

Seeing Double: The Covenant and the Tablet of Aḥmad

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For Bob Mather in memory of Kevin

*The Messenger of God stood up amongst the people and then praised and glorified God as He deserved and then he mentioned the Dajjál, saying, 'I warn you of him, and there was no prophet who did not warn his followers of him; but I will tell you something about him which no prophet has told his followers: the Dajjál is one-eyed whereas God is not.'*¹

The Tablet of Aḥmad has been identified as one of a number of prayers invested by Bahá'u'lláh with a special potency.² Bahá'is and others may reasonably ask what such a statement means. What is the potency referred to? How is a particular prayer charged with such a power? Upon what does such power act and how can we tell if it has acted? And by what criteria are we able to determine that a particular prayer has been so invested? Can we actually establish double-blind experiments by which to test the efficacy of particular prayers and incantations?

These questions quickly begin to sound a bit strange . . . 'pre-scientific', if you will. Are we therefore meant simply to accept that the Tablet of Aḥmad and the others identified by Shoghi Effendi (the Long Healing Prayer, the Fire Tablet) are especially efficacious and powerful and not trouble our brains about what such a statement means? It would appear that this attitude borders on the 'blind imitation' (originally *taqlíd*) so vehemently denounced by Bahá'u'lláh.³ Shoghi Effendi himself underscores the reasonableness of the God posited by this religion, a position fully consonant with one of the more well-known Bahá'í principles: the harmony of science and religion.⁴

The proposition here to be tested is that at the heart of the power of the Tablet of Aḥmad is a concern with the Covenant (*mítháq*/'*ahd*). The Covenant here would be the metahistorical Greater Covenant identified by the Bahá'í teachings as having been enacted and invoked several times throughout history, most recently through the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh's own mission.⁵ Each Covenant-taking depends for its meaning on the one immediately preceding it, as explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

His Holiness Abraham, on Him be peace, made a covenant concerning His Holiness Moses and gave the glad-tidings of His coming. His Holiness Moses made a covenant concerning the Promised One, i.e. His Holiness Christ, and announced the good news of His Manifestation to the world. His Holiness Christ made a covenant concerning the Paraclete and gave the tidings of His coming. His Holiness the Prophet Muḥammad made a covenant concerning His Holiness the Báb and the Báb was the One promised by Muḥammad, for Muḥammad gave the

tidings of His coming. The Báb made a Covenant concerning the Blessed Beauty of Bahá'u'lláh and gave the glad-tidings of His coming for the Blessed Beauty was the One promised by His Holiness the Báb. Bahá'u'lláh made a covenant concerning a promised One who will become manifest after one thousand or thousands of years. He likewise, with His Supreme Pen, entered into a great Covenant and Testament with all the Bahá'ís whereby they were all commanded to follow the Centre of the Covenant after His departure, and turn not away even to a hair's breadth from obeying Him.⁶

Thus, Covenant also includes the specific stipulations in the Bahá'í writings indicating how divine authority is to be extended after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. This authority (*waláya/viláyat*) was vested first in 'Abdu'l-Bahá (d. 1921), the Centre of the Covenant (*markaz-i mِيثاق*), then in Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957), the Guardian of the Cause of God (*walí amru'lláhi*).⁷ Today, according to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, authority is vested in the institution of the Universal House of Justice. We will begin our investigation of this topic with the Covenant in Islam. We will then proceed to the Covenant as it is referred to in the Tablet of Aḥmad and close with some remarks on the literary qualities of the Tablet and the reading strategies used in order to access them. Throughout the discussion, the idea of 'seeing double' is used to try to convey the basic structure of the reading act so important in registering the power which is the subject of this investigation. Basically, 'seeing double' refers to being able to see two things at once, a basic requirement of metaphorical thinking, which is in fact anagogical perception, a perspective whereby the world is seen as it truly is: an arena for the appearance of the divine.⁸ In order to register this reality, the observer must cultivate the ability to look at phenomena and at the same time look beyond phenomena. It is in this process that the world and all created things are discovered to be transparent while the sacred light of God shines through them.⁹ This same process, according to Bahá'í teachings, is involved in reading holy scripture. In the case of scripture, 'seeing double' means both looking at the words and looking in the direction beyond the words indicated by the context. Both the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith (and sacred writings in general) and the phenomena of the world are 'signs' by means of which the reader/believer may encounter holiness.¹⁰

The Covenant in Islam

The idea, if not the word, of Covenant is one of the oldest and most enduring in religious history.¹¹ It denotes a promise from God to continue to guide, bless and reward humanity as long as humanity conforms to God's plan, law and will. There is space here only to discuss, very sketchily, the Covenant in Islam with particular concentration on the Covenant in Shi'í Islam.¹² Further, we will focus on those aspects of the Covenant in Shi'í Islam that are seen to be directly related to the spirit and form of the Bahá'í teachings here represented by the Tablet of Aḥmad, a relatively short prayer revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for an Iranian follower sometime in 1865.¹³

The purpose of the Covenant may be thought, in the first instance, to provide spiritual strength to human beings who, while communicating through some medium with an invisible God, suffer the various challenges, tests, reversals and failures and disappointments that occur during the earthly experience. The Covenant says to us: if things go contrary to your plans here, continue to have faith and to obey the law of God because by doing so you will be fulfilling your part of the agreement or contract and God, who never reneges, will honour this agreement and reward you for your diligence, perseverance and faith. Of course the nature of the reward is construed in a number of ways and there is no space to discuss all of them or even many of them. Reward 'in the next world' is the most familiar. But in Shi'i Islam this eschatology is understood in both a this-worldly and an other-worldly way. In Islam in general, the Covenant is seen to have been instituted so that when, on the Day of Judgement (*yawm al-din*), or the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyama*), the children of Adam (that is to say all humanity) are gathered before the throne of God to receive His judgement, none will be able to say that they were unaware of God's command to obedience and faith because they had not been told of it – none can claim ignorance of the law – because God had sealed the Covenant and all humanity's assent to it on a special occasion (recounted in the Qur'an at 7:172-4) 'before' the actual creation of the world. The Quranic passage runs as follows:

Remember when thy Lord drew forth
 From the Children of Adam –
 From their loins –
 Their descendants, and made them
 Testify concerning themselves, (saying):
 'Am I not your Lord
 (Who cherishes and sustains you)?'
 They said: 'Yea!
 We do testify!' (This), lest
 Ye should say on the Day
 Of Judgement: 'Of this we
 Were never mindful':
 Or lest ye should say:
 'Our fathers before us
 May have taken false gods,
 But we are (their) descendants
 After them: wilt Thou then
 Destroy us because of the deeds
 Of men who were futile.'
 Thus do We explain
 The Signs in detail;
 And perchance they may turn
 (Unto Us). (Adapted Yusuf Ali translation)

This passage touches on a basic Islamic philosophy of history: communities and nations have flourished or failed according to their obedience to God's command and faithfulness to His Covenant. Not only will observance of the Covenant benefit one on the Day of Judgement and in the next world, it will also benefit the community here in the world: *in history*. If humanity is faithful to the Covenant, God will continue to send guidance. Nations that have prospered may be seen to have kept the law of God and His Messengers while those that have failed or become extinct have only their own heedlessness to blame. Just as the creation story in Genesis begins time for the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is of utmost importance to note that this verse locates the beginning of 'Islamic time', and therefore the institution of religious authority, in an event that takes place in a primordial realm of pre-existence.¹⁴

To the degree that the primordial founding event referred to in the Qur'an is thus incalculably more ancient than the time depicted in the biblical creation story, it may therefore also be thought to be, by virtue of this more venerable provenance, just that much more pure, accurate and incumbent or imperative. The event as recounted in the Islamic scripture may be seen to be persuasive of the proposition of the divine sanction and authority for the Islamic dispensation on the historical plane. The Islamic dispensation began functionally with the birth of the prophet Muhammad (c. 570 CE) and his call to the prophetic office (c. 610 CE). The official date for the reckoning of the Islamic period is the year 622 CE, the year of the Hijra. Muslims were able to demonstrate the truth of Islam to the followers of other religions in part by referring to this passage in the Qur'an and the various supplemental teachings contained in the Hadith. The emerging image of the Covenant is that together with its other functions it also puts the truth claims of Islam on a much more unassailable basis than, say, the Hebrew narrative telling of the world beginning, as the latter deals only with mundane creation. This view is exemplified in the following two Traditions from the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Šádiq:

One of the Quraysh said to the Messenger of God: 'By what thing do you claim precedence (*al-sábiqa*) over all the other prophets inasmuch as you came after them?' The Prophet said: 'I was the first to affirm faith (*amana* "to believe") in my Lord and the first to answer when God took Covenant with the prophets and made them testify against themselves (*alá anfusihim*) with the words "Am I not your Lord?" They said "Yea verily" I was the first prophet to say "yea verily"! (*balá*). In this way I outstripped the others in offering allegiance to God.'

The first to say 'Yea verily' was the Apostle of God and that was because he, of all creation, was closest to God. He was in the place where Gabriel spoke to him during the Night Journey saying: 'Approach, O Muhammad and walk the path no other has walked, neither angel nor sent prophet.' And were it not that his spirit and his soul were in that place, he would never have been able to attain. He was near God as He has indicated 'The distance of two bows, or closer still' [Qur'an 53:9], that is he was 'closer still'.¹⁵

With the Quranic story of the Day of the Covenant we have the assertion that the truth of Islam (and by possible association whatever government or worldly power has taken it upon itself to defend and expand its territories in the name of Islam) transcends – ‘outstrips’ – the truth heretofore expressed in other earlier scriptures. In addition, this new expression of the truth has implications for the life of the individual and the community which will produce new modes of religiosity and new emphases on what it means to be religious. For it was not only the practitioners of a private piety who saw in it nourishment for the individual spiritual quest.

In addition to having implications for eschatology and other purely religious considerations, the parable of the Covenant also has implications for community life in that it establishes a standard for agreements between human beings. Thus is life in the world spiritualized by a ‘literary’ connection with the spiritual world. The Quranic parable or myth of the Covenant (*mīthāq/‘ahd*) is seen as the model for all agreements amongst and between Muslims.¹⁶ Such agreements play a large role in early Islamic history: ‘Aqaba, al-Hudaybiyah, Ghadīr Khumm and after the death of the Prophet when the majority of the community gave their oath of allegiance to Abū Bakr. It is this act of allegiance or oath-taking (*bay‘a*)¹⁷ that is symbolic of obedience to Islam and God through allegiance to God’s earthly representative. A specific act of allegiance, whether it be primarily to a Sufi Shaykh, the Sunni Caliph or the Shi‘i Imam is felt as symbolic and reiterative – perhaps even as a performative recital – of the primordial act of allegiance of Qur’an 7:172. Thus to offer allegiance to or recognize the spiritual authority of one of these figures is referred to as *tawallā*, a word based on the root *w-l-y* from which are derived such important words as *mawlá* (lord, master, protector, friend, client), *walī* (guardian, friend, ‘saint’; pl. *awliyá* ‘friends’ frequently construed in the Qur’an as the ‘friends of God’, e.g. 10:63) and *waláya* (guardianship, authority, ‘sainthood’).¹⁸ This passage is the sacred paradigm for such oath-giving and taking. In a sense, any time someone makes an agreement and swears to honour it, they are participating in this primordial Covenant told in the Qur’an.

One of the most important of these occasions is the one that occurred during the Prophet’s return to Medina after his last pilgrimage to Mecca. Both Sunni and Shi‘i authorities record the famous episode of Ghadīr Khumm during which Muhammad is understood by the Shi‘a to have nominated ‘Alī as his successor (*khalīfa*) and the Imam of the Muslim community (*umma*) with the rank of Guardian of the Cause (*walī al-amr*). According to Sunni Muslims, this episode merely establishes ‘Alī’s special status in the community without bestowing upon him any special authority to govern in a religio-political sense as the embodiment of divine guidance. One of the more frequent derogatory slurs used by the Shi‘a against the Sunnis is precisely the Quranic term *nāqīd*: ‘breaker’, that is to say, of the Covenant established by the Prophet between himself, his community and ‘Alī as his successor during this historic gathering at the famous Pool of Khumm during the Prophet’s return from the Farewell pilgrimage.¹⁹ These breakers of the Covenant are considered to have ‘turned away from’ (*tabarrá*, the opposite of *tawallá*) divine guidance. It is known as the Event of Ghadīr Khumm and its anniversary is one of the main

holy days in the Shi'í liturgical calendar²⁰ where it is referred to as either the Day of al-Ghadír or, more pertinently, the Day of the Covenant (precisely: *yawm al-mitháq*). Here the all-important distinctions between the Sunnis and Shi'ís are focussed not on a disagreement over the facts of the event but rather on the more 'scholastic' question of the proper meaning of one of the key words in the sermon, namely *mawlá*: 'master'. A brief excerpt from the relevant Arabic source is offered here:

The travellers all gathered before [Muhammad] . . . When they had gathered, he climbed above the travellers so that he was high above them and he summoned the Commander of the Faithful [i.e. 'Alí, see below], peace be upon him. He made him come up with him so that he stood on his right. He then began to address the people. He praised and glorified God, and preached most eloquently. He gave the community news of his own death, saying: 'I have been summoned and it is nearly the moment for me to answer. The time has come for me to depart from you. I leave behind me among you two all-important things [i.e. *al-thaqalayn*, see below] which, if you cleave to them, you will never go astray – that is the Book of God and my offspring from my family [*ahl al-bayt*]. They will never abandon you until they lead you to me at the (sacred) waters (of Heaven).'

Then he called out at the top of his voice: 'Am I not more appropriate (to rule) you than yourselves?'

'By God, yes!' they answered [or 'Yea verily!' Arabic: *balá*, as in Qur'an 7:172 quoted above].

