

Beyond the “Seal of the Prophets”: Bahā’u’llāh’s *Book of Certitude* (*Ketāb-e Īqān*)

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Introduction

Because of its international audience, Bahā’u’llāh’s *Book of Certitude* (*Ketāb-e Īqān*) may now be regarded as the world’s most influential Koran commentary in Persian outside the Muslim world. The basis for this claim is simple: the *Īqān* is coextensive with the *Bahā’ī* faith. As its preeminent doctrinal text, the *Īqān* helped crystallize *Bahā’ī* identity and lent considerable impetus to its missionary expansion. The core claims advanced by the *Īqān* have, in principle, been adapted to other religious environments. It is post-Islamic by dint of its claims: the *Īqān* vindicates the prophetic credentials of Sayyid ‘Ali-Muhammad Shirazi, known as “the *Bāb*” (d. 1850), who broke decisively from Islam in 1844, by declaring himself to be the inaugurator of a new religious cycle. “Revealed” in January, 1861, the *Īqān* sets the stage for Bahā’u’llāh’s impending claim to revelation in April 1863 in Baghdad.

The *Īqān* advances an Islamic argument to legitimate its post-Islamic claims. The *Īqān*’s most original and dramatic act of Koranic interpretation may well be its argument for how God could (and would) send another prophet after Muhammad, notwithstanding the latter’s station as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Q. 33:40). Bahā’u’llāh’s exegetical strategy is a *tour de force* – using an essentially Islamic argument to prove something ostensibly alien to orthodox Islam, both Sunni and Shi’a. More significant than its theological argument, however, is the *Īqān*’s historical impact. Even though, from the Islamic point of view, the *Īqān* argued the impossible, Bahā’u’llāh’s discourse on realized eschatology became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The argument for a post-Islamic revelation was not academic. It was historical.

In order to understand the *Īqān*, it is necessary to know something about the *Bābī* movement, which provides the *Īqān*’s immediate historical context. The year 1260/1844-1845 marked the Shiite millennium, a

thousand lunar years since the occultation of the 12th Imam. On 22 May 1844, the *Bāb* effected a decisive, eschatological break from Islam. The *Bāb* “proclaimed himself the focus of an Islamic apocalypse” (Lawson, “Structure,” 8). This eschatological end of history presupposes the formal end of the authority of Islam, and the beginning of a new cycle of revelation. The *Īqān*, therefore, is an extension and further development of the *Bāb*’s radical break with Islam. Bahā’u’llāh extemporaneously dictated the *Īqān* within the space of two days and two nights, at the request of the uncle of the *Bāb*, who was puzzled about the claims of his martyred nephew. The book is composed in Persian (rather than in Arabic, as would be expected), which rendered the text immediately accessible to its initial *Bābī* audience.

The questions posed by the *Bāb*’s uncle make up the structure of the *Īqān*. These original questions, preserved in family archives, have been published in facsimile. They were penned on two sheets of paper and organized under four headings, all dealing with popular Shi’i expectations of the Islamic eschaton, the principal actor of which was to be the expected *Qā’em* (the Shi’i counterpart of the Mahdi in Sunni traditions). The questions may be summarized so:

1. *The Day of Resurrection*: Will it be corporeal? How will the just be recompensed and the wicked dealt with?
2. *The Twelfth Imam*: How can traditions attesting his occultation be explained?
3. *Koranic Interpretation*: How can the literal meaning of scripture be reconciled with the interpretations current among *Bābīs*?
4. *Advent of the Qā’em*: How can the apparent non-fulfillment of popular Imami traditions concerning the Resurrector be explained?

These questions all center on the seeming contradiction caused by the *Bāb*’s claim to a realized eschaton in the absence of a literal fulfillment of scripture and popular expectation.

Exegesis established a doctrinal foundation for the faith Bahā’u’llāh was to create, in which eschatology was transformed into spiritual and legislative authority. The *Īqān* provided an eschatological bridge into a new religious world view. The *Bahā’ī* prophet-founder’s most controversial Koranic argument is his claim that Muslim scholars had erred in their interpretation of the “Seal” verse (Q. 33:40) by not recognizing the promise of a post-Koranic revelation just four verses later at Q. 33:44.

