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The Qur'ān in Bahai Writings

1 Introduction

The Bahai faith sees itself as having grown out of Islam but as no longer Islamic in the usual sense of the word. Bahais, therefore, do not consider themselves to be Muslims. The “individuation” of the Bahai faith as a free-standing, distinctive, and, so to speak, “independent” world religion from within the matrix of nineteenth-century Iranian Shiite Islamic socio-religious culture appears to have been fully accomplished. Paradoxically, the Qur'ān is at the center of this process, one which developed over time through two distinct but deeply related phases or movements. The first phase, from 1844/1260 to 1863/1280, can be thought of as the Babi period. The second phase, from 1863 to 1963 and later, can be regarded as the Bahai period. The Qur'ān is still an important, not to say indispensable, source and reference in Bahai religiosity, faith, and practice. This perhaps raises the question of whether the Qur'ān is of significance in non-Muslim religious life. To attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to provide a brief historical outline of the growth and expansion of the Bahai faith.

The Bahai faith is now a worldwide religious phenomenon with its center in Haifa, Israel. The founder of the Bahai faith proper, Bahā'ullāh (d. 1892/1309), had been exiled, through a series of incarcerations, from his home in Iran to Ottoman Palestine, where he and his family, together with a small band of followers, arrived as prisoners in the year 1868/1285. According to the latest figures, there are between 5 and 6 million Bahais worldwide, with communities in hundreds (if not thousands) of localities around the globe. Membership in the Bahai faith is drawn from the planet's various religious, ethnic, national, and linguistic communities. The majority of Bahais, it would seem, come from non-Muslim backgrounds, even though the first Bahais were indeed mainly Iranian and Muslim, while Jewish and Zoroastrian Iranians also identified as Bahais from the earliest days. Bahai teachings about the Qur'ān are clear and indisputable. The first and only holder of the Bahai title “Guardian of the Cause of God” (*walī amr Allāh*), Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (Shawqī Afandī Rabbānī; 1897–1957/1314–1377), made it clear as early as in 1939 that the Qur'ān “constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God,” aside from the scriptures of the Babi and Bahai revelation.¹ At the same time, Bahai teaching insists that “religious

1 Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), 49, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/advent-divine-justice/>.

truth is relative not absolute,² and that divine revelation will continue as long as God continues – that is, forever. The distinctive Bahai theory of “progressive revelation” states explicitly that religious truth is expressed according to the exigencies of the time and place of a given revelation, and that such a revelation is composed of two types of truth: 1) eternal “spiritual” teachings, such as the Golden Rule; and 2) social teachings that can be expected to vary according to the historical, social, and cultural circumstances of the time. Both aspects of a given revelation or dispensation of truth are binding during the period for which they have been revealed. For example, the laws and social teachings of Moses were absolutely binding until the new revelation given through Jesus, while the laws and social teachings of Jesus were binding until the revelation brought by Muḥammad. These laws and social teachings were binding until the revelation conveyed by the Bāb, and his laws were binding until the coming of Bahā’ullāh’s revelation. From the time of Adam until “the end that hath no end,”³ the divine spiritual teachings will continue, but the laws and regulations that reflect the conditions and exigencies at the time of revelation must change in order to accommodate the changing needs and aspirations of a living, human community, which is conceived of, in Bahai terminology, as “an ever-advancing civilization.”⁴

Since one of the chief conditions and circumstances of the time and place of the Bahai revelation was, indeed, a highly developed Islamicate culture, the language of the Bahai writings is deeply conditioned by one of the more salient features of that culture’s linguistic conceptual world, namely, the powerful Qur’ānic component in all languages that may be thought of as having been “Islamic” at that time, with pride of place going to Arabic and Persian. Thus, Bahai writings are full of Qur’ānic quotations, references, and tropes, whether they were originally expressed in Arabic or Persian (both languages are considered languages of revelation in Bahai teachings). However, the Qur’ānic presence in the Bahai revelation should never be regarded as merely linguistic or accidental. It is obvious that the Bahai doctrine of progressive revelation is a continued development of the theory of revelation found in the Qur’ān itself, a theory which states unequivocally that every community has had a divine messenger (Q 10:47), and that every divine messenger has spoken in the language of the community addressed (Q 14:4). As argued in a recent publication, in some ways, the very soul of

2 Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1961), v, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/promised-day-come/>.

3 Bahā’ullāh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1969), LXXXIII, 165/110, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/gleanings-writings-bahaullah/>; see “The process of His creation hath had no beginning and can have no end.” The Bāb, *Selections from the Writings of the Bāb*, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre Publications, 1976), 125.

4 “All men were created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization / *jami’ āz barāy-i iṣlāḥ ‘ālam khalq shudah-and.*” Bahā’ullāh, *Gleanings*, CIX, 215/140.

the Bahai faith is deeply and even existentially islamicate. But due to its radical alteration in social laws and teachings, it can no longer be considered Islamic.⁵

2 The Writings of the Bāb

According to Bahai doctrine, the Bahai faith began with a 24-year-old Iranian merchant, Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad (the Bāb), who was an avid Twelver Shiite, born in Shiraz on October 20, 1819/Muḥarram 1, 1235. The revelation he received should be read in the context of the intense messianism that pervaded his time and place. Shiite Iran was then electric with expectations of the return of the Hidden Imam and the ensuing concomitant events so minutely detailed in the distinctive body of Shiite Twelver exegetical hadith or *akhbār*: resurrection and judgment (*qiya'ma*), including the long-awaited battles and triumphs of the holy remnant of the helpers of the returned Imam, who, together, would restore justice to the world.⁶ It was on May 22, 1844/Jumādā l-Ūlā 4, 1260 that the Bāb proclaimed himself to be the center and wielder of all authority by claiming to “bring forth” (*akhraja*) a book entrusted to him by none other than the Hidden Imam. According to Twelver Shiism, the Imam was the embodiment or manifestation of such divine attributes as authoritative guardianship (*walāya*), dominion (*mulk*), sovereignty (*salṭana*), and “political” power (*khilāfa*).⁷ In this book, the Bāb announced that the longed-for, and simultaneously feared, eschatological denouement was now indeed at hand. By announcing the return through this distinctive composition, he was also participating in and appropriating those same divine attributes. Six years later, on July 9, 1850/Shahbān 28, 1266, he was executed by firing squad in Tabriz on the orders of Nāṣir ad-Dīn Shāh (r. 1848/1264–1896/1313) and at the urging of a coterie of ulama.

The role of the Qur'an in Bahai writings begins with the above-mentioned book, which the Bāb “received” from the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi and Qā'im, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī, who disappeared into sacred occultation in the year 874/260 and who, according to Twelver belief, has been in hiding ever since. And it is here that we encounter one of the first keys to understanding how Bahais might well be “islamicate” but not Muslim. By claiming that the wait for the Hidden Imam's return was over, the Bāb and his followers, including those who would eventually explicitly identify as Bahais, also, as Henry Corbin judiciously observes, “put themselves quite

5 Todd Lawson, *Being Human: Baha'i Perspectives on Islam, Modernity and Peace* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2019), 1–9.