He went on speaking continuously without any interruption and taking both arms of the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, and raising them so that the white of his armpits could be seen, he said: 'Whoever I am the master (*mawlá*) of, this man, 'Alí, is his master. O God, befriend whoever befriends him, be hostile to whoever opposes him, support whoever supports him and desert whoever deserts him.'²¹

Then he, peace be on him, went down. It was the time of the mid-morning heat . . . He led them in the midday prayer. Then he, peace be on him (went to) sit in his tent. He ordered 'Alí, peace be on him, to sit in his tent opposite him, and he ordered the Muslims to go in group after group to congratulate him on his position and to acknowledge his command over the faithful. All the people did that. Then he ordered his wives and the rest of the wives of the faithful who were with him to go to him and acknowledge his command over the faithful. They did that.

Among those who were profuse in their congratulations on his position was 'Umar b. al-Khattáb. He gave a public appearance of great joy at it, saying: 'Bravo, bravo, 'Alí, you have become my master and the master of every believing man and woman.'²²

Because the Shi'a clearly seem to have failed in history and frequently suffered persecution as a dissenting minority (that is, until the time of the Safavids, 1501–1724, and for a while during the time of the Fatimids in the 10th–11th

centuries), the focus in Shi‘i piety *vis-à-vis* the Covenant was on a future date: the return of the Hidden Imam who would, on the Day of Resurrection/Judgement (*yawm al-qiyāma/dīn*) rise up (*qā‘im*) to restore justice to an unjust world – a justice which had vanished with the most recent breaking of the divine Covenant by the perfidious followers of Muhammad who usurped ‘Alī’s authority when his foster brother, cousin, father-in-law, protector and friend, Muhammad, the Prophet of God, died in 632 without leaving a clearly written will and testament or Covenant (*mīthāq/‘ahd*). All those who assented to the primordial Covenant mentioned in the Qur’an would be tested once again as to the sincerity of their oath when the Hidden Imam returned.

A very strong theme in Shi‘i religious works, therefore, sees the above Quranic passage as referring precisely to the special Covenant between God and Muhammad and ‘Alī. I will quote only a few passages from this material.²³ In the course of explaining how ‘Alī acquired the nickname ‘Commander of the Faithful’, the following Tradition takes form:

Muḥammad al-Bāqir [the fifth Imam] answered the question from Jābir: ‘When did the Amīr al-Mu‘minīn [literally “Commander of the Believers or Faithful”] get this name?’ al-Bāqir said: ‘God named him when He first revealed the verse “Remember when God took a covenant: [The part of this verse which says] ‘Am I not your Lord? (Qur’an 7:172) [was originally extended with the following:] and is not Muhammad My Apostle and is not ‘Alī the Commander of the Faithful?’”’

In the next Tradition, on the authority of Dā‘ūd al-Raqqī, a disciple of the fifth Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 735), we have a narrative explaining how the Imams acquired their authority:

When God wanted to create creation he scattered [their seeds, *dharr*²⁴] before Him and said to them: ‘Who is your Lord?’ The first to speak (*naṭaqa*) were the Apostle of God, the Commander of the Faithful and the [rest of the] Imams. They said: ‘Thou art our Lord.’ So, He charged them with knowledge and religion. Then He said to the angels: ‘These are the bearers of My religion and My knowledge and they are My trustees (*umaná*) among My creation.’

Then He said to the Children of Adam: ‘Testify (*igrār*) to God’s lordship (*rubūbiyya*) and submit to their guardianship (*walāya*) and obedience.’ They responded: ‘O our Lord we do submit!’

Then God said to the angels: ‘This (We imposed) lest you should say in the future (*sic*: not *al-qiyāma*) “Of this we were never mindful. Our fathers before us took false gods. And we are but their descendants after them. Wilt Thou then destroy us because of the deeds of men who followed falsehood?”’ (cf. Qur’an 7:173)

[The fifth Imam Muḥammad] al-Bāqir said: ‘O Dā‘ūd! Our authority (*walāya*) was made incumbent upon [humanity] during the [primordial day of the] Covenant (*mīthāq*).’²⁵

In sum, the Covenant in Shi'í Islam guarantees the Guardianship (*waláya*) of the Imams as the rightful successors of Muhammad as well as guaranteeing Muhammad's role as the renewer of the divine and eternal Covenant for his time and place. As we saw, in one Tradition the assertion of the Prophet Muhammad's authority entailed also establishing his superiority over all other prophets and messengers. It is hoped that the following exploration of the theme of the Covenant in the Tablet of Ahmad will help us better to appreciate the intimate relationship between Islam and the Bahá'í Faith by highlighting essential similarities and distinctions.

The Covenant in the Bahá'í Faith

We have noted how religious and spiritual authority (*waláya*) is seen to be preserved by the Covenant so that it is really quite impossible to think of the one without the other. They are inseparable in Islam and inseparable in the Bahá'í Faith. As everyone knows, the Bahá'í Faith was born in an Islamic environment. The significance of this fact has been expressed on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in the following words:

The Bahá'í view on [the position and significance of Islam in the history of civilization] is that the Dispensation of Muhammad, like all other Divine Dispensations, has been fore-ordained, and that as such forms an integral part of the Divine plan for the spiritual, moral and social development of mankind. It is not an isolated religious phenomenon, but is closely and historically related to the Dispensation of Christ, and those of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It was intended by God to succeed Christianity, and it was therefore the duty of the Christians to accept it as firmly as they had adhered to the religion of Christ.

. . . Islám constitutes a fuller revelation of God's purpose for mankind. The so-called Christian civilization of which the Renaissance is one of the most striking manifestations is essentially Muslim in its origins and foundations. When medieval Europe was plunged in darkest barbarism, the Arabs, regenerated and transformed by the spirit released by the religion of Muhammad, were busily engaged in establishing a civilization the like of which their contemporary Christians in Europe had never witnessed before. It was eventually through Arabs that civilization was introduced to the West. It was through them that the philosophy, science and culture which the old Greeks had developed found their way to Europe . . . It is wholly unfair to attribute the efflorescence of European culture during the Renaissance period to the influence of Christianity. It was mainly the product of the forces released by the Muhammadan Dispensation.

From the standpoint of institutionalism Islám far surpasses true Christianity as we know it in the Gospels. There are infinitely more laws and institutions in the Qur'án than in the Gospel. While the latter's emphasis is mainly, not to say wholly, on individual and personal conduct, the Qur'án stresses the importance of society. This social emphasis acquires added importance and significance in the Bahá'í

Revelation. When carefully and impartially compared, the Qur'án marks a definite advancement on the Gospel, from the standpoint of spiritual and humanitarian progress.

. . . The Bahá'ís should try to study history anew, and to base all their investigations first and foremost on the written Scriptures of Islám and Christianity.²⁶

And Shoghi Effendi himself wrote the following:

[The Bahá'ís] must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islám – the source and background of their Faith – and approach reverently and with a mind purged from pre-conceived ideas the study of the Qur'án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God. They must devote special attention to the investigation of those institutions and circumstances that are directly connected with the origin and birth of their Faith, with the station claimed by its Forerunner, and with the laws revealed by its Author.²⁷

One of the ways in which the institution of the Covenant is reinforced in Bahá'í writings is through the many references to and quotations from the Qur'an and the Holy Traditions. Such references are far from being merely learned gestures or displays. As suggested above in the citation of the Tradition of Ghadír Khumm where the word *al-thaqalayn* (the 'two precious things' viz., the Qur'an and the Imams) occurs, these two 'literary' sources represent the condensation in human language of divine authority and guidance.²⁸ Thus, when Bahá'u'lláh or the Báb or 'Abdu'l-Bahá appear to us to 'quote' from them by using phrases, words or symbols taken from the Qur'an and Hadith, they are really invoking this same divine authority and demonstrating the continuity of Muhammad's Covenant (which had already demonstrated continuity with Jesus' Covenant and all of the earlier prophets in the Abrahamic and Arabian tradition). Quotation here is a participation in, and an affirmation, appropriation, celebration, invocation, 'cantillation', deployment, reprise and enacting of the divine authority of the eternal Covenant.²⁹ Words, according to the Bahá'í teachings, are sources of extraordinary power and influence. For example, such power is acknowledged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his lament on the breaking of the Islamic Covenant in which he refers to the destructive power of the words of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭáb. The eventual second Caliph of Islam is reported to have ultimately rejected the station of 'Alí with the statement, 'Verily the Book of God is sufficient unto us.' That is to say: 'We need not follow any specific person for guidance.' Adib Taherzadeh has summarized 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks as follows:

. . . these few words, embodying the forces of negation, were so potent that they became the prime factor in precipitating all the discord and bloodshed in the Islamic Dispensation. They caused the martyrdom of the Imám 'Alí and His

illustrious son, Imám Ḥusayn. They gave rise to untold sufferings and death for countless souls within the Islamic fold. The effect of these words, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's testimony, was so far-reaching that a thousand years later it brought about the martyrdom of the Báb and all the sufferings of Bahá'u'lláh.³⁰

It is suggested here that one of the sources of the extraordinary power said to reside in the Tablet of Aḥmad is precisely the degree to which the Covenant is evoked either through reference to previous scripture (Qur'an and Hadith) or by the generation of new images and symbols for this most important of all agreements or contracts, which is given such dramatic mythic form in Qur'an 7:172. What follows, then, is an exploration of a few of these words and images in an attempt to demonstrate our thesis. This exercise will at the same time, it is hoped, demonstrate some of the value of one of Shoghi Effendi's stronger exhortations to the Bahá'is mentioned above: to learn about Islam.

Covenant in the Tablet of Aḥmad

The Tablet of Aḥmad contains numerous direct and oblique references to the Covenant and the authority or guardianship (*waláya*) associated with it. The first reference is in the form of an invocation of divine names: 'He is the King, the All-Knowing, the Wise!' The first name *al-sultán* does not appear in the Qur'an in this form, which could also be rendered 'the absolute ruler', but several instances of the indefinite *sultán* 'absolute rule or authority' do occur and their contexts indicate there is no doubt that such authority derives from God.³¹ The second and third names – *al-ʿAlí*, *al-ḥaccóm* – are frequent Quranic names for God. The name *ʿAlí*, 'the All-knowing', occurs both in the definite and indefinite form a total of 140 times in the Qur'an as a name of God, and *ḥaccóm*, 'the All-wise', similarly occurs 81 times. But they occur in this form together a total of 29 times and thus this combination of divine names may be considered one of the most characteristic of Quranic compound divine epithets.³²

The second reference to the Covenant is the image of the 'Nightingale of Paradise' singing on the 'twigs of the Tree of Eternity' (*warqatu'l-firdaws tughanná 'alá afnán sidrat al-baqá'*). Literally, the 'nightingale' is not a nightingale (*bulbul*) but rather a dove or pigeon, the Arabic name of which – *warqa* – is an onomatopoeic for the sound of its cooing. It seems clear that Shoghi Effendi is being sensitive here to the literary and linguistic tastes of an audience who may fail to find the necessary enchantment in a reference to the pigeon of paradise. Another more interesting effect of this translation choice is that it removes the classical nightingale from his typical rosebush habitat, where because of his attraction to the beauty and scent of the rose, the fated bird would thrust itself against the deadly thorns so that the roses are made redder by the shed blood of the nightingale sacrificing its life for beauty expressed both visually and through the sense of smell by the roses. This is one of the most venerable images in the Persian poetic tradition, which can be traced to the influential Rúzbiḥán Baqlí of Shiraz (d. 1221), in whose commentary on the

alím,
hakím

al-sultán

mystical *shahīdyāt* or ‘divine scandals’ the famous statement from the Prophet is cited: ‘The beauty of the rose is from (or ‘part of’) the glory of God (literally, *bahá’u’lláh*).’³³ But in the Tablet of Aḥmad, the nightingale is singing from the Tree of Eternity, *sidrat al-baqá’*. This is an image which deserves special discussion as it combines a number of themes and topics redolent of the institution of Covenant, revelation, authority and seeing double.

There are two words for tree in Arabic that are relevant here. The usual word is *shajara* but in this passage Bahá’u’lláh uses *sidrat*. In the Qur’an ‘the Lote-tree of the further boundary’ (53:16), is not the *shajarat al-muntahá* but the *sidrat al-muntahá*. *Sidrat* is the name of a species of tree and has been chosen here, one assumes, to evoke the Quranic passages (34:16, 53:16, 56:28) and especially 53:16 which is concerned with the famous night-journey of the Prophet Muhammad. Although most such narratives have numerous variants – and this one is no exception – there is agreement on the status of the Lote-tree: it is the point in Muhammad’s journey towards God beyond which – according to Tradition – either his guide Moses or Muhammad himself was not permitted to go.³⁴ The ‘Nightingale’ (a reference by Bahá’u’lláh to himself) is ‘placed’ in this essentially placeless and very lofty spiritual realm.³⁵ Thus the short phrase is a reference and affirmation of Muhammad’s spiritual authority and Bahá’u’lláh’s, as well as an evocation of the nearest possible proximity to the divine. This *sidrat al-muntahá* is called *sidrat al-baqá’* perhaps to avoid scandalizing readers who might be oblivious to the poetry of the spirit being sung here. But in reality *baqá’*, which means eternity and permanence, connotes the same spiritual truth as *muntahá’*: there is a limit to our understanding and perception of God. God is always beyond, hidden, unseen, absent, remote (while at the same time remaining closer to us than our jugular vein), sublime and transcendent, permanent unlike all else which is precisely the opposite: visible, present, mundane, ephemeral, evanescent. An understanding of eternity depends on experience of its opposite, an experience all human beings share. Thus ‘seeing double’ is necessary. One cannot conceive of eternity without a simultaneous conception of its opposite.

