

The Twin Birthdays – an explanation

Regular Person: So, if the Báb was born on October 20, 1819, and Bahá'u'lláh was born on November 12, 1817, how can they be “Twin Birthdays”? And why are you celebrating them now?

Calendar Geek: Well, that’s a calendar conversation. Got a few minutes?

RP: Sure.

CG: So, Bahá'u'lláh was born in Persia, a mostly Muslim country. In the Islámic calendar, it was the second day of Muharram in the year 1233. We in the west called that day the 12th day of November in the year 1817. Same day, different calendars.

RP: Okay, that’s simple enough.

CG: The Báb was also born in Persia, two years later, on the first day of Muharram in the year 1235. (Muharram 1 happens to be the first day in the Islámic year, if you’re curious.)

RP: Okay – first day of Muharram, second day of Muharram – twin birthdays. But if Bahá'u'lláh was born on November 12 (Muharram 2), why don’t “we in the west” say the Báb was born on November 11 (Muharram 1)? How’d we jump all the way back to October 20 for the Báb?

CG: That’s because the Islámic calendar is lunar – based on the moon – while the Gregorian calendar is solar – based on the sun.

RP: Gregorian calendar?

CG: It’s the calendar we generally use in the west that runs from January to December. It’s based on the ancient Roman calendar, which was reformed a few times, most recently by Pope Gregory VIII in 1582. Hence “Gregorian.”

RP: Whoa! Calendar overload!

CG: Yeah, there are a lot of calendars out there, but this boils down to two – the lunar Islámic calendar and the solar Gregorian calendar.

RP: Okay, I’m following, but what difference does it make if a calendar is based on the sun or the moon? How does that cause “twin” birthdays in one calendar to be three weeks apart in another?

CG: It’s all in how you define a year.

RP: Well, isn't that just 365 (and a fraction) days – the number of days it takes the earth to go around the sun?

CG: In a solar calendar, yes. That's what a year is in the Gregorian system. But the Islámic calendar defines a year as 12 lunar months.

RP: And what, exactly, is a lunar month?

CG: It's the time it takes for the moon to go through a full cycle of phases. In the Islámic calendar, a month is defined as new moon to new moon, but other calendars defined a month as full moon to full moon. It's pretty arbitrary how different cultures define their calendars.

RP: I'm starting to see that. So, what happens when you define a year as 12 lunar months?

CG: A year based on 12 lunar months is about 11 days shorter than the solar year. That means that Islámic dates "slide" 11 days earlier each year, when compared to the Gregorian calendar.

RP: {blank stare}

CG: Let me draw it out – the top row is a few solar Gregorian years and the bottom is a few lunar Islámic years. (Not to scale, by the way.) Let's assume both start on the same day, which does happen sometimes. Because the Islámic year is about 11 days shorter than the Gregorian year, the two get out of sync quickly.

Gregorian				
Islámic				

RP: Oh, I see it now. And because the Báb was born two years after Bahá'u'lláh, the calendars would be about 22 days out of sync by then. Hey! There's those three weeks!

CG: You've got it!

RP: Yeah, but that still doesn't explain why you're celebrating these birthdays now. Unless it's Muharram 1 and 2?

CG: No. Or, actually, I don't know. I don't keep up with the Islámic calendar. But it's true that Bahá'is living in Muslim countries used to celebrate these Holy Days on Muharram 1 and 2, so they always experienced them as Twin Birthdays. In the west, we always celebrated these days on October 20 and November 12, which hid the Twin Birthdays aspect.

RP: Um, wouldn't that mean that Bahá'is would be celebrating on different days, depending on where they lived? Wouldn't Muharram 1 and 2 always be "sliding" through the seasons, instead of staying in the fall like October and November do?

CG: Exactly! Bahá'is were out of sync with each other. But that changed in 2015, when the Universal House of Justice decided it was time to define the Bahá'í Holy Days according to the Bahá'í calendar.

RP: No! Not another calendar!

CG: Yes, I'm afraid so. Every religion brings a new calendar, and the Bahá'í Faith is no different. We can go over those details another time. For now, all you need to know is that Naw Rúz – the Bahá'í New Year – is celebrated on the Vernal (Spring) Equinox as measured at Tihrán. The Birth of the Báb is defined as the first day after the eighth new moon after Naw Rúz and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh is defined as the second day after the eighth new moon after Naw Rúz.

RP: Ah! My brain is twisting! How does anyone know when the “eighth new moon after Naw Rúz” is? Or when the first day of spring in Tihrán is, for that matter?

CG: The Universal House has calculated the dates for us out to 2065, and I suspect they'll keep doing that so we stay in sync. The result is that all Bahá'is around the world now celebrate the Twin Birthdays on the same, consecutive days. The specific dates will change each year, but they'll always be in the fall.

RP: Oh! Like Easter changes dates each year, but it's always in the spring.

CG: Exactly like that, yes.

RP: Hmm. That makes me wonder why Greek Easter is on a different day from regular Easter.

CG: Well, that's all about calendars, too. “Regular” Easter is set using the Gregorian calendar, while Eastern Orthodox Easter is based on the Julian calendar – or rather a Christianized version of the Roman calendar as revised by Julius Caesar in...

RP: {waving hands} I surrender!