6 Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdī in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

7 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 61–97.

beyond the pale of Shi'ism"⁸ and therefore the Islam that they had known and lived. Corbin bases his conclusion upon a rigorous phenomenological analysis, which finds that inasmuch as Shiite Islam was deeply conditioned by the eschatological tension of its teachings, the resolution of that eschatological tension would spell the immediate death of Shiism. A second key to understanding the paradox of Bahai identity has to do with the nature of this first "Bahai" revelation, the Bāb's *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*, to which we now turn.

2.1 The *Qayyūm al-asmā'*

The highly unusual Arabic work in which the Bāb announces the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the realization of the Shiite eschaton was the first step in the eventual separation of the Bahai religion from its parent Islam.⁹ This step represented nothing less than a radical rearrangement of the Qur'ān. The liberties that the Bāb took with the Qur'ān in this work, we can safely say, were sufficient to put him, his followers, and all future religious activity carried out in his name, outside the limits of Islam. A detailed description of this work will illustrate the truth of this statement.

The work, which we will henceforth refer to as *QA*, goes by a number of titles, three of the most frequent being 1) *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*; 2) *Qayyūm al-asmā'*; and 3) *Aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ* (perhaps a short form of *Tafsīr aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*). As the first title indicates, the book presents itself as a commentary, applying the classical Islamic generic category *tafsīr* to sura 12, *Yūsuf* (Joseph). The second title is a typically allusive and veiled *abjadī*¹⁰ reference to the transcendence of God as the source and sustenance of (and therefore somehow also beyond) all names, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the Qur'ānic prophet and messenger, Yūsuf b. Ya'qūb. This is because both words (*qayyūm* and *Yūsuf*) have the same *abjad* value, namely 156. This number adds up to twelve, which is a symbol of completion or consummation in the context of Twelver Shiite Islam. The idea of consummation becomes increasingly more compelling once we realize that this work actually claims to be not only a commentary on the Qur'ān but, in a "spiritual" (*ma'nawī*) sense, the true

8 Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects Spirituels et Philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 4: 213.

9 While many manuscripts of this work are readily available in various libraries and other collections, including online libraries, there has not yet been a scholarly edition. However, a relatively reliable edition of this work was published under the title *al-Āyāt ash-Shirāziyya: an-nuṣūṣ al-muqaddasa li-mu'assis al-ḥaraka al-Bābiyya*, ed. Qāsim Muḥammad 'Abbās (Damascus: Dār al-Madā li-th-Thaqāfa wa-n-Nashr, 2009), 54–370, hereafter *QAD* followed by page number. In quoting from this work, the passages have been checked against an electronic collation of two early manuscripts kindly provided by Dr. Moojan Momen. For information on the many existing manuscripts, see Denis MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Bābī Doctrine and History: A Survey* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 55–57, 195f. All translations of *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* are by Todd Lawson.

10 Pertaining to the numerical values of letters and words, here according to the Arabic alphabet.

Qur'an that has been in occultation with the Hidden Imam until now. Thus, it simultaneously claims to be a wondrously new (*badī*) and an imponderably ancient book, akin to the *Umm al-kitāb* (Q 3:7) itself.¹¹

QA is a long work that, according to its author, was completed over a forty-day period. It is, like the Qur'an, organized by suras and *āyas* (verses) connected from beginning to end by a truly mindboggling mastery of intertextual connections. The *QA* consists of 111 suras, with each sura containing forty or forty-two verses, depending upon how the *āyas* are counted. This number itself is also symbolic. The number 40 is the *abjad* value of the Arabic prepositional ligature “*li*” (to me) in Q 12:4: “When Joseph said to his father, ‘Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me (*li*).’”¹² The number 42 is the *abjad* value of the Arabic intensive affirmative adverbial in Q 7:172, namely humanity’s response to God’s question, “Am I not your Lord?,” to which all those assembled in that mythical spiritual time and place, namely all humans who will ever exist, reply “Yea verily!” (*balā*). Thus, both numbers are symbolic of authority recognized and submitted to – in short, they are each in their own way the symbolic number of the divine covenant between God and humanity as mediated by a prophetic figure, in the first case Joseph and in the second Adam.

Except for the first, each of the Bāb’s 111 suras is composed as an explanation or commentary on a different verse from the twelfth sura of the Qur'an. The first sura, as something of an introduction to the work as a whole, is structured around two thematic elements. The first is the book itself, echoing the Qur'anic theme of revelation found at the beginning of many Qur'anic suras. This is reflected in such language as, “This is the Book in which there is no doubt,” and in the many suras that start with disconnected letters, such as sura 12: “These are the verses of the clear book.” After the two-stage doxology *wa-bihi nasta'īn* (In Him we hope for help”) and the *Bas-mala, bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm* (In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate), the opening words of the first sura of the Bāb’s composition are:

Praise be to God, He Who hath sent down, in truth, the Book upon His servant that it (or he) might be a shining lamp unto all the worlds.¹³

The second thematic element around which this sura is structured is divine authority or dominion, *mulk*. By virtue of the unassailable authority of the book given to the Bāb by the long-awaited Hidden Imam, as stated in the tenth verse of *QA*, the Bāb, supported by the strongest possible *isnād* of Shiite Islam, declares that God himself

¹¹ In a prayer written by Bahā'ullāh during his incarceration in Edirne, he refers to the “book” of the Bāb as the *Umm al-kitāb*. Bahā'ullāh, “Tablet of Ahmad,” in *Bahai Prayers*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1982), 210.

¹² *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. Arthur J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=12&verse=4> (accessed online March 10, 2025).

¹³ *QAD*, 55

has commanded him to disseminate this book, which he has received from the Hidden Imam:

God has ordained that this book in explanation of the Most Beautiful Story be brought forth from its safekeeping with Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja‘far b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib to His servant that it/he might be an eloquent proof unto all the worlds from the Remembrance.¹⁴

In the course of this sura, the Bāb, in the “garment” of the Hidden Imam, says that all kings and sons of kings should now recognize the authority of this book and the one who propagates it, i.e., the Bāb.

