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Mysteries of *Alast*:

The Realm of Subtle Entities (*‘Ālam-i dharr*) and the Primordial Covenant in the Babi-Baha’i Writings

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Abstract

One of the more esoteric terms in Shi‘i-Shaykhi thought that has found its way into the vast corpus of the Babi-Baha’i sacred scriptures is called ‘the realm of subtle entities’ or ‘ālam-i dharr (lit. world of particles). The source of inspiration for this term (dharr) in the early Shi‘i cosmology and cosmogony lies in one of the more important and dramatic scenes which informs the whole spectrum of Islamic thought, namely the primordial covenant of Qur’an 7:171-2. It is there, in what seems to be pre-existence, that God addresses humanity in the form of particles or seeds (dharr) saying, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ (alastu bi-rabbikum) while the archetype or potential of all future generations of humanity responds with the loving reply, ‘Yes.’ (balā) In light of the significance of this term for the Covenant in the Babi-Baha’i revelations it is surprising that there has only been but passing references to it in some secondary Baha’i sources. In this paper we will outline the history and background of this term and examine some of the interpretations or hermeneutics accorded to it by select examination of its use in Shi‘ism, Shaykhism, and the Babi-Baha’i religions. Among other themes that will be touched upon in relation to ‘alam-i-dharr is the hermeneutics of the pre-existence of souls, the question of free will and predestination, the seven stages of creation (marātib-i sab‘ih), and the mystic colour hierarchies (alwān).

Keywords Covenant, Quaternary, Will, Purpose, Predestination, Decree, Free Will, Pre-existence, *dharr*

‘Hast thou forgotten the covenant that thou made with God before the creation of the universe—in the realm of the timeless [*dharr al-baqā*]?’¹

Among the cryptic terms which one encounters not infrequently throughout the whole corpus of the Babi-Baha’i Scriptures, is one which designates a mysterious region known as *‘ālam-i dharr* (in Arabic *‘ālam adh-dharr*), the ‘realm of subtle entities’², or more literally ‘the world of particles’. This enigmatic term, which has its origins in a primordial covenant (*‘ahd/mithāq*) between God and humanity in the Qur’an, has a long heritage in early primitive Shi‘ism³ (*tashayyu’*), Sufism (*tassawuf*),⁴ and Shaykhism (*shaykhiyya*). Indeed there exists a certain homology between primitive Shi‘ism, Shaykhism, and the Babi-Baha’i hermeneutics of *‘alam-i dharr*, yet with the writings of the Bab, Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha, this term - among many other Islamic categories - undergoes a subtle transformation by way of a new and novel divine hermeneutics (*ta’wīl-i ilāhī*).

In primitive Shi‘ism *‘alam-i dharr* is situated in meta-history and is subdivided into two metaphysical worlds. It is there, in pre-existence, that the covenant between God and humanity was first drawn up, not only regarding God, but with regard to the Prophet Muhammad, Imam ‘Ali and all the Imams, as well as the daughter of the Prophet, Fatima, namely the Fourteen Pure Ones (*chahārdah ma’sūmīn*). In Shaykhi metaphysics this same covenantal element is continued but with a clearer situating of *‘alam-i dharr* in the emanative stages of creation or arc of descent. Also, the dialectic of free will and necessity is worked out in relation to this realm and the corresponding existentionation of creatures according to their response. Finally, in Babi-Baha’i hermeneutics though all these elements are more or less present, they are radically reinterpreted so that the meta-history of the Primordial Covenant paradoxically becomes situated in the fact of history, in the historical appearance of the person of the Manifestation of God. It is through this cyclical theophanic advent that this Primordial Covenant is perpetually renewed and whereby beings are existentionated and differentiated according to their response to the divine call. Their ontological priority or pre-existence is therefore only in relation to the acknowledgment of the covenant of love which is ‘outside time’. In this study we will briefly outline, by way of an introduction, this background of the term *‘alam adh-dharr*

¹ Bahā’u’llāh, *La’āli’ al-H@ikmah* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Baha’i Brasil, 1990) 2:26-7 (provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami and Todd Lawson).

² This is the official English translation of *‘alam-i dharr* made by the Baha’i World Centre; see Baha’u’llah, *Tabernacle of Unity* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 2006) 48; another similar phrase used in the Baha’i scriptures is *dharr al-baqā* (see below).

³ Here we are using ‘primitive’ in the sense of ‘early’ as used by Amir-Moezzi. This is the phase of Shi‘ism in which the first compendia of the Traditions (*akhbār*) of the Imams were collected and was characterized by more esoteric and magico-theurgic elements, rather than the later influence of systematic and rational theology. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism* (trans. David Streight, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 13-19. Here it should be mentioned that throughout this paper, by ‘Shi‘ism’ we intend only *Ithnā ‘asharī* or Twelver Shi‘ism.

⁴ We will not develop the concept of *dharr* in Sufism here due to lack of space.

and its relation to the Primordial Covenant by select examinations of texts in Shi'ism, Shaykhism and finally its use and hermeneutics in the Babi-Baha'i writings.

'Alam-i dharr and the Primordial Covenant in Shi'ism

The word *dharr* under discussion here which variously means seed, particle, mote, or atom, has its origin in Qur'an 7:171-2 (henceforward Q 7:171-2), and is related to a meta-temporal and meta-historical event: Sacred Time (*in illo tempore*). It was there that God entered into a Primordial Covenant with the particles or seeds or potentialities (*dharr*) of humankind (Adamic *anthropos*) :

And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam,
From their loins, their seed [*dhurriyyatahum*],
And made them testify concerning themselves,
'Am I not your Lord?' [*alastu bi-rabbikum*]
They replied, 'Yes, we bear witness' [*balā shahadnā*]

This mytho-history of the Primordial Covenant, which is often referred to as *yawm al-mīthāq* or the 'Day of the Covenant' has been the source of endless contemplation in Islamic thought both among the Sunni and the Shi'i, and especially among the Sufis, who longed to return to this state of pre-existential being, and among whom it was lovingly referred to as 'the Day of Alast' (*Rūz-i alast*).⁵ It has spurred such varied discussions as the problematic of the pre-existence of souls, the dialectic of free will versus predestination,⁶ God's omnipotence and humankind's loving reply.⁷ Though the term

⁵ The designation 'the Day of Alast' appears particularly among the Persian poets, such as Attar, Rumi, and Hafiz. Various formulations of Alast, such as the 'wine of Alast' or 'the call of Alast', or 'the song of Alast', which have a long history in Persian mystical poetry are also found in the Baha'i scriptures. It was the Sufi Sahl b. Abdullah Tustari (d. 283/896) who in his meditations on the Primordial Covenant (Q 7:172) first placed the Platonic recollecting of knowledge of this pre-existential condition of souls in the world of *dharr* at the centre of his theoretical conceptions of *dhikr* (remembrance of God). See Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) 45-9, 201-7; also G. Böwering, 'Ideas of Time in Persian Sufism', in Leonard Lewisohn, ed., *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999) 219-20. The idea of recollection of the pre-existential state of gnosis is also mentioned by the Sufi Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri (d.246/861) who is cited in this connection by perhaps the most influential Sufi theoretician in Islam, namely Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 638/1240); see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1989) 155-5, 399. This element of pre-existential knowledge in Shaykhi, Babi, and Baha'i hermeneutics is discussed below.

⁶ Regarding the issue of free will versus predestination in Shi'ism, Daniel Gimaret ('Free Will in Twelver Shi'ism', in *Encyclopedia Iranica* at <http://www.iranica.com/newsite>), citing Kulayni and Ibn Babawayh, states, 'On the question of free will, the whole view of the Imams amounts to a famous saying by Imam Ja'far al-S@ādiq (d. 148/765): *lā jabr wa lā tafwīd@ wa lākin amr bayn amrayn* "neither complete constraint nor complete

‘Covenant’ (*‘ahd/mithaq*) does not appear in this passage, it has nevertheless been conceptually linked to it for centuries by all subsequent Islamic commentary.

In Shi‘ism, this mytho-history of the Primordial Covenant is extended to the Fourteen Pure Ones. It is captured in the idea of *walāyah*, which is the quintessential feature of Shi‘i religious consciousness. The term *walayah* is often inadequately translated as ‘sainthood’, and is notoriously difficult to render into a single English word, as it has the various shades of meanings of love, fidelity, friendship, guardianship, etc. In Shi‘ism it is the idea of the continuation of religio-charismatic authority after the Prophet through the person of the Imam, to whom fealty, loyalty, and love is owed by the faithful just as it is to God and the Prophet. It is the idea of the successorship and guardianship after the Prophet’s death, of the Imam as Divine Guide, within whom lies deposited the inner mysteries and esoteric (*bāt@in*) understanding of God’s revelation, and upon whom its elucidation and elaboration devolves. The Imam is then at once the interpreter and expounder of the Word of God (i.e. the Qur’an). It is he who is called the Speaking Book, whilst the Qur’an is called the Silent Book.⁸ It was these twin repositories of guidance, namely the Qur’an and his Household (*ahl-i bayt*), which according to Shi‘i tradition, the Prophet left the community after his ascension.

The beginning of this covenant of the *walayah* on the horizontal plane, the plane of history, is first reflected in the event of Ghadir Khum in an oasis outside Mecca, where in the Shi‘i liturgical calendar it is known as the ‘Day of the Covenant’ (*yawm al-mithaq*). It was there that the Prophet entered into a covenant with the Islamic community (*umma*) regarding the Walaya/Guardianship and Successorship of ‘Ali (d. 40/661) as the spirituo-temporal leader of the community after himself. In a famed Tradition (*hadith*, a traditional utterance of the Prophet Muhammad, which in a Shi‘i context also includes the sayings of the Imams and is as often referred to as *akhbār*), which is attributed to the Prophet by both the Sunni and the Shi‘i sources, this event is described thus:

We were with the Apostle of God in his journey and we stopped at Ghadir Khumm. We performed the obligatory prayer together . . . And then he took ‘Ali by the hand and said to the people: ‘Do you not acknowledge that I have a greater claim on each of the believers than they have on themselves?’ And they replied: ‘Yea verily’ [*bala*]. And he took ‘Ali’s hand and said: ‘Of whomsoever I am lord

freedom but something in between”.’ This same middle view is espoused and elaborated in the Babi-Baha’i writings.

⁷ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) 24.

⁸ M. Ayoub, ‘The Speaking Qur’ān and the Silent Qur’ān: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imami Shi‘i *tafsir*,’ in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 177-98; Todd Lawson, ‘The Qur’an Commentary of Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad, the Bab (1819-1850),’ (unpublished PhD thesis, McGill University, 1987; forthcoming as *Gnostic Apocalypse in Islam: The Qur’an and the Babi Movement*, London: Routledge, 2009) 78-114.

[*mawla*], then ‘Ali is also his lord. O God! Be Thou the supporter of whoever supports ‘Ali and the enemy of whoever opposes him.’⁹

As is plain from the above passage the word ‘Yea verily’ (*bala*), which is precisely the assent of humanity at the scene of the Primordial Covenant (Q 7:171-2), is uttered by the Muslim faithful in recognition of ‘Ali as their Lord or Master after the Prophet. It should also be mentioned that here the word *mawla* is related to the word *wali* or *walayah*, which according to a characteristically Shi‘i interpretation of this event demonstrates the incontrovertible fact of the *walayah* of ‘Ali, his Guardianship and designation as such by the Prophet.

On the vertical plane, however, this event is said to have its archetype in pre-existence, in the realm of ‘*alam-i dharr*, where the covenant was taken for the *walayah* of Ali before all existence, as Kohlberg states,

In other traditions it is stated that the *walaya* (principle of loyalty to Ali and the other Imams) existed before the creation, and that the formula ‘‘Ali *amir al-mu‘minin*’ is engraved on the upper part of God’s throne. [Kulayni, *Kafi* 1:224.] After the creation of Adam, when all future generations of man were assembled at ‘Arafa in the form of atoms (. . . *dharr*), they solemnly acknowledged not only Allah’s divinity (as stated in Qur’an 7:172), but also Muhammad’s prophethood and ‘Ali’s *walaya*.¹⁰

Thus in a long Tradition, God addresses the Prophet and the Imams in the ‘*alam-i dharr* (the world of the primordial covenant), thus: ‘I have appointed you intercessors for Me. All things are passing away except My face, and you are My face which never perishes [cf. Qur’an 28:88], and he who turns toward you will likewise never perish.’¹¹

One of the important motifs underlying the whole of these arcane Traditions, is not only that the Prophet and the Imams were pre-existent in the world of *dharr*, but that the votaries of the Imams, the Shi‘i faithful, or *mu‘minin*, are also pre-existent in that world, as Corbin observed: ‘By contrast, the awareness that the *mu‘min* or believer has of his origins, and of the future on which the meaning of his present life depends, is centred on facts which are *real*, but which belong to metahistory. The sense of his origin is perceived in the question which God, on the ‘Day of the Covenant’, asked of Adamic humanity, before this humanity was transferred to the terrestrial plane. No system of chronology can fix the *date* of this ‘Day of the Covenant’, which takes place during the

⁹ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 15.

¹⁰ Etan Kohlberg, *Belief and Law in Imami Shi‘ism* (Aldershot : Variorum, 1991), ch. 16 (Some Shi‘i views of the Antediluvian World), p. 44; cf the Tradition of the fifth Imam Muhammad al-Baqir cited in Todd Lawson, ‘The Covenant and the Tablet of Ahmad’, in Moojan Momen (ed.), *The Bahā‘ī Faith and the World’s Religions* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2003) 45.

