Textual Resurrection

Book, Imám, and Cosmos in the Qur'án Commentaries of the Báb

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Abstract

The Báb was a strong reader — some would say a strange reader — of the canonical texts of Islam. The bulk of His earliest writings were in the form of commentaries on these texts. In what follows, I will discuss the radical notions of textuality underlying the Báb's Qur'ánic commentaries. Drawing upon categories from contemporary literary studies, I will first provide a framework for my discussion of textuality. I will then discuss the history of Qur'ánic commentary in Islam in light of these categories, focusing on elements in Akhbárí Shí'í religious thought that can be seen to underpin the Báb's novel approach to the Qur'ánic text. Far from being traditional commentaries, I will argue, the Báb's readings of the Qur'án were messianic performances, enunciations of an eschatological restoration of the Imám, the cosmos, and of the Qur'án itself.

I can give no better introduction to the unusual character of the Báb's Qur'ánic commentaries than a brief example of His reading in action. Here then, are three passages: the first is the Súrat al-'Aṣr from the Qur'án; the second is an abridgement of a classical Sunni commentary on this súrah, by Ibn Kathír; the third is a brief selection from the Báb's lengthy commentary on this súrah.

1) The Súrat al-'Aṣr, Qur'án 103 (Rodwell trans.)

> *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*
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> *1] I swear by the declining day!*
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> *2] Verily, man's lot is cast amid destruction,*
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> *3] Save those who believe and do the things which are right, and enjoin truth and enjoin steadfastness on each other.*

2) From Ibn Kathír's Commentary

Verse 1: That is, the ages during which the deeds — both good and bad — of the sons of Adam take place. Malik said that it refers to the time of *'aṣr* prayer, but the first explanation is more correct.

Verse 2: God swears by it (time) that mankind is in loss, that is misfortune and ruin.

Verse 3: God excludes those of mankind who believe sincerely with all their hearts and do good deeds with their

hands. That is, in the face of misfortune or calamity, the things which have been decreed for us and the persecution by those who would seek to harm whoever orders the good and forbids the evil.

According to al-Ṭabárání, whenever any two Companions of the Prophet met, they would not part, until one of them had recited to the other Súrat Al-'Aṣr and then delivered salutations upon him. Al-Sháfi'í said: "If the people were to ponder on this Súrah, it would be sufficient for them."[1]

3) From the Báb's Tafsír wa'l-'aṣr (min Súrat al-'Aṣr)

(These are commentaries on each of the three Arabic letters in the word *'aṣr,* (meaning "time," "age," "afternoon," or "declining day"), which are *'ayn, ṣad,* and *rá,* respectively. These are the fourth, fifth, and sixth letters of the first verse.)

Then the fourth letter is 'ayn, [1] *the loftiness* ['uluw] *of God's Exclusive Unity* [al-aḥadiyya] *in the station of the Realm of Divinity* [láhút]; [2] *then the loftiness of Inclusive Unity* [al-wáḥidiyya] *in the states of the Empyrean of Power* [jabarút]; [3] *then the loftiness of Existentiating Mercy* [raḥmániyya] *in the stations of the Kingdom and its Estates* [mulk wa'l-malakút]; [4] *then the loftiness of Eternal Glory* [ṣamadániyya] *in what God hath self-manifested unto all, in all, in the realities of the souls and horizons, of the earth of the Realm of Humanity* [násút].

Then the fifth letter is ṣad, [1] *the*

stations of the theophanic Eternal Glory [ṣamadániyya] *in the essential inner-beings of the inhabitants of the Divine Realm* [láhút]; [2] *then the radiant, sanctified, and theophanic Eternal Glory in the abstract essences of the inhabitants of the Empyrean of Power* [jabarút]; [3] *then the gleaming, wondrous Eternal Glory in the veridical identities of the inhabitants of the Kingdom and its Estates* [mulk wa'l-malakút]; [4] *then that Eternal Glory which is reflected from the first of the four levels of the divine Act, and which God sent down as manifest apparitions into the spiritual realities of the inhabitants of the Realm of Earthly Humanity* [násút].

Then the sixth letter is the ra', [1] *the universal mercy* [raḥmat al-kulliyya] *by which God created the Will by itself and before all things, which He then made to be the cause of the totality of the essences.* [2] *Next, it is the mercy of Inclusive Unity, by which God created the souls that are comprehended in the knowledge of the Book.* [3] *Next, it is the universal revealed mercy in the station of Determination* [qadar], *a billowing, surging, fathomless sea in which the judgements of character are marked out. The happy are gladdened by recognition of the abode which God hath created in the furthermost limits of this station, while the miserable are saddened by their incognizance of what God hath revealed in that billowing, surging and fathomless sea.* [4] *Next, it is the mercy which encompasses all things, which God*

made to be as a well of 100 portions [juzʻ], *just as is explained by ʻAskarí* [*the 11ᵗʰ Imám*] *in his commentary on the name of God the Compassionate* [ar-raḥím]: *'Only a single portion of compassion is found in this world, and ninety-nine portions are God's mercy upon His servants on the day of Resurrection, according to what He hath Purposed and Determined in the Book.' This all-embracing mercy encompasses believers and infidels, and indeed all things. It is that mercy that existentiates and essentiates the essential substances of all possible beings. Verily, God hath made the bearer of that mercy at that station to be Ḥusayn, and therefore he (may my spirit and those of all who dwell in the kingdoms of command and creation be his sacrifice) intercedes with God on the day of Resurrection with an intercession such as no one whatsoever has its like. May God bestow upon me, and upon whomsoever desires the meeting with Him, his intercession on the day of Reckoning. Verily, He is the Ever-Forgiving, in the beginning and in the end.*[2]

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Something strange is going on here. The Báb, from this example, may appear to us as a rather unusual reader. What notion of text might lie behind such an approach to "interpretation"; what, in other words, can we say about the Báb's textuality on the basis of passages like these? What, for the Báb, is the process of reading, and what place does meaning have in this interaction of reader and text? These are the questions that I will

explore in what follows.