O Assemblage of Kings and sons of kings! Gracefully abandon, all of you, your unlawful claim to the dominion which rightly belongs to God in very truth!¹⁵

In the next chapter, the *Sūrat al-Ulamā*, the pattern of placing a verse from sura 12 at the head of each of the suras of the *QA* is established, as well as adding a combination of disconnected letters following the Qur’ānic phenomenon. Many of these sets of disconnected letters are quite un-Qur’ānic, as can be seen in the provisional table of contents reproduced below (Figure 1). Also, three of the Bāb’s suras (not including the first sura) do not exhibit this feature of disconnected letters. We will now reproduce the opening lines of the second sura of *QA*¹⁶ in order to illustrate this important feature:

The Chapter of the Learned Divines (*al-ulamā*)
(Forty-two verses)

In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate 1
Alif Lām Rā’ – These are the signs of the perspicuous Book [Q 12:1] 2
Alif Lām Mīm 3

This is the Book from God the Truth concerning the matter of the Remembrance, indeed sent down in truth about the fire 4

And indeed we have made these verses in this Book perspicuous 5
Made as a reminder and glad tiding for the servants of the Merciful for one who is, in absolute truth, trustworthy according to God and his verses. 6

The sura ends by returning to the opening disconnected letters of verse 3:¹⁷

Say “Our Lord is God, our Lord is the Truth, of Whom it is rightly said there is no god but He. Therefore, forgive us through Thy mercy and be merciful to us. Verily, Thou art our Master.

14 Ibid., 55.

15 Ibid., 56.

16 Ibid., 58.

17 Ibid., 59.

Then write for us the Return to Thee, in reality the true place of refuge and Return.¹⁸ 39
 God, He of Whom it is rightly said there is no god but He, has ordained that the *Alif*, His servant, according to the divine command be very strong. 40

God, of Whom it is rightly said there is no god but He, has indeed ordained the letter *Lām* to stand for His divine wisdom according to the law of the Book through a clear and powerful ordaining. 41

God, of Whom it is rightly said there is no god but He, has appointed the letter *Rā'* for the spreading of His Cause according to what He willed in the Mother Book according to the Truth, by means of the Truth from the precincts of the sacred Fire, irrevocably decreed. 42

Thus, the general pattern and structure of this proclamatory or annunciatory commentary is established, which can be described as follows:

- 1) Introductory section: title of the sura with the number of verses. In some manuscripts, the place of revelation is also mentioned. When this occurs, the place is invariably Shiraz. Then comes the standard Islamic *Basmala*; the Qur'anic verse of sura 12, *Yūsuf* (Joseph) – that is, the (at least ostensible) topic of the given sura by the Bāb. This is followed by the Bāb's own set of disconnected letters and a second, or possibly third, verse, depending on whether the *Basmala* is counted as a separate verse. A word should be said here about how to count the set of disconnected letters. It is unclear whether they should be counted as a single verse alone (as in Q 2:1) or counted as a verse together with the ensuing language of the verse (as in Q 12:1). In either case, what occurs is a declamation or announcement of revelation, as seen throughout the Qur'an, such as "That is the Book" (Q 2:2), "It is He who sent down to thee, in truth, the Book" (Q 3:3), or similar verses. These likewise appear regularly in the twenty-nine suras of the Qur'an that open with a set of disconnected letters. Another question raised by any attempt to count the verses of each sura is the status of the Qur'anic verse that serves as the lemma of the particular "exegetical" sura at hand. There is reason to think that it should also be accounted for as a distinct verse in this composition. To do so would highlight one of the more scandalous features of this text: its claim to reveal anew that which has already been revealed. So, taking all this into consideration, the first section of a sura typically consists of four verses.
- 2) The middle sections of the chapters are quite varied among the 111 suras. Space constraints do not permit us to explore this further; it must therefore suffice to

¹⁸ *Ar-Rujū'* also has a special technical meaning in Shiism, "to return to the authority (*walāya*) of 'Alī," the first Imam, presumably after having abandoned his cause and breaking the covenant established at the Oasis of al-Ghadīr by the prophet Muḥammad on his way back to Medina from the Farewell Pilgrimage in 632/10. Abū l-Ḥasan al-Āmilī l-Iṣfahānī, *Muqaddimat-i tafsīr-i mir'āt al-anwār wa-mishkāt al-asrār bā tarjamah wa-sharḥ-i ḥāl-i mu'allif wa-fihrist-i kitāb* (Tehran: Maṭba'ah-yi Aftāb, 1374 [1955]), 161.

say that it continues in the Bāb's *saj'* Qur'ānic Arabic as in the examples above, bringing together previously quite separate Qur'ānic segments that are now joined together in a "wondrously new" (*badī'*) revelational prose.¹⁹ This prose consists almost entirely of Qur'ānic words or verse segments, artistically rearranged by the Bāb to speak about the Hidden Imam's impending return. So intense is this language that the return seems to occur as one is reading the text. This was clearly no accident. Thus, the Bāb emerges from such "literary activity" as the one who warns of the return and is also the embodiment of the eschatological return itself.

- 3) The final section of a sura usually repeats and paraphrases the lemma, the Qur'ānic verse for which the sura itself is written. This repetition may encompass the entire verse or just part of it, as is the case here in our example of the second sura in *QA*, the *Sūrat al-'Ulāmā'*. Here, as shown in the translation above, the Qur'ān's disconnected letters are repeated and blended into the final verses of the Bāb's sura.

This, then, is the way in which the Qur'ān figures in the Bāb's proclamatory and initiatory composition, which the Bahais consider to be a divine revelation. Furthermore, the status of this unusual work in Bahai sacred literature could not be higher. Bahā'ullāh, in his first important doctrinal work, which also happens also to be a commentary on the Qur'ān, as will be seen below, unequivocally sealed its uniquely high status by calling this revelation from the Bāb "the first, greatest and mightiest of all books."²⁰ While it is also a book that might easily be thought change to naive in Qur'ān scholarship, it is important to recognize that this work had a great impact on the earliest followers of the Bāb, the majority of whom were not merchants or "laity" but young seminarians who were deeply schooled in the traditional Qur'ānic sciences. It is important to try to imagine what it was about this composition that caused them to view the Bāb as the promised one of the Shiite eschaton and the new divine manifestation (*mazhar ilāhī*). A number of features can be singled out:

- In contrast to his first followers, almost all of whom were devoted students of Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī (1259/1843 or 1844), the second "Shaykhī" leader,²¹ the Bāb was virtually unschooled in the formal curriculum of Shiite religious sciences.

¹⁹ See now: Todd Lawson, "The Role of Wonder in Creating Identity," *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023): 6. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060762>.

²⁰ *Va avval va a'zam va akbar jamī' kutub ast. Bahā'ullāh, Kitāb-i Īqān. The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing, 1989), 231/180, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/kitab-i-iqan/>.

²¹ On the intellectual link between the Bābi religion and the Shaykhī school, see Armin Eschraghi, *Frühe Šaihi- und Bābi-Theologie: Die Darlegung der Beweise für Muḥammads besonderes Prophetentum (Ar-Risāla fī Itbāt an-Nubūwa al-Ḥāṣṣa)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). For a more purely sociological and historical analysis, see Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 2005), 109–207, 260–94.