¹¹ Todd Lawson, ‘Akhbari Shi‘i Tafsir’, in Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (ed.), *Approaches to the Qur’an* (London: Routledge, 1996) 177.

time of that pre-existence of souls which Shi'ism in general affirms.'¹² In one tradition reported on the authority of Bukayr ibn A'yan this premise seems to be demonstrated:

Verily God, blessed and exalted is He, took the Covenant from our Shi'is for *walayah* toward us when they were particles (*dharr*) on the day when He took the Covenant of the particles [*dharr*] to affirm Himself, as Lord, and Muhammad as Prophet. And He showed Muhammad his community (*ummatahu*) in the clay (*t@īnah*), and they were shadows (*az@illah*), and He made them from the clay from which He created Adam; and He created the spirits (*arwāh@*) of our Shi'is a thousand years before their bodies and showed them to [Muhammad] and they were recognized by the Messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him) and by 'Ali b. Abi Talib (peace be upon him) and we recognize them by the peculiar nature of their speech (*lah@n*).¹³

Similarly, Newman states: '... the Imams alluded to a pre-existential world in which Allah agreed with the Shi'ah, when they existed in the form of particles (*dharr*), a pact in which they pledged their affection (*al-walayah*) for the Imams. Allah then gave them form using the same clay that He used for Adam and the other prophets.'¹⁴

In primitive Shi'i cosmology and cosmogony '*alam adh-dharr* therefore is envisaged as a metaphysical world. Again and again the earliest Shi'i Traditions from the Imams relate to the pre-existence of the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams, as well as worlds ('*awālim*) which they and the essence of their faithful inhabited before the creation of the world. In these traditions as we have seen, reference is made to '*alam adh-dharr al-awwal*, or the first world of particles, which is precisely one of these pre-existential worlds in which the Prophet and the Imams exist as shadows (*az@illa*) or silhouettes of light (*ashbāh*) before the creation of the world and wherein they enter into a covenant (*mithaq/'ahd*) with their votaries before the creation of all things. In this early Shi'i cosmology the worlds are respectively named:

1. Mother of the Book (*Umm al-Kitab*)
2. The first world of particles/the world of shadows/the world of the covenant
3. The second world of particles
4. The material sensible world

The first metaphysical world is then the world of the Mother of the Book. It is in this world that the subtle light of Muhammad first emanated forth from God and from which the light of 'Ali originated thereafter. Amir-Moezzi indicates that the 'second world,'

¹² Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1993) 64; cf. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (tr. by Nancy Pearson, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 326n.71.

¹³ Cited in Maria Massi Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 2007) 148.

¹⁴ Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism: Hadith as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad* (Culture and Civilisation in the Middle East, RoutledgeCurzon, Surry, 2000) 55.

called in the texts ‘the first world of shadows’ (*‘alam al-az@illa al-awwal*) or ‘the first world of particles’ (*‘alam adh-dharr al-awwal*), is also the same ‘stage that the divine throne¹⁵ was created’. Furthermore, ‘the first world of shadows’ is also known in the texts as the ‘world of the covenant’ (*‘alam al-mithaq*), for it was in this first world of particles in which God concluded the primordial covenant with the ‘pure beings.’ These ‘pure beings’ were the shadows of future spiritual beings and non-human entities, which include the Prophets and the believers.¹⁶ Amir-Moezzi continues, stating that, ‘this covenant encompassed four solemn oaths...the promise to adore God and the promises of love for and fidelity (*walaya*) to Muhammad and his prophetic mission, to the imams and their sacred cause, and to the *Mahdi*, the universal saviour at the end of time.’ It was also in the first world of particles/shadows/covenant that ‘the shadows of the “pure beings” are said to have been initiated by the luminous entities of the immaculate ones [The fourteen Pure Ones] into the secrets of the two sacred sciences of unification and glorification, well before the creation of the other shadows... these secrets were the four sacred formulas *lā elāha ellā’llāh, sobh@āna’llāh, al-h@amdo le’llāh, and Allāho akbar.*’ In this regard Amir-Moezzi rightly observes that, ‘even the number of these formulas [i.e. four], which contain the most sublime mysteries, has a cosmic value, for it is because of these four that the throne and all the sanctuaries occupying the superimposed centers of the seven heavens and the seven earths are cubical.’¹⁷ Then comes the last stage before the creation of the sensible world, which is called ‘the second world of particles’ (*dharr*) where the creation of the descendants of Adam in the form of particles (*dharr*) takes place and where they are ‘divided into “people of the right” (*as@h@āb al-yamīn*), characterized by their obedience to God, and “people of the left” (*as@h@āb al-shemal*), who refused to obey the divine order.’¹⁸

In light of the above it is interesting to note that in a sermon attributed to Imam ‘Ali called *Khutbat al-Tutanjiyya*, (Sermon of the Gulf) reference is also made to the first world of particles (*adh-dharr al-awwal*). Here the Imam in a series of profound theophanic utterances states: ‘I know of the wonders of God’s creation, which none save God knoweth, and with me is the knowledge of what hath been and what shall be and what transpired with those who preceded the time of the first particles (*adh-dharr al-awwal*) which belongeth to the First Adam (*adam al-awwal*).’¹⁹

¹⁵ See discussion of the Divine Throne below

¹⁶ In this connection, in reply to the question ‘How then did they [the pure beings] respond if they were only particles (*dharr*)’, Ja‘far al-Sadiq said: ‘In the world of the Pact [*al-mithaq*], [God] instilled in them that which they needed to answer his question.’; Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide* 163n.182. Note here that Ja‘far al-Sadiq clearly equates the stage of particles (*dharr*) with the world of the covenant (*mithaq*).

¹⁷ This quaternary or four solemn oaths/pact/covenant has significant typological ramifications in the idea of the covenant in the Babi-Baha’i Revelation (see below).

¹⁸ M. A. Amir-Moezzi, ‘Cosmogony and Cosmology, v. in Twelver Shi‘ism’, in *Encyclopedia Iranica*. See also, Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide* 29-37.

¹⁹ ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, *khutab al-tutanjiyya* (Sermon of the Gulf). For the Arabic used here, see Todd Lawson, ‘Coincidentia Oppositorum in the Qayyum al-Asma: the terms ‘Point’ (*nuqt@ah*), ‘Pole’ (*qut@b*), ‘Center’ (*markaz*) and the Khutbat al-tatanjiyya’, *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January, 2001).

The whole primordial drama of the covenant is brought onto the plane of history in the episode in which the ‘People of the Cloak’ (*ahl al-kisā*), namely the prophet Muhammad, ‘Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn, (which Persian tradition calls the *panj tan* or the Temple of the *Pentad*) were present when the famous debate (*mubahalah*) occurred between the Prophet and the Christian delegation from Najran. Here the motifs of the Imams as silhouettes of light (*ashbah*) and shadows (*azilla, azlal*) which we encountered in the pre-existential time of the first world of particles serve as symbolic signifiers to locate the primordial in the temporal. It was upon the visionary topography of the Crimson Sandhill or *kathīb ah@mar*²⁰ that the luminous forms of the ‘People of the Cloak’ irradiated forth before the delegation. Massignon relates this initiatory scene in this manner:

The Shi‘ite school of the *Mukhammisa* was interested in interpreting in all of its symbolism, the *mubahala* scene. At the cemetery in Medina, at the bottom of the Baqi‘, on the red dune (*kathīb ahmar*), we see the Five standing under the Mantle, illuminated with thunderbolts and lightning flashes. Before them, together with the other initiated *mawali*, stands Salman pointing out the Five for the veneration of the amazed Najranian Christians. At the call of the Initiator, they recognize the Five in their glorious transfiguration (*tajalli*). Their halo of lightning flashes signifies that their authority is a divine ‘right,’ inducing them to affirm that their bodies are shadows (*azilla, azlal*) cast by Divine Light, silhouettes (*ashbah*) temporarily outlined in the divine emanation, exempted from the generation and corruption of suffering and death.²¹

In this episode we see that the People of the Cloak are described as having manifested the same form of apparitional lights and luminous forms that they are said to have possessed in pre-existence in *‘alam adh-dharr* and yet this event is precisely situated in history in

For translations, see Khazeh Fananapazir: <http://bahaistudies.net/kf/gulf.html> and Stephen Lambden: <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/TTNJ.HTM>

²⁰ The Crimson Sandhill (*kathīb-i ahmar*) refers to one of the way stations of the pilgrimage (*hajj*). It is also mentioned in some of the early Traditions, in which it is related to the tomb of Moses. However, its visionary dimension maybe discerned in the fact that the Prophet saw Moses by his tomb during his Night Journey (*isra*). According to tradition, it is also said to be located in the holy land between Jerusalem and Jericho; see Moshe Sharon, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae*, vol. 3 (Brill: Leiden, 2007) 102-103. For a brief but useful research note on the Crimson Sandhill (*kathīb-i ahmar*) in the Babi-Baha’i writings, see Stephen Lambden, ‘Some Notes on the Islamic Background and Bābī-Baha’i use of the phrase Ard@ kathīb al-ah@mar (“The Land of the Red Sand-Dune”)', <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/K-AHMAR.HTM>. For further discussion of this, see below.

²¹ Massignon, quoted in Todd Lawson, ‘Reading Reading Itself: The Bab’s “Sura of the Bees”, A Commentary on Qur’an 12:93 from the Sura of Joseph— Text, Translation and Commentary’ *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i Studies* No. 5 (November, 1997).

what is described as the Crimson Sandhill (*kathib ahmar*). It is here that we may discern the seeds of the Babi-Baha'i hermeneutics of '*alam adh-dharr*' (see below) and of the initiatory covenant of love drawn up with the faithful regarding him and the succession of lights after him, namely the covenant of faithfulness to the reality of *walayah*.

Another Tradition attributed to Ja'far al-Sadiq which has similar implications for our theme, is one in which at once both the theophanic station of the Imam as the locus of the knowable or revealed aspect of God is announced and the whole pre-existential drama of the primordial covenant (Q 7:171) is historicized.

Abu Basir has related that he said to Abu 'Abdallah [Ja'far as-Sādiq] – upon whom be peace – ‘Tell me about God, the Mighty, and Majestic. Will believers see Him on the Day of Resurrection?’ He answered, ‘Yes, and they have already seen Him before the Day of Resurrection.’ Abu Basir asked, ‘When?’ The Imam answered, ‘When He said to them, “Am I not your Lord?” They said: “Yes, verily”’ (VII, 172). Then he was quiet for a time. Then he said, ‘Truly the believers see Him in this world before the Day of Resurrection. Dost thou not see Him now?’²²

Here the Imam is stating that he is the locus of the manifestation (*mazhar*) of God or *Deus revelatus*, and that seeing him in this station is to see God.²³ It is also important to note that since the Resurrection will be heralded with the advent of the Qa'im, the Twelfth Imam, it is he who is the locus of the manifestation of God, *Deus revelatus* and it is this that mankind will see God on the Day of Resurrection, and not the essence of God, who is *Deus absconditus*, the unknowable God. Here then the whole covenantal drama has the effect of being situated in the eschatological advent of the Qa'im, which is as the day of the primordial covenant. It is in this light that the advent of the Bab as Qa'im and as the Manifestation of God may be discerned.

It is of interest to note that that the fourth oath in the world of the particles/shadows/covenant (see the above quotation from Amir-Moezzi) is regarding the Mahdi and that the form of its expression is *Allāhu akbar* (God is Great!). It is here that we may discern the profundity of Corbin's observation that Shaykhism was the 'revival of primitive Shi'ite Gnosis',²⁴ that is, the pure teachings of the Imams. As we shall see these four oaths are revived in Shaykhism and in the writings of the Bab, who is precisely the promised Mahdi/Qa'im. Indeed the new initiatory salutation of the faithful (Babis) of the Bab – the promised Mahdi/Qa'im – was changed from the Islamic salutation of *Salam* (peace) to *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great!), the fourth expression of the solemn oath

²² William C. Chittick, *Shi'ite Anthology* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1980) 42.

²³ As regards the station of the Imams as the loci of manifestation of the revealed and knowable aspect of God in early Shi'i sources, Amir-Moezzi describes two ontological realms of the Divine Being, the first that of the 'Essence', 'the Unknowable God' in 'His vertiginous, unmanifested concealment'. The other being that of 'Acts performed by the organs of God, the Imams, instruments capable of making known to the creatures what can be known of God . . .'; Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide* 45.

²⁴ Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body* 58.

pertaining to the Mahdi.²⁵ It is not difficult to see that the Shaykhi-Babi doctrine of the Fourth Support is already present here. This quaternary of ‘an oath of worship (*‘ubudiyya*) of God, oaths of love and fidelity (*walaya*) toward Muhammad and his prophetic mission, toward the imams and their sacred Cause, and also toward the Mahdi as universal saviour at the end of time’²⁶, is therefore revived once again in a novel hermeneutical turn in the quaternary structure of the covenant in the Babi-Baha’i revelation vis-à-vis the conceptual framework of *dharr*.

The Shaykhi background of ‘*Alam al-dharr* and the Primordial Covenant

The powerful and charismatic figure of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i (d. 1242/1826) and his disciple and successor Sayyid Kazim Rashti (d.1259/1843) are considered by Baha’is to be the twin heralds of the Babi-Baha’i religions.²⁷ Their profound works, which have as yet remained under-studied, form the immediate background for understanding some of the more philosophically abstruse and difficult aspects of the Babi-Baha’i scriptures, not least the concept of ‘*alam adh-dharr*. In the works of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i, ‘*alam adh-dharr* is precisely linked to his meditations on the Primordial Covenant and the related problematic of free will and predestination, good and evil, and are developed on this basis via a complex alchemical physiology, soteriology, and eschatology grounded in his contemplations and exegesis of Qur’an 7:171.

In one of his major works called *al-Fawā'id al-H@ikmiyyah*, Shaykh Ahmad refers to two distinct stages of the coming into being of creation, called the ‘first creation’ (*al-khalq al-awwal*) and the ‘second creation’ (*al-khalq al-thānī*). The ‘first creation’ may be said to belong to the stages of Will (*mashiyyat*) and Purpose (*irādah*), and the ‘second creation’ to the stage of Predestination (*qadar*) and Fate (*qad@ā*).