It would be useful to begin with a framework of textuality, a spectrum of the kinds of readings that can be and are produced. One way of defining such a spectrum can be had by invoking the concepts of the worlds behind and in front of the text.[3]

The world behind the text is the world that generated and produced the text, and of course the author looms large in this world. When our attention is focused on the world behind the text, our assumption is that the text *represents* a single authorial intention. The text is a surface of signifiers, and the author's communicative intention is the signified. Any interpretive practice that begins with this assumption will look to various features of the world behind the text in order to test or confirm the success of the interpretive movement from the signifying text to the apprehension of the signified intention. Among the features of the world behind the text that this kind of interpretation would most likely attend to include the author's biography, the historical circumstances, the contemporary character of the language, and intertextuality, or the allusive relationship between this text and other texts that came before it. These features might be thought of as boundaries of the author's intention, boxing in what we, as the interpreters, may legitimately assume to have been the author's intended meaning.

Interpretation centered on the world behind the text is one that assumes weak

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readers, by which I mean it does not assign to readers a very active or strong role in the production of meaning. The *meaning* is what the author *meant* or intended to communicate, and thus the author and the text are the strong elements in the reader/text interaction. The text is a static structure, its referential, representational, and informative nature pointing to a meaning that is stable and determinate.

The world in front of the text is the world in which the text is received, and this world is populated by readers. It is the ever-changing world of readers in history, who successively encounter the text as well as the various "imaginaries" that have accumulated around the text in the process of the previous readings. By "imaginaries," I mean the nebulas or auras that surround a text at any given moment in the history of its reception, auras comprising such things as the book's fame, the concretized evaluation of its worth or general meaning, its assignment to genre and labelling as to literary conventions and so forth. Imaginaries are networks of symbols or associated ideas that serve as screens or lenses through which a text is experienced, and they create expectations in the reader for what he or she is likely to find in a text. Take Moby Dick, for example. Its earliest critics could not decide what is was: a romance, a novel, a philosophical enquiry, an adventure tale. But in the course of its history, certain imaginaries have surrounded it, such that we now will "know," even before picking it up, that it is, first of all, a novel, sec-ond, a great novel, and third, a great metaphorical novel. This imaginary of Moby Dick will impinge upon our reading of the book, and our reading of it will be much different from its earliest readers, who did not read it through the same screen as we do. As Moshe Idel puts it:

> Books, especially famous books, possess auras that may enwrap them long before most of their readers open them. The social imagination of certain elites prepares the ground for the acceptance, dissemination, and depth of influence of a book even before it has been conceived by its author. Even more so in the case of books dealing with religious topics that already permeate the faith of many individuals and the praxis of groups and movements. These books, which are founding documents of a religion, ideology, or intellectual movement — that is to say, canonic — are rarely consumed as pure literature and only seldom are able to evince their "proposed worlds" without the mediation of the imaginary that surrounds them and has been accumulated over the centuries and has conferred on them their particular status.[4]

Much has been written in recent literary theory about the world in front of the text and the role of the reader in the process of producing meaning in textual transactions. The significant trend in this literature is the shifting of focus from authorial intention and a view of the text as a static and determinative signifier toward a view of the ever-changing "con-

cretizations" (to use Ingarden's term)[5] of textual possibilities in the active and constitutive encounter between readers and texts. Whether in so-called reader-response criticism, deconstruction, or reception aesthetic, these theoretical strategies recognize that texts do, in fact, mean many different things in the course of their various receptions, and that the richness of language itself, in its constant historical flux, outweighs the mastery or manipulation of language held by any author. The author, in other words, may have had a single intention, but language itself cannot be so easily reined in. No reader can interact with an author's intention, but they do interact with language in the text, and this language holds within it and in its dynamic history the possibilities of many, many meanings indeed.

To illustrate the idea of the world in front of the text, consider that, as modern Bahá'ís, we commonly read a given work of Bahá'u'lláh with such questions as what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said about it, what Shoghi Effendi wrote about it, what stories do we have from Hands of the Cause illustrative of its potencies, etc. The prior readings by these figures condition our reading of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh but are not related, in the conventional sense, to the world behind the text, to authorial intention. They create horizons of expectation (to use Jauss's idiom)[6] within which a given Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh is situated in our act of reading. Modern Bahá'ís embody an interpretive community, operating in the world in front of the text, that is constituted by a set of imaginaries posterior to the text itself, and thus not likely to be involved in a reading of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh by another interpetive community.

Now, I began with a súrah of the Qur'án and two examples of tafsír upon that verse. Obviously, the two commentaries were pursuing very different interpretive strategies, based upon entirely different semiotic assumptions. I would like at this point to very briefly explore and further define these different textualities, with reference to the history of Qur'ánic tafsír literature. In what follows, my schematization of this history will be necessarily over-simplified. My general characterizations of periods and phases of tafsír literature would not hold for every author in the given period, but I think they are nonetheless true to larger trends that I see in the history of this literature.