Baqá’ has other connotations as well, especially in the context of Islamic mysticism where it is frequently yoked with its spiritual and semantic opposite *faná’*: extinction and annihilation. In the quest of the mystic, as reiterated for example in the Seven Valleys, there comes a time for utter annihilation of the self in order that the absolute permanence of the divine may be encountered.³⁶ Thus the ‘eternity’ of the ‘Tree’ is evoked to draw attention to God and to the impermanence of the ‘time-ridden’ world that is its opposite. In the context of Bahá’í teachings, the Covenant is also identified with the ‘Tree’ and this imagery has ramified throughout the tablets. The first example to come to mind is the distinctive terminology used by Bahá’u’lláh to refer to descendants of relatives of the Báb and to His own offspring, Afnán and Aghsán respectively, who are in reality twigs and branches on the Tree of the Covenant. Such twigs and branches are most properly adorned by leaves (*warāqa*, note the phonic similarity between leaves and ‘nightingale’ in the original languages) – without which the tree would soon die – another distinctive Bahá’í term used to refer to the female members of the holy household.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly refers to the 'tree of the Covenant' in the following passage:

Had the Covenant not come to pass, had it not been revealed from the Supreme Pen and had not the Book of the Covenant, like unto the ray of the Sun of Reality, illuminated the world, the forces of the Cause of God would have been utterly scattered and certain souls who were the prisoners of their own passions and lusts would have taken into their hands an axe, cutting the root of this Blessed Tree.³⁷

And from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's last tablet to America the following four passages demonstrate the aptness of associating the 'Tree of Eternity' with the Covenant:

Through the power of the divine springtime, the downpour of the celestial clouds and the heat of the Sun of Reality, the tree of life is just beginning to grow. Before long, it will produce buds, bring forth leaves and fruits, and cast its shade over the East and the West. This Tree of Life is the Book of the Covenant.

In America, in these days, severe winds have surrounded the Lamp of the Covenant, hoping that this brilliant Light may be extinguished, and this Tree of Life may be uprooted.³⁸

O Lord of the Covenant! O luminous Star of the world! The persecuted 'Abdu'l-Bahá has fallen into the hands of persons who appear as sheep and in reality are ferocious wolves; they exercise every sort of oppression, endeavour to destroy the foundation of the Covenant, – and claim to be Bahá'is. They strike at the root of the Tree of the Covenant – and count themselves persecuted – just as did the people of the Bayán who broke the Covenant of His Holiness, the Báb, and from six directions shot arrows of reproach and calumny at Thy Blessed Body.³⁹

Here, in a Tablet to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, [Bahá'u'lláh] says also: 'O God! This is a Branch which has sprung forth from the Tree of Oneness, the Sadrat of Thy Unity.'⁴⁰

The Tree in the Qur'an

Of course, the 'tree' enjoys great popularity in the mythology and folklore of the world. Perhaps one of the most important features of the tree, in this context, is that it represents both the visible and invisible worlds: its visible canopy of leaves and branches is mirrored by its invisible root system, by its verticality it unites the visible earth with the invisible heaven, it is a symbol of life itself and it gives life. It is a source of food and shelter. The Qur'an itself is likened to a tree that offers its shade to the tired and weary.⁴¹ It requires sun and water and fertile soil to grow. All of these aspects are readily transmuted into metaphors for the spiritual life of humanity. But we must limit ourselves here to the Islamic background and even that only very cursorily. Trees in the Qur'an are used as symbols of divine wrath and pleasure, of bounty, sustenance and shelter. Trees and the ancillary ideas of fruit

and shade are referred to in the Qur'an by a variety of words. We will only discuss three of these here.

al-sidra: This tree is mentioned four times in the Qur'an. As mentioned, it is the 'Lote-tree beyond which there is no passing' in 53:14 'shrouded in mystery' in 53:17. In the plural form it appears in both a positive and negative light in the Qur'an. At 34:16 the wild, thorny, fruitless and shadeless lote-trees have replaced the once flourishing pomegranates, dates and grapes that grew in 'Arabia Felix' before God punished its inhabitants for turning away from Him, breaking His covenant. At 56:28, however, the cultivated, shade-giving and fruit-producing lote-trees are a symbol of heavenly bliss, akin to the *sidra* mentioned in sura 53. They will provide comfort to the so-called 'Companions of the Right Hand' in Paradise.⁴² So, in addition to being a symbol of divine transcendence and permanence, this tree is also a symbol of 'free will': through humanity's knowledge and volition negatives may be transformed into positives.

al-shajara: The Qur'an speaks, for example, of a 'goodly tree' to which a 'goodly word' is likened (Qur'an 14:24) and an 'evil tree' to which an 'evil word is likened' (Qur'an 14:26). At Qur'an 17:60 mention is made of the 'accursed tree' or 'tree of Zaqqûm' whose roots are sunk in the bowels of Hell producing bitterness for its inhabitants (see also 37:62-5, 44:43-6 and 56:52).⁴³ As is so often the case with the more apocalyptic conceits of the Qur'an, a good thing is opposed by a similar bad thing, a polar opposite. Perceiving one entails perceiving the other: seeing double. At 16:67-8 reference is made to the 'trees' in which God has inspired the bees to build their hives. In the esoteric exegetic tradition of Shi'ism, the bees are none other than the Imams themselves whose proper home is in the Tree of the Covenant.⁴⁴

At 22:18 'trees' are returned to nature, as it were, and described as being in a state of worship along with all of the other natural phenomena created by God such as 'all things in heaven and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the trees, the animals, and a great number among mankind'. (See also 55:6 for a similar statement.) The Qur'an immediately (and characteristically) adds 'But a great number are also fit for punishment.' At 32:80 the fact that fire can be brought forth from 'green trees' (viz., through rubbing two sticks together) is adduced as a miraculous sign of God. Indeed, nature itself is seen in the Qur'an as just another means whereby God communicates His power and will to humanity. Thus to observe nature is in reality a double observation: one sees the visible natural phenomenon at the same time that one 'sees' the invisible power of God. See especially in this connection Qur'an 27: 60: 'Has He not created the heavens and the earth and does He not send down rain from the sky? Yea, with it We cause to grow well-planted orchards full of beauty and delight. It is not in your power to cause the growth of the trees in them. Can there be another god besides God?' (See also 56:72 for a similar statement.) The tree which Adam and Eve were instructed not to approach is mentioned several times (2:35, 7:19-20, 22). Qur'an 20:120-1 is

particularly interesting: 'But Satan whispered evil to him. He said: "O Adam! Shall I lead thee to the Tree of Eternity (*shajarati 'l-khuld*) and to a kingdom that never decays?" So they both ate of the Tree . . .' The Burning Bush of Moses is represented in the Qur'an as the 'Tree growing upon Sinai' (23:20) or 'the blessed Tree growing on the right bank of the valley in the holy territory' (28:30).⁴⁵ When Jonah was cast forth from the belly of the fish, God caused a large tree to grow as shelter for him (37:146). At 48:18 a particularly interesting passage is the direct reference to the oath sworn to Muhammad at al-Hudaybiya, an agreement referred to by Muslims as the 'Oath of Ridwán' (*Bay'at al-riḍwán*) because of the language in the following verse:

God's good pleasure (Arabic: *radiya 'lláhu*) was with the believers when they swore fealty (cf. *bay'a*) to thee under the Tree. He knew what was in their hearts, and He sent down His Divine Tranquillity (*al-sakna*) to them and rewarded them with a speedy victory. (Qur'an 48:18)

The word Ridwán (Arabic pronunciation: *riḍwán*) is important as the name Bahá'u'lláh gave to the garden which was the site of the renewal of the ancient covenant in 1863, transferring its focus from the Báb to Bahá'u'lláh himself. It is also the name of the series of perhaps the most important holy days in the Bahá'í Faith, commemorating that sacred event. As such, the Ridwán holy days are analogous to the Ghadir Khumm observances in Shi'ism, however differently they may be observed. The word *riḍwán* is derived from the above Quranic verb *radiya*. The form *riḍwán* occurs in a variety of contexts 13 times in the Qur'an (3:15, 3:162, 3:174, 5:2, 5:16, 9:21, 9:72, 9:109, 47:28, 48:29, 57:20, 57:27, 59:8) where it may always be translated as 'the good pleasure of God'. Its Bahá'í usage and reading is an excellent example of the way traditional Islamic ideas and symbols are employed by Bahá'u'lláh and others to simultaneously honour that tradition and to separate from it. Seeing double.

al-zaytína: But perhaps the single most powerful image of the tree in the Qur'an comes at the exquisitely beautiful Light Verse:

God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. The likeness of His light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp, the Lamp enclosed in a Glass, the glass as it were a glittering star: Lit from a Blessed Tree, an olive neither eastern nor western, whose oil would almost shine forth by itself even though no fire touch it. Light upon light! God doth guide to His light whom He will. And God strikes metaphors for mankind. And God is Knower of all things. (Qur'an 24:35)

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this verse in Islamic thought and spirituality. Similarly, it would be impossible to overestimate its significance for the Bahá'í tablets. An exhaustive study of this significance would further elucidate the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Islam, the study of which was so strongly

urged upon the Bahá'ís by Shoghi Effendi. The verse is of course the subject of a vastly variegated exegetic tradition. In the Shi'í tradition the oil is none other than the 'oil' of divine loving protection and authority (*waláya*) which 'shines forth even if no fire touches it'. In a Tradition related on the authority of Ja'far al-Šádiq, the verse is explained as follows: The 'Niche' is said to be Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad and wife of 'Alí and considered the 'Mother of all the Imams'. 'In it a Lamp, the Lamp' is said to refer to Hasan and Husayn. 'The glass as it were a glittering star' is said to mean that Fatimah shines like a star amongst the women of the world. 'Lit from a blessed Tree' is said to mean 'lit' from Abraham. 'Neither eastern nor western' means neither Jewish nor Christian. 'Its oil would almost shine forth by itself' means that divine knowledge almost flows spontaneously from it. 'Even though no fire touched it. Light upon light' means Imam after Imam in unbroken succession.⁴⁶ The Báb himself refers to this tree, its light, its oil, its transcendence throughout his *Qayyúm al-asmá*.⁴⁷

Rejection of Bahá'u'lláh is Rejection of All Divine Messengers

Perhaps the most powerful and uncompromising sentence in the tablet – with regard to the fulfilment of the Covenant – is the following remarkably explicit statement:

Be assured in thyself that he who turneth away from this Beauty hath also turned away from the Messengers of the past and showeth pride towards God from all eternity to all eternity.⁴⁸

Here Bahá'u'lláh, with consummate certainty and poise, explicitly identifies the Báb's cause with all of the divine Messengers of the past. That is, the one who turns away from this cause has *de facto* broken the Covenant instituted on the primordial Day of the Covenant (described above) and renewed and reiterated through every Prophet and Messenger from that time to this. Here Bahá'u'lláh without the slightest hint of tentativeness or apology asserts the divine and authentic origin of his religion. The 'Beauty' (*hádhá 'l-jamál*) in the above excerpt is a simultaneous reference to both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. While for Bahá'ís today this may seem unexceptionable or unremarkable because they have never questioned the divine source of the Cause, it is suggested that those living at the time of Bahá'u'lláh had many pressures to deal with, pressures that from time to time might cause them to ask whether or not this is the true Cause for which Muslims – and especially Shi'í Muslims – had been waiting and praying for so long.

Day of Resurrection (*Yawm al-qiyáma*)

It should be noted that the end of the Tablet of AḤmad has remained untranslated in prayer books in European languages. But because this brief passage also refers to the Covenant we will examine it here. The reference to the Covenant is in the

mention here of the Day of Resurrection. The Covenant taken between God and humanity during that time before time when all things existed only in potential recounted at Qur'an 7:172 was taken so that souls would be able to recognize the truth on the Day of Resurrection.⁴⁹ The following is a provisional translation of this brief coda:

So remember Us to all those dwelling in the City of God, the King, the Mighty, the Beauteous – those who have faith in God and in Him Whom God doth raise up on the Day of Resurrection. Verily, they are the true sojourners upon the ways of Divine Truth and Reality.⁵⁰

From the context of the tablet, it seems clear that Bahá'u'lláh is referring to the Báb as 'He Whom God raises up'. The tablet was revealed in 1865⁵¹ at a time when the Bábí community was divided and in disarray. Bahá'u'lláh wished to express his acknowledgement of the Báb's authority – his affirmation of the Báb's Covenant – and his recognition of him as the promised one of the Islamic dispensation. In recognizing this, Bahá'u'lláh also affirms the primordial, pre-eternal, pre-creational Covenant. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh asserts His own authoritative relationship with the Covenant. The phrase 'those who have faith in God and in Him Whom God doth raise up on the Day of Resurrection' (*al-ladhína hum ámanú bi'lláhi wa bi'l-ladhí yaba'thuhu alláhu fi yawm al-qiyámati*) refers both to the past and the present because of the grammatical tenses: the verb 'to have faith' is in the perfect tense, a tense that indicates an action has been completed. The verb 'to raise up' is in the imperfect tense, a tense which indicates that an action is in process, continuous: it began in the past, it is certainly taking place now and it may continue in the future. Thus it can refer to the Báb, whom God had already 'raised up' and it can refer to Bahá'u'lláh, whom God is now 'raising up'.

Bahá'u'lláh refers to the Báb earlier in this tablet in the sentence, 'And that the One Whom He hath sent forth by the name of 'Alí was the true One from God . . . He is the King of the Messengers and His Book is the Mother Book (*umm al-kitáb*) did ye but know ('*arifín*).'⁵² In this passage there are three direct references to the Covenant: 1) the phrase 'by the name of 'Alí was the true One from God' (*huwa haqq min 'ind alláh*); 2) the phrase 'King of the Messengers'; 3) the phrase 'His Book is the Mother Book'. 'Alí is the name of the Báb, or as he was most frequently referred to at this stage in the history of the movement, Hadrat-i A'lá (His Holiness the Most Exalted). But it should never be forgotten or lost sight of that the identity of Islam, whether Sunni or Shi'i, is formed in large measure by the dispute over the succession to Muhammad referred to above, in which one side claims that the Prophet appointed no one to succeed him and another side claims that 'Alí was the true one from God.