The Shaykh’s cosmogony starts the process of creation not in the essence of the Godhead, which for him is pure unbelief (*shirk*), but in the Primordial Will of God (*mashiyyat*). In the Shaykh’s lexicon this Primal Will is coterminous with the Muhammadan Reality, and is designated variously as the Command (*amr*) of God, the

²⁵ Persian Bayan, 6:5, cited in Denis MacEoin, *Rituals in Babism and Bahaism* (London: British Academic Press, 1994) 14. It is interesting to note here that in Shaykh Ahmad’s colour mysticism, the four oaths of primitive Shi‘ite cosmology and cosmogony are assigned respectively the four colours of the Hadith of the Throne: *subh@āna-llah* [White], *al-hāmdu li’llāh* [Yellow], *lā ilāha illā’llāh* [Green], and in particular *Allāhu akbar* is related to the colour Red or Crimson; see Stephen Lambden, ‘Kaleidoscope: Some Aspects of Angelology, Light, the Divine Throne and Color Mysticism in Bābī and Bahā’ī Sacred Scripture’, <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/kaleidoscope.htm>. The importance of this colour mysticism and particularly that of Crimson in relation to ‘*alam adh-dharr* will become more evident below.

²⁶ Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide* 34.

²⁷ **Error! Main Document Only.** *Selections from the Writings of the Bāb* (Haifa: Bahā’ī World Centre, 1976) 51. Baha’u’llah, *The Kitāb i Íqān, the Book of Certitude* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1974) 65.

Word (*kalimah*) of God and the Muhammadan Light.²⁸ Among the many reported sayings of the Shi‘i Imams which informs the metaphysics and cosmology of Shaykh Ahmad, one of the utterances of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq is of particular importance in this regard, namely, the famed Tradition of *mashiyyat* (Will). Jafar al-Sadiq states, ‘God created the Will through its own self (*bi-nafsihā*), and created all things (*al-ashyā*’), through the Will.’²⁹ For Shaykh Ahmad the process of creation, is precisely a process of action (*fi ‘l*) that takes place through four stages, which are most crucial for the coming into existence of any ‘thing’ (*shay*’)³⁰. The Shaykh states:

...the creative action that is connected to existence is the Will, and by the archetype (*al-‘ayn*), i.e. the species form (*al-surat al-naw‘iyah*), it becomes Purpose (*iradah*), and by the [intelligible] limitation of the created, i.e. design, like length and breadth, stability and change, fixed time, and the like, it becomes Predestination (*qadar*), and by the realization of the act of creation and the thing itself, it becomes Fate (*qada*).... The fashioning of each existent is completed by these four actions [i.e. Will, Purpose, Predestination, and Fate].³¹

According to Shaykh Ahmad ‘*alam adh-dharr* pertains to the ‘second creation’. Shaykh Ahmad states that the second creation begins in the stage of Predestination (*qadar*).

... predestination [*qadar*], which is the stage of existentiational topography (*handasa ijadiyya*). Through it the limitations of things are set, including provisions, terms of duration, continuance and temporality, restraint of

²⁸ See Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa‘i, *Sharh@ al-Mashā‘ir* (XXXX) 228-230, translated by Keven Brown, in Translation Notes from Shaykh Ahmad’s *Sharh al-Masha‘ir* (<http://users.sisqtel.net/kevenbrown/SHAYKH.htm>). For the concept of the Muhammadan Light (*nur muhammadi*) in Shi‘ism; see Uri Rubin, ‘Pre-Existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muhammad,’ *Israel Oriental Studies*, 5 (1975) 62-119. For the same concept in Sufism, see Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 123-44.

²⁹ Idris Hamid, *The Metaphysics and Cosmology of Process According to Shaykh ‘Ahmad al-Ahasa‘i: Critical Edition, Translation, and Analysis of Observations of Wisdom* (PhD thesis, State University of New York, Buffalo, 1998) 174n, 23. The Arabic translation is my own. Cf. a slightly different version of the same Tradition in Vahid Rafati, ‘Marātib-i Sab‘ih va H@adīth-i Mashiyyat’, *Safīnih-yi ‘Irfān*, Book One, (Darmstadt: Asr-i Jadid, 1998, pp. 53-98) 65.

³⁰ This is the first four of the seven stages of creation (*maratib sab‘ih*) or arc of descent, the last three of which have to do with the outward coming into existence of a thing (*shay*’): Permission (*idhn*), Fixed Time (*ajal*), and *Kitab* (book). On Babi-Baha‘i references to these seven stages of creation, see Rafati, ‘Maratib-i Sab‘ih’.

³¹ Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa‘i, *Sharh@ al-Mashā‘ir* 16, 38, cited in Keven Brown, *Evolution and Baha‘i Belief: ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s Response to Nineteenth-Century Darwinism* (Studies in the Babi and Bahai Religions, v. 12, Los Angeles: Kalimat, 2001) 72-3.

magnitudes, temporal and atemporal modes . . . The beginning of the second creation occurs in this stage [*qadar*], the start of felicity and misery.³²

Shaykh Ahmad refers to the attribute of existence of a thing as proceeding from the actional Will of God and its essence as proceeding from the stage of Purpose. He maintains that every created thing is a composite of existence and essence, the aspect of existence being derived from the actional Will of God and being the cause of matter (*māddah*), and the essence being derived from Purpose and being the cause of form (*sūrah*), which is related to the creatures own potentiality and receptivity (i.e. essence). Here Shaykh Ahmad radically turns the traditional Aristotelian doctrine of hylomorphism on its head by making form receptive and matter active, instead of the traditional formula of matter/receptive and form/active.³³ Vahid Brown, has noted that early Isma‘ili philosophers such as Nasafi and Sijistani were perhaps early proponents of the reversal theory,³⁴ but a more detailed study is required to establish this interesting theory. However, it seems that all the sources necessary for the Shaykh’s novel formulation are already present in the Traditions of the Imams, as Corbin has rightly observed regarding Shaykh Ahmad’s inspiration, ‘The meaning of the terms of Peripatetic hylomorphism is reversed: matter is light, being itself, existence. Form is quiddity, compassion, the shadowy dimension which fixes and defines this light. This is why matter is the father, the masculine aspect, while form is the mother or feminine aspect, and the ‘imaginal Form’ (*sūrah mithāliyah*) is the principle of individuation. Thus the Tradition of the sixth Imam Ja‘far al-Sādiq finds its justification: “The believer is the brother of the believer because of their father and mother. Their father is the Light, their mother is Mercy.” Shaykh Ahmad used the Traditions of the holy Imams in the same creative way to construct the anthropology characteristic of his school.³⁵

The Shaykh calls the composite of existence and essence Man’s *hyle*. He states that ‘this hyle composed of existence and essence is suitable to both the faithful and the denier; they are only distinguishable by the second form which is the second creation’ [i.e. in the first creation they are indistinguishable and undifferentiated].³⁶ Shaykh Ahmad goes on to say that, ‘the act of becoming generated constitutes an act of choice on the part of the created entity in the second creation . . .’³⁷ It is precisely here that the Shaykh in his

³² Hamid, *Metaphysics* 434-36.

³³ The term ‘hylomorphism’ comes from the Greek *hyle* meaning matter, and *morphe* meaning form. The reversal of traditional hylomorphism which is quite central to Shaykh Ahmad’s metaphysics, was first noticed by Henry Corbin. See Corbin, *History* 355. See also Idris Hamid, *Metaphysics* 392n.38; and idem, ‘The Polarity of Existence and Essence in the Metaphysics of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i’, in *The Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming (Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology in Dialogue)*, (ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Dordrecht: Springer, 2003) 201-2.

³⁴ Vahid Brown, ‘The Beginning that hath no Beginning: Bahai Cosmogony’, *Lights of ‘Irfān*, 3 (Evanston: ‘Irfan Colloquia, 2002) 37n.82

³⁵ See Corbin, *History* 355 (emphasis added). It must be recalled that Isma‘ilis and Twelvers accept the same line of the Imams until the sixth Imam, Ja‘far as-Sādiq.

³⁶ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 309.

³⁷ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 243.

reading of the Primordial Covenant of Q 7:171, which includes the covenant of the Prophet and the *walayah* of Imam Ali, starts his complex anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology which ends with situating '*alam adh-dharr*' in the 'second creation'. Here is an extended passage:

So when they requested that He [God] question them, He, in His knowledge of them, questioned them. So He said to them, 'Am I not your Lord, and Muhammad your Prophet, and 'Ali your Guardian?' Then they said altogether, 'Yes, indeed!' [*bala*] Among them were those who, on the basis of their knowledge, each said it with his tongue and heart . . . So He [God] created them from the form [*sura*] of affirmation and cognizance . . . Those are the messengers, the prophets, the veracious, the martyrs, and the righteous.

And among them were those who each said it with his tongue while his heart was denying and gainsaying, not receiving. So He created them from the form [*sura*] of gainsaying, denial, and disacknowledgement. It is the devilish satanic form. Those are the rejecters, the hypocrites, and their followers among them; those for whom the truth is made clear and yet they turn away from it . . . Their forms in this lower life is human only because of their [positive] answer with the tongue [i.e. *yes/bala*], which is the lowest level of response. In the hereafter their human forms will be stripped from them and their real forms, following their hearts, will self-manifest.

And among them were those who each said it with his tongue while his heart was hesitant; God created them in human form due to their acknowledgement through their tongues. He does not create their inward natures (*bawāt@in*) until they acknowledge or disacknowledge. So He creates them from their state. Now they are divergent, some of them [acknowledge or disacknowledge] in the proximate life; some in the intermediary world; and some in the hereafter. Whomsoever's inward nature (*bāt@in*) is created in human form [*sura*] will enter the garden; whoever is created otherwise will enter the fire.

These forms created from either positive response or denial constitute the clay [*tīnah*]. It is the mother in whose belly the felicitous become felicitous; and the miserable become miserable . . .³⁸

Then Shaykh Ahmad concludes his profound exegesis with this statement: 'So this is the second creation, under the green light, in the world of shadows, in the leaf of myrtle, thus they were, in the world of notes [*'alam adh-dharr*]. . . . Then He differentiated them in the red light; this is the meaning of his saying (peace be upon him): then He returned them to clay, that is the clay of nature.'³⁹

It is interesting to note that Shaykh Ahmad equates the world of shadows (*alam al-azilla*) and the world of particles (*'alam adh-dharr*) just as it is in the *akhbar* of the

³⁸ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 309-10. The Shaykh virtually repeats the same argument in his *Sharh@ al-'Arshiyya* (commentary on the Throne), which he wrote as a critique of Mulla Sadra, while again mentioning Qur'an 7:171 and '*alam adh-dharr*'; see Corbin, *Spiritual Body* 219-221.

³⁹ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 311.

Imams in primitive Shi‘i cosmogony and cosmology. He also gives two stages to the world of particles, one undifferentiated and the second differentiated. The first is distinguished with symbolism of the green light, which in the Shaykh’s lexicon corresponds to *‘ālam al-malakūt* (world of the Kingdom) and the stage of Predestination (*qadar*), where creatures remain undifferentiated. In the second stage it is distinguished by the symbolism of the red clay (red light), or the clay of nature (*al-tabi‘at*). It corresponds to *‘ālam al-nāsūt* (the physical world), and the stage of Fate (*qada*), where creatures are differentiated according to their own volition. The mystical symbolism of colour acts as a signifier for designating the proper hierarchy of worlds, and is also repeated in the Babi-Baha’i sacred texts (see Figure 1).⁴⁰

It is worth mentioning here that the colour crimson also frequently occurs in the Shaykh’s alchemical theories and forms the basis of his novel contemplations on the resurrection body. In one passage, Shaykh Ahmad states that if the white elixir acts upon tin, which corresponds to the elemental body, it will become silver, which corresponds to body which survives ‘in the tomb’ and into which the spirit enters from the paradise of this world. If the red elixir then acts upon this, it becomes gold, which corresponds with the body which departs with the spirit from the corporeal body after death and enters the paradise of this world. If the red elixir is projected onto it a second time, it becomes an elixir itself, which corresponds to the essential resurrection body which will gain admittance into the paradise of the hereafter. That this gold has become an elixir is a sign and proof that this was latent in the reality of the tin.⁴¹ It is clear that the Shaykh wishes to situate the whole process of resurrection as a spiritual process occurring within the individual, for just as gold is hidden and latent within the reality of tin, so the resurrection body is hidden within the reality of the individual. It is a transformation or transmutation occurring within the same substance/person via the red elixir that brings about the resurrection. It was this profound transformation of the notion of the resurrection, which was to prove one of the most troubling doctrines for the more exoteric *‘ulama* who were to renounce our Shaykh as a heretic. It is here as well that we may discern that the Shaykh’s correspondence of the transmutation of the resurrection body through the symbolism of the red elixir⁴² is precisely linked to the red clay/red light related to the

⁴⁰ This mystical symbolism of colour has its origin in the Tradition of the Throne (*al-‘arsh*) ascribed to Imam ‘Ali (cf. the Imam’s interpretation of the Throne as ‘the Religion of Truth’; see note 66 below). For an excellent treatment of the motif of mystic colour symbolism in the Babi-Baha’i writings, see Vahid Rafati, *Alvān dar Āthār-i Bahā’ī* (Mut@āli‘ih Ma‘ārif Bahā’ī, second series, no. 1, Dundas, Ont.: Persian Institute for Bahā’ī Studies, 1988). See also Stephen Lambden, *Kaleidoscope* at <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/kaleidoscope.htm>.

⁴¹ Shaykh Ahmad, *Jawāmi‘ al-Kalim*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 123-124. Translated by Keven Brown in ‘Some Alchemy Texts of Shaykh Ah@mad’, <http://users.sisqtel.net/kevenbrown/ShaykhAhmadAlchemy.htm>. See also Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* 180-221. In the Babi-Baha’i writings the elixir has various shades of meaning and is at times equated with the person of the Bab and Baha’u’llah or their scriptures.

⁴² The alchemical concept of the red elixir (*iksīr ah@mar*) may be said to be conceptually linked with the famed red sulphur (*kibrīt ah@mar*), which has a long heritage in Islamic

world of *nāsūt* (nature), and to the stage of Fate/Decree (*qad@ā*) in the seven stages of creation and finally to the earth of '*alam adh-dharr*, or the pleroma of the covenant.