In fine, this latter verse refers to the eschatological meeting with God – a beatific encounter reserved for the faithful. Bahā'u'llāh argues something quite different. His reading of the verse is that it is a veiled reference to the *Bāb*. Since God cannot be seen, then the Koran's promises that the faithful would behold the face of God must perforce be symbolic. To enter into the presence of God is to attain the presence of God's "Manifestation," or Prophet.

Bahā'u'llāh's novel interpretation is said to be entirely consonant with the deep meaning of the Koran, yet incompatible with the orthodox understanding of it. It achieved a breakthrough in creating a real possibility for a post-Koranic claim to revelation, which the *Bāb* had already advanced. The *Īqān* expounds apocalyptic passages of the Koran – texts that defied precise interpretation yet inspired a plethora of them. Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne, writes of the *Īqān* that "it is a work of great merit, vigorous in style, clear in argument, cogent in proof, and displaying no slight knowledge of the Bible, Koran, and Traditions" (*Selections* 254).

The *Īqān* as a Work of Koranic *Tafsīr*

The *Īqān* is essentially an exposition of the Bahā'ī doctrine of "Progressive Revelation," which is a theory of civilization in which spiritual evolution is the engine of social evolution. However broadly the *Īqān* expatiates on spiritual "sovereignty" – that is, on the moral and spiritual authority of the prophets of God, the text focuses particularly on the authority of the *Bāb*. In a manner of speaking, Bahā'u'llāh's thesis is that the Koran, the *Ḥadīth*, and even the Bible anticipate a future prophet of God who would appear at the end (or culmination) of history. Now, the Koran says nothing about these things *outwardly*. Therefore, in order to argue that the Koran says something *inwardly*, it is necessary to enter into a sophisticated religious argument that explores the subtle dimensions of the Koran. It is an argument that depends on rules of inference in order to supersede existing doctrine. To achieve this, the *Īqān* speaks at length about the nature of the Koran and how its subtleties may be discovered and elucidated.

At the time the *Īqān* was revealed, the Koran remained inviolable as the primary authority in an erstwhile Islamic context. In the Muslim world, no idea could be entertained, much less accepted, unless it was somehow anchored in the Koran itself. Interpretation of the Koran is

technically known as *tafsīr*. I believe that the most useful introduction to this literature is that of Andrew Rippin's entry on "Tafsīr" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987); and the most comprehensive Western academic study of *tafsīr*, in all its dimensions and historical contexts, is *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Koran*, edited by Rippin (Oxford, 1988). What kind of *tafsīr* is the *Īqān*? First, it is not a classical *tafsīr*, in that the *Īqān* is not a verse-by-verse running commentary. Rather, the *Īqān* is a work of symbolic exegesis of the Koran and, to a lesser extent, of the New Testament.

Exegesis is typically far more than mere interpretation serving to elucidate a sacred text. Typically, especially in post-classical works of *tafsīr*, the exegete has a definite agenda. Interpretation thus becomes the vehicle for propounding that agenda. While the interpretation serves to elucidate the text, the inverse holds true, too. The interpreter invokes the authority of the Koran as revelation to validate a particular view. In such a case, exegesis is apology, written in defense of a position held. The *Īqān* focused on spiritual authority from an Islamic perspective, rationalizing the eschatologically conceived fulfillment of Islam in the advent of the *Bāb*.

The *Īqān* also served to heighten the adventist fervor current in the *Bābī* community, in anticipation of the advent of a Messianic figure foretold by the *Bāb*, eschatologically realized in the person of Bahā'u'llāh himself on the event of his declaration in Baghdad in April 1863. While the *Bāb* (and subsequently Bahā'u'llāh himself) maintained continuity with Islam at a doctrinal level, historically this claim of fulfillment was tantamount to a break from Islam.