The classical Sunni tafsír literature, exemplified first and foremost by al-Ṭabarí, and crystallized in its most conservative form in Ibn Kathír, was overwhelmingly concerned with the world behind the text. Every scrap of information or detail about the life of Muḥammad and his nascent community that could be seen as relevant to a specific verse or súrah was scrupulously sought out and gathered together. The *asbáb al-nuzúl,* or specific circumstances of the revelation of a given verse, were likewise of central importance to the interpretive project of these early mufassirún, and the voluminous tafsír works of these authors are teeming with them. Similarly,

exempla of Arabic grammar and its lexicon were teased out of every available specimen of pre-Islamic poetry and Arabic literature, in an attempt to situate the linguistic usages of the Qur'án in their contemporary environment. These writers were following the assumption that the Qur'án was stable in meaning, that its correct interpretation could be gotten at along the lines they pursued into the world behind the text. The early interpretation of a specific Qur'ánic passage that well illustrates this is in the exegesis of Q 3:7, of which I give here two translations [emphases added]:

> It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses [muḥkamát] that are the Mother of the Book, and others that are ambiguous [mutashábihát]. As for those in whose heart is deviation, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation [ta'wíl]; and none knows its interpretation save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, "We believe in it; all is from our Lord"; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.

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> yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.[7]

These two translations of this verse are obviously very different, the meaning being radically dependent on how you divide up the semantic units. The first version is the one that will be found in the vast majority of English translations of the Qur'án, and represents how the majority of Sunnis have read this verse. The second translation represents the predominant Shí'í (and, subsequently, Bábí-Bahá'í) reading. In the former, the Qur'án is acknowledged to have both clear and ambiguous verses, but the interpretation of the latter are known only to God. Given the classic Sunni approach to tafsír, which assumed a stable and intelligibly signifying character to the Qur'án, it is not surprising that al-Ṭabarí settled on an understanding of the ambiguous verses as meaning the isolated letters that preface certain of the Qur'án's suras. As isolated letters, these are parasemantic in the first place, so it does not challenge the assumption of a stable structure of transparent intelligibility in the Qur'án to identify these as the ambiguous verses whose interpretation is known only to God.

In what has been called classical Shí'í commentary, represented by al-Ṭúsí (d. 1067) and al-Ṭabarsí (d. 1144), and with whom I would class the classical philosophical mufassirún, such as al-Rází and al-Zamakhsharí, this narrow understanding of the ambiguous verses is set aside in favor of a recognition of ambiguity throughout much of the Qur'ánic text. This phase of tafsír shares a great deal

with the classical Sunni phase: a great deal of attention is given to grammar and lexical oddities, and the world behind the text is turned to for help in clarifying problems in these areas. Likewise, masses of Sunni hadith regarding occasions of revelation and so on are included in their commentaries. But there is a good deal more attention given to the world in front of the text in this phase of tafsír, which could again be well illustrated by the approach taken to Qur'án 3:7. On this verse, Ṭúsí, Ṭabarsí, and al-Rází all take a remarkably similar approach. First, they assume that there are ambiguous verses in the Qur'án beyond just the isolated letters. Second, they read Qur'án 3:7 according to the second version, and generally identify "those firmly rooted in knowledge" with the 'ulama. But they also attempt to explain the utility of the ambiguous verses, to explain why God would have ordained ambiguity in His Book. Their answer is very interesting, as it involves a direct turn to the world in front of the text and to an assumption of relatively strong readers. For brevity's sake, I quote from Jane McAuliffe's distillation of al-Rází's exegesis of 3:7 and the utility of the ambiguous verses, an argument which recapitulates points advanced earlier by al-Ṭúsí and al-Ṭabarsí:

> (1) The greater effort expended in trying to understand them [the ambiguous verses] will secure a greater reward. (2) They provide an opportunity to test and clarify diverse theological views. (3) The need to use reason frees one from 'the darkness of *taqlid* [blind imi-

tation]'. (4) They require the cultivation of exegetical skills, such as knowledge of language, grammar, and *usul al-fiqh.* (5) Finally, and most importantly, the *mutashabi - hat* [ambiguous verses] suit the Qur'án to the differences in human capacity to receive it, allowing sufficient variety in the modes of revelation to accommodate both the learned and the ignorant.[8]

This view of the multiple unfoldments of textual meaning in the various reader encounters represents a fascinating medieval adumbration of modern reader-response criticism. The various elements of the world in front of the text are, in this phase of the history of tafsír, bound up with the meaning of the text itself. The stability and transparency of the Qur'án as a surface of signifiers is a notion that clearly does not fit with this conception of textuality.

I would add, also, that in this phase of the development of tafsír, the Qur'ánic text has, in a sense, absorbed the social text. That is, the hierarchies that defined the social realities of these writers are found by them in their reading of the Qur'án; or, what amounts to the same thing, they read the social text *into* the Qur'ánic text. The Qur'ánic ambiguities will unfold in hierarchical readings — the commoners will understand what they need for their level, the learned will find more "elite" stages of Qur'ánic meaning — and thus the Qur'án, in its readings, will unfold the social hierarchy.