Bahá'u'lláh further exalts the station of 'Alí (the Báb) by calling him the 'King of the Messengers' (*sultán al-rusul*). There are two common words in Arabic for 'king': *malik* and *sultán* and while it might be thought that the designation *sultán* represents a lower level of sovereignty than *malik*, the fact that the Tablet of Aḥmad

opens with an invocation in the name 'the King, the All-Knowing, the Wise', where 'king' here is also *al-sulṭān*, suggests that for Bahá'u'lláh the word indicates the highest possible level of sovereignty. The word *rasúl* is interesting as it represents one of the few uses of traditional Islamic terminology for what is usually referred to in the Bahá'í writings as 'divine Manifestation'. It is interesting also in this regard to note that Bahá'u'lláh is not calling the Báb a divine Messenger (*rasúl alláh*) but is rather calling him the King of the Messengers. Here, the King may or may not be of the same 'species' as his subjects. However we finally understand this epithet, it is certainly clear that as the King of the Messengers, the Báb is deeply implicated in the propagation and preservation of the divine Covenant that it is the main task of the divine Messengers to reiterate and reestablish in their respective communities.

The station of the Báb is perceived on an even higher plane when Bahá'u'lláh deems his tablets to be not 'merely' divine revelation but to be the actual 'Mother Book' referred to in the Qur'an at 3:7; 13:39; 43:4 and frequently associated in the commentaries with the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ mahfúz*) mentioned at Qur'an 85:22. While anything approaching a complete discussion of this designation would take us far afield, it is perhaps sufficient here to our purpose simply to characterize the broadest possible consensus on the meaning of these designations in Islam. The Mother Book or the Preserved Tablet is the 'heavenly archetype' of all divine revelation. The books of the Prophets (Torah, Gospel, Qur'an) are but reflections of this sacred and transcendent divine message. Thus, when Bahá'u'lláh designates the Báb's tablets as the Mother Book, he is saying that they are qualitatively different from the previous scriptures in that they are paradoxically the source of these earlier revelations rather than the result. Such a dramatic and apparently illogical claim by Bahá'u'lláh about the writings of one who for all practical purposes and to all appearances was defeated by the world bespeaks an adamant commitment to the Covenant of his predecessor. That this claim is done in the very language of the Qur'an identifies that Covenant with the Covenant of the Prophet and the Imams.

A number of other phrases in the Tablet of Aḥmad also stand out as signs of the Covenant:

Thus doth the Nightingale utter His call unto you from this prison. He hath but to deliver this clear message. Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord.

O people, if ye deny these verses, by what proof have ye believed in God? Produce it, O assemblage of false ones.

Nay, by the One in Whose hand is my soul, they are not, and never shall be able to do this, even should they combine to assist one another.

'Thus doth the Nightingale utter his call unto you'

The verbal phrase 'utter His call unto you' is the translation of a single compound Arabic word: *yudhakkarakum*. This word is derived from the basic root *dh-k-r* which also gives us the word *dhikr*, usually translated as 'remembrance'. It has been said that although Islam recognizes no original sin, it does recognize that human beings are forgetful and need to be reminded. Such a statement is based on the numerous and varied uses of this word *dhikr* and its derivatives in the Qur'an. It has been suggested that the word for human being, *insán*, is derived from the basic Arabic word *nasíya* meaning precisely 'to forget'.⁵³ Whether or not this etymology is sound, the theological position of Islam and the Qur'an is unmistakable: mankind requires the periodic intervention of divine Messengers who come to remind them about their Covenant or 'contract' with God.⁵⁴ When the Nightingale utters his call, he is actually reminding his listeners/readers of their obligations and duties. (cf. also the admonition elsewhere in the tablet to forget not: *lá tansa*.)

'The path to his Lord'

There is probably no more pervasive metaphor in Islam than that of the path. Here the Arabic word is *sabíl* (this word occurs two other times in this tablet), a frequent Quranic word, occurring there in the singular form 112 times, often in contexts implying struggle and hardship as in 'Say not of those who are killed in the path of God that they are dead' (Qur'an 2:154). Other words in the Qur'an for or indicating path or way are: *manáhij* (5:48), *manákib* (67:15), *rashada* (2:186), *sawá'* (2:108, 5:12) *shirát/shirát al-mustaqím* (*passim*), *sharí'a/shir'a* (45:18, 5:48), *sunna* (*passim*), *ṭaríq/ṭaríqa* (4:168-9, 46:30; 20:63, 104), *yabas* (20:77 'dry path in the sea'). These words, together with their companions 'guidance' and 'leading astray' form one of the central distinctive religious motifs of the Islamic religion. To be faithful to the Covenant means to be on the right path and vice versa. It would be impossible for a Muslim religious thinker to use such a word – or a Muslim audience to hear or read such a word – as *sabíl* without making a conscious association with the truth of Islam and the Covenant it entails. Bahá'u'lláh's use of the word here is no exception: the path of God is the same in this day as it was in the past.⁵⁵

The challenge to those who deny the verses to produce a proof of their belief in God and the assurance that they will fail in this is a variation on the Quranic theme of *taḥaddí* or 'challenge', in which the enemies of the Prophet are challenged to produce a book or verses comparable to the Qur'an. That they cannot do so is understood in the context as a proof of the divine source of Muhammad's revelation. At Qur'an 17:90, for example, we find the following:

Say: If the whole of mankind and Jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support (*law kána ba'duhum li-ba'din zahíran*; cf. Bahá'u'lláh's *law*

yakunu ba'duhum li-ba'din zahiran – even should they combine to assist one another – in the Tablet of Ahmad).

Say: Then bring ye a book from God which is a better guide than either of them that I may follow it if ye are truthful. (Qur'an 28:49; cf. also Qur'an 2:23-4)

Signs

The motif of signs and verses is also an important feature of the Islamic dispensation. The Arabic word *áya* 'sign' (pl. *áyát*) means both portent and verse of divine revelation, verses of poetry being referred to as *bayt/abyát* to differentiate scripture from other forms of literature. The Qur'an is very specific about the nature and function of these *áyát*: whether they are in the form of divinely revealed language ('verses') or are in the form of created phenomena, when read correctly they indicate God and God's Covenant with humanity. A few Quranic quotations will illustrate this. The first is perhaps the most widely cited verse in this connection. The Báb's writings are full of references to it and Bahá'u'lláh either quotes it directly or refers to it many times as well.

Soon will We show them Our Signs in the horizons and in their own souls until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that thy Lord is witness over all created things? (Qur'an 41:53)

The Qur'an may be understood to say that in addition to the miraculous verses of scripture⁵⁶ which are portents or signs of God, such signs are also deposited in nature and in the soul. Thus the reading of signs is to be done on three levels or in three contexts: nature, self/soul and revelation. The implication is that such a triple reading will strive to perceive the harmony obtaining throughout these various realms. The implication here is also that the primary station of the human being is that of reader of the world. In this act of reading, it is expected that one views the sign as important in that it indicates something beyond itself, so the reading act entails 'seeing double'. One must pay close attention to the given sign, which may be in nature, in the soul or in the Book. At the very same time, one's vision must be drawn towards the beyond-the-sign (God) in order for the reading to be accurate.⁵⁷ One may read the famous Quranic verse, said to have been revealed on the occasion of the change in the direction of prayer (*qiblah*), as corroborating this point.

To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God; God is All-embracing, All-knowing. (Qur'an 2:115)

Here it is important to note that the Arabic word *wajh* (Face) also can mean direction. It has also been translated in this context as 'Presence'. When understood this way, and especially in connection with another important verse:

Supplicate no other god save God. There is no god but He. Everything that exists is perishing except His Face. (Qur'an 28:88)

the Qur'an says that the way to God is eternal while the various phenomena that indicate Him are in a process of change. His eternity is suggested in the very presence of evanescence. Thus we have another species of seeing double and one that is very common to our modes of perception. A thing is known by its opposite: heat through cold, left through right and so on.⁵⁸ Perceiving heat entails also perceiving, or at least remembering the perception of, cold.

Elsewhere the Qur'an reiterates its 'theory' of signs:

On the earth are Signs for those of assured faith.
 As also in your own souls, will ye not then perceive?
 And in heaven is your sustenance, as also that which ye are promised.
 Then, by the Lord of heaven and earth, this is the very Truth as much as the fact that ye can speak intelligently to each other. (Qur'an 51:20-3)

A final lengthier quotation is included because it represents a powerful example of the relational and self-referential dynamics of reading. Here the Qur'an, representing a distinct category of signs, uses its signs to illuminate the signs of nature and the soul. The lesson seems to be that the triple reading of phenomena, self and Book must be coordinated first of all by reference to the Book.

It is God Who causeth the seed-grain and the date-stone to split and sprout. He causeth the living to issue from the dead and He is the One to cause the dead to issue from the living. That is God. Then how are ye deluded away from the Truth?

He it is that cleaveth the day-break (from the dark): He makes the night for rest and tranquillity, and the sun and moon for the reckoning (of time). Such is the judgement and ordering of (Him) the Exalted in Power, the Omniscient.

It is He who maketh the stars as beacons for you, that you may guide yourselves with their help through the dark spaces of land and sea. We detail Our Signs for people who know.

It is He Who hath produced you from a single soul. Here is a place of abiding and a place of departure: We detail Our Signs for people who understand.

It is He who sendeth down rain from the skies: With it We produce vegetation of all kinds. From some We produce green crops out of which We produce grain heaped up at harvest. Out of the date-palm and its spathes come clusters of dates hanging low and near. And then there are gardens of grapes, and olives and pomegranates. Each similar in kind yet different in variety. When they begin to bear fruit feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! In these things are Signs for people who believe. (Qur'an 6:95-9)

The Covenant is established through revelation (verses/signs) and that which the signs indicate is none other than the divine and the Covenant implied thereby – the hermeneutic circle, if you please. Throughout the Tablet of Ahmad are numerous such references and hints to the Covenant of Islam instituted by Muhammad and guarded and protected by His progeny, the Imams. We have only discussed a few of the more obvious ones. The important point here is that these clues and hints are to be read in two registers at once: the Islamic and the Bahá'í, a historical or 'horizontal' reading. Each 'sign' as we have stated repeatedly is also to be read doubly in a second direction: 'gothically' or vertically as metaphor. Metaphor is not merely a verbal or rhetorical device but a strategy through which divine Truth is made known in the 'sub-lunar' realm.⁵⁹ In the mystical tradition, metaphorical love (*'ishq majázi*) is precisely the love between human beings; real love (*'ishq haqíqí*) is the love of God and God's love for humanity. Human love is a bridge (*majáz*) to the real goal of divine love. Of course these signs and verses may be read in only one register, with one eye, as it were. However, if this is done then the message of Bahá'u'lláh is either distorted or negated altogether. The 'Islamic Antichrist' – al-Dajjál – was described in the Hadith by the Prophet Muhammad, which is quoted at the head of this paper, as having only one eye. This indicates that evil is implicated (either the cause of or caused) by a refusal or inability to see clearly with two eyes – to see double. In the following provisional translation of the Súrat al-shams, Bahá'u'lláh is quite unambiguous about how to read:

Know ye that he who clings to the outer meaning and abandons the inner meaning is an ignorant savage and he who clings to the inner meaning and abandons the outer meaning is a negligent one. But he who takes the inner meaning in harmony with the outer meaning, that one has perfect awareness.⁶⁰

'A service in both worlds' (*al-thaqalayn*)

Another reference to the Covenant is the phrase 'service in both worlds'. The Arabic is *'ibádat al-thaqalayn*. The first word here is derived from the same word as *'abd*, servant/slave, as in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Servant of Bahá'. In this form in the Tablet of Ahmad it is an abstract noun: servitude/service. Thus, Shoghi Effendi's choice in translation of this first word is quite straightforward. His choice in translating the second word, *thaqalayn*, as 'both worlds' is not quite so transparent and invites serious study and meditation. Interestingly enough for the present discussion, the word *thaqalayn* is in the dual number.⁶¹ The singular noun *thaqal* means 'burden, load, baggage'. Cast in the dual form it simply means two of these. (The plural, *ithqál*, refers to three or more. The word *mithqál* is derived from this root and means a weight for measuring – for example, a quantity of gold or silver.) The word *thaqalayn* does appear once in the Qur'an⁶² in the Sura of the Merciful (*síwatu r-rahman*):

Soon shall We settle your affairs, O both ye worlds (*ayyuha 'th-thaqaláni*)! (Qur'an 55:31, Yusuf Ali translation)

This sura is distinguished by its rhyme, predominantly in *-án*, which also happens to be the grammatical suffix indicating the dual number. Thus the word *thaqalán* fits perfectly into this rhyme scheme. It is also distinguished by the frequent refrain: 'Which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?' The sura has a highly incantatory form and its contents are very poetic, musical and mystical. It is thought to be one of the early Meccan suras. As Yusuf Ali so astutely observes:

Here the special theme is indicated by the refrain. The rhyme in most cases is in the Dual grammatical form, and the Argument implies that though things are created in pairs, there is an underlying Unity, through the Creator, in the favours which He bestows, and in the goal to which they are marching.⁶³

Nonetheless, the precise meaning of *thaqalán* is far from clear.⁶⁴ The most frequent explanation is that it refers to the two burdensome groups: mankind and jinn. As we see in Yusuf Ali's translation, the two groups are taken as symbolic of two worlds: one visible, the other invisible. However, the world of jinn, as understood by Muhammad's audience, would not have been a paradise, rather it was an inter-realm where both the virtuous and the mischievous and even malevolent beings known as jinn pursued their separate destinies. There is no evidence that the world of jinn, just because it was invisible to humans, was therefore also the hereafter or paradise (or in Bahá'í terms, the Abhá Kingdom). Such an idea would be unthinkable. However, when Yusuf Ali translates *al-thaqalayn* as 'both worlds' he is counting on his reader being familiar with the immediate context which mentions specifically men and jinn several times (Qur'an 55:14,15, 33, 39, 56, 74) so that there can be no doubt about what is intended by Yusuf Ali's 'both worlds'. A short excerpt from this sura, indicating the presence of the controlling rhyme *-án* mentioned above, will further illuminate the matter:

- 26 All that is on earth will perish (*fán*)
 27 But will abide (forever) the face of thy Lord – full of majesty, Bounty and Honour (*al-ikrám*)
 28 Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny? (*tukadhhibán*)
 29 Of Him seeks (its need) every creature in the heavens and on earth: every day in (new) splendour doth He (shine)! (*sha'n*)
 30 Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny? (*tukadhhibán*)
 31 Soon shall We settle your affairs O both ye worlds! (*al-thaqalán*)
 32 Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny? (*tukadhhibán*)
 33 O ye assembly of Jinns and men! If it be ye can pass beyond the zones of the heavens and the earth, pass ye! Not without authority will ye be able to pass! (*sulṭán*)
 34 Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny? (*tukadhhibán*)

Yusuf Ali's note to this verse is worth quoting:

Thaqal: weight, something weighty, something weighed with something else. The two *thaqalas* are {the two worlds of} Jinns and men, {the unseen world and the world before our eyes} *who are burdened with responsibility or, as some commentators hold, with sin.* They are both before {God}*Allah*, and the affairs of both are conducted under His Command. If there are inequalities or apparent disturbances of balance, that is only for a season. {God}*Allah* gives to both good and evil men a chance in this period of probation; but this period will soon be over, and Judgement will be established. To give you this chance, this probation, this warning, is itself a favour, by which you should profit, and for which you should be grateful. (R)⁶⁵

Another important occurrence of the dual of *thaqal* is in the Sermon of Ghadír Khumm quoted above. For convenience, I will cite the relevant passage here. Note that the word appears in a different grammatical case in this instance, giving a slightly different pronunciation.