Idris Hamid in his reading of Shaykh Ahmad's discussion of *alam ad-dharr* correctly states that:

...the world of motes (*'alam ad-dharr*) is the universe in which the question, 'Am I not your Lord?' is asked at the moment of the creation of each individual soul. This world, for Shaykh Ahmad, lies in the lower regions of the *mundus intelligibilis*, where the oneness of the 'universal soul' (*an-nafs al-kulliyat*, in the 'green light'), gives way to the diversity of individual souls in the world of nature (*at-tabi'at*, in the 'red light').⁴³

Regarding Shaykh Ahmad's discussion of Q 7:172, Hamid further observes that, 'God's question symbolizes the giving of existence. The affirmative reply (*yes/bala*) symbolizes the receiving of this existence (i.e. via the essence).'⁴⁴ He concludes that,

According to Shaykh Ahmad, the act of becoming-generated constitutes an act of choice on the part of the created entity in the second creation. In the inner reality of things, each of us chooses, at the very moment of our creation, whether we accept our existentiatio or not. This accepting or rejecting is regarded as constituting an essential modality of a quintessence's act of becoming. In other words, essences are in a sense acts of self-creation.'⁴⁵

It is also noteworthy that Shaykh Ahmad's first creation seems to correspond to the first world of particles/shadows/covenant in the primitive Shi'ite gnosis of the Imams, and his second creation seems to echo the second world of particles where distinctions are made

alchemy and is attested in the spiritual lexicon of Shi'ism and Sufism; see Abu ar-Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, *Kitab al-jamāhir fī ma'rifat al-jawāhir* (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1989; web edition, http://www.farlang.com/gemstones/biruni-book-gemstones/page_108) 108; Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 26; Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur* (Cambridge : Islamic Texts Society, 1993) 112n.10. Baha'u'llah often in his writings equates rarity with the red sulphur; for example the station of martyrdom (Ishraq-Khavari, *Mā'idih-yError! Main Document Only.i Āsmānī*, 9 vols., Tehran: Mu'assisih Millī Mat@bū'āt Amrī, 121-29 B.E./1963-72, 4:348) and in the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*, **Error! Main Document Only.**2nd edn., Wilmette, Ill., Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1974, 79), he cites a Tradition of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq comparing the rarity of a true believer to *kibrit-i ahmar* (which is translated by Shoghi Effendi as the 'philosopher's stone'). See also 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari, *Qamūs-i-mukhtas@ar-i-Īqān* (Bundoora: Century Press, 1992) 70; idem, *Ma'idih* 1:36.

⁴³ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 401; cf. Shaykh Ahmad, *Sharh@ az-Ziyāra al-Jāmi'a al-Kabīra*, cited in Corbin, *Spiritual Body* 187.

⁴⁴ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 244.

⁴⁵ Hamid, *Metaphysics* 243-4.

from ‘the people of the left’ (those who reject the Imam) and ‘people of the right’ (those that accept the Imam) who are differentiated according to their choice.

Before we turn our attention to the Babi-Baha’i hermeneutics of ‘*alam adh-dharr*, we should mention here for the sake of completeness another element of the Shaykh’s interpretation of the primordial covenant and ‘*alam adh-dharr* which he seems to share with that of the Sufis: the pre-existential knowledge deposited in our souls in ‘*alam adh-dharr* and its recollection. As we have seen the Shaykh does not need to draw upon the theories of the Sufis for his interpretations on this matter, as the basic elements for a doctrine of the pre-existence of souls from a purely exoteric reading seems to be present in the earliest Shi‘ite Traditions. In fact it is interesting that Shaykh Ahmad, in his rejection of the need for such figures as the Sufi Shaykh, invokes the idea of pre-existential knowledge inherent in man and cites the event of the primordial covenant (Q 7:172) in the world of particles (‘*alam adh-dharr*) as the proof that such knowledge was presented to all creatures on that day, and consequently all that such teachers may do is to reawaken these memories. Thus there is inherently no superiority in these Sufi guides who only awaken in chronological time before the seeker.⁴⁶ This notion of pre-existence in the writings of the Shaykh should be understood in light of the greater picture of his metaphysics and cosmology discussed briefly above. As we shall see, this idea of the pre-existence of souls in ‘*alam adh-dharr* is radically redefined in the Babi-Baha’i scriptures and situated in relation to the appearance of the Manifestation of God.

Will	Lahut	White	The first creation	
Purpose	Jabarut	Yellow		
Predestination	Malakut	Green	The second creation	' <i>Ālam adh-dharr</i>
Fate	Nasut	Red/Crimson		

Figure 1.

⁴⁶ Shaykh Ahmad, *Jawami` al-Kilam*, I, ii, 2, pp, 71-72. See Juan R. I. Cole, ‘Individualism and the Spiritual Path in Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i’ *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i Studies* no. 4 (September, 1997).

'Alam adh-dharr and the Primordial Covenant in the Writings of the Bab

According to Baha'i belief, the Bab (d. 1850), is the martyr-herald of the Baha'i Faith and at once the promised one of Islam, the Qaim/Mahdi, and a Manifestation of God. He forms with Baha'u'llah the Twin Manifestations of God in the Baha'i Dispensation. The writings of the Bab are often enigmatic and difficult to understand as they are couched in the mystical and esoteric lexicon of its Shi'i-Shaykhi milieu, and also because the Bab himself at times deliberately made out of his writings an elaborate cipher only to be properly decoded by the promised messianic figure of the Bayan, namely, 'Him whom God shall make manifest' (*man yaz@harullāh*), whom Baha'is believe to be Baha'u'llah. Indeed the decoding and unveiling of the true intent and nature of his revelation and writings itself was to be one of the supreme signs of 'Him whom God shall make manifest'. In the early writings of the Bab, the concept of *dharr*, echoing the Shaykhi heritage of the Fourth Support, is situated in the conceptual framework of the covenantal quaternary of Divine Unity, Prophethood, Imamate, and the Shi'a, which may be termed the quaternary logic of the covenant. In his later writings, such as the Persian Bayan, the Bab situates *'alam adh-dharr* in relation to the appearance of the Manifestation of God (i.e. himself) on the plane of history, and discusses the spiritual correspondence and unity between the heavenly worlds and the earthly domain, or what may be termed the Hermetic dictum of 'as above, so below', or the doctrine of *tashrī'* and *takwīn* (see below). Let us now first turn to the Shaykhi background and the early writings of the Bab in which the term *dharr* appears in the quaternary framework of the covenant.

As we have seen one of the emblematic paradigms of Shi'i spirituality lies in the concept of *walayah*, so much so that Corbin called Shi'ism 'the religion of Walaya'.⁴⁷ In the five pillars of Shi'i belief (*us@ul ad-din*), three of which it shares with Sunnism, the added pillars of Justice ('*adl*) and the *walayah* of the Imamate were the defining character of Shi'i mythos. The five pillars being:

1. *Tawhid* (Divine Unity)
2. *Nubuwwah* (Prophethood)
3. Imamate
4. Resurrection
5. Justice

These five pillars or *usul* were the foundation of Shi'ite religious consciousness for centuries until in the works of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i (less clearly pronounced) and Sayyid Kazim Rashti (more clearly pronounced) these five pillars were in a radical turn reduced to four, corresponding to the primitive Shi'ite gnosis of the Imams, by the conjoining of divine unity with justice, and prophethood with resurrection and by adding

⁴⁷ Henry Corbin in *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality* (ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, New York, 1988) 167. Here the Arabic word *madhhab* (school/branch) for Shi'ism would be more proper, rather than religion (*din*) as such.

the doctrine of the Fourth Support (*Rukn-i Rāb 'ih*) otherwise called the Perfect Shi'ī (*Shi'ī Kāmil*), or Gates (*Abwāb*).⁴⁸ The four Shaykhi pillars are thus:

1. *Tawhid*
2. *Nubuwwah*
3. Imamate
4. Perfect Shi'ī, The Fourth Support, The Gates

This Shaykhi quaternary structure of the covenant is again and again repeated in the writings of the Bab and often within the conceptual framework of *dharr*. The motif of the quaternary structure as a whole has a cosmic value in the numerico-alphabetic hermeneutics of the Bab, and profoundly informs his entire scriptural cosmos, and is directly related to the mysteries of the covenant and its quaternary unity.⁴⁹ In the Persian Bayan, the Bab in his discussion of the four words (*h@urūf*) that constitute *bismi llāh al-man'a al-quds* (In the name of God, the Inaccessible, the Holy) gives a veritable list of quaternities that form unities (*vāh@id*) such as: essence, attributes, actions, 'ibadat (worship); creation, *rizq* (sustenance), life, and death; fire, air, water, earth (the four elements); heart, spirit, soul, inner body (the human reality); white, yellow, green, and red (the mystic lights).⁵⁰ Not least among them is the quaternary of Will, Purpose, Predestination, Fate/Decree. These quaternities as we shall see are often juxtaposed with each other typifying the homology and correspondence that exists between all the worlds.

In one of the earliest works of the Bab called *Risālat as-sulūk ilā 'Allāh* (The Epistle of Spiritual journey towards God), the Bab mentions the interrelationship of the covenantal quaternary:

Indeed Religion is supported by four pillars (*bi-arkān arba 'ah*): *Tawh@īd* (Divine Unity), *Nubuwwa* (Prophethood), *Walaya* (Guardianship), and Shi'ah (the community of true believers).⁵¹ These are four gates (*abwāb*) of which no one is of any use without the others. And all of this is the Face of God (*wajh allāh*), which will never perish. And it (i.e. the 'Face of God') is the love of the Family of God (*h@ubb āl Allāh*) which is the same as the love of God.⁵²

⁴⁸ Momen, *Introduction* 228.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of these quaternities in the early writings of the Bab, see Todd Lawson, 'Qur'an Commentary' 115-45

⁵⁰ See the Persian Bayan, 5:8 (Iran National Baha'i Archives, vol. 24, Tehran, c. 1977; repr. East Lansing, Mi.: H-Baha'i, 2006). J. Vahid Brown presented a paper 'Quaternities of the Writings of the Bab: A Study in Babi and Baha'i Symbolism', at the Irfan Colloquia Session, no. 44, Louhelen Bahá'í School: Michigan, USA, October 11-14, 2002, but we have not seen this paper.

⁵¹ In yet another place the Bab explicitly mentions Sayyid Kazim Rashti as the pure or true Shi'ī; see Fadil Mazandarani, *Tārīkh-i Z@uhūr al-H@aqq* vol. 3 (East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2000) 223.

⁵² Cited in Lawson, 'The Bab's Epistle on the Spiritual Journey towards God' in Momen, *Baha'i Faith* (pp. 231-47) 237. This is an Imamological interpretation of Qur'an 22:88.

It is important to note that the above quaternary is mentioned in light of the dialectic of the spiritual journey or mystic voyage (*sulūk*) towards God. It is through the recognition, or rather gnosis (*‘irfān*) of the inseparable and conceptual unity of these four oaths of initiation that one attains the imperishable Face of God, which the Bab affirms is naught but the love of the Family of God (*āl Allah*), that is the *walayah* of the Imamate, or the covenant of succession after the Prophet, which is the love of God. In this precise sense the secret of the gnosis of the Divine (*‘irfān illāhī, ma‘rifat Allāh*) lies in the recognition of this covenantal quaternary.

Now it is important to state here that in the lexicon of the Bab, *mashhad* (place of testimony), *rukn* (support) and *dharr* are often used interchangeably in his writings and are coextensive with one another in his discussions of the tetrad of the covenant.⁵³ The Bab in his second work, named *Tafsir Surat al-Baqara*, substitutes the term *rukn* for *dharr* in his discussion of the same quaternary covenant. Here he also equates each stage with a subtle mystical physiology typifying the spiritual organ relating to the various stages. This is a subtle juxtapositioning of the arc of ascent or *qaws s@u‘ūd* (the spiritual journey) and the arc of descent or *qaws nuzūl* (descent of creation).

These signs were placed within (*fī*) the dimension (*dharr*) of the hearts [which represents] the station (*maqam*) of Divine Unity (*tawhid*), and [in] the dimension [*dharr*] of the intellects [which represents] the level (*rutba*) of Prophethood (*nubuwwa*), and [in] the atoms [*dharr*] of souls [which represents] the abode of the Imamate (*imama*) and [in] the dimension [*dharr*] of the bodies [which represents] the place (*mahall*) of the love of the Shi‘a after God imposed this solemn binding upon all created things [which is] faith (*iman*) in Muhammad, ‘Ali, Hasan, Husayn, Ja‘far, Musa, and Fatima.⁵⁴

Thus in the above passage the affirmation of *tawhid* is equated to the heart, prophethood to the intellect, Imamate to the soul, and the Shi‘ah to the body. In another terse passage in the *Tafsir Surat al-Baqara*, the Bab explicitly alludes to the transcendent scene of the Primordial Covenant in the Qur’an whilst discussing the same quaternary structure of the covenant, the importance of the *walayah* and its appearance on the horizontal plane of history in the event of Ghadir Khum.

That place of testimony is the same as the ‘dimension’ (*dharr*) of the primordial covenant (Q 7:171), when the covenant of lordship was taken: whoever was recognized [then] was recognized [for all time]. Indeed, ‘those possessed of mind’ know what happened there by what happened here (Ghadir Khumm), the realm of this world (or ‘religion’, *tashrī‘*) is in accord with the realm of that world (or ‘divine creation’ *takwīn*). But this place of testimony (viz. the Day of al-Ghadir)

⁵³ For the same covenantal quaternary in which *mashhad* is used in the Bab’s *Sura wa l-‘asr*, see Todd Lawson, ‘The Dangers of reading: Inlibration, communion and transference in the Qur’ān Commentary of the Bāb’ in *Scripture and Revelation* (ed. Moojan Momen, London: George Ronald, 1997) 185-91.