- This work demonstrates truly impressive mastery of the Qur'an, for example, in the manner in which its author combines various Qur'anic words, verses, and verse segments in a remarkably fluent, somewhat hypnotic and musical recital.
- Just one example among hundreds is how he combines existing Qur'anic elements with the concerns about the expectations of the return of the Hidden Imam with his equally long-awaited retinue, the establishment of justice, and the dramatic theological performance of demonstrating the truth of key Qur'anic verses, such as “On that day the kingdom will in truth belong only to (God) the most merciful. And it will be a day of dire difficulty for the unbelievers (Q 25:26: *al-mulk yawma'idhin al-ḥaqq li-r-Rahmān wa-kāna yawm^{an} 'alā l-kāfirīn 'asīr^{an}*.)”
- Clearly, its form and contents, stretching over 4,662 verses composed, according to witnesses, with astonishing speed, present something extraordinary. The mixture of genres and the blurring of the lines between text and commentary may also have been received as something akin to what in the European cultural tradition might have been seen as an avant-garde modernist gesture and critique of the status quo. The scandalous outrage and uncompromising claim to artistic liberation presented with the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* nearly eighty years later, in a time and place quite different from the Bāb's, offers clues as to the vision of spiritual liberation that inspired his first followers. Both of these historical and cultural contexts were being shaped by a process of new identity formation, in conversation with and in rebellion against tradition²²

2.2 Other Qur'an Commentaries by the Bāb

QA is not the only work by the Bāb in which the Qur'an figures prominently, whether as the subject of commentary and explanation or as a source and reference for the credentials of the author. Indeed, the first major work by the Bāb was a *tafsīr* written shortly before he made his public claim to special status in the QA. This is the much more traditional *Tafsīr sūrat al-Baqara*, which proceeds along the lines of classical *tafsīr* and in which there is no possibility of confusing the words of the exegete with the words of the Qur'an. A recent book has described this work in depth, identifying the four main themes with which it is concerned: 1) *walāya*, “spiritual authority”; 2) *ta-jallī*, “divine self-manifestation”; 3) ontic, sacerdotal, and social hierarchy; and finally, 4) the awaited Qā'im and attendant *qiyāma* or resurrection.²³ A examination of this first major work by the Bāb demonstrates the central role played by the Qur'an and hadith in his thought, including its structure, form, and contents, in which the distinc-

²² See the chapter “Joycean Modernism in Quran and Tafsir” in Todd Lawson, *Quran, Epic and Apocalypse* (London: Oneworld, 2018), 132–68.

²³ Todd Lawson, *Tafsīr as Mystical Experience: Intimacy and Ecstasy in Quran Commentary; The Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqara by Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad, The Bāb (1819–1850)* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

tively Shiite spiritual office, principle, and institution of *walāya* is both center and circumference – an institution that is, in turn, illuminated by the distinctive Akbarian-cum-Safavid Shiite cosmogonic process of divine self-manifestation, *tajallī*.

In addition to this *tafsīr*, the Bāb composed several other works in exegesis of the Qurʾān. Unfortunately, there is no space here to examine these, even cursorily, beyond saying that, in several of them, the Bāb returns to a slightly more traditional style in which his words and the words of scripture are easily distinguished. Two examples of these are his later *Tafsīr sūrat al-Kawthar* and the *Tafsīr sūrat al-ʿAṣr*. Both works have been studied in some detail.²⁴ All in all, there are over thirty titles by the Bāb that contain the word *tafsīr* or *sharḥ*.²⁵

The Bāb produced a remarkably large body of work in Persian and Arabic. It is safe to say that the Qurʾān never ceased being important in his writing. Even in his last and, according to some metrics, most doctrinally important work, the two Bayāns (one in Arabic and one in Persian), the Qurʾān radiates through the discourse like the sun. In his *daʿwā* (“mission,” “summons”), there was never a desire to disassociate his truth from the truth of the Prophet, the Qurʾān, and the twelve Imams of Shiism. His love for these three central, interrelated essentials of his religion seemed to grow, even as his own vision veered or swerved away from traditional Islam.

3 The Writings of Bahāʾullāh and ʿAbd al-Bahāʾ

As in the writings of the Bāb, references to Islam, the Qurʾān, and the hadith abound in the writings of Bahāʾullāh (1817/1233–1892/1309), the prophet-founder of the Bahai religion, and ʿAbd al-Bahāʾ (1844/1260–1921/1340), his eldest son, and designated successor and interpreter (*mubayyin*).²⁶ Bahais regard their statements as crucial to understanding the meanings of obscure verses, not only in the Qurʾān and hadith but also in other religious scriptures, especially the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

24 Todd Lawson, “The Dangers of Reading: Inlibration, Communion and Transference in the Qurʾān Commentary of the Bab,” in *Scripture and Revelation: Papers Presented at the First Irfan Colloquium Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, December 1993 and the Second Irfan Colloquium Wilmette, USA, March 1994*, ed. Moojan Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), 171–215; and Todd Lawson, “Qurʾān Commentary as Sacred Performance: The Bāb’s Tafsīrs of Qurʾān 103 and 108, the Declining Day and the Abundance,” in *Iran im 19. Jahrhundert und die Entstehung der Bahāʾī-Religion*, ed. Christoph Bürgel and Isabel Schayani (Hildesheim: G. Olms Verlag, 1998), 145–58.

25 See the index in MacEoin, *Sources*.

26 Bahāʾullāh, *Kitāb-i Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahāʾī World Centre, 1992), n. 130, 192/221. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/kitab-i-aqdas/> (English translation, accessed March 10, 2025), <https://www.bahai.org/fa/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/kitab-i-aqdas/> (the original Arabic, accessed March 10, 2025).

Shoghi Effendi, 'Abd al-Bahá's grandson, chosen successor, interpreter (*mubayyin*), and "Guardian of the Cause of God" (*walí amr Alláh*),²⁷ urged Western Bahais "to make a thorough study of the Qur'an, as the knowledge of this sacred Scripture is absolutely indispensable for every believer who wishes to adequately understand and intelligently read, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh."²⁸ Despite the few competent Bahais at that time (1935/1354) who would have been "capable of handling such a study in a scholarly way," Shoghi Effendi encouraged the Bahais "to get better acquainted with the Sacred Scriptures of Islám" so that "there will gradually appear some distinguished Bahá'ís who will be so well versed in the teachings of Islám as to be able to guide the believers in their study of that religion."²⁹ These words, in fact, suffice to emphasize the importance of Islam and the Qur'an for the Bahais.

Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi highlighted that "[i]t is certainly most difficult to thoroughly grasp" the Qur'an since "it requires a detailed knowledge of the social, religious and historical background of Arabia at the time of the appearance of the Prophet."³⁰ He suggested studying it with the help of commentaries and explanatory notes as found, e.g., in the translation produced by George Sale.³¹ As this would require much thorough study and would be a slow process, he told the Bahais to study the Qur'an according to subjects "and also in the light of the Bab, Bahá'u'lláh and Abdulbaha's interpretation, which throw such floods of light on the whole of the Qur'an."³² It is this last statement that we will elaborate upon here, discussing examples of Bahai commentaries on suras and verses from the Qur'an and hadith.