[Muhammad] gave the community news of his own death, saying: 'I have been summoned and it is nearly the moment for me to answer. The time has come for me to depart from you. I leave behind me among you two all-important things (*al-thaqalayn*) which, if you cleave to them, you will never go astray – that is the Book of God and my offspring from my family (*ahl al-bayt*). They will never abandon you until they lead you to me at the (sacred) waters (of Heaven).'⁶⁶

The relevance this passage has for a study of the Covenant is obvious. *Al-thaqalayn* refers to the two things most valuable for maintaining faithfulness to the Covenant: the Qur'an and the progeny of the Prophet who have been designated as the successive Guardians (*awliyá*, sing. *walí*) of the Cause of God and the Covenant.⁶⁷ These two things, moreover, are stipulated as 'bequests' in this Tradition, as Muhammad's own Covenant or testament (*'ahd*), since, according to the Shi'a, Muhammad was prevented from committing His will and testament to paper by the covenant-breakers. It is interesting to observe here that an alternate translation for *thaqal* is 'army'.⁶⁸ Thus it may be possible to understand Muhammad's words in the *ḥadīth al-thaqalayn* as designating the Qur'an and the Imams as two armies protecting the community from the various enemies of covenant-breaking and dissension. Such armies would also aid the believers in their task of establishing the widest possible area for the practice of Islam, known technically as the Abode of Islam (*dār al-islām*), and also as the Abode of the Covenant (*dār al-'ahd*).⁶⁹

The Shi'i Qur'an commentaries consulted for this article all equate the word *thaqalán* of the Qur'an verse 55:31 with 'the two precious things' mentioned in the prophetic Hadith, although Muhsin Fayḍ Káshání adds his opinion that the word refers to the world of jinn and men. Whether this means that it *also* refers to these 'two worlds' is not raised.⁷⁰ That Bahá'u'lláh himself affirmed the significance of the *Ḥadīth al-thaqalayn* is clear from his quoting it in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. Here Shoghi Effendi has translated *thaqalayn* as 'twin weighty testimonies' in line with the usual Shi'i understanding of this dual noun.⁷¹

The nominative dual usage in sura 55:31 is of special interest because of the great discrepancy between the interpretations of this verse throughout Islamic history and the related phrase in the Tablet of Ahmad which the Guardian has translated as 'a service in both worlds'. Grammatically, Bahá'u'lláh's *'ibádat al-thaqalayn* might also be translated as 'a service to both worlds' or 'authorities' – the Book and the teacher/Imam – since the preposition 'in' (*fi*) does not occur here. Thus the meaning might also be: For the one who chants this Tablet, God will give the reward of a hundred martyrs and the rank of having served faithfully both of the 'two precious things'. That is, the one who sincerely believes that which is stated in the Tablet of Ahmad has been true to the Qur'an, to the Prophet and to the Imams – to the 'Islamic' Covenant, even if it appears otherwise.

The purpose in drawing attention to this translation question is to highlight another aspect of the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Islam. Shoghi Effendi's enrichment of a standard symbol of the Islamic Covenant, by departing from the traditional understanding of a single word, is characteristic of the way in which the Bahá'í Faith has become distinct and has acquired an identity which may be best described as post-Islamic.

Reading as Sacrament

Over 25 years ago John Hatcher published an essay in which he discussed basic Bahá'í presuppositions about what it means to be in the world.⁷² From what has been said about the theory of signs above, that this essay is 'apparently' about the nature of reading will be quite understandable since we have seen how the act of reading signs has immediate existential implications.⁷³ Essential here is what might otherwise be thought a mere literary figure, the metaphorical process. However, Hatcher demonstrated in his article the profound connections between being, spiritual growth and reading that are assumed in the Bahá'í teachings. In order to make his point as clear as possible, he painstakingly described the structure of metaphor, which entails three elements: 1) 'the *tenor*, that which is being described'; 2) 'the *vehicle*, that which is compared to the tenor; and 3) the *meaning*, that area of similarity between the tenor and the vehicle.'⁷⁴ So, in the famous simile 'My love is like a red red rose', the tenor is 'My love', the vehicle is the 'red red rose' and the meaning is what occurs in the mind when the comparison is struck. It may be added here that for all practical purposes the tenor in the metaphorical process is like the 'x' in an algebraic equation, waiting to be discovered through the process. In other words, it is unknown and to a large extent unseen, unimagined and unthought until the metaphor is generated. *Unlike* the algebraic 'x', however, the value that is discovered through the metaphorical process is not quantifiable. The metaphorical 'equation' yields a field of meaning rather than an integer. The tenor, then, is seen and known in the way the author of the metaphor wishes us to know and see it in such a field of meaning. In his remarkable article, Hatcher explicates in masterful and engaging fashion how the Bahá'í tablets insist that the author of creation, God, wishes this handiwork to be perceived in and through the metaphorical process.

The reader or listener must be made to think, to be a bit creative, because he must complete the final and most important part of the process himself. He is responsible for determining in what way the tenor and the vehicle are similar.⁷⁵

This basic proposition about the perception and reading of existence and reality is 'a safeguard against dogmatism'⁷⁶ precisely because a metaphor, by its very nature, is a living and changing entity owing to its utter dependence for its life on the active, creative imagination of the human mind. Just as each mind is different, so each mind imagines in a distinctive fashion. 'My point is not to assign one translation to this metaphorical event . . . to affix one meaning violates the very nature of the metaphor . . .'⁷⁷ Furthermore, this individual reading act has profound (and it would seem irreversible) implications for society. It is not solely a private act, no matter how metaphorical:

The point is that there is no final or complete perception of the abstraction; it can always be more acutely perceived or more exquisitely dramatized in the phenomenal world. Of course, the idea of limitless growth is not confined to the individual. Society itself can manifest a collective awareness of authority, justice, honesty, and as its awareness of these attributes expands, society is capable of implementing that understanding more completely in social action.⁷⁸

The physical metaphor . . . functions on this plane as an integral and inextricable part of man's efforts to fulfil his primary goal, spiritual development. It provides the means by which he perceives spiritual qualities in the first place and it is the means by which he may express and acquire that attribute once it is understood. Even as the process of spiritual growth attains higher levels of response, man never completely relinquishes on this plane the reciprocal relationship between the conception of spirituality and the implementation through metaphorical act.⁷⁹

The source of this 'theory of reading' – which is really a theory of being – Hatcher locates in none other than 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*:

. . . human knowledge is of two kinds. One is the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses . . . The other kind of knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place, and is not perceptible to the senses . . . Therefore to explain the reality of the spirit, its condition, its station – one is obliged to give explanations under the forms of sensible things, because in the sensible world all that exists is sensible. For example, grief and happiness are intellectual things; when you wish to express those spiritual qualities you say: 'My heart is oppressed; [or] my heart is dilated', though the heart of man is neither oppressed nor dilated. This is an intellectual or spiritual state, to explain which you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures. Another example: you say, 'such an individual made great progress', though he is remaining in the same place; or again, 'such a one's position was exalted', although like everyone else, he

walks upon the earth. This exaltation and this progress are spiritual states and intellectual realities, but to explain them you are obliged to have recourse to sensible figures because in the exterior world there is nothing that is not sensible.

So the symbol of knowledge is light, and of ignorance, darkness; but reflect, is knowledge sensible light, or ignorance sensible darkness? No, they are merely symbols.⁸⁰

It is the 'metaphorical act' or event that has been the proper topic of this paper, the place where seeing double, or the double vision, occurs because in order for the metaphor to be 'enacted' or initiated (and in some sense to be embodied) the subject must be looking at two things at once, or almost at once – a difficult but quintessentially human accomplishment.⁸¹

The Muslim mystical tradition, out of which the Bahá'í Faith is seen to have been born, has long recognized this as an axiom of epistemology in the veneration of such Holy Traditions as: 'The Paths to God are as numerous as the souls of the believers.' Thus each reader/believer will engage with the text in a very personal and intimate way. When the double vision is in play, a certain degree of confusion or amphiboly can occur. This means that the tenor and the vehicle become 'confused'.⁸² Amphiboly, as Corbin explained, is a cardinal axiom of the mystical and poetic tradition; as such, it is relevant to the Bahá'í corpus. It may be understood through the example he gives. Hafiz, whom many consider the greatest Persian mystic poet, has generated much controversy over the problem of interpreting his wine poetry literally or figuratively. The question, as Corbin points out, is badly conceived, since it is a matter of the otherwise transcendent (or as 'Abdu'l-Bahá preferred, 'spiritual or intellectual' truth) having been clothed so that it might be visible, accessible. And in this, the clothing also acquires something of the Truth. But the 'clothing' – not only the Truth itself – is also prone to being misunderstood and confused and confusing.⁸³

Amphiboly

This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfil in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue.⁸⁴

In this well-known introduction to his Hidden Words Bahá'u'lláh employs the metaphor of clothing to illumine the status, function and purpose of this brief work. Whether or not there is any direct connection or relationship, it will help explicate further the theme of seeing double by referring to a similar metaphor used by the famous and influential 13th-century Iranian mystic Rúzbihán Baqlí Shírází (see p. 48) in his attempts to elucidate the method by which the Unknowable becomes known. In fact, Rúzbihán uses exactly the same metaphor of clothing, but whereas Bahá'u'lláh uses a word based on the root *q-m-š*, in this case the metaphor

is based on the root *l-b-s* and the operative word is *iltibás* 'disguised' or 'veiled'; divine Truth is 'disguised' in phenomenal 'signs'.⁸⁵ In elucidating this metaphor, the renowned scholar of Islamic mysticism Annemarie Schimmel has written:

Rúzbihán becomes enraptured when he speaks of his own experiences, of his suffering, his yearning for beauty. The *iltibás*, the concealment of preeternal beauty in created forms, is the theme of his meditations; faithful to the classical Sufi tradition, he sees in love the effort to break once more through the limits of the created world in order to reach the state of true [Divine Unity] as it existed at the [primordial] Day of the Covenant.⁸⁶

The scholar responsible for insisting on the importance of Rúzbihán for an understanding of Islamic mysticism was the above-mentioned Henry Corbin.⁸⁷ Corbin uses the word amphiboly to translate *iltibás* and it is felt that this choice is admirably suited to its purpose.⁸⁸ Amphiboly occurs in logic, for example, when a statement becomes susceptible of two meanings, not because of the double meaning of the words used, but because of the construction of the sentence. For example: 'The killing of the lions was swift and merciful.' Thus, logical amphiboly depends not on the double meanings of elements in the statement (ambiguity) but on the structure of the statement itself. Similarly, creation is susceptible of two 'meanings' because of the very structure of Being or Existence. This structure is related to the Hadith Qudsi: 'I desired to be known, therefore I created creation in order to be known and I was known.'⁸⁹ The meaning of this statement for Rúzbihán is that the material world is essential as a means of knowing Truth or God or Absolute Being and as a means for humanity to know the Truth. This is much different from saying that creation and God are the same. Such a confusion is quite understandable given the amphibolous nature of the cosmos.⁹⁰ Indeed, one of the connotations of the word *iltibás* is precisely 'confusion'. God created the phenomenal world in order that He be known but His transcendence is such that He can never be truly known. His attributes, His energy, if you will, can be detected through the 'residue' of His creative act, that is to say 'all created things'. That this is so elevates immeasurably mere material phenomena to a status otherwise unanticipated. Each created thing becomes a vehicle for the knowledge of God, an 'embodiment' of divine virtue. Bahá'u'lláh himself says exactly the same thing in *The Book of Certitude*:

... the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing a door of knowledge hath been opened, and within every atom traces of the sun hath been made manifest.⁹¹

Prior to using, say, a tree to stand for proximity to God, the Covenant and Guardianship,⁹² the tree is merely a tree. By using the tree to stand for some aspect of the divine, the revelation transforms (or transposes) nature from its worldly, mundane register. Through the process of divine manifestation (*tajallí, zuhúr*), which

paradoxically depends upon the material realm and the human sensorium,⁹³ this material realm is transmuted by association, as if the divine energy charging through it actually transfigures it. The tree, by virtue of its participation in the Unknown, the Divine Hiddenness, the Invisible realm, the Holy Silence, becomes charged with the electricity of this Other Realm. And so the phenomenal world is spiritualized (which may be thought to be different from divinized) in the soul or the imagination of the observer, reader, believer. Nature read in this manner becomes impossible to participate in without being brought into contact – however tentatively – with holiness, sacredness, divinity. As one scholar explains, the phenomenal realm – in the spiritualized consciousness – becomes transparent and the divine light now is perceived as shining through all created things.⁹⁴ But this light needs to be seen by humans ('God desired to be known'). By human perception being 'drawn through' nature during the metaphorical process, nature is also humanized. The world becomes a Holy Land by being humanized.⁹⁵