⁵⁴ The Bāb, cited in Todd Lawson, ‘Fatima’s Religious Authority in an Early Work of the Bab,’ in *The Most Learned of the Shi‘a: The Institution of Marja‘ Taqlid* (ed. Linda Walbridge, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 108.

is greater than the first place of testimony, the dimension [*dharr*] of the affirmation of Divine Unity, while the second place of testimony is the dimension [*dharr*] of the affirmation of Prophethood – nay, rather it is the essence of the Divine Cause. This place of testimony of the day of al-Ghadir is the third place of testimony the greatest dimension. The remaining place of testimony is the last: it is the dimension of the Fourth Support, the rising of the Qa'im. . . This occasion of testimony will occur in the beginning of his appearance (*zuhur*) and it is the dimension [*dharr*] of the affirmation by their Shi'a that the Family of God are the word of magnification in the midmost sanctity of praise.⁵⁵

Here then, the quaternary structure is repeated once again in the framework of *dharr*. It is important here to mention the four solemn oaths (*mithaq*) of primitive Shi'i cosmology and cosmogony – which as we have seen were drawn up in the first world of particles (*'alam adh-dharr al-awwal*) – are repeated verbatim here by the Bab. It was there that the fourth oath was precisely the oath of allegiance to the Qa'im /Mahdi. Here the Bab also makes the fourth oath/covenant co-incident with the Qa'im and in a radical turn equates it with the Shaykhi Fourth Support. In this pre-proclamatory work, the Bab's novel hermeneutical turn opens the exegetical gate to his future declaration to be the Mahid/Qa'im, the eschatological Lord of the Age (*sahib zaman*).

In the above, the Bab also mentions the doctrine of *tashrī'* (revelation) and *takwin* (creation)⁵⁶, or what we have termed the Hermetic dictum of 'as above, so below,' which is one of the foundational hermeneutical categories that lies at the heart of the Babi-Baha'i scriptural cosmos. This hermeneutical category may be said to permeate the whole of the Babi-Baha'i textual universe. At the very centre of its axis, is the autonomous figure of the Manifestation of God (*maz@har ilāhī*), the Primal Will (*mashīyyat awwaliyya*), the *axis mundi*, whose cyclical theophany on the plain of history enacts, or rather re-enacts events of cosmological and cosmogonic order, for which he, as the epiphany of the Primal Will, is the motive force in the processio-perpetual creation of the world. However, it should be noted that the Bab as well as Baha'u'llah radically reverse this Hermetic dictum, so that it is properly 'as below, so above,' first rather than 'as above, so below.' This is based on the insight that all that can be known epistemologically of the spiritual and heavenly worlds is primarily gained through the historical advent and lives of the Manifestations of God and not vice versa. This will be born out more clearly in the Bab's hermeneutics of *'alam adh-dharr* in the Persian Bayan (see below).

⁵⁵ The Bāb, cited in Lawson, 'Fatima's' 107.

⁵⁶ The principle of *tashrī'* (revelation) and *takwin* (creation) is often mentioned in the Babi-Baha'i scriptures. Another word often used interchangeably with *tashrī'* is *tadwīn* (i.e. *tadwin* and *takwin*). This doctrine is mentioned as one of the principle beliefs of the Shaykiyya and by extension that of the Shi'a, by Sayyid Kazim Rashti in *Us@ūl al 'Aqā'id*; see Nusratu'llah Muhammad-Hussaini, *Had@rat-i Bab* (Dundas, Ont.: Institute for Bahā'ī Studies in Persian, 1995) 122. For the alchemical and cosmogonic background of *takwin* in the works of Jabir Ibn Hayyan and early Islamic alchemy, see Kathleen Malone O'Connor, 'The alchemical creation of life (takwin) and other concepts of Genesis in medieval Islam', PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1994.

The Bab in the *Sah@īfih-yi 'Adliyyih*, or the *Book of Justice*, before mentioning the same quaternary of the covenant, discusses the subject of free will (*tafwīd@*) and predestination/compulsion (*jabr*) and like Shaykh Ahmad, affirms that God's Will brings forth creation via the seven stages of creation (*maratib sab 'ih*). He affirms that this quality of will is inherent in all things, that is to say that each thing (*shay'*) is an event of the Will, and is existentiated according to its own volition. The Bab states:

Verily, He [God] is cognizant of the choices of all things and creates all in accordance to their choices and rewards them according to their act of choosing and if He should create them not according to the degree of their receptivity/capacity, verily He has committed an injustice towards them.⁵⁷ For, He hath created all for the sake of His love, and the love of His friends (*awliya*). Therefore, the decree of fate (*qad@ā'*) hath been established through His execution (*imd@ā*), so that all may receive their share. In the four *mashhads* (places of testimony) of Command (*amr*), He hath created all through His Will (*irādah*) and covenanted with them, so that there should not remain any excuse for a single person. In the first *dharr* [particle], He hath covenanted with all things regarding His [God] own Divinity, in the second *dharr*, He hath covenanted with all things regarding the prophethood of the messenger – upon him and his family be the peace of God – and in the third [*dharr*], He hath made firm the covenant regarding the guardianship (*wilāyat*) of the Family of God (*āl Allāh*) and in the fourth, he hath covenanted regarding the love of the people of *wilayat* [the Shi'ah], and He hath created all things through the Will, and [created] the Will through its own self.⁵⁸

The last section of this passage evokes the same Tradition of *mashiyyat* (Will) of Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq mentioned earlier. The Bab like Shaykh Ahmad then is reiterating that every 'thing' (*shay'*) is created by the Primal Will according to its choice and that no 'thing' exists without its possibility to come to exist. Hence its existence itself is the sign of its choice; otherwise it would never have existed, as that would be against the justice of God to create it without its own volition. The statement that 'he hath created all for the sake of his love and the love of his friends (*awliya*),' is crucial here as it subtly alludes to the fact that one cannot be compelled to love, and that it must be freely given of one's own accord. The purpose of creation is hence to love God and His chosen friends, namely the prophet and his successors, through our own free will. It is interesting to note that the stage of Fate/Decree (*qad@ā'*), which is the fourth stage of the arc of descent, is mentioned here in light of the dialectic of free will and necessity. Thus it may be said that

⁵⁷ Keven Brown's provisional translation of the beginning of the above passage reads: 'He [God] knows the dispositions of all things, and through the dispositions of all, He creates all, giving each one a portion according to its disposition . . . Were He to create something other than in accord with the state of its own receptivity, this would be an injustice to it.' Mazandarani, *Amr va Khalq*, repr. 4 vols. in 2, Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahā'ī-Verlag, 1985, 1:76; trans. online at <http://users.sisqtel.net/kevenbrown/sevenstages.html>.

⁵⁸ Provisional translation from the Bāb's, *Sahifih-yi 'Adliyyih* (Tehran: n.p., n.d.) 21.

this revelation of the covenant of God on the plane of history is decreed/fated but how we respond to it is our choice.

In another place the Bab in his discussions of the seven stages of creation, mentions the stage of Fate/Decree in the conceptual framework of the Qur'anic primordial covenant. Just as in the works of Shaykh Ahmad, the stage of Fate is correlated to the primordial covenant where they who exclaim 'yea, verily' are existentiated according to their freedom to respond.⁵⁹ In yet another place the Bab in his discussion of the stage of Fate/Decree corresponds to it the colour Crimson: 'That which I set forth in explanation of the letter Hā was to extol the Tree of Bahā, for the supporters of Fate (*qada*) recognize the decree of spontaneity (*badā*) in the Crimson Pillar.'⁶⁰ Here then the Bab correlates the fourth mystic colour that is crimson with the fourth stage of the arc of descent, namely Fate/Decree. In another instance the Bab, in the *Qayyūm al-Asmā*, mentions crimson in relation to his station as the alchemical elixir: 'Indeed God hath created everywhere around this Gate (*bāb*) oceans of divine elixir (*iksir*), tinged crimson (*ahmar*) with the essence of existence and vitalized through the animating power of the desired fruit; and for them God hath provided Arks of ruby, tender, crimson-coloured, wherein none shall sail but the people of Bahā.'⁶¹ Here we see that the elixir of the resurrection body in the works of Shaykh Ahmad is identified as the Bab. As we have said earlier such juxtapositioning in the writings of the Bab illustrates the unity and correspondence of all the worlds, and demonstrates the dictum of 'as above, so below' which imbues all his writings.

Here we must note that the Bab only progressively made a self-disclosure of the fullness of his station according to the dictum 'speak to the people according to their capacity.' His station as the Manifestation of God, or the Primal Will, became more clearly pronounced in his later writings and in the Persian Bayan he explicitly links the last stage or the fourth *dharr* in which he appeared in the station of the *bab*, to the first stage or the first *dharr* which is that of the Primal Will. The Bab states:

. . . For at that time he manifested himself according to the fourth *dharr* and called himself as the appearance of one of the Gates (*abwab*). Thus it is for that reason that the first *dharr* is manifest in the fourth *dharr*, for it was in that *dharr* [fourth *dharr*] that he spoke the words, 'Verily, I am God; there is none other God but me.' Should there be a possessor of understanding in the world, he would set out wayfaring and attain certitude in that the Last is the same as the First, and the Manifest as the Hidden . . .⁶²

⁵⁹ Keven Brown's provisional translation of the Bab, manuscripts in the Iran National Baha'i Archives, 14:268 ff; 67:38 ff; 86:137 ff. in 'Selections from the Bahá'í Writings and from Shaykh Ahmad on the Seven Stages of Creation' at <http://users.sisqtel.net/kevenbrown/sevenstages.html>

⁶⁰ The Bāb, translated in Keven Brown, 'Selections'.

⁶¹ From Qayyum ul-Asma, chap XLI, trans. in the Bab, *Selections*, pp. 57-58.

⁶² Provisional translation of the Bāb, Persian Bayan, 18:8. The Bāb writes about the gradual self-disclosure of his station in the *Dala'il-i Sab'ih* (The Seven Proofs); see *Selections* 119.

Here we see that the unity and the correspondence of the various stages are invested in the very *being* of the Bab, in whom the first is the same as the last and the hidden as the manifest. Thus the dictum of ‘as above so below, as below so above,’ is manifested in the very person of the Bab himself who in his station as the Primal Will encompasses all of the stages.

The Bab in his later writings clearly identifies the eighteen Letters of the Living (*H@urūf-i H@ayy*) with the ‘precursors’ or *sābiqūn*, namely the Imams, as they who preceded before others in their recognition of the Bab, as well as in more initiatory terms as they who responded to God’s Primordial Covenant in ‘*alam adh-dharr*. Just as in the Shi‘i Traditions it was Muhammad and the Imams who preceded all in creation in the world of particles, so in the Bab’s dispensation they return (*raj‘a*) and are the first to recognize him who is the Qa’im.⁶³ In this connection it is important to mention a tradition ascribed to the sixth Imam Ja‘far al-Sādiq wherein he states, ‘When the Qa’im rises, the people will reject him because he will return as a youth in his best years (*shābban muwaffaqan*). No one will remain believing in him except those with whom God made a covenant in [the world of] the first particles (*fi adh-dharr al-awwal*).’⁶⁴ This Tradition is extremely interesting in light of the fact that the common Shi‘i interpretation of the appearance of the Qa’im assumes that he will be universally recognized. But, according to this Tradition only those who in pre-existence, in the world of the first particles, had made a pact/covenant to accept the Qa’im will bear allegiance to him in his *parousia* (*z@uhūr*) at the end of the age (*zamān*), and the rest of the people will reject him for being a youth. We must recall that the Shi‘ah believe that the twelfth Imam disappeared as a child, and therefore is now over a thousand years old. It is interesting to note that the Bab, who claimed to be the awaited Qa’im, enounced his station in the prime of his youth (*shābban muwaffaqan*) and it was the Letters of the Living, the first to believe in the Bab, who were called the ‘precursors’ or *sābiqūn*, namely they who arose to assent to his recognition before all created things.

In this connection the Bab in the Persian Bayan makes explicit the interpretation regarding ‘*alam adh-dharr*, and in a radical turn situates it in this world in relation to the appearance of the Manifestation of God: ‘The first to respond’ to the primordial question ‘Am I not your Lord?’ was ‘Muhammad, who was the first to be created. So all in this day confess that, if they say that the response took place in the world of pre-existence (*alam adh-dharr*), this is that same world, for the realm above the throne (*al-‘arsh*) of

⁶³ Denis MacEoin, ‘Hierarchy, Authority, and Eschatology in Early Bābī Thought,’ published in *In Iran* (Studies in Bābī and Bahā’ī History vol. 3, ed. Peter Smith, Los Angeles: Kalimat, 1986) 104-5. For the concept of *raj‘a* (return) in Shi‘ism, see Amir-Moezzi’s excellent article on *raj‘a* in *Encyclopedia Iranica*.