At the center of Bahai *tafsír* is Bahá'u'lláh's book *Kitáb-i Íqán* (*KI*, "The Book of Certitude"),³³ his preeminent doctrinal work. *KI* has been characterized by Christo-

27 'Abd al-Baha, *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990 reprint), 11; *Alváh-i Vaşáyá-yi Mubárahak* (Mona Vale: Australian Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992), 11.

28 Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), ##.

29 Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian* (India/Hawaii: n.p., 1973), 63, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/DG/dg-171.html> (at the old official *Bahá'í Reference Library* of the Bahá'í World Centre).

30 From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer dated August 22, 1939 published in *Lights of Guidance* #1666. Hornby, Helen, ed. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. (New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983).

31 Sale, George. *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed*. Trans. by George Sale.. 9th ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1923), ##.

32 Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian* (India/Hawaii: n.p., 1973), 64, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/DG/dg-171.html> (at the old official *Bahá'í Reference Library* of the Bahá'í World Centre).

33 The English translation by Shoghi Effendi is available online at the new official *Bahá'í Reference Library* of the Bahá'í World Centre, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/kitab-i-iqan/>. Major studies on the *KI* include Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004); and Sholeh A. Quinn and Stephen Lambden, "Ketáb-e Íqán," in *Elr*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, last updated March 15, 2010, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ketab-iqan>.

pher Buck as “arguably the world’s most widely-read non-Muslim Qur’ānic commentary,” in which Bahā’ullāh “advanced an extended Qur’ānic and biblical argument to authenticate the Bāb’s prophetic credentials.”³⁴ According to Buck, Bahā’ullāh uses exegetical techniques that include most of the twelve “procedural devices” that are attested in the classical commentaries as well as various others. Like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1111/505) before him,³⁵ Bahā’ullāh also stresses the need to harmonize literal and figurative interpretations and “states that eschatological verses should be understood through esoteric interpretation (*ta’wīl*), whereas Qur’ānic laws are to be understood by their apparent (*zāhir*) sense.”³⁶ Buck describes *KI* as “a work of symbolic exegesis of the Qur’ān and, to a lesser extent, of the New Testament.”³⁷

In *KI*, Bahā’ullāh, who composed it in Baghdad in 1862/1278, advances his prophetic claim in a subtle way, foreshadowing the imminent declaration of his mission (which occurred in 1863/1280) in a fashion that Bahai scholars have referred to as “messianic secrecy.”³⁸ In a pivotal passage of his book, Bahā’ullāh, in a “most significant exegetical move,” relativizes the Muslim claim about the final prophethood of Muḥammad as “Seal of the Prophets” expressed in Q 33:40.³⁹ He does so by turning the reader’s attention to the “attainment of the presence of God” (*liqā’ Allāh*) on the Day of Resurrection – which, from the Bahai viewpoint, occurs spiritually, not physically – at Q 33:44, which he deals with earlier by quoting and discussing Q 29:23, 2:46, 2:249, 18:111, and 13:2. In his seminal work on the *Kitāb-i Īqān*, Buck proposes that Bahā’ullāh intended the verses Q 33:40 and Q 33:44 to be read together:

This juxtaposition – indeed, pairing – not only of two concepts, but of two pivotal verses – Q 33:40 and Q 33:44 – has a dramatic effect. Among Muslims worldwide the importance of Q 33:40 is universally acknowledged. In the *Iqān*, Bahā’ullāh places Q 33:44 on a par with Q 33:40. Indeed, as paramount in prophetic history as the advent of Muḥammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” surely is, according to Bahā’ullāh’s interpretation/argument, of even greater significance is the eschatological encounter with God.⁴⁰

34 Christopher Buck, “Bahā’īs [Supplement 2016],” in *EQ*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed August 24, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_050505.

35 See the recent comprehensive study on this aspect of al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutics in Georges Tamer, “Revelation, Sciences and Symbolism: Al-Ghazālī’s *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*,” in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī; Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary*, vol. 1, ed. Georges Tamer (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 49–88, esp., 49–56.

36 Buck, “Bahā’īs.”

37 Christopher Buck, “The Kitāb-i Īqān: An Introduction to Bahaullah’s Book of Certitude with Two Digital Reprints of Early Lithographs,” in *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Bahai Studies* 2, no. 5 (June 1998), accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol2/iqan&sn.htm>.

38 Armin Eschraghi, “Promised one (*maw’ūd*) or imaginary one (*maw’hūm*)? Some notes on Twelver Shī’ī Mahdī doctrine and its discussion in writings of Bahā’ Allāh,” in *Unity in Diversity: Mysticism, Messianism, and the Construction of Religious Authority in Islam*, ed. Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 112.

39 Buck, “Bahā’īs.”

40 *Ibid.*

Bahā'ullāh argues that, since a direct encounter with God is impossible, there needs to be a future theophany with a new messenger of God as his representative. This, he states, has been manifested through the revelation of the Bāb, but he also implies that the “messianic secret” of his own mission will be declared soon.

There are other Qur'ān commentaries by Bahā'ullāh from the early years of his mission; however, after he publicly declared his divine mission, Islamic topics, especially *tafsīrs*, seem to have become less frequent in his writings as Bahā'ullāh started laying the scriptural foundations of his new religion by introducing specific Bahai doctrines and praxis.⁴¹

One of Bahā'ullāh's other major *tafsīrs* is “The Commentary on the Sura of the Sun” (*tafsīr sūrat ash-Shams*, Q 91), which was composed late in his ministry in Akka.⁴² Its importance lies in the fact that this is where he says how religious scripture should be interpreted. Bahā'ullāh advocates a balanced interpretation, neither stressing the “outer” (*ẓāhīr*, exoteric) nor the “inner” (*bāṭīn*, esoteric) meaning:

Those who wrote commentaries on the Qur'ān fell into two sorts. The first neglected the literal sense in favor of an esoteric exegesis. The other interpreted literally and ignored its metaphorical dimension. [. . .] Blessed are they that cling both to the literal and to the esoteric, for those are His servants that have believed in the universal Word. Know that whoso clingeth to the outward sense of the words, leaving aside their esoteric significance, is simply ignorant. And whoso concentrateth on the metaphorical sense to the exclusion of the prosaic meaning is heedless. Only the one who interpreteth the verses esoterically while harmonizing this reading with the literal meaning can be said to be a complete scholar.⁴³

It can be said that Bahā'ullāh opposed literalism or, in modern terms, fundamentalism. At the same time, he disapproved of mystics and Sufis who disregarded the plain or common-sense meaning of the Qur'ān in favor of wild speculation. This is best expressed in his “Most Holy Book,” the *Kitāb-i Aqdas* (*KA*), where he states,

Amongst the people is he who seateth himself amid the sandals by the door whilst coveting in his heart the seat of honor. Say: What manner of man art thou, O vain and heedless one, who wouldst appear as other than thou art? And among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge (*al-bāṭīn*), and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge (*bāṭīn al-bāṭīn*). Say: Thou who speakest false! By God! What thou dost possess is naught but husks (*al-qushūr*) which We have left to thee as bones are left to dogs.⁴⁴

Bahā'ullāh regards the *KA* – the “book of laws” of the Bahais – and in fact all of his revelation, as the “choice wine” (*raḥīq makhtūm*) that the Qur'ān promises the righ-

⁴¹ Eschraghi, “Promised one (*maw'ūd*) or imaginary one (*mawhūm*)?” 112.