The last stage of the history of tafsír that I would like to consider is that of

later Shí'í exegesis, specifically Akhbárí tafsír, beginning in the late-Safavid period and including, for all intents and purposes, the Shaykhí movement of more recent times. This trend represents a radical break with the previous two. Here there is absolutely no concern for the world behind the text, for the grammatical or lexical background to the Qur'án. The mass of early Sunni hadith which served to situate the Qur'ánic verses in a context for earlier interpreters is entirely absent from Akhbárí tafsír. The Akhbárí interpretive innovation is grounded in a view of the Qur'án that begins to emerge in the famous *hadith al-thaqalayn,* or "the tradition of the two weighty legacies." There are dozens of variants of this tradition, so I will quote from a composite form presented by Todd Lawson:

> The Prophet said: 'I am soon about to be received . . . I am telling you before I am taken up that I shall leave with you as representatives after me the Book of my Lord, and my progeny, the people of my household. The all-Gracious, all-Knowing told me that they [the two weights, al-thaqalayn] shall not be separated until they meet me [on the Day of Resurrection] . . . Do not precede them, for you would go astray, and do not fall behind them, for you would perish. Do not teach them, for they are of greater knowledge than you.[9]

In this report, Muḥammad's authority and guidance are seen as being carried into the future by twin representatives — the Qur'án and the Imáms. It is the identification of these latter two entities in Akhbárí tafsír that is its defining characteristic. The tafsír literature from this period is generally composed of two strata: voluminous citation of sayings of the Imáms (*akhbár,* sing. *khabar,* whence the designation "Akhbárí"), and a reading of the Qur'ánic text as a coded narrative of the Imáms and their historical careers. For example, in the chapter of Sayyid Háshim al-Baḥrání's (d. ca. 1695) *al-Burhán* on the clear and ambiguous verses of the Qur'án, the following *khabar* from the sixth Imám is cited:

> al-Ṣadiq said: 'We are the people obedience to whom God has made obligatory. To us belongs the booty and to us belongs the best property, and we are those *firmly rooted in knowledge* [Q. 3:7], and we are the objects of envy alluded to in the verse: 'Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of his bounty?' (Q. 4:54).[10]

Akhbárí tafsír, relying on reports from the Imáms such as this one, reads the entire Qur'án as ambiguous in itself, but capable of being disambiguated by reference to the Imáms.[11] The resultant disambiguation is one that reads nearly every verse of the Qur'án as a hidden statement about the Imáms, their followers, or their enemies. The tragic Qur'ánic tales about the rejections faced by the pre-Islamic prophets are not really about pre-Islamic prophets; these tales are about the Imáms and their lack of recognition from the Sunnis. The same formula is applied across the board, to an extent that the modern reader is left

bewildered at what may seem to us as extremely arbitrary readings.

Lawson has referred to this as a process of the "Imámization" of the Qur'án,[12] but I think one can go further.[13] That is, it is not simply that the Qur'án is read here as being a cryptic Imámí mythohistory. It is also the case that the Imáms are understood to be, in a certain sense, Qur'ánic. The Qur'án and the Imáms are assimilated to one another, they are mirrors of one another, and they complement one another. Consider, for example, this statement attributed to the seventh Imám, Músá al-Kázim:

> "*Ha Mim. By the Perspicuous Book! Verily, We have sent it down on a blessed night, to forewarn mankind; on a night when every precept was made plain as a commandment from Ourself.*" [Q. 44:1-4] *The letters* "ha mim" *are Muhammad. . . . The* "*Perspicuous Book*" *is the Commander of the Faithful, 'Alí.*[14]

Not only are the Imáms found in the Book — they *are* the Book, this being the implication of identifying references to the *kitáb al-mubin* in the Qur'án with 'Alí. Furthermore, as is well known, 'Alí identified himself with the very textual essence of the Qur'án, in that famous statement wherein he says that all of revelation is contained within the point beneath the Arabic letter "bá'" the first letter of the Qur'án, and that he is that point.[15]

The complementarity of the Qur'án and the Imáms is heightened by the Akhbárí belief that the Qur'án, as they had it, was not the entire, or indeed the entirely true, Qur'án as it was revealed by God. This very early Shí'í contention — that verses of the Qur'án which unambiguously referred to the authority of 'Alí and the family of Muhammad were taken out, certain non-revealed verses were added, and the original ordering of the Qur'ánic text was violated — was suppressed during the Buwayhid period, but re-emerged in Akhbárí thought.[16] It was subsequently rejected anew in Usúlí-inspired 20th-century Shí'í thought, as can be seen by the polemics *against* the notion of a corrupted Qur'án in the tafsírs of Tabátabá'í and al-Khú'í.[17]

Obviously, there is a great deal at stake in such a belief. If the Qur'án is not entirely as it should be, and if even when it *is* correct it is all codes and secrets, how is the faithful Shí'í to go about his business of being faithful? The Akhbárí answer is that the Imáms knew the whole of the Qur'án, that where they have spoken the path is clear, and that what we do know about the Qur'án is just going to have to be sufficient for the time being. This complementarity was symbolized by the terms "Silent Book" (the Qur'án) and "Speaking Book" (The Imáms). In itself, the coded and, indeed corrupted Qur'án was mute, but the Imáms spoke with the voice of the Qur'án — they were the Qur'án speaking to the community in history.