Divine love requires a human reality; Divine Unity requires a divine reality. This situation gives rise to possible confusion, a misreading of the world which sees either nothing beyond matter or the essence of God in the material realm (a frequent misinterpretation of mysticism).⁹⁶ The double vision sees matter *qua* matter, an invaluable and indispensable vehicle for the truth *and* detects also the transcendent Truth that actually enlivens matter. The experience of ultimate Meaning or Truth must also be referred to through symbols and images precisely because its abstract reality is incommunicable and inaccessible. Rúzbihán frequently referred to this inner Reality as the betrothed or bride; in such a metaphor, the intensity of the experience of the perception of Meaning is likened to the intensity of the experience of physical love in marriage.⁹⁷ It would seem that Bahá'u'lláh himself is speaking out of this tradition in those places in the Kitáb-i-Íqán where he refers to the 'brides of inner meaning'.⁹⁸ In Arabic the idea of esoteric meaning is also etymologically associated with the feminine since the word *báṭin*, 'inner meaning, esoteric dimension', is derived from the word for womb (*baṭn*). Indeed, one may see the presence of this tradition of associating the feminine with true meaning in the several works devoted by Bahá'u'lláh to the 'Maid of Heaven' who, it will be recalled, was the agent of his revelation in the first place.⁹⁹ Thus Bahá'u'lláh's encounter with the 'Maid of Heaven' may be intended to be understood as an encounter with Absolute Meaning, or the like.¹⁰⁰

The Manifestations of God (that is to say, Prophets and Messengers and perhaps Guardians, *awliyá'*¹⁰¹) are the guides to this way of reading/seeing. Rúzbihán says that it is through these beings, 'ignored by the mass of humanity', that God sees the world and that they are the eyes by which creation beholds God.¹⁰² They are ignored because that which acts as the place of manifestation, the particular phenomenon, can also act as a veil (*multabís*). Indeed, one of the more remarkable qualities of a veil is that it reveals and conceals simultaneously: by its very presence it indicates a reality that is being hidden. Siyyid Kázim Raṣṭí, in a passage very much in line with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as found in the Súrat al-shams mentioned above, refers to a similar way of seeing in discussing the

process of manifestation and its veiling. He says that some people are manifestations of divine unity, others are manifestations of prophethood and others are manifestations of guardianship in the realm of nature. But all are manifestations of both their specific stations and the whole 'process' simultaneously. Taking as his authority a series of Quranic verses and the famous Hadith in which Muhammad said, 'I am the City (or House) of knowledge and 'Alí is its gate', he further elaborates this idea:

And Our command (*amrunâ*) is but one (*wahidatun*) [Qur'an 54:50] . . . ; Thou can see no disharmony in the creation of the Merciful [Qur'an 67:3] . . . ; If it had been from any other than God they would have therein much disharmony [Qur'an 4:72].

So he who recognizes only one aspect is one-eyed and he who recognizes [only] two aspects in one is cross-eyed. But he who recognizes them all in one aspect, and not in three, is a true seer (*baṣīrun kâmilun*) . . . Know that the gates of the gate and the aspects of the threshold are all one, when you consider what is inside the House or the City. But if the sight is turned only to the gates (*ilâ nafs al-abwâb*), then the access [to the House] will disappear and the way will become blocked.¹⁰³

'The Nightingale of Paradise singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity'

Such a beautiful image can also indicate, in addition to the time-bound Covenants of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, the timeless Covenant of the marriage of Meaning with creation, indicated in the Quranic verse discussed at the beginning of this article. As the Báb says in the *Qayyúm al-asmá*, echoing this Quranic language:

Verily We have taken a covenant from every created thing upon its coming into being concerning the Remembrance of God, and there shall be none to avert the binding command of God for the purification of mankind . . .¹⁰⁴

Thus time and eternity are gathered together in the individual sign or verse: seeing double. This seeing double is constantly reinforced in our experience of duality in the world. Whether in the thought of Heraclitus or the moving lament on the binary nature of human perception in the *Phaedo*, it has long been acknowledged that our tendency to perceive polarities in our experience is one of the chief distinguishing features of thought and perception.¹⁰⁵ By virtue of our experience of duality and opposition (unity/multiplicity; whole/partial; inner/outer; past/present; up/down; hot/cold; present/absent; black/white; friend/enemy; good/bad, faith/reason and so on) we are conditioned to instinctively posit the 'other half' or 'other side' of each phenomenon we encounter. Indeed, the word 'symbol' stems from the Greek word *symbolon*, 'that broken object, the two halves of which bear witness, for those holding them, to old bonds between themselves or their families; but it also signifies *sign, contract, a signification* that is undecipherable without its counterpart'.¹⁰⁶ In a sense, the world itself is that broken object. Its other half is the transcendent realm.

Such duality is another feature of seeing double because the basic binary mode of perception is constantly reinforced by our experience of the myriad dualities of existence. The reader 'sees double' when reading but habitually does not register this all-important perspective or approach at the conscious level. By discussing it here, I wish to draw out the workings of the reading act to the realm of awareness, not in order to 'explain away' the inherent power of the act but to permit us to be more mindful and therefore to participate more fully in the act, to understand reading as an experience akin to what the Christian tradition¹⁰⁷ calls a sacrament.

'Seeing double', a term frequently used to describe someone who has become intoxicated, is a perfect term in this context, although the intoxication or inebriation is of a special kind. Bahá'ís are familiar with the various instances of wine imagery throughout the Bahá'í scriptures (another legacy of the Islamicate literary tradition). Indeed, the innumerable uses of the symbol by Bahá'u'lláh calls out for a separate study.¹⁰⁸ One example will suffice here. In his biographical eulogy of Ustád Ismá'íl, 'Abdu'l-Bahá cites the ode of Rumi that Bahá'u'lláh had written down specifically for this early staunch believer, an ode he further instructed Ustád Ismá'íl to chant while facing towards the Báb. The first two stanzas are:

I am lost, O Love, possessed and dazed,
 Love's fool am I, in all the earth.
 They call me first among the crazed,
 Though I once came first for wit and worth.

O Love, who sellest me this wine,
 O Love, for whom I burn and bleed,
 Love, for whom I cry and pine –
 Thou the Piper, I the reed.¹⁰⁹

The paradox (seeing double) here is that this intoxication enables one to see things as they are, rather than in the distorted way associated with 'physical' drunkenness. The motto here would then be 'In truth, wine', rather than the traditional, 'In wine, truth' (*in vino veritas*). Paradoxically, also, such duality and amphiboly produce certitude so that duality somehow becomes the antithesis of ambiguity in the sense of indeterminacy and vagueness. By searching for the 'brides of inner significance' the reader declares belief in a Covenant that guarantees meaning and purpose in the world, a reason for our suffering and a promise for the future, a future which is, at the same time, the bride of inner meaning.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language. One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light

whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions and the evident verses already mentioned. The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed.¹¹¹

It is important to close with a word of apology: this article – despite false appearances to the contrary – is not written to ‘expose’ the profound ‘Islamicness’ of the Bahá’í Faith. Such an exercise would in any case be too redundant to waste time and effort on. Rather, it is written to open up to those who might not have access to the necessary sources the deep connection between the two religions and to establish this relationship as one among many in what must remain the continuing and perhaps endless attempt to mine the Bahá’í scriptures for all of their possible implications. This Islamic substrate need not be privileged at the expense of all other possible hermeneutic presuppositions but it must be acknowledged and taken into account in any serious attempt that strives for anything approaching a thorough reading of the Bahá’í scriptures.¹¹²

The Bahá’í Faith has, despite its Islamic provenance and background, acquired a distinct identity through a number of processes and stands today therefore as a so-called independent world religion, although the terms distinct and discrete may be preferred by some. It may be queried then why it is necessary or even advisable to spend so much effort in identifying the Quranic and Hadith content of the writings of the founders of the Faith since presumably one of the most important implications of the Bahá’í message is that the Islamic dispensation has now been replaced by a new one. Even if we did not have all of the exhortations from or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi repeatedly urging Bahá’ís to become knowledgeable about Islam, we might be encouraged in such a project by the results of recent developments in the study of literature in general. Specifically, studies of the influence of the Bible on the western literary tradition have opened up new vistas for the assessment of the relationship between religion and culture.¹¹³ The proposition is that the Bible is responsible for the terms of reference, the structure of thought and the vocabulary of much of western civilization. If such discoveries are valid, then not only do their results have implications for the perhaps strictly academic problem of the formation of a literary tradition, but since a literary tradition is also both a source and result of moral and ethical spiritual values and a guide to the specific consciousness and conscience or ‘soul’ of a society, these discoveries provide concrete evidence for the influence on society of what Bahá’ís call revelation. Similar work on the influence of the Qur’an on the Islamic tradition has not been done and is badly needed.¹¹⁴ Even though scholars have spoken of such things as the ‘quranization of consciousness’ and have recognized – indeed how could one not – the unprecedented degree to which the book has influenced history and culture, there has been no Northrop Frye in Quranic studies, as yet, to demonstrate this influence in terms compatible with western post-enlightenment scholarly tastes.¹¹⁵ But the kinds of insights Frye offers about the relationship between the

Bible and 'western' culture are very suggestive for the study of the Qur'an and Islamic culture.¹¹⁶ This insistence upon reading the inner with the outer has a long and venerable tradition in Islamic culture and may be regarded as one of the most precious aspects of the Islamicate legacy to the world, a legacy enshrined, preserved and universalized by the Bahá'í teachings.¹¹⁷ The Bahá'í Faith is a bearer of this Quranic and Islamic influence to a much larger audience than that one defined by the traditional boundaries of the 'Muslim world' – the traditional Abode of the Covenant.¹¹⁸ In the process, the Bahá'í Faith has also distinguished itself from Islam more so than any other similar contemporary Islamicate development. The remarkable and distinctive 'post-Islamic' features of the Bahá'í Faith – by virtue of their number and nature – merit a separate study. It is thought, however, that by focusing upon the similarities and the profound genetic relationship between Islam and the Bahá'í Faith we will be in a better position to recognize those features when we see them. It is, in any case, quite understandable how the Bahá'í Faith and Islam enjoy a kind of amphibolous relationship and what is meant in the Hadith when the Prophet Muhammad declared that 'Dajjál is one-eyed whereas God is not'.

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Notes

1. Al-Bukhári, *Ṣaḥíḥ*, Book 88 – Fitán, no. 241, vol. 9, p. 183.
2. 'These daily obligatory prayers, together with a few other specific ones, such as the Healing Prayer, the Tablet of Ahmad, have been invested by Bahá'u'lláh with a special potency and significance, and should therefore be accepted as such and be recited by the believers with unquestioning faith and confidence, that through

- them they may enter into a much closer communion with God, and identify themselves more fully with His laws and precepts.' (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 209)
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 75, p. 143/97; no. 84, p. 166/111; Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 5/96, 24/116.
 4. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 112.
 5. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 27.
 6. *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 358.
 7. The word *walí* (guardian, friend, saint) is derived from *waláya* (authoritative friendship, sainthood). More accurately, both words are derived from the same basic semitic root *w-l-y* from which all of the various related connotations and denotations of the two words, such as friendship, guardianship, protection, sanctity, allegiance, love, nearness, trust and so on are derived. See also below.
 8. On this topic, in connection with the Bahá'í Faith, there is no better source than the writings of John Hatcher, beginning with his *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*, discussed in detail below. See bibliography for other relevant titles.
 9. For a particularly lucid and masterful discussion of this process as found in Islamic mysticism, see Izutsu, 'The Paradox of Light and Darkness'.
 10. This idea is elaborated further below.
 11. See *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* and the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 'covenant'. In the Hebrew Bible, God is often represented as making a covenant with individuals: Genesis 9:9, 15:18; Exodus 6:4, 24:4ff; Numbers 25:13; Deuteronomy 5:2; Jeremiah 34:13. Breaking the covenant was followed by punishment: Deuteronomy 17:2ff; Joshua 7:11ff, 23:16; Judges 2:20; II Kings 18:9-12. Blessing followed its being observed, e.g. Psalms 132:12: 'If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies which I shall teach them, their sons also for ever shall sit upon your throne.' Note that the New Testament is known in Arabic as the New Covenant (*al-'ahd al-jadíd*).
 12. A summary of the Covenant in Islam is in Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 1, pp. 125-8.
 13. On the recipient of the Tablet of Ahmad, see Faizi, *A Flame of Fire*. See also Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2, pp. 107-36.
 14. Readers of Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words will be reminded of Persian no. 19, although 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated that this association is not the most important, if it is correct in the first place: '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? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your own 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.' See 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of this text, Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 1, p. 81. On the Day of the Covenant and the Day of Resurrection as the defining moments of 'Islamic time', see Böwering, 'Ideas of Time in Persian Sufism'.
 15. Huwayzí, *Núr al-thaqalayn*, vol. 2, pp. 341-3, nos. 6 and 8.
 16. On the Covenant in the Abrahamic tradition, see Firmage, et al., *Religion and Law*.
 17. For the commercial background of this term see *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, see

- under 'Bai'. See the related usage of *bay'a* in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 241/187 quoting a Hadith from Ja'far al-Šádiq, the sixth Imam: 'There shall appear a Youth from Baní-Háshim, Who will bid the people *plight fealty unto Him*. His Book will be a new Book, unto which He shall summon the people *to pledge their faith*. Stern is His Revelation unto the Arab. If ye hear about Him, hasten unto Him.' (italics added)
18. See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 199–213 for a discussion of these terms as they are used in Sufism. See Lawson, 'Authority of the Feminine', for a discussion of these terms in Shi'ism and the writings of the Báb.
 19. cf. Qur'an 2:27, 4:155, 5:13, 8:56, 13:20, 13:25, 16:91
 20. Observed on 18th of Dhu'l-Hijja annually. It is an official public holiday in Iran.
 21. Note the similarity of the language here to that in a passage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament: 'The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. *Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God.* May the wrath, the fierce indignation, the vengeance of God rest upon him!' p. 11. (italics added)
 22. al-Mufid, *Kitáb al-Irshád*, pp. 124–5. Translation slightly adapted. On 'Umar's eventual breaking of the Covenant, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá summarized below.
 23. It is interesting to observe that the topic of Covenant acts as something of a pivot for other important doctrinal disputes and questions: the corruption of the Qur'an, the notion of *fiṭra* (human nature), creation itself and so on.
 24. The word seed, Arabic *dharr*, is understood here. *Dharr* figures very prominently in some of the more abstruse discussions of creational metaphysics in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad and the Báb.
 25. Huwayzī, *Kitáb tafṣīr nūr al-thaqalayn*, vol. 2, p. 337, no. 2.
 26. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 27 April 1936, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1664, pp. 495–6.
 27. Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, p. 226.
 28. The Holy Traditions, sometimes called *akhbār*, may be seen as the actual presence of the Imams, Muhammad's progeny – the people of his house – in 'literary' form. See Lawson, 'Dangers', pp. 176–8.
 29. In the beginning of his mission, the Báb invoked the authority of the Covenant through the very structure of his *Qayyúm al-asmá*, each chapter of which contains 42 verses. Forty-two is the numerical equivalent of the Quranic 'Yea verily [we do testify]!' (*balá*) found in Qur'an 7:172 quoted above. It signifies that God is God and therefore obedience is due Him – in short, this single word symbolizes the Covenant.
 30. From the *Lawḥ-i Hizár-Bayt* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, summarized by Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 1, p. 127.
 31. Qur'an e.g. 3:151, 4:91, 4:153, 11:96. The word *al-Sultán* was eventually adopted by rulers who had effectively wrested power from the Caliphate and it came, therefore, to stand for the bearer of political authority as distinct from the bearer of spiritual authority.