⁶⁴ Muhammad bin Ibrāhīm al-Nu‘mānī, *Kitāb al-ghayba* (Qum: Anwār al-Hudā, 1422/2001) 194 (no. 43). Also cited in al-Shaykh ‘Alī al-Kūrānī al-‘Āmilī, *Mu‘jam ahādīth al-Imām al-Mahdī* (Qum: Mu‘assasat al-Ma‘ārif al-Islāmīya, 1411/1991) 3: 353 (no. 900); cf. *Bihār al-anwār* (110 vols., Tehran: Matba‘a al-Islamiyya) 52: 287 (no. 23). Reference and translation provided by Omid Ghaemmaghani. The Baha’i scholar Mirza Abu’l-Fadl Gulpaygani also cites this tradition in his master apologetic work *al-Error! Main Document Only.Farā’id* (Cairo: Matba‘ah Hindiyyah, 1315 A.H./1897) 56.

heaven is identical to the earth on which the Manifestation of God dwells.’ We must note that it was precisely this same Divine Throne which in early Shi‘i cosmology and cosmogony was created in the first world of the particles/shadows/pact, and which was interpreted in the lexicon of the Imams as ‘Religion’ (*din*).⁶⁵ The Bab here then returns the meaning to its origin, to the hermeneutic of the Imams, which is precisely the meaning of *Ta’wil* (to bring back to its origin), and states that any other understanding of the Throne or *‘alam adh-dharr* is nothing but fanciful imagination. Indeed the Bab states that nothing of that world, namely the pre-existential world, can be known, unless it has its correspondence first here in the life of the Manifestation, in whose revelation archetypal cosmogonic events are realized and become knowable. Finally in this passage the Bab then refers to the words of the Tradition relating to the visitation of the shrine of Imam Husayn: ‘whoso visits Husayn with a full understanding, it is as if he has visited God upon his throne’ and states that ‘It is manifest to the possessors of intelligence that that is the very locus of the throne of God, and that he is the throne of Muhammad, the messenger of God.’⁶⁶

***‘Alam adh-dharr* and the Primordial Covenant in the Baha’i Writings**

Along with the sacred texts of the Bab, it is in the writings of Baha’u’llah (d. 1892), the prophet-founder of the Baha’i revelation, and ‘Abdu’l-Baha (d. 1921) his eldest son who is at once the successor and interpreter of that revelation, that *‘alam adh-dharr* finds its clearest exegesis. Though elements of its Shi‘i-Shaykhi heritage are present, yet it provides a new and novel element of understanding the coordinates of this mysterious region of ‘the realm of subtle entities’ and may be seen both as a divine *ta’wil* or hermeneutic of those traditions of the Imams which relate to this world and the dialectic of the primordial covenant. Therefore, the mytho-history of the drama of the Qur’anic covenant (Q 7:172) is radically re-interpreted in the Baha’i scriptures both in the light of the Greater Covenant (i.e. the covenant made by the Manifestation regarding the acceptance of the next Manifestation) as well as the Lesser Covenant (i.e. the covenant made by the Manifestation regarding his successor). Indeed the same conceptual framework of the covenantal quaternary and its structural unity that was present in the early writings of the Bab is also present in the Baha’i Revelation. As will become clear, in the Baha’i Writings the whole pre-existential drama of the primordial covenant becomes historicized in the life of the Manifestation and finds its true meaning in relation to his revelation. *‘Alam adh-dharr* then denotes the undifferentiated station of mankind before the revelation of the Manifestation of God on the plane of history. It is the moment in which human beings freely chose their realities and essences in accordance with their response to the divine call. It is here that the antinomy of free will versus predestination is resolved and the problematic of the pre-existence of souls finds its solution. Thus

⁶⁵ See the tradition of Iman al-Baqir reported by his son Ja‘far: ‘the Throne [*al-‘arsh*] is the Religion of Truth’ (Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide* 31).

⁶⁶ *The Persian Bayan of Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab*, 2.8, tr. Dennis MacEoin: [*H-Baha’i*] *Translations of Shaykhi, Babi, and Bahai Texts* (July, 1997). Part of this passage has been translated in *Selections* 112-113.

'*alam adh-dharr* is the spiritual topography of the divine-human encounter and represents the mystical and atemporal realm of the covenant.

Throughout the writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha the theme of the Covenant ('*ahd/mithaq*), both Greater and Lesser, have an unparalleled and unprecedented importance. Indeed all of the teachings of the Baha'i Faith circle around 'the pivot of the Oneness of mankind' which is unrealizable in the temporal world, save through 'the power of the Covenant', namely that of the Lesser Covenant.⁶⁷ The Baha'i Revelation is then the quintessential religion of the covenant. This covenant may be seen in initiatory and esoteric terms as the fulfillment of that covenant which remained tragically unfulfilled in Islam, indeed in the whole of the Adamic Cycle, and at last was fulfilled in the Baha'i Dispensation by the reality of the Lesser Covenant in the form of a tablet penned by its author, wherewith the solidarity and oneness of the whole of existence is said to be realizable at long last. In this precise sense, the Baha'i revelation even more than Shi'ism may be termed the religion of *Walayah par excellence*.

Though there have been some general references to '*alam-i dharr* in secondary Baha'i literature,⁶⁸ a full study of its scope and significance in the Baha'i writings have remained hitherto unexplored; this despite the fact that this term has profound implications for a deeper understanding of the esoteric mysteries of the covenant in the Baha'i Revelation. Two exceptions, however, are Fazil Mazandarani and 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari, who have made passing references to '*alam-i dharr* in their respective encyclopedias.

In his Encyclopedia *Asrar al-athar*, Fazil Mazandarani has an entry on '*alam-i dharr* (the realm of subtle entities) and *dharr-i 'amā* (the particles of the Unknowable Cloud). Regarding *dharr-i 'ama*, he states that it is 'a term of esoteric philosophy and gnosis which has also been mentioned in this Cause,' then he cites a passage from the writings of Baha'u'llah referring to *dharr-i 'ama*: 'These sovereigns of existence (*sult@ān-i-wujūd*) in the particles of the unknowable cloud (*dharr-i 'ama*) and in the world of spirits (*awālim-i arwāh@*) accepted all calamities in the Path of God - with supreme fortitude and forbearance . . .'⁶⁹

The term *dharr* in *dharr-i 'ama* is more a reference to '*ama* or the Unknowable Cloud, which is the station of the primordial Manifestation of God, as the Primal Will, or Word of God. The conjunction of *dharr* with '*ama*, typifies or signifies the spiritual ground, station or dimension of '*ama*, that is to say the station of the unknowability of the Manifestation.⁷⁰ Regarding '*alam-i dharr* or realm of subtle entities, however,

⁶⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: **Error! Main Document Only.**Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, rev. edn., 1995) 238-239.

⁶⁸ See Nader Saiedi's two excellent articles, in which he makes references to *dharr* and '*alam-i dharr*'; Nader Saiedi, 'Kalimat-i mahnūnih va as@l-i mīthāq', *Pazhūhishnāmih*, A Persian Journal of Baha'i Studies, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1999) 90; idem, 'Tafsīr bismi llāh rah@mān rah@īm', *Pazhūhishnāmih* vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1998) 185. Muhammad-Hussaini also mentions *dharr* in regard to his discussions of the Bab's Writings; *Had@rat-i Bāb* 735-736.

⁶⁹ Provisional translation from Ishraq-Khavari, *Ma'idih* 4:42

⁷⁰ See Stephen Lambden's study of the concept of '*ama* in the Babi-Baha'i scriptures, 'An Early Poem of Mirza Husayn 'Ali Baha'u'llah: The Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing (Rashh-i 'ama),' *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* 3.2 (1984) 4-114.

Mazandarani states that ‘the world of particles/realm of subtle entities is as it has been referred to in the Qura’n (Q 7:171-2)...’ and continues in this vein,

it is the same realm in which the whole of humanity before this earth/world bore witness to the oneness of the essence of God, and in Islamic sources they have written that humanity before this existence in that world of witnessing were addressed by the words ‘Am I not your Lord?’ Some said, ‘Yes’, but became unbelievers and others said, ‘Yes’ and were accounted as faithful, and each one received their share and due in this world according to that world.⁷¹

Here Mazandarani affirms that ‘*alam-i dharr*’ pertains to the transcendent scene of the primordial covenant in the Qur’an and briefly mentions the Islamic interpretation of this world. Then he cites an important passage by Abdu’l-Baha in which the interpretation and meaning of ‘*alam-i dharr*’ is provided. Mazandarani does not explicate the interpretation provided by Abdu’l-Baha any further, nor does he seem to give a clear indication of the overall meaning of ‘*alam-i dharr*’ in the Baha’i writings. We shall have occasion to discuss Abdu’l-Baha’s interpretation of this term below.

‘Abdu’l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari on the other hand in his Baha’i Encyclopedia *Dā’irat al-Ma’arif-i Bahā’ī* has two entries on a cognate of ‘*alam-i dharr*’ in the Baha’i writings, namely *dharr al-baqā* or the timeless realm of eternal particles. The first entry is as follows: ‘The knowledge of God wherein the essences and realities of things existed in that realm [*dharr-al-baqā*] in conceptual (‘*ilmī*’) form before outward existence and were brought forth through the address of God; and God said unto them, “Am I not your Lord?” which has been revealed in the Quran [Q 7:171-2].’⁷²

Ishraq-Khavari again properly situates *dharr al-baqā* in relation to the primordial covenant in the Qur’an. He provides no textual evidence from the Baha’i writings however for his interpretation, though it seems to be derived from the exegesis of Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha regarding ‘*alam-i dharr*’ and other similar passages which mention *darr al-baqā*. Before we turn to the most explicit interpretations of ‘*alam-i dharr*’ by Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha, let us first look at some examples of how *dharr al-baqā* is often used in the Baha’i writings. In one instance, it alludes to the pre-existent station of Baha’u’llah in which his destiny to suffer as the Manifestation of God was foreordained.

Hast Thou forgotten the Covenant that thou made with God before the creation of the universe—at the beginning of time (*dharr-al-baqā*)—to die a martyr’s death in His path? Verily, this matter hath been foreordained in the Mother Book (*umm al-kitāb*).⁷³

⁷¹ Translated from Asadu’llah Fadil Mazandarani, *Asrār ul-Āthār*. Volume 3 (Tehran: Mu’assisih Millī Mat@bū’āt Amrī, 128 BE/ 1972, pdf Edition digitally republished, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2006) 270-71.

⁷² Translated from ‘Abdu’l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari, *Da’irat al-Ma’arif-i Baha’i* [Baha’i Encyclopedia], vol. 9 (Digitally published, East Lansing, Mi.: H-Bahai, 2001) 82.

⁷³ Bahā’u’llāh, *La’ali’ al-Hikmah*, 2:26-7. Provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami.

It is noteworthy to recall here the reference to the Mother Book (*umm al-kitab*) in the above passage, which as we saw in primitive Shi'ism was the first metaphysical world in which the light of Muhammad existed. It was also in '*alam adh-dharr al-awwal*, which here corresponds to *dharr-i baqa*, that the covenant with God was first made. In another place in the Surah of the Temple, Baha'u'llah refers to the covenant, which was taken with all created beings in *dharr al-baqa* in this manner:

O Living Temple! Through Thee have We gathered together all created things, whether in the heavens or on the earth, and called them to account for that which We had covenanted with them before the foundation of the world [*dharr al-baqa*]. And lo, but for a few radiant faces and eloquent tongues, We found most of the people dumbfounded, their eyes staring up in fear. From the former We brought forth the creation of all that hath been and all that shall be. These are they whose countenances God hath graciously turned away from the face of the unbelievers, and whom He hath sheltered beneath the shadow of the Tree of His own Being; they upon whose hearts He hath bestowed the gift of peace and tranquillity, and whom He hath strengthened and assisted through the hosts of the seen and the unseen.⁷⁴

Here we are already approaching the hermeneutics of *dharr al-baqa*, which is co-extensive with '*alam adh-dharr* or the realm of subtle entities. In this passage the reality of the Primal Will as the pre-existential reality of the Manifestation of God addresses his earthly Temple, that is Baha'u'llah, that he has covenanted with all created beings before the foundation of the world (*dharr al-baqa*), regarding his Manifestation, and lo when the hour of his appearance struck, most of mankind turned away from him, save 'a few radiant faces and eloquent tongues'. In a profound turn Baha'u'llah then states that it is from them that he has 'brought forth the creation of all that hath been and all that shall be.' This would be first and foremost his son 'Abdu'l-Baha, the centre of his Covenant, and his daughter the Greatest Holy Leaf, and his great grandson Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957), the Guardian (*wali*) of the Cause of God, namely the Holy family; and second, his most faithful followers, or the faithful of love. Therefore the mystical earth from which 'the creation of all that hath been and all that shall be', is first and foremost the earth of the Holy Family which is precisely the reality of *walayah* and that of the Lesser Covenant, from whom the earth of the faithful is first kneaded.⁷⁵

In another instance Baha'u'llah is addressed as Him who is the bearer of the pre-existential bounties and favours of God in these words: 'O Solace of the Spirit! Speak to the people of the bounties that We bestowed upon thee before the foundation of the world (*dharr al-baqa*), before the bodies of all things were adorned with the garment of names,

⁷⁴ Baha'u'llah, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (**Error! Main Document Only.**Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 2002) 10-11.

⁷⁵ For this same idea, in which the faithful are created from the clay of the reality of the holy Imams, see Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide* 39-40, 44-55.

when the eternal Adam (*adam al-baqa*) lay concealed within the clay of the Divine Decree (*t@īnat al-qad@ā*).⁷⁶

It is important to highlight in the above passage that the eternal Adam, which represents humanity is here referred to as concealed within the clay of Divine Decree.⁷⁷ This as we have seen was the fourth stage in the seven stages of creation (*maratib sab'ih*) which both in the works of Shaykh Ahmad and the Bab is invariably related to '*alam adh-dharr*. Similarly it is related to the world of nature ('*alam al-nasut*) and the mystical colour and photism corresponding to this stage is red or crimson (*ahmar*). In one instance 'Abdu'l-Baha in his explication of a term which we encountered earlier in our section on Shi'ism, called *al-kathib al-hamra* (the crimson hill),⁷⁸ explicitly mentions the subtle mystic colours of light accorded to each of the first four stages of the arc of descent and at once illuminates the spiritual significance of that term:

By the crimson land (*ard@-i h@amrā*) and the crimson hill (*kathīb-i ah@mar*) the station of Fate/Decree is intended, for in the terminology of the people of God, white indicates the station of the Will, while green signifies the station of Predestination. Crimson (*ahmar*) indicates the station of Fate/Decree and yellow the station of Completion (*imd@ā*'). Thus it is that the crimson land signifies the station of the most great martyrdom [testimony].⁷⁹

Similarly in yet another instance 'Abdu'l-Baha in referring to these mystic colours states,

This is the terminology of the late Shaykh [Shaykh Ahmad]. White is the station of the Will, for it transforms into whatsoever colour thou dost desire. The colour red/crimson is the station of Decree/Fate, yellow that of Purpose, and green that of Predestination. By the snow-white Spot the station of Will is intended . . . The Primal Point [the Bab] in the Best of Stories (*ah@san al-qis@as@*, i.e. *Qayyūm al-Asmā*) hath said: 'By the righteousness of the One true God, I am the Maid of Heaven begotten by the Spirit of Bahā, abiding within the Mansion hewn out of a mass of ruby, tender and vibrant...' The station of crimson (*ar-rutbat al-h@amrā*)"... This is the station of Fate/Decree.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Baha'u'llah (*Sūrih-yi Qamīs*), *Āthār-i Qalam-i A'lā*, Vol. 4 (Dundas, Ont.: Institute for Bahā'ī Studies in Persian, 2002) 374. Provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami.