At the time that these attitudes and approaches were developing, however, the Imáms were *not* speaking to the community in history. This is 17th- through 19th-century Iran, the time of the Greater

Occultation. The Book is entirely ambiguous, and the Imáms are themselves silent. The implication is clear: not only is the community awaiting the return of the Hidden Imám, they're waiting also for the return of the Hidden Qur'án. The two have been identified with one another to such an extent in Shí'í discourse that they've become, in a sense, a single messianic figure. So, for example, this *khabar* from the fifth Imám is cited by Muḥsin Fayḍ Káshání (d. 1680) in his Akhbárí tafsír, *al-Safi*:

> Al-Baqir said: 'If the Book of God had not been added to and sub-tracted from, our right (haqqana) would not be obscure to anyone with understanding. When the Qa'im arises, he will correctly read the Qur'án.[18]

Káshání himself, after affirming in his own words that the Qur'án has been excised, altered, and rearranged, has this to say:

> The Qur'án which is in our hands must by followed during the occultation of the twelfth Imám. It must be assumed that the true Qur'án is with him.[19]

To reflect for a moment on the kind of textuality implicit in these Akhbárí approaches to the Qur'án, I would first of all emphasize that the world in front of the text has swallowed up the text, as it were. There is no world behind the text in any meaningful sense, nor is the text seen as a stable semiotic structure. Pulsing *beneath* and *within* the surface of signs that make up the Qur'án, the trag-ic salvation history of the Shí'a is unfold-

ing. I remarked earlier how classical Shí'í and philosophical approaches to the text led to an absorption of the social text by the Qur'ánic text, of the hierarchical social reality being activated by the his-tory of the text's readings. With Akhbárí textuality, the Qur'án has continued to expand beyond the covers of a book, and is now a mirror of the community of Its readers. The Qur'án and the Shí'a are liv-ing a shared experience of loss, of oppression, of abuse at the hands of the Sunni majority. Only the messianic age can alter this reality, and the One that is Promised, awaited, and prayed for, is not simply a returned Imám — it is just as much a renovated Qur'án.

There is one other element of Akhbárí Shí'í thought that must be noted before we turn to considering the Báb's readings of the Qur'án. This is what could be called the divinization of the Imáms. This was especially developed in the Shaykhí movement, wherein the Imáms were seen not simply as the legitimate leaders and guides of the community and the knowers of the true Qur'án; they were seen, in the shaykhíyya, as nothing less than the creators of the cosmos. Shaykh Aḥmad, as is well known, was considered to have been skirting the lines of heresy in his belief that the Imáms were the four Aristotelian causes of the universe.[20] The pre-existent lights of the Fourteen Infallibiles — Muḥammad, Fáṭima, and the twelve Imáms — were understood as the generative energies of the coming-into-being of all things, as the substratum of all existence, as the inmost essence of reality by which all

things subsisted. The Imáms, then, are not simply persons, they are cosmic powers. The primordial essence of the Fourteen Infallibles is identified with the Primal Will, a concept which functions in Shaykhí thought much the same way it functions in Bahá'í theology.

I would argue that there are then three imaginaries coming from this Akhbárí — and ultimately Shaykhí — milieu which provide the context for understanding what appears, at first blush, to be the Báb's strange reading.

- First, the imaginary of the Imám/Qur'án assimilation. The Imáms and the Qur'án are identified with one another. The idiom used to indicate this connection is textual rather than personal. That is, it is more that the Imám is seen, according to this imaginary, as a Book than it is that the Qur'án is seen as a person.

- Second, the messianic imaginary that enwraps these two identified entities of Imám and Qur'án. As the Imáms are textualized — imagined in terms of points, letters, books — so the messianic return will be a textual eschaton, the renovation of a clear and speaking Book. Also, as the Qur'án is corrupted, incomplete, the messianic expectation for the Imám is bound up with an expectation for a restored Qur'ánic text.

- Third, the imaginary of the cosmic or divinized Imáms, or what I would call the ontological imaginary of the Imáms. The Imáms,

according to this view, are the creators and sustainers of the cosmos, and are thus assimilated to other concepts of cosmic creativity, such as the Primal Will, or the seven instrumental stages of coming-into-being (i.e., Will, Purpose, Determination, Decree, Permission, Fixed Time, and Book).[21]

With these concepts in hand, I think we can find a way into the Báb's notion of texts, reading, and meaning. They combine, in the context of the Báb's declaration of messianic fulfilment, into an ontological imaginary of the messiah as text, which leads, in the Báb's messianic Qur'án commentaries, to a world-renovating cosmicization of the non-semantic units of the text.

This may seem an impossibly obscure way to put things, so let me attempt to unpack this statement. The three imaginaries are explicitly linked together in a lengthy introduction to the Báb's commentary on the Súrat al-'Aṣr, in which He provides the following schema for the homologous unfoldment of the cosmos, of the text, and of sacred history.

Cosmic Levels	Textual Levels	Historical Manifestations
Primal Will	Point	Muḥammad
Purpose	Soft Alif	'Alí
Determination	Occulted Alif	Ḥasan
Decree	Upright Alif	Ḥusayn
Permission	Letters as such	The Imáms
Fixed Time	Joined Letters	The Remnant of God, the Promised One
Book	Word	Fáṭima

This is what the Báb says by way of introduction to the seventy-three individual letter-commentaries that He proceeds to give in this tafsír, one for each letter of the Súrat al-'Aṣr.