Shi'i Background

The interpretive strategies in Bahā'u'llāh's work are amply attested in the classical Shi'i heritage. In *Aḳbārī* Shi'ism, the Koran as a text is functionally inseparable from its valid interpretation. Although interpretation is still a human enterprise, the methodological guarantor of accuracy is reliance upon traditions ascribed to the Imams. In this respect, the sacred text is imbued with the charisma of both the Prophet and the Imams.

The Koran is said to contain coded language. In his extensive studies of the *Bābī* and Shi'i background of *Bahā'ī* exegesis, Todd Lawson renders from the French Corbin's translation of a statement from the *Bāb*'s

spiritual precursor, Sayyid Kazim-i Rashti: "When you have understood that the true meaning, the spiritual Idea of the Koran is a code (*ramz*) which only God Most High, the Prophets and the members of His House understand, [...] then it will be clear that our understanding of this code varies according to the diversity of our faculties of understanding" (trans. Lawson, "Akhbārī Shī'ī Approaches to *Tafsīr*," 204). This "code" obviously requires decoding. Bahā'u'llāh demonstrates that the Koran has a symbolic dimension that only an inspired interpreter might accurately demystify.

Exegetical Style and Techniques

Bahā'u'llāh's interpretations entail some complex and original acts of exegesis. First, it should be pointed out that Bahā'u'llāh's discourse style is inherently exegetical, with frequent pairings, linked by the Persian metaphorical genitive (*eẓāfe-ye majāz*), of Koranic symbol and referent. The *eẓāfe* is a construct – an enclitic to be precise – used for possessive, partitive, and descriptive purposes. Bahā'u'llāh's use of this construct becomes, in itself, an important exegetical device. In the course of exegesis, Bahā'u'llāh interprets a verse, explicating a symbol by suggesting its referent. He then uses both symbol and referent together, bound grammatically by the Persian construct, to reinforce his exegesis. Bahā'u'llāh coordinates his various explications by means of extended metaphors, invariably drawn from nature. In other words, Bahā'u'llāh's very discourse style itself reinforces his symbolic interpretations of Koranic texts.

Bahā'u'llāh's repertoire of exegetical techniques exceeds, but includes most of the twelve "procedural devices" attested in classical *tafsīr*: poetic *loci probantes*, lexical explanation, grammatical explanation, rhetorical explanation, periphrasis, analogy, abrogation, circumstances of revelation, identification of the vague and ambiguous, prophetic tradition, and anecdote (Wansbrough, QS, Part II). Furthermore, although many of Bahā'u'llāh's interpretations have an elegant simplicity, some of his interpretations actually conflict with traditional Islamic interpretations and often require a rather complex syntactical and semantic analysis. Generally, Bahā'u'llāh has a two-step procedure for interpreting an eschatological text: first, establish that the text in question is figurative, not literal, and then provide its symbolic purport.

Rhetorical Argumentation

Hermeneutically, the *Īqān* resonates with five Islamic orientations to symbolism: (1) the semanticism of rhetoric (esp. *'elm-e Bayān*, “science of tropes”); (2) the dialectic of theology (*kalām*); (3) reason (*'aqlīye*) and analogy (*qīyās*) as a reflex of philosophy (*falsafe*); (4) use of allusion (*ešāre*) and gnosis (*ma'ārefe-ye qalbīye*) in Sufi mysticism; (5) recourse to apocalyptic presentism (adducing prophetic proof-texts to instantiate a “realized eschatology”), characteristic of millenarian sectarianism. But before he actually engages in symbolic interpretation, Bahā'u'llāh first establishes the symbolic nature of the Koran itself.

Literal texts require little interpretation beyond explication, whereas symbolic texts are not as they appear to be and require interpretation. For the latter approach to be accepted, the reader must be convinced that a text has a symbolic dimension based on a figurative substrate. The most effective strategy for arguing symbolism, beyond assertion, is to predicate symbolism on figurative language. As tropical discourse, figurative language, by nature, excludes literal interpretation, which would otherwise lead to absurdity. Bahā'u'llāh therefore advanced a figuration-based rationale to demonstratively establish Koranic symbolism.