⁷⁷ Here Baha'u'llah echoes the prophetic tradition in which it is said, 'I was a prophet when Adam was still between spirit and flesh.' See Javad Nurbakhsh, *Traditions of the Prophet: Ahadith* (New York, 1981) 27.

⁷⁸ The term *kathib al-hamra* also appears in the writings of the Bab precisely in his discussion of the quaternities in the fourth stage pertaining to the Shi'ah. Sayyid Kazim Rashti mentions *kathib al-hamra* in his *Sharh@ al-qasīda al-lāmīya*. See Todd Lawson, 'Qur'an Commentary' 133-5. See also Stephen Lambden's Note on *kathib al-hamra* here: <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/03-Biblical-islam-BBst/K-AHMAR.HTM>.

⁷⁹ Provisional translation from Ishraq-Khavari, *Ma'idih* 2:48, 4:17.

⁸⁰ Provisional translation from 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari, *Muhadirat* (2 vols. in 1, Hofheim-Langenhain: Baha'i-Verlag, 1987) 980. Here we have provided the longer text of the Bab's *Qayyūm al-Asmā*, which in Ishraq-Khavari seems to be partially quoted or

Thus as we have seen, *dharr al-baqa* is related to the station of *qada* which is the fourth stage of the arc of descent and in the Babi-Baha'i lexicon is situated in relation to the world of *nasut* and the colour corresponding to it is red or crimson.⁸¹ All of this as we have seen has its spiritual genealogy in the works of Shaykh Ahmad and the writings of the Bab.

It is interesting to note here that the Hebrew origin for the word Adam which is *adamah* means red or crimson earth, this may be typologically related to the mystical locale known as *al-kathib al-hamra* or the Crimson Sandhill, which 'Abdu'l-Baha has related to the stage of Fate/Decree (*qada*) which is precisely related to *dharr al-baqa* or '*alam adh-dharr*. Therefore the Genesis drama of the creation of Adam is correlated in this manner to the Qur'anic primordial covenant whereby the red dust-earth from which Adam⁸² was created is the mystical locale of *dharr* or the realm of the covenant (*mithaq*), and in its highest signification designates 'the station of the most great martyrdom [testimony]' which may be the cry of 'yea verily, we bear witness' (*balā shahadnā*, Q 7:172) freely uttered by the faithful in response to the divine call even unto death. This is the only true existence perceived from the divine point of view and hence the red clay dyed crimson by the blood of lovers is the earth of the faithful of love kneaded from the covenant (for further Genesis symbolism in the Baha'i writings in relation to our theme, see below).

Similarly in another passage in the *Sūrat al-Bayān*, Baha'u'llah precisely turns this notion of sacrifice around, in that the primordial covenant that was drawn in *dharr al-baqa* is not only to sacrifice oneself for the Beloved but also to offer up one's life for those who have the fragrance of the love of the Beloved. Baha'u'llah addressing the Maid of Heaven states: 'If Thou smellest from any one the smell of the love of Thy Lord, offer up Thyself for him, for We have created Thee to this end, and have covenanted with Thee, from time immemorial (*dharr al-baqa*), and in the presence of the congregation of Our well-favored ones, for this very purpose.' Here then the very purpose of existence is to sacrifice one's life not only for the Beloved, but for the lovers of the Beloved.⁸³

Before we turn to the Lesser Covenant let us look at an example of the use of the term *dharr* typifying the motif of the Greater Covenant, in which each Manifestation has

missing. Also, the word *al-rutbat al-hamra* (the station of Crimson) which appears in *Muhadirat* does not seem to be part of the text of the *Qayyūm al-Asmā*'.

⁸¹ Baha'u'llah in *Lawh-i Kullu't@-T@a'ām* (the Tablet of all Food), allocates the colour white to the metaphysical world of Lahut, yellow to Jabarut, green to Malakut, and red to Nasut (the physical world). See provisional translation by Stephen Lambden, <http://www.bahai-library.org/provisionals/food.html>.

⁸² Here it is worth mentioning that one of the symbolic and spiritual dimensions inherent in the Genesis tale of Adam and Eve is precisely the freedom to choose and to will, which in the story is exercised contrary to the Divine admonition.

⁸³ *Athar-i Qalam-i A'la* 4:268; available at <http://reference.bahai.org/fa/>. Trans. in Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah* 284. Shoghi Effendi here translates *dharr al-baqa* as, 'from time immemorial.' The other translation by the Baha'i World Center, as we have seen, is 'before the foundation of the world.' This reference was kindly provided by Omid Ghaemmaghami and Moojan Momen.

made a solemn oath/covenant regarding the appearance of Baha'u'llah, as the promised one of all religions.

Say: Beware lest ye become veiled by evil suggestions from Him who is the Possessor of all Names and Attributes. This is he [Baha'u'llah] whose Manifestation the Bab hath covenanted ('*ahd*) in every particle (*dharr*) of the Bayan, whose coming Muhammad, the Messenger of God, hath promised in every particle of the Qur'an, whose advent the Spirit (Jesus) had promised in every particle of the Gospel, whose appearance he who held converse with God (Moses) had promised in every particle of the Torah, and whose revelation the Friend (Abraham) had promised in every particle of God's Decree (*amr*) — if ye be of them that comprehend.⁸⁴

In the above passage Baha'u'llah in a profound hermeneutical turn makes the Holy Books of each of the Manifestations to be the very world of particles (*dharr*) in which the covenant was drawn between the prophet and his ardent lovers regarding their acceptance of Baha'u'llah at the time of his promised manifestation (*z@uhūr*). The covenant then in these Holy Books is the realm of subtle entities ('*alam adh-dharr*) in which the primordial covenant was drawn. It is here that paradoxically '*alam adh-dharr*' is at once related to both time and timelessness, for the event of the revelation of these Books occurs in the world of time, but in respect to the covenant or origin of revelation, it is outside time. 'Abdu'l-Baha in his interpretation of one of the Persian Hidden Words (no. 71) of Baha'u'llah mentions this phenomenon and in a radical turn as well resolves the problematic of the pre-existence of souls as related to '*alam-i dharr*'.

As for the reference in the Hidden Words regarding the Covenant entered into on Mount Paran, this signifieth that in the sight of God the past, the present and the future are all one and the same whereas, relative to man, the past is gone and forgotten, the present is fleeting, and the future is within the realm of hope. And it is a basic principle of the Law of God that in every Prophetic Mission, He entereth into a Covenant with all believers – a Covenant that endureth until the end of that Mission, until the promised day when the Personage stipulated at the outset of the Mission is made manifest. Consider Moses, He Who conversed with God. Verily, upon Mount Sinai, Moses entered into a Covenant regarding the Messiah, with all those souls who would live in the day of the Messiah. And those souls, although they appeared many centuries after Moses, were nevertheless — so far as the Covenant, which is outside time, was concerned — present there with Moses.⁸⁵

Therefore this covenant, 'which is outside time', is precisely with those souls who are to exist in the future, but in relation to the covenant they are present – *in potentia* – pre-existentially in the realm of the covenant, which is the world of particles. Here we are already approaching the radical Baha'i hermeneutics of the Shi'i Tradition, which spoke

⁸⁴ Ishraq-Khavari, *Ma'idih* 8:47-48. Provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami.

⁸⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1982) 207.

of the pre-existence of the Shi'ite faithful a thousand years prior to their actual existence. As we shall see this ontological priority rather than temporal priority will become clearer in Baha'u'llah's hermeneutic of *'alam-i dharr* in which the whole pre-existential drama of the primordial covenant (Q 7:172) is interpreted in relation to the theophanic appearance of the Manifestation of God on the horizon of history. This is clearly expressed in relation to Baha'u'llah in a letter addressed to an individual Baha'i by 'Abdu'l-Baha:

O thou speaker of the word "yea verily" (*bala* - Q2:171-2)! In this Day of the Divine Presence (*yawm-i liqā*), a hundred thousand souls have contemplated for years the mysteries of *Alast* (*sir-i alast*), and the days of the *dharr* of existence (*wujūd*), and the reality of the Intended One (*h@aqīqat-i maqsūd*) and who imagined [spiritual] meanings, and made esoteric interpretations (*ta'wil*) of the Traditions and Qur'anic verses, and solved problems. But when the Sun of Aloneness (*tafrīd*) shone forth from the horizon of Divine Unity (*tawhid*), the Divine Call was raised and the Call of *Alast* reached the ears of the whole of existence, all became dumb of speech and were made known as deaf and dumb. But thou didst respond to the [Divine] Call and cried out "yea verily" and entered neath the shadow of the word of Divine Unity and drank from the flowing waters of Tasnim (Qur'an 83:27), and tasted from the cup tempered at the Camphor Fountain (Qur'an 6:5-6).⁸⁶

We must now make mention of a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha in which he provides a hermeneutic of *bismi llāh ar-rah@mān ar-rah@īm* (In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful) which adorns the beginning of every *surah* of the Qur'an save the ninth *surah* Tawbah. ('Abdu'l-Baha states that even this *surah* starts with the letter *bā*, with the words *bara'itu*.) While discussing the significance of the first letter of *bism* that is '*bā*' and its significance as the Primal Will, namely Baha'u'llah, he mentions as a sign that the creation of all things have originated with this letter (which is the first letter of the name Baha'u'llah) and that all other sacred scriptures, such as the Torah and the Gospels, also start with this letter. For, indeed it is precisely with this letter that the Hebrew scriptures start, for the book of Genesis begins with the Hebrew letter '*ba*' or *bet*, that is with the word *bereshit* (in the beginning), and the New Testament which begins with the Gospel of Matthew also begins with the Greek letter *beta*, that is with the words '*byblos*' (book). Then 'Abdu'l-Baha in another linguistic turn states that this letter, which at the primordial scene of the covenant in *dharr al-baqa* when creation first uttered the word 'yes' (*bala* which starts with the letter '*ba*'), is thus precisely the cause of the coming into being of all things: '... [and it was] The first letter [*ba*] that came out of the tongue of all beings and filled up their mouth in the beginning of the creation, when God addressed His creation [in the world of eternal particles] before the foundation of the world (*dharr al-baqa*) and said: "Am I not your Lord?" and they said: "Yes" (*bala*).'⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Provisional translation from *Safīnih-yi 'Irfān* 9 (2006) 15.

⁸⁷ Provisional translation of 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Min Makātīb-i Had@rat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā*, vol. 1 (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Baha'i Brasil, 1982) 38. See also Nader Saiedi, 'Tafsir bismi llah' 188-198.

Now let us turn to the Lesser Covenant, which is regarding the successorship of ‘Abdu’l-Baha and that of the Guardian of the Cause of God (*walī amru llāh*) Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice after Baha’u’llah. Shoghi Effendi, while discussing the significance of the Lesser Covenant, quotes from several of the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Baha. In one instance ‘Abdu’l-Baha is cited as stating: ‘The Covenant which God hath made in the realm of the eternal particles (*dharr al-baqa*), was for the sake of the Centre of the Covenant (*markaz-i mīthāq*, i.e. ‘Abdu’l-Baha).’⁸⁸ Then Shoghi Effendi immediately cites another passage from the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Baha wherein a further hermeneutical element is added:

This is the Covenant which God made in the realm of eternal particles (*dharr al-baqa*) neath the shade of the Tree of Anisa on the Day of His Revelation. It then appeared in the realm of creation in the form of a Tablet graven by the Pen of the Most High. Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious.⁸⁹

It is instructive to recall here that the covenant of the *walayah* of ‘Ali which was drawn in ‘*alam adh-dharr al-awwal* or the first world of the particles, in early Shi‘i cosmology and cosmogony, is repeated here in regard to ‘Abdu’l-Baha precisely in *dharr al-baqa*. Here ‘Abdu’l-Baha mentions the covenant that was drawn in *dharr al-baqa* by Baha’u’llah and in a profound hermeneutical turn states that this covenant appeared in the world of creation in the form of a Tablet. This Tablet is the *Book of the Covenant* (*Kitāb-i ‘ahdī*) which is the last will and testament of Baha’u’llah in which he appoints ‘Abdu’l-Baha as his successor and centre of the covenant. Therefore *dharr al-baqa* is here the spiritual earth of the book of the covenant. Here Genesis symbolism such as the Tree of Anisa which is coterminous with the Tree of Life is used in the hermeneutics of the Lesser Covenant via the realm of eternal particles (*dharr al-baqa*). Indeed, the *Book of the Covenant* is often referred to in Baha’u’llah’s mystical lexicon as the Crimson Book, as Shoghi Effendi has stated: ‘The Crimson Book refers to the Book of His Covenant.’⁹⁰ Here again we must recall that the symbolism of the colour crimson or red is precisely related to *dharr al-baqa* and corresponds to the stage of Fate/Decree (*qada*) in the arc of descent and to *alam al-nasut* in the hierarchy of worlds. Thus it is that crimson is the colour of the earth of Adam, or *adamah*. It is from this mystical crimson-coloured earth associated with the *Book of the Covenant*, which is related to *dharr al-baqa* that ‘the

⁸⁸ Provisional translation from Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqī‘āt-i mubārakah* (Langenhain: Bahā’ī, 1992) 207-208.

⁸⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Baha cited in Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqī‘āt* 207-208. Provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami; cf. the reference to the ‘Tree of Anisa’ as the ‘Tree of the Covenant’ which was ‘entered into in primordial Origin [*dharr al-baqa*]’ in *Lawh@-i Qarn* (Tehran: Mu’assisih Millī Mat@bū‘āt Amrī, 1944); provisional translation by Khazeh Fananapazir at <http://bahaistudies.net/kf/centennial.html>

⁹⁰ Helen Bassett Hornby (comp.), *Lights of Guidance: A Bahā’ī Reference File* (5th ed., **Error! Main Document Only.** New Delhi: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1997) 181. ‘Abdu’l-Baha has also designated both the Lesser Covenant and the whole corpus of Baha’u’llah’s writings as the Crimson Book; see Ishraq-Khavari, *Ma’idih* 3:1.

creation of all that hath been and all that shall be' is brought forth. In this precise sense the power of the covenant is the cause of the new creation.