32. Qur'an 2:32, 4:11, 4:17, 4:24, 4:26, 4:92, 4:104, 4:111, 4:170, 8:71, 9:15, 9:28, 9:60, 9:97, 9:106, 9:110, 12:6, 12:83, 12:100, 22:52, 24:18, 24:58, 24:59, 33:1, 48:4, 49:8, 60:10, 66:2, 76:30. Other frequent compound epithets are 'the Merciful, the Compassionate' (*al-rahman al-rahim*) and the Living, the Eternal (*al-hayy al-Qayyum*).
33. Baqlí, *Sharh-i shathíyát*, p. 153; idem, *Kitáb 'abhar al-'asháqín*, p. 34; cf. also *ibid.* p. 3 for a brief reference to the 'niche' mentioned in the famous Light Verse (Qur'an 24:35), where Rúzbihán says that humanity has been made a 'niche' for the light of the glory of God (*núr bahá'í-hi*). See the discussion of the 'Light Verse' below.
34. Remember also that it was beneath *sidrat al-muntahá* that the primordial Covenant was taken. See above. A standard reference for both tree and bird imagery in an Islamic milieu is Wensinck, *Tree and Bird*. Cole, 'World as Text' is largely about tree and bird imagery in a work by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i. See also his interesting remarks on the etymological relationship obtaining among the words 'tree', 'true' and 'druid'. See also the recent anthropological study by Fernandez ('Trees of Knowledge of Self') for a discussion of trees as symbolic of self knowledge. In connection with the theme of duality and 'seeing double', the motif of reversal (a sub-species of duality) is found expressed in a most evocative context in the universal image of the inverted tree, suggested by Qur'an 69:23 to none other than Karím Khán Kirmání, arch-rival of the Báb, who cites a tradition from 'Alí in explanation of the verse: 'The trees of Paradise are the inverse of the trees of this world. The trees of Paradise have their roots above and their branches below.' Quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, pp. 225-6; see Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, p. 327, n. 9, for reference to Carl Jung's study of the *arbor inversa*.
35. cf. the use of the word *warqá* as a metaphor for the soul used by Ibn Siná in the recent article by Wilferd Madelung ('An Ismá'ílí Interpretation'). See also Hermann Landolt, 'Deux opuscules de Semnání' and the important discussion of bird imagery in Buck, *Symbol and Secret*, pp. 266-8. In this connection the similarity between *baqá* and *bahá'* is to be taken seriously. Lewis, 'Symbol and Secret' [Review], pp. 79-80 offers essential commentary on the trope.
36. cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp. 36-9/129-33: The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness/*wádt-ye fiqrí-ye haqiqí u faná't-ye asl*.
37. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 49.
38. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'The Master's Last Tablet to America', in *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 429.
39. *ibid.* p. 433.
40. *ibid.* p. 436.
41. cf. for example the title of Siyyid Qutb's Qur'an commentary: *Fi Ziláli 'l-Qur'an* 'In the Shade of the Qur'an'.
42. On all this see Yusuf Ali's commentary on the respective verses.
43. In early Shi'i exegesis this 'accursed tree' was read as standing for the Umayyad dynasty. See Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung*, pp. 265-8.
44. Lawson citing Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kázim in 'Reading reading itself', Introduction, n. 19.
45. See Steven Lambden's magisterial 'The Sinaitic Mysteries'.
46. 'Alí ibn Ibráhím al-Qummi (d. late 9th/early 10th century CE), *Tafsír al-Qummi*, vol. 2, p. 78. The richness and suppleness of Islamic piety allows the following interpretation by Muhammad al-Báqir (the fifth Imam and father of al-Sádiq) to stand side by side with this one: the 'niche' is the breast of the believers, and the first 'lamp' is the heart, the second 'lamp' is the light which God put in the heart of the believer, the 'tree' is the believer (*qála: al-shajara al-mu'mín*; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

- statement that the believers should become like 'trees', *Tablets of the Divine Plan, passim*). '... an olive neither eastern nor western' means that it is growing on the peak of a mountain, having thus no cardinal direction, 'when the sun rises it rises upon it and when it sets it sets upon it.' '... would almost shine forth' means that the light which God has placed in his heart would almost shine forth even if he did not say a single word. *ibid.* p. 79.
47. See Lawson, 'Reading reading itself'. See also Lawson, 'Interpretation as Revelation'.
48. The Arabic reads: *wa innaka anta ayqin fi dhátika bi-anna al-ladhi 'a'rada 'ami hádhá al-jamáli faqad 'a'rada 'an al-rusuli min qablu thumma 'stakbara 'alá 'lláhi fi 'azali 'l-ázáli ilá 'abadi 'l-ábidín.*
49. See above the translation of Qur'an 7:172-3.
50. The Arabic: *thumma dhakkir min ladunná kulla man sakana fi madínati 'lláhi al-maliki 'l-'azizi 'l-jamili mina 'l-ladhina hum ámanú bi'lláhi wa bi'l-ladhi yab'athuhu 'lláhu fi yawmi 'l-giyámati wa kánu 'alá manáhiji 'l-haqq lamín al-sálikín.* (*Risálih-yi tashbíh wa takhíl*, ed. Ishráq Khávári, p. 218) It has remained untranslated in Bahá'í prayer books, possibly because it speaks so directly and specifically to the Shi'í eschaton, which, as we have seen, was one of the primary topics associated with the exegesis of the verse of the Covenant – the tone and contents of which Shoghi Effendi perhaps considered as too arcane and parochial for a wider readership.
51. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2, p. 107. For a discussion of the divine 'transference' by means of which Bahá'u'lláh also intends himself when speaking of the Báb, see Buck, *Symbol*, pp. 233-47; see now also Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization*, pp. 38, 123, 135 and especially 195.
52. This noun, translated here as a verbal phrase by the Guardian, is highly significant and there is no space left to discuss it in full. I have referred to it below in the discussion of amphiboly but it really deserves a separate study. Suffice it for the moment to point out that it represents a mode of knowledge quite different from the 'ilm of the sacerdotal establishment and may best be translated as recognition, possibly intuition and sometimes even gnosis. It is the word for 'to know' that God speaks in the Hadith of the Hidden Treasure referred to more fully below. (cf. also the Hadith *man 'arafa* quoted or referred to many times in Bahá'í writings: 'He who knows himself knows his lord.') The 'recognition' of the true bearer of *waláya* is essential for upholding the Covenant. See Lawson, 'Islam and the "lower" senses'.
53. Najm al-Din Razi, *The Path of God's Bondsmen*, pp. 125-6.
54. See Waley, 'Contemplative Disciplines', pp. 507-8.
55. Compare, for example, Qur'an 17:77: 'Our way with the Messengers We sent before thee is the same. No change wilt thou find in the way of God.' cf. also 33:62, 35:43, 40:85, 48:23.
56. The Quranic verses are considered miraculous for three basic reasons: their sheer beauty and persuasive or rhetorical power, their 'alchemical' ability to transform the lead of human nature into the 'gold' of human spirituality, and the 'fact' that Muhammad was supposedly illiterate, thus the appearance of such exquisite and remarkable language from such a person is analogous to the birth of Jesus from a virgin. Here it is rarely observed that the Qur'an is an oral composition, making the whole question of literacy irrelevant.
57. In this connection, note the celebrated Hadith Kumayl, quoted in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 164/128. The first Imam was asked by one of his closest disciples 'O

Master! What is Reality?' 'Alí eventually answered: 'Piercing the clouds of glory without reference to anything else (*bi-lá ishára*). See also Lawson, 'The Báb's Epistle on the Spiritual Journey towards God', in this issue for a fuller discussion of this Hadith.

58. See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, 'The Fire Tablet'.
59. On the importance of this idea in the Bahá'í writings, see, in addition to the works of Hatcher (referred to at length below), May and Woodman.
60. Bahá'u'lláh, 'Súrat al-shams', p. 11. cf. Cole's translation of this passage, *ibid.* p. 18. cf. the similar idea in the writings of Siyyid Kázim Rashtí, translated in Lawson, 'The Terms', pp. 34-5 and below.
61. Arabic has three grammatical numbers: singular, plural and dual.
62. Profound thanks to Dr Manuchihr Salmanpour for drawing my attention to this during the conference where an earlier draft of this paper was presented.
63. Yusuf Ali, p. 1471. On the importance of pairing in the Qur'an, see Zwettler for an extremely suggestive study of *zawj* 'mate' in the Qur'an and the relevance this may have for the typological argument (another form of seeing double) in that Book for Muhammad's authority.
64. Various other translations of this verse are listed here for comparison:
- 1) We shall surely attend to you at leisure, you weight and you weight! (Arberry)
 - 2) Soon shall We apply Ourselves to you, O you two armies! (Maulvi Muhammad 'Alí)
 - 3) We shall have leisure for you, O ye two burdensome companies. [n] (Bell. Bell's note, vol. 2, p. 550: 'or two races, i.e. jinn and men. Elsewhere Bell says: '[This verse] contains a threat that in spite of His occupations Allah will have time to deal with men and jinn, the *thaqalán*.')
 - 4) We shall dispose of you, O ye two dependents (man and jinni). (Pickthall)
 - 5) We shall soon be free to turn to you, O weary caravans. (Ahmed Ali)
 - 6) Soon shall We attend to you, O ye two big groups. (Maulawi Sher Ali as v. 32)
 - 7) O you burdens of the earth, we shall soon be getting free to call you to account. (Maududi) Maududi's note: *Thaqal* is the burden loaded on a conveyance. *Thaqalán* (dual), therefore, will mean: 'two loaded burdens'. Here this word refers to jinn and men, who are both loaded on the earth. As the addressees here are those jinn and men who have turned away from the service and obedience of their Lord, they have been addressed as: 'O burdens of the earth.' In other words, the Creator is warning these two disobedient companies of His creation, saying: 'O you who have become a burden for My earth, I am soon getting free to take you to task.' This does not mean that Allah at this time is too busy to call the disobedient servants to account but it means that Allah has arranged a special timetable according to which the time for the final accountability and reckoning of the jinn and men has not yet come. (p. 878)
 - 8) Nous vaquerons un jour à votre jugement, ô hommes et génies! (Kasimirski)
65. Yusuf Ali, p. 1401. This note was revised by later editors as indicated by the (R) which appears at its end. It would be very interesting to see what Yusuf Ali wrote originally. In an earlier edition by the same publisher (1983) the note, this time on p. 1476, is perhaps the original, though I have not verified this. I have indicated the variations of the text as follows: {-} indicates material deleted in the later edition; *-* indicates material added in the later edition. Thus it can be seen how the Guardian's translation of the word in the Tablet of Ahmad has much in common with the interpretation offered in this note by Yusuf Ali.