⁴² Juan Cole, “‘The Commentary on the Surah of the Sun,’ Introduction and Translation,” *Bahai Studies Bulletin* 4, no. 4:3–4 (April 1990): 4–22, accessed March 8, 2024, https://bahai-library.com/bahai_studies_bulletin_archive/.

⁴³ Cole, “The Commentary on the Surah of the Sun,” 18.

⁴⁴ Bahā'ullāh, *Kitāb-i Aqdas* #36.

teous believers (Q 83:25), disclosing spiritual truths that were previously unknown. Those who drink it will “discern the splendors of the light of divine unity” and “grasp the essential purpose underlying the Scriptures of God.”⁴⁵ Bahā’ullāh’s statement “Think not that we have revealed unto you a mere code of laws (*al-aḥkām*). Nay, rather, we have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power”⁴⁶ is a rejection of both a purely legalistic *and* an antinomian approach to sharia, because both see law as a “mere code.” Nader Saiedi states that “unsealing” the “choice wine” affirms the centrality and significance of Bahā’ullāh’s laws, and because the symbol of “wine” means emancipation from limits, he “is arguing that his laws should be understood not as repressive or constraining limits, the way some Sufis understood law, but as the essence of liberation.”⁴⁷ In other words, Bahā’ullāh criticizes those who devalue the importance of divine laws and interpret them away esoterically. He observes some “who call themselves dervishes” claiming that they do not need to perform the Islamic obligatory prayer, having been “born into a state of prayer,” meaning that they have “already performed the ‘true’ obligatory prayer.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, as we have seen, Bahā’ullāh also criticizes a purely legalistic approach to divine laws, whereby said laws gain importance to the detriment of spiritual principles.

In many of his writings, Bahā’ullāh makes clear references to the well-known Qur’ānic distinction at Q 3:7 between metaphorical verses (*mutashābihāt*) that can be interpreted individually through *ta’wīl* on the one hand and, on the other, commands, ordinances, or religious observances that are clear, binding, and to be followed by believers (*muḥkamāt*). At first glance, it would seem that he prohibited the flagrantly antinomian interpretation of normative verses as expressed in the following: “Whoso interpreteth (*yu’awwīlu*) what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning (*yukhrijuhu mina z-zāhir*), he, verily, is of them that have perverted (*harrafa*) the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book.”⁴⁹ However, he does not categorically forbid interpretation. Obviously, Bahais are free to engage in the study of their religion and thereby arrive at their own personal understanding or interpretation. In the introduction to the official translation of the *Kitāb-i Aqdas*, the Universal House of Justice (the highest governing Bahai institution) states that interpretations of the Bahai teachings of ‘Abd al-Bahā’ and Shoghi Effendi are considered divinely guided and binding on the Bahais, giving the following explanation of individual interpretation:

45 Bahā’ullāh, *Tablets of Bahā’u’llāh Revealed After the Kitāb-i Aqdas* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1988), 105, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/tablets-bahaullah/>.

46 Bahā’ullāh, *KA*, 5.

47 Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahā’u’llāh* (Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 2000), 217. For Saiedi’s argument here, see 216–20.

48 Bahā’ullāh, trans. and cited in Saiedi, *Logos*, 218.

49 Bahā’ullāh, *KA*, 105.

A clear distinction is [. . .] drawn in the Bahá'í Writings between authoritative interpretation and the understanding that each individual arrives at from a study of its Teachings. Individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the Teachings constitute the fruit of man's rational power and may well contribute to a greater comprehension of the Faith. Such views, nevertheless, lack authority. In presenting their personal ideas, individuals are cautioned not to discard the authority of the revealed words, not to deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation, and not to engage in controversy; rather they should offer their thoughts as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that their views are merely their own.⁵⁰

Bahá'ulláh's intention in *KA* 105, quoted above, is to forbid the allegorical or figurative interpretation of revealed laws insofar as this excuses believers from obeying divine ordinances such as prayer, fasting, and abstention from the social and recreational use of alcohol and drugs. In one of his writings, in which he explains the meaning of *ta'wíl*,⁵¹ Bahá'ulláh gives the following example:

The purpose of figurative interpretation (*ta'wíl*) is not that one be deprived of the outward sense of the verse, nor that its intent be veiled. For instance, let us say that from the heaven of the divine will the command is revealed, "Wash your faces" [*fa-ighsilū wujūhakum*, Q 5:6]. Do not interpret it figuratively (*ta'wíl*), saying that the intent is that one should wash the countenance of one's inner self (*wajh-i bāṭin*), cleansing it with the water of mystical insight (*āb-i 'irfān*), and so forth. For in this manner a person might, by reason of such a figurative interpretation, continue to have a malodorous face soiled with dirt, yet be convinced in his own mind that he had carried out the very essence of God's decree. For in this station it is clear and obvious that the intent is that the face be washed with physical water (*āb-i zāhir*).⁵²

On another level, in the same text, Bahá'ulláh states that some of the words of God can be interpreted figuratively, but this should not result in illusions or misconceptions (*ẓunūn wa-awhām*) nor miss the divine intent. Here, he gives the example of Q 2:269, "and whoso is given wisdom (*al-ḥikma*), has been given much good."⁵³ Moreover, Bahá'ulláh provides examples of how people have understood "wisdom," saying that "some of the figurative interpretations of 'wisdom' that were referred to above are each, in their own right, correct. For they are not contradictory to the principles underlying the divine commands (*bā uṣūl-i aḥkām-i ilāhī mukhālif nist*)."⁵⁴ Again, dif-

⁵⁰ Ibid., n. 130, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/kitab-i-aqdas/12#704803062>.

⁵¹ Bahá'ulláh, *Iqtidārāt va chand lawḥ-i dīgar* (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.), 279–86, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/b/> (no. 22). Here, we are citing the unofficial draft translation by Juan Cole, who gives the Persian text by Bahá'ulláh the title *Lawḥ-i Ta'wíl*. Juan Cole, "Tablet on the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture (*Ta'wíl*)," accessed August 27, 2020, https://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_tawil_cole.