Baha'u'llah's Persian Hidden Word no. 19 reads:

O My Friends! Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awestruck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of my utterance should be made evident unto all of you.⁹¹

'Abdu'l-Baha has given a number of interesting different exegeses of this Hidden Word:

- 'By the "Tree of Anīsā" is meant the Tabernacle of the Lord of Grace, the divine Lote-Tree, the Tree of Life, "the Olive that belongeth neither to the East nor to the West, whose oil would well nigh shine out even though fire touched it not" [Qur'ān 24:35].'⁹²
- 'O leaf upon the Tree of Life! The Tree of Life, of which mention is made in the Bible, is Bahā'u'llāh, and the daughters of the Kingdom are the leaves upon that blessed Tree.'⁹³
- 'The "true and radiant morn" is the dawn of the Covenant, and the first light of the Testament of the Day-Star of the world. The "Tree of Anīsā" is the blessed tree which hath flourished in the Most Great Paradise and casteth its shadow upon all regions.'⁹⁴
- 'By the term "that true and radiant morn" mentioned in the Hidden Words is meant the Dawn of divine Revelation when the Exalted One (i.e. the Bab) manifested Himself in the plenitude of His glory, while the Blessed Tree referreth to the Ancient Beauty (Baha'u'llah). By those "surroundings" is meant the realm of the heart and of the spirit, and the gathering of the people implieth a spiritual communion, not a physical one. However when the Call of God was raised in the realm of the heart and spirit, mankind remained heedless and inattentive, and therefore was dumbfounded.'⁹⁵

⁹¹ It is interesting to note here that Baha'u'llah evokes the imagery of *anamnesis* in relation to 'those hallowed and blessed surroundings,' using Platonic tropes of forgetfulness and recollection which as we mentioned earlier were utilized in Sufism as well as Shaykhism.

⁹² 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Compilation' 258-9.

⁹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Selections* 57.

⁹⁴ 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Compilation' 258-9.

⁹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahā, from a Tablet to an individual – translated from the Persian in 'Compilation: references of 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi to the Hidden Words', Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, *Bahā'ī Studies Review* 9 (1999-2000) 258-9.

- 'This is the Covenant and Testament which the Blessed Beauty established through the Supreme Pen in the Holy Land under the shade of the Tree of Anīsā and which was promulgated after the Ascension.'⁹⁶ This is the Lesser Covenant.

We must recall here that it was upon the land of the Crimson Sandhill which according to Muslim tradition was located in the Holy Land that the drama of the People of the Cloak was said to have taken place (see above). Baha'u'llah in the *Sūrih-yi Mulūk* while in prison and in exile in the holy land on the plain of 'Akka utters these words:

O kings of the earth! Give ear unto the Voice of God, calling from this sublime, this fruit-laden Tree, that hath sprung out of the Crimson Hill [*kathib al-hamra*], upon the holy Plain, intoning the words: 'There is none other God but He, the Mighty, the All-Powerful, the All-Wise.' This is a Spot which hath been sanctified by God for those who approach it, a Spot wherein His Voice may be heard from the celestial Tree of Holiness.⁹⁷

Here the visionary topography of the Crimson Hill paradoxically becomes prophetically historicized by the exile of Baha'u'llah to the Holy Land and his declaration there to the whole world. It was here in 'Akka as well that the *Book of the Covenant* or the *Crimson Book* was written by Baha'u'llah, designating 'Abdu'l-Baha as the centre of his covenant.⁹⁸

The Lesser Covenant, which as we have seen was drawn in the topography of *dharr al-baqa*, is further extended to the line of succession after 'Abdu'l-Baha by Shoghi Effendi and the Administration, namely both the Guardianship and Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi states regarding the Lesser Covenant:

The second form of covenant is such as the one Baha'u'llah made with His people that they should accept the Master ['Abdu'l-Baha]. This is merely to establish and strengthen the succession of the series of Lights that appear after every Manifestation. Under the same category falls the covenant of the Master made with the Baha'is that they should accept the administration after Him...⁹⁹

Thus according to Shoghi Effendi the Administration (i.e. the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice) is deemed to be in the same category as the Lesser Covenant, thereby squarely situating the whole drama in the conceptual framework of *'alam-i dharr* or *dharr al-baqa*. Here it is important to state that the quaternary of the covenant (*'ahd/mithaq*), in which one cannot be divorced from another, becomes as well the foundation of the dialectic of the covenant in the Baha'i revelation echoing its Shaykhi-Babi form; where the recognition of God, His Manifestation

⁹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Compilation' 258-9.

⁹⁷ Baha'u'llah, *Summons of the Lord of Hosts* 185.

⁹⁸ See also the reference to the 'blest and crimson Spot (*al-buq'at al-mubāarak al-h@amrā*)' in Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (**Error! Main Document Only.** Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) 56, which in the notes to this book (220n.127) is said to be 'a reference to the prison-city of 'Akkā.'

⁹⁹ Hornby, *Lights of Guidance* 181.

(Baha'u'llah) and the *walayah* of the centre of his covenant (Abdu'l-Baha), the Guardianship of Shoghi Effendi (who is precisely called *wali amrullah* or Guardian of the Cause of God) and the Universal House of Justice is upheld.

1. God
2. Baha'u'llah (Manifestation/Prophethood)
3. *Walayah* of Abdu'l-Baha, *Walayah* of Shoghi Effendi (*wali amrullah*)
4. Universal House of Justice

Thus, in this covenantal quaternary separating any one of the stages from the others is tantamount to the negation of all of them. The recognition of one must therefore include the recognition of all the stages and the rejection of one becomes the rejection of all four. This is the mystic unity and essence of the covenant, which is precisely framed in the mystical logic of '*alam-i dharr*'. It is here again that the same gnosis of the Divine through the love of *walayah* or the succession of lights after the prophet, is couched in the framework of the quaternary of the covenant, which as we have seen was present in primitive Shi'ism, Shaykhism and finally the writings of the Bab.

Now let us turn to the most explicit interpretation of '*alam-i dharr*' in the writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha. In one brief passage in response to a query made of the meaning of '*alam-i dharr*', Abdu'l-Baha states:

The realm of subtle entities ('*alam-i dharr*') that is alluded to refereth to the realities, specifications, individuations, capacities and potentialities of man in the mirror of the divine knowledge ('*ilm-i ilahi*'). As these potentialities and capacities differ, they each have their own particular exigency (*iqtid@ā*). That exigency consisteth in acquiescence and supplication.¹⁰⁰

This passage indicates that each created being has its conceptual existence in the knowledge of God, which in the Baha'i lexicon refers to the station of the Primal Will and not to the reality of the Divine Essence (*dhāt ilāhī*). It is from here therefore that being individuates and attains concrete existence according to its potentialities and capacities. Indeed it is interesting to note that the word *iqtid@ā* is from the same Arabic root as *qad@a* (Fate/Decree), the fourth stage of the arc of descent and used here in relation to the very freedom to existentiate according to each 'thing's' potentiality and capacity. This is an extremely succinct version of what we have seen in the works of Shaykh Ahmad and that of the Bab in relation to the dialectic of free will versus predestination which is worked out in relation to this realm (see above).

Here we must now turn to Baha'u'llah's hermeneutics of '*alam-i dharr*', which gives 'Abdu'l-Baha's interpretation a more concrete context. Baha'u'llah, in reference to the query of pre-existence regarding a special section of humanity, categorically denies such elitist metaphysical concepts and states that all were created through the Primal Will of God which is the same as the Word of God (*Kalimat Allah, Logos*). He squarely situates the realm of subtle entities ('*alam-i dharr*') on the plain of history whereby the

¹⁰⁰ Ishraq-Khavari, *Ma'idih* 2:30; cited in Baha'u'llah, *Tabernacle of Unity* (**Error! Main Document Only.**Bahā'ī World Centre, 2006) 80.

Qur'anic drama of the primordial covenant (Q 7:172) is interpreted by way of a divine hermeneutics in the light of the historical appearance of the Manifestation of God (i.e. himself). Baha'u'llah states that any other interpretation is only superstition and imaginary. He further states that at the time of this revelation, before the Word of God is delivered by the Manifestation, all men are considered equal and are one and the same in their station and, that it is only thereafter that distinctions appear, due to the various responses in relation to this call:

As to the 'realm of subtle entities' (*'alam-i-dharr*) which is often referred to, it pertaineth to the Revelation of the Prophets, and aught else is mere superstition and idle fancy. At the time of the Revelation all men are equal in rank. By reason, however, of their acceptance or rejection, rise or fall, motion or stillness, recognition or denial, they come to differ thereafter. For instance, the one true God, magnified be His glory, speaking through the intermediary of His Manifestation, doth ask: 'Am I not your Lord?' Every soul that answereth 'Yea, verily!' is accounted among the most distinguished of all men in the sight of God. Our meaning is that ere the Word of God is delivered, all men are deemed equal in rank and their station is one and the same. It is only thereafter that differences appear, as thou hast no doubt observed.¹⁰¹

In a similar instance Baha'u'llah in his discussion of cosmogony transforms the cosmogonic *moment* into the moment of the advent of Divine revelation or the hour of Divine theophany on the horizon of history. He states:

Consider the hour at which the supreme Manifestation of God revealeth Himself unto men. Ere that hour cometh, the Ancient Being, Who is still unknown of men and hath not as yet given utterance to the Word of God, is Himself the All-Knower in a world devoid of any man that hath known Him. He is indeed the Creator without a creation. For at the very moment preceding His Revelation, each and every created thing shall be made to yield up its soul to God.¹⁰²

All things are then brought forth through the revelation of His words: while this revelation of the Divine Will and Purpose are conjoined by Predestination (*qadar*) in the historical reality of the manifestation, he is still hidden, 'the Creator without creation'; but then once it is articulated, revealed, and manifested the stage of Fate/Decree (*qada*) is actualized in which the ability to respond is available to humanity, it is precisely at this stage that the dialectic of predestination versus free will, the divine call and the human freedom to respond is realized and determined.¹⁰³ This undifferentiated moment is then

¹⁰¹ Baha'u'llah, *The Tabernacle of Unity* 80. Baha'u'llah has also stated this principle in the Tablet of Salman; see *Majmū'ih-yi Mat@bū'ih* (ed. Muhyi'd-Din Sabri Kurdi Sanandaji Kanimishkani, Cairo: Mat@ba'at as-Sa'adah, 1920; reprinted, H-Bahai: East Lansing, Mi., 2001) 147-148.

¹⁰² Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah* (tr. Shoghi Effendi, **Error! Main Document Only**. Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1983) 151.

¹⁰³ Rafati, '*Maratib-i Sab'ih*' 60-62, 73-75.

equivalent to the stage of *qadar* and to the realm of *Malakut* and to the colour green.¹⁰⁴ But differentiation and differences appear in the second stage, which is that of the stage of Fate/Decree and is related to the world of *Nasut* (nature) and the colour corresponding to it is crimson/red. Put in the quaternary framework of the covenant, the stage of Will (*mashiyyat*) corresponds to Baha'u'llah, Purpose (*iradah*) to that of Abdu'l-Baha,¹⁰⁵ Shoghi Effendi (Guardian) to Predestination (*qadar*) and the stage of Fate/Decree (*qada*) to the Universal House of Justice. Therefore it is the recognition and combination of all these four stages that brings about the spiritual creation of the faithful.

The realm of subtle entities (*'alam-i dharr*) then becomes the mystical and meta-temporal topography of the covenant wherein the dialectic of predestination and free will, and of divine questioning and the freedom to respond, combine to existentially and realize the essences of beings. This response to the divine call may change within the individual's life and their essence may be changed according to that response; therefore in line with a metaphysics of process it demonstrates that the life of the soul is not static but in a process of constant motion or flux and at any moment in this world the soul may respond differently to the call of 'am I not?' and thereby existentially itself accordingly in a processual creation.

Thus as we have seen throughout the Babi-Baha'i scriptures that which is described as taking place in primordial time is situated in historical time, in the epiphany of the Manifestation of God, whereby both *being* and *time* are historicized. However, this history is not the history and chronology of events as such, but a transformation of our perception of history, it is a hierophany of history or rather a hierohistory which has at the centre of its axis the revelation of the Manifestation to whose call 'am I not your Lord' at the hour of the inauguration of this Revelation, all being existentially, individuates and differentiates in accordance to their response; they that exclaim 'yea verily', from them that proclaim 'nay verily', including they who chose neutrality, all from the force of their own freedom to choose and to will in responding to that call. This event may be the very existential *moment* for which all human beings can properly be said to exist and for which the autonomous will of humanity has the consummation of its

¹⁰⁴ For the undifferentiated stage designated as *Malakut* see Baha'u'llah, *Majmu'ih-yi Matbu'ih* 147-148.

¹⁰⁵ Baha'u'llah in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* designates 'Abdu'l-Baha precisely as 'Him Whom God hath Purposed' (*min iradah allah*). See Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas* 63. I wish here to thank Moojan Momen, for his encouragement to submit this paper to BSR. I must thank Nader Saiedi for his communication with me on this issue, as well as Keven Brown for his kind permission to use his provisional translations. I especially wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to my friend Omid Ghaemmaghami for offering his provisional translations as well as assisting with some of my own renderings of the Arabic. His ample generosity with time and the sharing of resources are the marks of a true friend and scholar. I also wish to thank Nasim Wafaei for discussing with me some of the Arabic passages. Finally, I wish to thank my dear friend Farzin Vejdani who has given so generously of his time and who has provided valuable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors or shortcomings, are of course entirely my own. This article is lovingly dedicated to my parents; 'My Lord, have mercy upon them, as they raised me up when I was little' (Qur'an 17:24)

purpose, so that we may choose through our own free will, the Will of the Beloved, and from this mystical yielding of the will to the Primal Will (*mashiyyat awaliyya*) our being proper may be realized and actualized from ‘the realm of subtle entities’ (*‘alam-i dharr*).

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