Bahā'u'llāh advances arguments that are, in certain respects, analogous to the strategies of Sunni rhetoricians who demonstrated occurrences of figures of speech in the Koran as a feature of its eloquence and inimitability. The figurative reading of a verse must not lead to absurdity. Nor should a literal reading. In the *Īqān*, prior to his actual symbolic exegesis, Bahā'u'llāh logically demonstrates the presence of figurative language in the Koran, based largely on appeals to absurdities that result from literal readings. Once the symbolic valence of the Koran has been established, symbols in prophecy are interpreted and then contemporized within Bahā'u'llāh's own historical present, leaving the reader to accept or reject their fulfillment. Such an interpretive move often involves the verdict of absurdity after having overruled the surface meaning of anthropomorphisms in scripture. Hence, Bahā'u'llāh's exegetical procedure at Q. 39:67 overrules a literal reading of the eschatological hand of God, as it entails both impossibility and anthropomorphist entrapment:

And now, comprehend the meaning of this verse: “The whole earth shall on the Resurrection Day be but His handful, and in His right

hand shall the heavens be folded together.” [...] And now, be fair in thy judgment. Were this verse to have the meaning which men suppose it to have, of what profit, one may ask, could it be to man? Moreover, it is evident and manifest that no such hand as could be seen by human eye could accomplish such deeds, or could possibly be ascribed to the exalted Essence of the one true God. Nay, to acknowledge such a thing is naught but sheer blasphemy, an utter perversion of the truth (ET 47-48).

Here, the “right hand” of God receives a negative interpretation. Whatever it means, it cannot mean what it literally says. For to assert that God has a “right hand” is sheer anthropomorphism, and a full projection of human attributes onto the Deity. The literal interpretations having thus been overruled, a positive interpretation follows:

On the contrary, by the term “earth” is meant the earth of understanding and knowledge, and by the “heavens” the heavens of divine Revelation. Reflect thou how, in one hand, He hath, by His mighty grasp, turned the earth of knowledge and understanding, previously unfolded, into a mere handful, and, on the other, spread out a new and highly exalted earth in the hearts of men, thus causing the freshest and loveliest blossoms, and the mightiest and loftiest trees to spring forth in the illumined bosom of man” (ET 48).

Note the illustrative use of nature imagery, transported into the psychic realm, where spiritual life is described as an interior landscape, an inner world. The Koran, while rich in symbolism, is not transparent. Divine authority, in both Shi‘i and *Bābī* contexts, is needed to interpret Koranic references to divinity and to resolve the problem of anthropomorphisms in the text. Such interpretation becomes even more sensitive when it comes to the subject of Muhammad himself, as the Koran represents him.

The “Seal of the Prophets”

The Koran dignifies Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Q. 33:40). In the earliest currents of Islamic consciousness, this honorific was by no means understood uniformly (see Yohanan Friedmann, “Finality of Prophethood in Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*

7 [1986]). The concept of Muhammad being the final messenger of God was firmly entrenched in Islamic doctrine, both Sunni and Shi‘a. In Shi‘ism, however, the concept of *walāya* (arab.) allowed for a continuation of divine guidance after the death of the Prophet. Such guidance was considered subordinate to the revelation of the Koran, of course. But the *Bāb* had dared to proclaim himself more than an Imam, and a messenger equal to or greater than Muhammad, with a revelation that surpassed the Koran in scope and authority. This, obviously, challenged the very foundations of Islam.

From the perspective of classical Sunni Islam as well as Shi‘ism, Bahā‘u’llāh achieved the seemingly impossible: to show that God could reveal a prophet after Muhammad. The manner in which Bahā‘u’llāh did so requires some explanation.

First, Bahā‘u’llāh applied Koranic concepts of the oneness of the prophets to relativize the idea of the “Seal of the Prophets” as a term that applies to all of the prophets, not just Muhammad. In other words, Bahā‘u’llāh relativizes the orthodox claim of Muhammad’s finality in order to supersede it. One of the ways Bahā‘u’llāh does this is by refocusing the reader’s attention a mere four verses later (Q. 33:44), where the Koran speaks of eschatological attainment to the presence of God on the Last Day. Central to Bahā‘u’llāh’s argument in the *Īqān* is the argument that the Koranic promise of what Bahā‘u’llāh refers to as “attainment unto the Presence of God” is an allusion to the appearance of another Manifestation of God at the eschaton. How is this possible?