⁵² Translated in Cole, "Tablet," from Bahá'ulláh, *Iqtidārāt*, 279. I have added the original Arabic/Persian words.

⁵³ *Koran Interpreted*, slightly amended, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=2&verse=269>. Cole erroneously refers to Q 2:272.

⁵⁴ Bahá'ulláh, *Iqtidārāt*, 279f., 283f.

ferentiating between *mutashābihāt* and *muḥkamāt*, he adds that verses containing commands or prohibitions (*awāmīr wa-nawāhī*), such as rituals, the payment of blood money to the victim's relatives for manslaughter, crimes, and so forth, are intended to be implemented according to their literal meaning (*ẓāhir*). But the divine verses concerning the Resurrection and the Hour, whether they were revealed in past scriptures or in the Qur'ān, are for the most part to be interpreted figuratively. He quotes the verse "And none knows its interpretation, save only God" (*wa-lā ya'lamu ta'wīlahu illā Allāh*, Q 3:7) to make it clear that human beings are not in the position to offer *ta'wīl* of allegorical verses such as those mentioned.⁵⁵ The message behind this is that, even though such verses are to be interpreted figuratively, only those who have been chosen by God for this purpose may actually perform universally binding *ta'wīl*.

Like in the discussion in his "Commentary on the Sura of the Sun," Bahā'ullāh, on the one hand, heavily criticizes antinomian Sufis for their allegorical interpretation of ordinances and divine laws as well as, on the other hand, the famous Sunni Qur'ān commentator 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar al-Bayḍāwī (685/1286) for his too-literal approach. Commenting on the Qur'ān verse "It behooves not the sun to overtake the moon, neither does the night outstrip the day" (Q 36:40), Bahā'ullāh says,

The clergy (*ulamā*), ancient and modern, have commented upon and interpreted figuratively (*tafsīr wa-ta'wīl*) this blessed verse, and each derived its meaning from their own beliefs (*i'tiqād*). But these are the stations of delusion and idle fancy, whereas this is the station of knowledge. The individual whom they call the king of scripture commentators (*sultān al-mufasssīrīn*), Qadi Baydawi, asserted that this verse was revealed in refutation of those who worshipped the sun. Note how far he is from the spring of knowledge, despite the assertion of the people that he was profoundly learned. The reins of the branches of knowledge are in the grasp of the divine power. He bestows them upon whomever he desires.⁵⁶

When Bahā'ullāh says "this is the station of knowledge" in the passage above, he is referring to himself as the divinely ordained messenger, the "beloved of the mystics" (*maḥbūb al-ārīfīn*) who has brought true knowledge in the form of God's renewed religion, asking the reader to be thankful to him: "Indeed, today that which can cleanse the people of defilement, and can deliver them into true repose, is the faith of God (*madhhab Allāh*), the religion of God (*dīn Allāh*), the Cause of God (*amr Allāh*). Thus has the invisible discourse rained down from the heaven of mystical insight (*samā' al-irfān*), as a grace upon you."⁵⁷

55 Ibid., 284.

56 Ibid., 284f. Obviously, this single example of al-Bayḍāwī is given for rhetorical purposes. Bahā'ullāh is not presenting a detailed history of *tafsīr*, which undoubtedly holds a wide variety of interpretations for this particular verse.

57 Cole's translation, cf. Bahā'ullāh, *Iqtidārāt*, 285f.

In a similar vein, 'Abd al-Bahā' wrote Qur'an and hadith commentaries⁵⁸ in which he confirms that the word of God has various meanings, from external and literal to mystical and hidden. One of his important commentaries is a lengthy text about sura 30, *ar-Rūm* (The Romans), where he expounds upon the name *ar-Rūm* and the first words "The Byzantines have been overthrown" (*ghulibat ar-Rūm*). This is a reference to the overthrow of the Byzantines in Syria by the Persians during the time of the prophet Muḥammad (614 CE).⁵⁹

Moojan Momen, who brought this Arabic writing ("tablet") by 'Abd al-Bahā' to light and produced an unofficial translation of it, says that it is

a manual or guide to Bahai mysticism in that it lays out the pathway or stages for the ascent of the soul from its lowest state of abasement and preoccupation with the things of the world to its highest state, where the human qualities are effaced and only the divine attributes are manifest in the individual, the state where it becomes aware of the secrets of hidden and invisible realities.⁶⁰

In his commentary, 'Abd al-Bahā' gives nine esoteric interpretations of *ar-Rūm* and *ghulibat ar-Rūm*. In the ninth of these, he says that *ar-Rūm* signifies the stages of the soul (*nafs*; mineral, vegetative, animal, and human), its states (*an-nafs al-ammāra bi-s-sū'* Q 12:53, *an-nafs al-lawwāma* Q 75:2, *an-nafs al-muṭma'inna*, Q 89:27), degrees, elevation, ascent, and descent. Momen summarizes the commentary thus:

In relation to his commentary on the overthrow of "Rum," Abdalbaha says that it means, in this context, that as the human soul ascends stage by stage, it overthrows the conditions of the lower stage in order to attain the higher stage.

It can thus be seen that not only has Abdalbaha given nine spiritual or esoteric interpretations of this sentence of the Qur'an, but he has done so in relation to only one event – the coming of the Manifestation of God. Presumably Abdalbaha could have given further interpretations of this verse relating to other aspects of spiritual reality.⁶¹

Among 'Abd al-Bahā's noteworthy commentaries, his *tafsīr* of the *ḥadīth qudsī*, which he wrote in his youth, stands out: "I was a Hidden Treasure and loved to be known.

58 For a selection with introductions and context, see Vahid Rafati, *Badāyi'-i ma'āni va tafsīr: Majmū'ah-yi az āsār ḥaẓrat 'Abd al-Bahā' dar tafsīr-i āyāt-i Qur'āni a ḥādīs-i Islāmī* (Darmstadt: 'Aṣr-i Jadid, 2012).

59 Moojan Momen, "Abdu'l-Bahā's Commentary on the Qur'anic Verses concerning the Overthrow of the Byzantines: The Stages of the Soul," *Bahai Studies Review* 12 (2004): 67–90; and in *Lights of Irfan* 2 (2001): 99–118, accessed March 10, 2025, https://bahai-library.com/momen_byzantines. The Arabic text of the commentary was published in *Makātīb-i ḥaẓrat-i 'Abd al-Bahā'* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Milli-yi Maṭbū'at-yi Amrī, 1910), 1: 62–102, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MA1/ma1-61.html>; see also *Min Makātīb-i ḥaẓrat-i 'Abd al-Bahā'* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bahai Brasil, n.d.), 1:12–31, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MMAB/mma10.html>; see also, Rafati, *Badāyi'*, 86–117.

