of His maternal uncles arrived at Būshihr, and the same merchants who had returned the indigo dye came to see the uncle and complained about His behavior, saying, "He has ruined our reputation. We had a deal on dyes, however, as customary, we wished to renegotiate, but He did not comply. He arranged for the goods to be brought back from our store. This is a great insult to us as merchants. You should counsel Him not to repeat such offenses."

The maternal uncle approached the Báb advising Him, "Why do You refuse to yield to
people’s wishes and disrupt the established customs of the realm?” He told him, “Even now, if they should wish to bargain after a transaction is completed, I would refuse again.”

That was a very blissful day. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá smiled unceasingly and repeated several times, “Prior to His declaration, the Báb announced that He would change many of the accepted ways.”

Having lived in Búshihr for six years, the Báb, wished to move to Atabat. Atabat is a name of a region where the cities Kázimayn and Sámarrá are located. These cities are famous as the Shrines of Imám ‘Alí, Imám Husayn, and four more are located there. The Báb wrote several times to his uncles informing them that He wished to visit Atabát and asking one of them to come to Búshihr to take over the businesses. Mírzá Habíbu’lláh Afnán tells the story.

The uncles procrastinated and did not comply with His wish. When the time for His departure arrived, He settled His accounts with everyone, prepared a detailed ledger, sealed the books, and left them in the office. He then sealed the entrance to the office and entrusted the key to the custodian of that building with the instructions that whichever of His maternal uncles should arrive first from Shiráz to Búshihr should be allowed to enter. Thereupon, He wrote to Shiráz “Though I wrote you repeatedly asking that one of you come to Búshihr as I have a journey to the 'Atabát in mind, you have not come. Therefore, I have sealed the door of the shop and entrusted the key to the custodian and have left for the 'Atabát.” So, after six years in Búshihr, He left for the 'Atabát.

Once His blessed letter was received in Shiráz, [His eldest maternal uncle,] Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muhammad became deeply worried and perturbed, complaining, “What manner of conduct is this? Our good name in the commercial community will be ruined, and the chain of our business transactions will be broken! What will happen to our accounts with the people?” To this, the illustrious uncle, Hájí Mírzá Siyyid ‘Alí, responded, “Rest assured! I know Him, and our Nephew does not do anything wrong. [I am certain that] He has arranged people’s accounts before leaving.” The uncle, Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muhammad, set out for Búshihr. Upon his arrival, he secured the key from the custodian of the caravansary, noted the seal on the door of the room, opened the door, and began a careful examination of the books. He found that the accounts relating to every person were most satisfactory and accurate. Relieved, he wrote to his brothers, “the accounts and record books are in order” and expressed praise and gratitude for their Nephew. (Accounts of Mírzá Habíbu’lláh Afnán)

Preparation for the Declaration

Khadijih Bagum recalled that one day in the late afternoon He came home earlier than usual. That evening, He said, He had a particular task to attend to, and asked that dinner be served earlier. Fiddih, the servant who did the cooking, was so informed, and the family had their evening meal in the room of the mother of Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad. Then He retired for the night.

Speaking of the events of that memorable night, which, according to recollections of members of the Afnan family, occurred some time before the Báb declared His mission, Khadijih Bagum related: 'An hour later, when the house was quiet and its occupants had
gone to sleep, He rose from His bed and left the room. At first I took no particular notice of His absence, but when it lengthened to more than an hour I felt some concern. Then I went out to look for Him, but He was nowhere to be found. Perhaps, for some reason, He had left the house, I thought; but, trying the street door I found it locked from within, as usual. Then I walked to the western side of the house, looked up at the roof-top, and saw that the upper chamber was well lighted. This added to my surprise, because I had never known Him to go to that part of the house at that hour of the night, unless He had guests. And He always told me when a visitor was expected. He had not said that He was to have a guest that night. So, with both astonishment and trepidation, I went up the steps at the northern side of the courtyard.

There I saw Him standing in that chamber, His hands raised heavenwards, intoning a prayer in a most melodious voice, with tears streaming down His face. And His face was luminous; rays of light radiated from it. He looked so majestic and resplendent that fear seized me, and I stood transfixed where I was, trembling uncontrollably. I could neither enter the room nor retrace my steps. My will-power was gone, and I was on the point of screaming, when He made a gesture with His blessed hands, telling me to go back. This movement of His hands gave me back my courage, and I returned to my room and my bed. But all that night long I remained deeply disturbed. In my fitful moments of sleep that scene in the upper chamber would present itself to my mind, adding to my consternation. I kept asking myself what grave event had come to pass to evoke such sorrow and such tears, inducing prayer and supplication of such intensity. Sleep was impossible that night, and then came the dawn, so foreboding, and I heard the muezzin’s call to prayer.

‘At sunrise Fiddih took the samovar and tea-things to the room of my mother-in-law and, as usual, He went to His mother’s room to take tea. I followed Him there, and as soon as my eyes alighted on Him, that attitude and that majesty which I had witnessed the night before took shape before me. I paled and shuddered involuntarily. His mother had, at that moment, gone out of the room, and He was quietly drinking His tea. He raised His face to me, and received me with great kindness and affection, bidding me be seated. Then He passed to me what was left of the tea in His own cup, which I drank. His kindness restored my courage, and when He asked me what it was that troubled me, I boldly replied that it was the change in Him which weighed heavily on my mind. "You are no longer", I told Him, "the same person I knew in our childhood. We grew up together, we have been married for two years, living in this house, and now I see a different person before me. You have been transformed." I further remarked that this had made me anxious and uneasy. He smiled and said that although He had not wished to be seen by me in the condition of the previous night, God had ordained otherwise. "It was the will of God", He said, "that you should have seen Me in the way you did last night, so that no shadow of doubt should ever cross your mind, and you should come to know with absolute certitude that I am that Manifestation of God Whose advent has been expected for a thousand years. This light radiates from My heart and from My Being."[1] As soon as I heard Him speak these words I believed in Him. I prostrated myself before Him and my heart became calm and assured. From that moment I lived only to serve Him, evanescent and self-effacing before Him, no thought of self ever intruding.’ (H.M. Baluzi, Khadijih Bagum The Wife of the Báb, page 10-13)

[1 These are the words of the Báb as recalled by Khadijih Bagum in later years, and recorded decades after, and should not be taken as His exact words on that occasion. (Ed.)]

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