Identification of the eschatological encounter with God (Q. 33:44, 10:45, 6:31, 2:249, 2:46, 11:29, 69:20, 13:2, 6:154, 18:111, 29:23) with the advent the *Qā’em* (Riser/Resurrector) had already been established by Sheykh Ahmad Ahsa’i (d. 1241/1825), founder of the *Sheykhī* School, which was the immediate ideological forebear of *Bābī* -*Bahā’ī* thought. Shaykh Ahmad’s approach to eschatological verses – classified as ambiguous (*motašābehāt*) – was “rational” (interpreting away anthropomorphisms) and allegorical. As for “seeing” God on the Day of Judgment, Shaykh Ahmad rejected a literal interpretation in favor of an Imamocentric one. On the basis of certain Shi‘i traditions, Sheykh Ahmad interpreted the Day of Judgment as the Day of the advent of the expected *Qā’em*, who would bring about changes in the social, moral, and religious life of the world (Rafati 118-119).

By shifting the focus of prophetological attention away from the “Seal” verse itself to refocus on the several Koranic “Divine Presence” verses could Bahā‘u’llāh make an Islamic case for post-Koranic revela-

tion. From a certain point of view, his entire line of argumentation in the *Īqān* is calculated to establish the priority of Q. 33:44 over Q. 33:40. Bahā'u'llāh accepts the importance of the Koranic verse designating Muhammad as “the Seal of the Prophets” (Q. 33:40), yet draws attention to an exegetical oversight but four verses later:

How strange! [...] Even as the Lord of being hath in His unerring Book [the Koran], after speaking of the “Seal” in His exalted utterance: “Muhammad is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets” (Q. 33:40), hath revealed unto all people the promise (*va'de*) of “attainment unto the divine Presence” (*laqā-ye kodā*, cf. Q. 33:44). To this attainment to the presence of the immortal King testify the verses of the Book, some of which We have already mentioned. The one true God is My witness! Nothing (*hič amrī*) more exalted or more explicit than “attainment unto the divine Presence” (*a'zam-e az laqā va ašrah-e az ān*) hath been revealed in the Koran (*forqān*). [...]

And yet, through the mystery of the former verse, they have turned away from the grace promised by the latter, despite the fact that “attainment unto the divine Presence” in the “Day of Resurrection” is explicitly stated in the Book. It hath been demonstrated and definitely established, through clear evidences, that by “Resurrection” is meant the rise of the Manifestation of God to proclaim His Cause, and by “attainment unto the divine Presence” is meant attainment unto the presence of His Beauty in the person of His Manifestation. For verily, “No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision” (Q. 6:103). (*Īqān* 169-70/Persian text, 112)

This argument is predicated on an anti-anthropomorphist interpretation of Q. 6:103. It would be safe to say that, for Muslims universally, the Koran's designation of Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Q. 33:40) is possibly the most important prophetological verse of the Koran (certainly it ranks as one of the most crucial verses doctrinally). Yet Bahā'u'llāh here points to a verse just four verses later, and makes that verse (and its parallels) the centerpiece of his exegesis and the crux of his entire argument: “Their greeting on the day when they shall meet Him shall be “Peace!” And He hath got ready for them a noble recompense” (Q. 33:44).

While this brief description of the *Īqān* scarcely does justice to its

broader range of Koranic interpretations, the reader should now have a clear idea as to the book's purpose, theophanic claims, and historical impact. As a heterodox work of *tafsīr*, the *Īqān* advances an Islamic argument to exegetically create the possibility of post-Koranic prophets. For this and other reasons, the *Īqān* preserves its place as the preeminent doctrinal text of the *Bahā'ī* faith. To claim that the *Īqān* may now be regarded as the world's most influential Koran commentary outside the Muslim world is simply to acknowledge the historical fact that the *Bahā'ī* religion has spun out of its Islamic orbit and radiated globally, while maintaining its Islamic roots.

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VIII

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