> Verily, in every letter of the Qur'án there are many stations. Rather, God hath created in one verse the reality of all that hath been given the name "thing" . . .
>
> • Among the stations of the letters of the Qur'án is the level of the Point in the stations of the Act [= Will].[22] This station hath been specialized unto Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, the blessings of God be upon Him and His family.
>
> • Among them is the level of the "soft alif." That is the station manifesting the second level of the levels of the Act [= Purpose]. Truly, God, in the subtleties of His wisdom and the greatness of His providence hath made that station to be specialized unto the regent [waṣí] of His Beloved [Muḥammad], [that is,] 'Alí, upon him be peace.
>
> • And among them is the level of the "occulted alif," the pure theophanic and eternal glory [ṣamadániyyah], the light of divinity, the letter of the manifestion of the divine ipseity, the sign of Exclusive Unity in the human reality. Verily, in that station this letter is for Ḥasan — upon whom be peace — and indicates the level of the manifestation of trinity in the level of Determination [qadar].
>
> • And among them is the "upright alif," which is the station

> of the manifestation of the Name of God, the Slayer [al-mumít] in the levels of the Act, and the beginning of the cause of Decree [qadá']. Verily, God hath decreed that the bearer of that station be Abu 'Abd Alláh al-Ḥusayn, upon whom be peace. Verily he/it [Ḥusayn, the upright alif] is the letter of command by which the heavens and the earth were established in a manner which none knows but God and whomsoever He has created in a level above those of Ḥusayn's grandfather [i.e., Muḥammad], his father ['Alí], and his brother [Ḥasan] — the blessings of God be upon them. How luminous are the wonders!
>
> • And [further,] among them is the letter in the station of Permission [maqám al-idhn]. It is the station of letters as such and is specially designated for the Suns of Grandeur [the Imáms], the blessings of God be upon them.
>
> • And among them is the letter in the station of the assembled letters, the level of Fixed Time [ajal], and is the light of the Remnant of God . . .
>
> • And among them is the letter in the station of the word, and it is the level of the Book in the sense of the conclusion of judgements [khiṭáb]. Verily God hath determined the status of that letter unto Fáṭima — the blessings of God be upon her.[23]

This explicit identification of the imaginaries of book, cosmos, and manifestation is essential to the Báb's mes-

sianic performance. The reading of Súrat al-'Aṣr that it leads into is consistently cosmic in its concerns, each letter being treated as a reality or spiritual force operating at each of the four levels of the Báb's universe.

The Báb's "commentaries" — with the exception of the *Tafsír Súrat al-baqara,* which was written prior to His declaration of mission — are distinct from any previous tradition of Qur'ánic tafsír in that they are enunciative of the inauguration of the messianic moment; they simultaneously enact the renovation of the world and of the Qur'án. They were not simply written as expositions of the Qur'ánic text, with the ostensible purpose of clarifying the meaning of the words and phrases used in that Book. Three of His lengthiest Qur'ánic commentaries — the *Qayyúm al-'Asmá',* the *Tafsír Súrat wa'l-'Aṣr,* and the *Tafsír Súrat al-kawthar* — were all "written" in public, they were "performances" that had as their purpose the communication of the Báb's messianic claims. They were thus written in settings such that the Báb's "readings" of the Qur'án were simultaneously messianic enunciations.

Shaykh Ḥasan-i-Zunuzí, in a narrative preserved from Him by Nabil in the *Dawn-Breakers,* has this to say about the nine full commentaries of the Qur'án written by the Báb whilst the latter was imprisoned at Mah-ku:

> In connection with one of these commentaries, the Báb one day asked me: 'Which do you prefer, this commentary which I have revealed, or the Ahsanu'l-Qisas,

My previous commentary on the Surih of Joseph? Which of the two is superior, in your estimation?' 'To me,' I replied, 'the Ahsanu'l-Qisas seems to be endowed with greater power and charm.' He smiled at my observation and said: 'You are as yet unfamiliar with the tone and tenor of this later commentary. The truths enshrined in this will more speedily and effectively enable the seeker to attain the object of his quest.'

Dawn-Breakers, p. 31

The object of such a quest, we can infer, was the recognition of the Promised One.

The Shí'í eschatological imagination was a rich and many-splendored thing. There were a great many roles and expected deeds that the community assumed the Promised One would fulfil in His restoration of justice to a world plunged into injustice and oppression. The pre-messiah world, in a sense, was seen as broken, the cosmic order in disarray, the Qur'án corrupted, and the Qá'im alone, at some long-awaited time, was going to put things back in order. The way in which He was going to do so was worked out in advance, in detail, and these details constituted the imaginary of the end, expectations that filled the minds of the Shí'a to whom the Báb spoke. What I would like to emphasize here is that the Báb, in choosing to express His self-consciousness as the Promised One in such a textual way, engaged these eschatological expectations by shifting them into a textual register. This shift, as I tried to show above,

had already started with the imaginary of the Imámized Qur'án, but the Báb took this much, much further.