66. See above.
67. Note that *awliyá*, the plural of *walí*, is frequently used by Bahá'u'lláh and is typically translated as 'friends' by Shoghi Effendi, e.g. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 23.
68. See above, note 64, translation no. 2.
69. See the reference to Djalili below.
70. Káshání, *al-Sáfi*, vol. 5, p. 110. cf. Bahráni, *Kitáb al-burhán*, vol. 4, p. 267 and Qunmí, *Tafsír*, vol. 2, p. 323. The first two works rely very heavily on the earliest stratum of Shi'i scriptural interpretation as found, for example, in the third work. A recent study of this early material is Bar-Asher, *Scripture and exegesis*; see especially pp. 93-8 for more on the meaning and interpretation of the *Hadith al-lhaqalayn*.
71. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 201/155. My thanks to Moojan Momen for drawing my attention to this passage.
72. Hatcher, *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*.
73. cf. also the quotation from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* below, beginning 'It is evident . . .'
74. Hatcher, *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*, p. 8.
75. *ibid.* p. 9.
76. *ibid.*
77. *ibid.* p. 17. See here the very interesting passages on the Manifestations' use of dramatic metaphor, exemplified in episodes from the life of Christ and compared with episodes in Bahá'í history, namely the conference of Badašh̄t.
78. *ibid.* p. 11.
79. *ibid.* p. 12.
80. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 83-4, also cited in *ibid.* p. 10.
81. cf. 'Ahmad became the embodiment of his own Tablet.' Faizi, 'A Flame of Fire', ii, p. 2.
82. cf. Hatcher, *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*, p. 9: 'To view the metaphor as having one meaning is to miss the analogical equation, mistake the vehicle for the tenor, and [in the instance cited here] to end up believing that Christ was actually a piece of bread.'
83. cf. Kant's use of the term, denoting an object of 'pure understanding' confused with appearance.
84. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*.
85. One of the immediate implications of the root *q-m-s* is the automatic allusion to Joseph and his 'shirt' (*qamís*) (see Lawson, 'Reading reading itself') which Bahá'u'lláh refers to so frequently throughout his writings, notably in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 4/4, and the *Book of the Covenant/Kitáb-i-Áhd*, p. 220/198. It may be suggested that detecting the 'fragrance/'*arf*' mentioned here in the poetic figure is actually a metaphor for the recognition of spiritual authority/*waláya*. Note that '*arf*' is built on the same root as '*irfán*', the very word used in the first line of the *Aqdas* mentioned below in note 92. From *l-b-s* the Arabic word *libs* 'apparel, clothing' is formed, as is the word *labs, lubs* 'confusion, ambiguity' i.e. something is clothed in such a way that its true identity is unrecognizable or veiled.
86. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 299. To 'break through the limitations' is very suggestive of the theme of the *Hadith Kumayl* and Bahá'u'lláh's employment of it in the *Íqán* mentioned above.
87. Corbin's several studies of this author are essential reading for persons interested in Iranian religion and Islamic spirituality.

88. Pace Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli*, p. 104. It may be questioned whether the sustained criticism of one of the greatest scholars of modern Islamic studies found *passim* is on solid ground. See, for example, the serious mistranslation of Corbin's French, *ibid.* p. 105.
89. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written a lengthy commentary on this very influential Tradition. Serious students are directed to Momen (trans. and commentary), 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary'.
90. cf. amphibole as a technical term in geology
91. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 28, pp. 29–30/23.
92. *waláya/wiláya/valáyat/wiláyat*/spiritual authority/love/guidance. *Waláya* is mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: 'Take heed lest the word "Prophet" withhold you from this Most Great Announcement, or any reference to "Vicegerency" debar you from the sovereignty of Him Who is the Vicegerent of God, which overshadoweth all the worlds.' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 167) As stated in the notes to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: 'The word here translated "Vicegerency" is, in the original Arabic, "viláyat", which has a range of meanings including "vicegerency", "guardianship", "protectorship" and "successorship". It is used in relation to God Himself, to His Manifestation, or to those who are the appointed Successors of a Manifestation.' (*ibid.* note 181) See also Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 175–6, no. 89: 'Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbours, and share with them their food and their drink.' 'Representative of God' is Shoghi Effendi's translation of *matla'u'l-waláyat* (many thanks to Moojan Momen for this reference). It may also be translated as 'place where *waláya* appears' or 'manifestation of *waláya*'. cf. the different translation of *matla'* in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 1, p. 19/1. *Matla'* is a frequent near-synonym for *mazhar*, 'manifestation' in the Bahá'í tablets.
93. 'Seeing double' also applies to the other senses so that reading is done through hearing, tasting, touching, feeling and so on.
94. See the article by Izutsu mentioned above. Elsewhere, speaking of the necessity of seeing double for progress along the spiritual path, Izutsu has written: 'He who has reached this stage is known in the tradition of Islamic Philosophy as a "man of two eyes" *dhu al-'aynayn*. He is a man who, with his right eye sees Unity, i.e. Absolute Reality, and nothing but Unity, while with his left eye he sees multiplicity, i.e. the world of phenomenal things . . . in addition to the simultaneous vision of Unity and Multiplicity, he knows that these two are ultimately one and the same thing. Such being the case he recognizes in every one of the actually existent things two different aspects: the aspect of *faná* and the aspect of *baqá*.' (Izutsu, 'The Basic Structure', p. 19. cf. the above comments on the "Tree of *baqá*". See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 356ff: 'Seeing with Two Eyes')
95. cf. the Tradition: 'The human form is the greatest proof of God to creation.' (Káshání, *Kalimát*, p. 125) The implications for ecology are obvious. If poetic and metaphorical trees are allowed to die, then earthly trees are also doomed. See also Sours, 'Ecofeminist critique'. It is also interesting, in the present context, to note that early Muslim scholars divided the earth into two parts: the region where Islam had yet to be established, known as the abode of strife or war (*dár al-harb*), and the region where Islam had been established, known as the abode of peace

- or security. This region could be known either as *dár al-Islám* 'the Abode of Islam' or *dár al-'ahd* 'the Abode of the Covenant'. (Djalili, 'International Law', p. 214) One implication of this in this context is that where the Covenant is established the physical environment is *de facto* protected as an instrumentality for registering the divine and for the divine registering humanity or, perhaps better, more fully humanizing humanity. Similarly, the abode of strife entails not only political and social warfare but also 'environmental warfare'. cf. 'The leaves are yellowed by the poisoning winds of sedition.' (Bahá'u'lláh, 'Fire Tablet', *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 316)
96. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, pp. 75–6.
97. *ibid.* p. 59. Rúzbihán may be influenced here by the Arabic poetic tradition where a verse of poetry is called a 'tent' in which the damsel of meaning (*ma'ná*) resides protected, awaiting reunion with her lover. Rumi later would refer to the Qur'an itself as a bride (precisely '*arús*') and there can be no question here of Rumi teaching that the Qur'an should submit to anyone; rather the suggestion is that the reader/husband, through love, submit to his bride/the Qur'an. See Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, p. 226. cf. also Ghazali's famous metaphor of sexual ecstasy for spiritual and intellectual knowledge: i.e. that it cannot be explained or taught but must be experienced directly. (Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, pp. 213–14)
98. 'Behold how within all things the portals of the Ridván [= good pleasure] of God are opened, that seekers may attain the cities of understanding and wisdom, and enter the gardens of knowledge and power. Within every garden they will behold the mystic bride of inner meaning ('*arús-i ma'ání*) enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment.' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 149, p. 140/109) Similarly: 'Let the future disclose the hour when the Brides of inner meaning ('*arúshá-yi ma'ání*) will, as decreed by the Will of God, hasten forth, unveiled (*bi hújáb*) out of their mystic mansions, and manifest themselves in the ancient realm of being.' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 190, pp. 175–6/136) In this connection, see also Bahá'u'lláh's mention of the 'húris of inner meaning/'*húriyát-i ma'ání*' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 70, p. 70/54) and the other similar usages and the astute comments on these by Sours in his 'The Maid of Heaven', p. 49. On the importance of the feminine generally in the Bahá'í tablets, see Culhane, *I Beheld a Maiden*.
99. On the Zoroastrian background for the Maid of Heaven, see the excellent article by Ekbal, 'Daéná-Dén-Din'. See also the important analysis in Buck, *Paradise and Paradigm*, pp. 195–8 and *passim*.
100. This is not to suggest that this powerful image be intellectualized or 'sanitized' and therefore rendered a mere allegory (an integer in a formula). Rather, it is suggested that the idea of the encounter with Meaning be read alongside other possible meanings – another form of seeing double – perhaps privileging this reading over that for emphasis in various contexts. In short, the Maid of Heaven must be allowed to remain a vibrant and living symbol.
101. cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 198, p. 181/140.
102. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, pp. 37–8.
103. Rashti, *Shah al-qasídat al-lámiya*, p. 103. cf. also the discussion of al-Dajjál above. (It may be of some incidental interest to note that Hajj Karím Khán Kirmání, one of the most vociferous detractors of the Báb, had only one eye.) The Báb expresses this idea in his commentary on Súrat al-Baqara: 'The Greatest Name (*al-ism al-a'zam*) is "He" (*huwa*). It is the gate of communion with God . . . in that it causes [the believer] to enter unto God without looking to the gate (*Báb*),

because the gate is [merely] the pointer (*al-ishára*).’ (provisional translation; *Tafsír Súrat al-Baqara*, p. 12) cf. also the Hadith of Kumayl: *kashf subuhát al-jalál min ghayr ishára* and Bahá'u'lláh's commentary on it in *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, paras. 175–8, pp. 164/128–166/129. See also Lawson, ‘The Báb's Epistle on the Spiritual Journey towards God’ in this issue. In his refutation of *Shaykh Ahmad's Risálat al-'ilmíyya*, the renowned 19th-century Iranian philosopher Mulla Hádí Sabzavári contends that its author ultimately lacked ‘perspective’ in his condemnation of *wahdat al-wajúid* (‘existential monism’). He says that had *Shaykh Ahmad* been able to see with ‘two eyes’ he would have understood that even though the divine essence is, of course, utterly unknowable and ‘beyond being’, it is still permissible and even necessary to speak about proximity to it, its knowledge and so on. (Sabzavári, *Shah*, p. 667) On this work of *Shaykh Ahmad's*, see Lawson, ‘Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy’. Two Traditions from the Prophet Muhammad regarding the two eyes of the heart are contained in *Ámulí, Jámí' al-asár*, p. 581. One reads: ‘Verily, the heart has two eyes, just like the body. With the physical eye the physical realm is seen, with the eye of Reality, which is spiritual, the inner spiritual realm and the divine realities are seen.’ The other is very similar.

104. The Báb, *Selections*, p. 65.
105. On the Homeric life of duality and the coincidence of opposites, see the recent work of Van Duzer, *Duality and Structure*. His thesis has implications for tracing the thought of such pre-Socratic philosophers as Heraclitus (on whom see *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, q.v. ‘Heraclitus of Ephesus’, especially p. 478). For a later philosophic celebration of duality and opposition, see Nicholas of Cusa, *Vision* and Hopkins. The question of a possible Islamic influence in Cusa's thought on this topic is broached in Lawson, ‘Nicholas’. In Lawson, ‘Interpretation’, some of the remarkable coincidences of opposites (cf. *coincidentia oppositorum*) found in the *Qayyúm al-asmá* are mentioned and in Lawson, ‘The Qur’an Commentary’, a preliminary analysis of these figures is offered, especially pp. 329–61.
106. Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 70. She continues, ‘One should understand that each sex is the “symbol” of the other, its complement and support, its bestower of meaning. Love, as tendency toward synthesis, would be precisely that which creates the recognition of signs, a reading, significations, and would thus set itself up in opposition to the closed, egg-shaped world of androgynes.’ See also the lucid and stimulating discussion of symbols in Buck, *Paradise, passim* and especially pp. 121: ‘Symbols are the illustrations of sacred ideas and ideals’ in texts that would otherwise be without pictures. And, of course, icons are subject to the double vision just like all other phenomena.
107. See Lawson, ‘Reading as Holy Communion’.
108. A preliminary search turned up over 120 separate uses in the English language works.
109. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials*, p. 30 and note where there is reference to the wine being from the jar of ‘Yea, verily!’, an allusion to the primordial covenant described in Qur’an 7:172 and discussed above. Note also the very apposite verse from Rumi quoted here, p. 31: ‘From every eye Thou hidest well,/ And yet in every eye dost dwell.’ See also *Memorials*, p. 141 for a similar use of the symbol of wine.
110. Surely it is of some interest here to observe that though one is, by necessity, most alone while reading, one is, perhaps, at the same time – and again paradoxically – the least lonely. Such an observation has implications for the category ‘religions of the Book’ on which see Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, pp. 135–218.

111. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para 283, pp. 254-5/197: *atyár-i huwiyya wa ḥamámát-i azaliyya*.
112. Lewis, 'Scripture' is a foundational and essential study on the relationship between the Bahá'í canon and the Persian and Islamicate literary tradition. '... the knowledge of [the Qur'án] is absolutely indispensable for every believer who wishes to adequately understand, and intelligently read the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.' (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, 2 December 1935, in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 561)
113. Specifically the work of the celebrated critic Northrop Frye. His last books, *The Great Code* and *Words of Power*, were devoted to the very interesting proposition that all literature and speech in the western world has been formed and deeply influenced by the Bible, the so-called Old and New Testaments (or Covenants as they are known in Arabic). A kind of summary of these books is the short collection of lectures published shortly after his death entitled *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* and which is partly responsible for the title of this essay. cf. also the comments on Frye made in Woodman, 'Metaphor', pp. 1-7, 24.
114. The 'influence' of the Bible and other earlier scriptures on the Qur'an is a controversial and sometimes vexatious topic and one that remains to be studied properly. Earlier western scholarship frequently sought to 'expose' the biblical provenance of much of the Qur'an's contents. But the motive was to question Islam's authenticity as a 'true religion' (whatever that might mean). This naturally was taken as an insult by Muslims and the effects of such motives can be felt as an impediment today in the academic study of Islam and the Qur'an.
115. The works of Arkoun (e.g. *Lectures*) and others have hinted at such a project.
116. It is indicative of the kinds of problems and obstacles that still separate Europe from the 'Middle East' that we cannot even think of cognate categories with which to describe ourselves. Western/Islamic is certainly false, except if 'western' is made to stand for a value that is extra-geographic; 'Enlightenment Territory' is cumbersome and stillborn. In any case, Islam has been resident in the 'west' for centuries. We cannot speak of Christian culture precisely because of the allergy to religion that developed in the post-Enlightenment period. We cannot refer to Islamic culture as eastern and if we use the term middle eastern it still posits Europe and her offspring as the point of orientation.
117. Of course, it is not a question of inventing metaphor or 'spiritual reading of scripture' (something usually credited to Philo in any case). But through a very happy coincidence of the virtual elevation of reading to the level of sacrament at the same time that the arts of the book were becoming improved and elaborated – leading to a more universal spread of literacy than that which had obtained heretofore – the Islamicate world refined and cultivated such an approach to texts far beyond that which had gone before, in both scale and intensity.
118. 'By virtue of its diffusion in 205 or more sovereign and non-sovereign countries and territories, the Kitáb-i-Íqán emerges as the most influential work of Qur'anic exegesis outside of the Muslim world.' (Christopher Buck, 'The Kitáb-i-Íqán')