As you might have already guessed, the Qur'ánic text, for the Báb, will not fit so well into our schema of readings, with the worlds behind and in front of the text. It is not primarily a surface of signs, pointing to extrinsic meanings, so the question of whether meaning is in the author, the text, or the reader is in a sense totally irrelevant. The Báb's Qur'án is a cosmic Qur'án. Its letters are generative, primordial substances that create and sustain the universe. The text lies behind all possible worlds, so if there is any "meaning" to be extracted from it, it is cosmographic. Since the text unfolds in a way homologous to the cosmos, the cosmic structure can be described in terms of the Qur'án's structure. Bábí semiotics is thus not meaningfully distinct from its cosmology. The "re-revealing" of the Qur'án, through the Báb's commentaries and other writings, are thus recreations of the cosmos. The same is true of the unfoldment of the human being, of time, of religious communities, all of which are enwrapped in textual symbolism in the Báb's Writings.

As we saw in the Imámi traditions that I quoted earlier, the Promised One was expected to restore, not only the cosmos, but the Qur'án as well. In the words of the fifth Imám: "When the Qá'im arises, He will correctly read the Qur'án." In the *Qayyúm al-'Asmá',* the text which signalized the Báb's arising as the Qá'im, there is a passage closely patterned after Qur'án, 3:7:

Verily, We have sent down unto Our servant this Book, from the presence of God and in Truth, and have made therein clear verses [muḥkamát]*, and no ambiguous verses* [ghayr mutashábihát]*. None knoweth the interpretation* [ta'wíl] *thereof save God, and whomsoever We have willed from among the sincere and devoted servants of God. So ask of its interpretation from the Remembrance, for He, by the grace of God, is knowing with regard to God's verses and in accordance with the decree of the Book.*[24]

The Báb declares here, in the midst of what is outwardly a tafsír, a commentary, a reading, that His reading is itself a re-revealing of the Book, and that this Book has *no* ambiguous verses. The oppression of the Book is ended.

The Báb combined both of the expected redemptive functions into one act. He textualized His own messianic identity, assuming the title of Primal Point — the point from which all things, cosmic and textual, emerge. This is of course an identity drawing from the primordial sentence of the Qur'ánic text, the *bis-malláh,* which consists of four words, totalling nineteen letters, the first of which begins with a point. Each of these nineteen letters, according to the Báb, spawned six súrahs, giving us the total 114 súrahs of the Qur'án. In the same way, He, the Point, and the Eighteen Letters of the Living, brought into being the members of His community, which were further identified by the Báb with textual realities. A similar unfoldment of this Qur'ánic symbolism can be seen

operating in every aspect of the religious world that the Báb created, from the Badí' calendar to ritual practice, from talismanic magic to the expectations of the Promised One of the Bábí dispensation. The latter — "He Whom God will make manifest" — was to be the "Speaking Book" to the "Silent Bayán," was to reveal the complete Bayán, left unfinished by the Báb, and was to produce an ordering of the Bayánic text that Shoghi Effendi understood as a re-ordering of the world.[25]

The sense in which the Báb is a "strong reader" should by now be obvious. The Báb recognizes no constraints in the Qur'ánic text that would limit the direction his reading would go. Neither sentences, nor phrases, nor even words are seen by the Báb as ultimately significant. The focus of the Báb's "readings" are not the signifying, semantic units of the texts, but rather what he sees as their substantive, cosmic reality. The individual letters, having in themselves no semantic content, are nonetheless the essence of the text and indeed of the world. His reading is strong, or active in the most radical sense. His readings not only reconstitute the text, they recreate the world in which that text will be read.

Notes

1. Abridged translation of Ibn Kathír's commentary on Súrat al-'Aṣr, from *Tafsír al-Qur'án al-Karím li-Ibn Kathír,* online at www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/tafseer/103.htm.

2. *Tafsír Súrat wa'l-'aṣr,* pp. 36-9.

3. My definition and use of these concepts is inspired by, but not identical to Ricoeur's notion of the "world of the text." See his *Figuring the Sacred,* pp. 240f.

4. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections,* p. 112.

5. See his "On the Cognition of the Literary Work of Art," p. 193.

6. Developed in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception.* See also McAuliffe, "Text and Textuality," pp. 69 and 75n 76.

7. Adapted from the two translations given by Stefan Wild, "Self-Referentiality," p. 423, which he calls the "majority" and "minority" readings, respectively.

8. "Text and Textuality," p. 65.

9. "Akhbárí Shí'í approaches to Tafsír," p. 178.

10. Adapted from ibid, p. 191

11. There is even a *khabar* from the sixth Imám according to which the Imáms *are* the unambiguous verses:

    Abú 'Abd Alláh [Ja'far al-Ṣádiq] said, with regard to God's saying – exalted be He – {It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses [*muḥkamát*] that are the Mother of the Book} that these are the Commander of the Faithful ['Alí] and the Imáms; {and others that are ambiguous [*mutashábihát*]}, and these are So-and-so and So-and-so [i.e., Abu Bakr and 'Umar]. {As for those in whose heart is deviation}, these are their companions and followers [i.e., the Sunnis]. {They follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation [*ta'wíl*]; and none knows its interpretation save only God and those firmly rooted in knowledge.} These last are the Commander of the Faithful and the Imáms.

    Kulayní, *Uṣúl al-Káfí,* 1:482; the text in braces is from Q. 3:7.

12. See Lawson, *Qur'án Commentary,* p. 21.

13. Lawson himself goes further; in "Akhbárí Shí'í approaches to Tafsír," p. 203, he writes of "the fusion of Imam and text," and then alludes to the "culmination of this process in the Qur'án commentaries of the Báb."

14. From Kulayní, *Uṣúl al-Káfí,* 1:552.

15. These traditions are not found in main-

stream Shí'í collections, though the Báb quoted them frequently in His writings, as did Shaykh Aḥmad before Him and Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him. See, e.g., *Bayán-i fársí,* váhid 3, Báb 12, for "I am the Point beneath the bá'," and the *Tafsír Ḥurúf al-basmala,* INBA 14, p. 57, for the longer version, in which 'Alí is quoted as saying: "the essence of the basmala is in the bá', and the essence of the bá' is in the point, and I am the Point beneath the bá'." The statement "I am the Point beneath the bá'" is commonly attributed to Abú Bakr al-Shiblí (d. 945) in such well-known works as Ibn al-'Arabí's *Futuḥát al-Makkiyya,* p. 83, al-Ghazálí's *Iḥya` 'Ulúm al-Dín,* p. 1028, and Qushayrí's *Risála,* p. 69 (these page numbers are to the online editions of these books at www.alwaraq.com).

The earliest source that I am aware of in which this saying is put in the mouth of 'Alí is Rajab Bursí's 14ᵗʰ-century *Masháriq Anwár al-Yaqín* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami lil-Matbu'at, 1970, p. 22). There's a complete form quoted by Qundúzí (d. 1877) in his *Yanábí' al-Mawwada* (Najaf: Matbu'at al-Hadariyya, 1965), p. 79: "Know that the essences [*al-asrár*] of all of the heavenly books are contained in the Qur'án, and all that is in the Qur'án is within [*Súrat*] al-Fátiḥa, and all that is in al-Fátiḥa is in the basmala, and all that is in the basmala is in the bá', and all that is in the bá' is in the point, and I am the Point beneath the bá'." A very similar version appears in a Bábí treatise in INBA 80, pp. 293f. The anonymous "al-qatíl" also quotes a similar form of the extended version of this tradition in his/her Risála, in *Zuhúr al-Haqq,* 3:518. See also William McCants, "Grammar of the Divine," note 2.

16. See Lawson, *Qur'án Commentary,* p. 3; Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis,* pp. 39-45 and 218-19, on the "censorship" of anti-Sunni material in Shí'í Tafsírs during this period.

17. See, for example, al-Khú'í's (d. 1992)

Prolegomena to the Qur'án (trans. A.A. Sachedina, Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 7, "The Protection of the Qur'án from Alteration," where he presents a point-by-point refutation of earlier Shí'í beliefs in the alteration or corruption of the Qur'ánic text.

18. Lawson, "Akhbárí Shí'í," p. 183.

19. Ibid. p. 187; this is M. Ayoub paraphrasing Káshání.

20. "The Imams are the four causes of the created things. They are the efficient cause; they are the material cause — that is, their [primordial] lights and shadows [are the material from which all things were made]; they are the formal cause, in the apportioning of the capacities of all things for good and for evil; they are the final cause, inasmuch as all things were created for their sake." (From Sharḥ al-ziyára, quoted in ál al-Ṭálaqání, al-Shaykhiyya, p. 288.)

21. On these seven, see Jadhbání, "Marátib-i sab'a," and infra, note 22.

22. The stations or levels of the Act (*marátib al-fi'l*): this is a technical term of esoteric Shi'ism, and is found throughout the writings of Shaykh Aḥmad and the Báb, wherein it refers to the seven levels of the coming into being of all things mentioned by the sixth Imám, Ja'far al-Ṣádiq, in the following tradition: "Nothing on earth or in heaven comes into being but by these seven qualities: will (*mashiyya*), purpose (*iráda*), determination (*qadar*), decree (*qaḍá`*), permission (*idhn*), book (*kitáb*), and fixed time (*ajal*)." (From Kulayní, *Uṣúl al-Káfí,* 1:200). The order of the last two was for some unknown reason reversed by Shaykh Aḥmad, and this tradition was invariably quoted by the Báb with *kitáb* as the last of the seven.

In another tradition, from the seventh Imám, Músá al-Káẓim, we learn: "'Nothing comes into being but that God willed it, purposed it, determined it, and decreed it.' ['Alí b. Ibráhím al-Hashimí] asked: 'What does will mean?' He said: 'It

means the beginning of the Act (*ibtidá` al-fi'l*).'" (From ibid., 1:201). These two Akhbár provide a classical Imámí basis for the Shaykhí and Bábí usage of the phrase *marátib al-fi'l*. For Shaykh Aḥmad's usage, see, e.g., *Sharḥ al-ziyára*, 2:110f. The Báb defines His own usage later in the *Tafsír wa'l-ʻaṣr* itself, where He writes:

Faith in the levels of the Act and the manifestations of the acted-upon has been made obligatory for all, according to the command of al-Ṣádiq, regarding the allotments of the basis of the Act: 'Nothing on earth or in heaven comes into being but by the following seven: will, purpose, determination, decree, permission, fixed time, and book, and whoever maintains that they are one less than these has thereby become an infidel'.

Tafsír wa'l-aṣr, p. 124.

23. *Tafsír wa'l-ʻaṣr,* pp. 12-18; my translation is abridged.

24. *Qayyúm al-Asmá',* sura 3 (*al-ímán*), p. 9.

25. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh,* pp. 146f., and *God Passes By,* pp. 25f. For a discussion of this interpretation, with reference to previous treatments in the secondary literature, see Ismael Velasco, "Fixing the Gaze: Reflections on the 'Order of Bahá'u'lláh' in the Báb's Persian Bayan," forthcoming.

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