60 Momen, "Abdu'l-Bahā's," 67.

61 Momen, "Abdu'l-Bahā's," 72.

Therefore, I created the Creation that I might be known” (*Kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan fa-aḥbabbtu an u’rafa fa-khalaqtu al-khalq*).⁶² Shoghi Effendi mentions that he composed “while still in His adolescence in Baghdád” and “at the suggestion of Bahá’u’lláh,” a “superb commentary on a well-known Muḥammadan tradition.”⁶³ ‘Abd al-Bahā wrote it at the request of Ali Şevket (‘Alī Shawkat) Pasha, an Ottoman official and, apparently, a Sufi. The commentary is one of the most important sources for the study of Bahai mysticism and metaphysics, according to Momen, and ‘Abd al-Bahā’s “clearest and fullest exposition of many important points.”⁶⁴ The phrases on which ‘Abd al-Bahā’ comments are “Hidden Treasure,” “Love,” “Creation,” and “Knowledge,” all themes in the works of the great Muslim mystic Muḥyī d-Dīn b. al-‘Arabī (638/1240), to whom ‘Abd al-Bahā’ alludes in his commentary.

Ultimately, the gist of this commentary is that it is impossible for humans to ever fully acquire or attain knowledge of God. ‘Abd al-Bahā’ argues that the most that human beings can ever hope to know of God is to discern fully the signs of God within themselves. In support of this, he quotes Q 17:14: “Read your own book, your self/soul is sufficient to give an account against you this day.” Momen explains that ‘Abd al-Bahā’ compares this verse to “the point of a compass. However far human beings may travel in their search for knowledge of God, ultimately they are only travelling in a circle around the implications of this verse.”⁶⁵ These “signs of God” within human beings are best and most fully uncovered through the guidance of one of the Manifestations of the Divinity (messengers of God) who appear upon the Earth from time to time. Hence, the “knowledge of God” referred to in this tradition is recognition of the Manifestation of God, under whose guidance the new and fuller knowledge of the signs of God within each individual human being is revealed.

In another, shorter commentary that ‘Abd al-Bahā’ composed in Turkish,⁶⁶ in which he refers to the stages of the human soul in a concise form, he echoes the ter-

62 Moojan Momen, “Commentary on the Islamic Tradition ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure . . .,’” *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin* 3, no. 4 (December 1995): 4–35, revised version available online, accessed March 10, 2025, https://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_kuntu_kanzan_makhfiyyan; Arabic text: ‘Abd al-Bahā’, “Tafsīr kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan,” in *Makātīb-i ḥaẓrat-i ‘Abd al-Bahā’*, ed. Farajullāh Zakī l-Kurdī (Cairo: Kurdistān al-‘Ilmiyya, 1911/12), 2: 2–55, available online, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MA2/ma2-55.html>; see also Rafati, *Badāyi’*, 174–218.

63 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979), 241, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/god-passes-by/16#055478979>. Recent research has established that the place of composition was Edirne in Turkey. See Bahá’ullāh’s and ‘Abd al-Bahā’s own statements in *Safīnih-yi-‘Irfān* 6: 10; Masumian 2021; and *Makātīb* 2: 55; see also Rafati, *Badāyi’*, 179.

64 Momen, “Commentary,” 4.

65 *Ibid.*, 7.

66 On ‘Abd al-Bahā’s Turkish and his renown among Ottoman literati, see Necati Alkan, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘Abbás,” in *The World of the Bahá’í Faith*, ed. Robert H. Stockman (London: Routledge, 2021), 78f.

minology used by Ibn al-'Arabī. In this *tafsīr* of sura 95, *at-Tīn* (The Fig),⁶⁷ in which 'Abd al-Bahā' discusses the words "fig" and "olive" (*az-zaytūn*), he explains that the interpretation of the fig and the olive as fruits is problematic in the context of the passage, which continues with the terms "Mount Sinai" (*tūr sīnīn*) and "secure city" (*al-balad al-amīn*). He informs the addressee that, although the "people of truth" (*ehl-i hakikat*) do accept the famous Muslim commentators' traditional interpretations of the first verse of sura 95, they "have carefully examined this blessed verse and unravelled therein other far-reaching meanings." He identifies the "fig" as Mount Tīnā and the "olive" as Mount Zītā/Zaytā', "two blessed mounts" in the vicinity of Jerusalem where God has honored his prophets and appeared to them. Mount Sinai is the "day-spring of God's boundless grace," where the divine signs were disclosed to Moses. Contrary to his own and traditional Islamic interpretations, 'Abd al-Bahā' says that "the City of security" is Medina (*Medine-i mūnevvere*), where Muḥammad had migrated, "the centre of the manifestation of Islam and the designated point where the Word of God had been raised."⁶⁸

In 'Abd al-Bahā's summary of sura 95 in his Turkish commentary, God swears by Mount Tīnā, Mount Zaytā', Mount Sinai, and "this City of security" that he has created the reality and temple of man in the "best of forms" (*aḥsan taqwīm* Q 95:4). Although other creatures and all of creation are the manifestations of various signs (of God), only man embodies the totality of signs and the reality of divine perfection collectively. Man is the greatest demarcation (*barzakh*; Turk. *berzah*), the archetype of the macrocosm – i.e., of all the worlds of God. 'Abd al-Bahā' states that only humankind has the privilege of receiving divine messengers who hold the station of prophethood. And the reality of all things in creation, the intrinsic worth of human beings, and the mysteries in creation, first hidden in the imaginary world, will be discovered and appear in the visible realm through the power of human mental faculties and talents.

That human beings have been created in the "best form," that they are a *barzakh*, "demarcation" or "barrier," and, perhaps paradoxically, an essential "link" between two worlds is indicative of their destiny. Creation, according to 'Abd al-Bahā', is collectively a manifestation of clear signs (*āyāt-i beyyināt*), but only human beings are the focal points (cf. *mazāhir*) of divine perfections. If spiritual powers are victorious over physical constraints, individuals can become heavenly, a source of love. But, if the sensual side and carnal senses dominate, human beings become a mine of darkness, a source of deceit, a manifestation of ignorance and wickedness. As in Sufism, 'Abd al-Bahā' here also states that man, by attaining spiritual perfection on his path to God,

67 Necati Alkan, "By the Fig and the Olive": 'Abdu'l-Bahā's Commentary in Ottoman Turkish on the Qur'anic Sura 95 – Notes and Provisional Translation," *The Bahai Studies Review* 10 (2001/2002): 115–128; cf. Johanna Pink, "The Fig, the Olive and the Cycles of Prophethood: Q 95:1–3 and the Image of History in Early 20th-Century Qur'anic Exegesis," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 317–38.

68 Alkan, "By the Fig and the Olive," 123.

first has a *nefs-i emmare*, a “lower” soul that commands him to behave immorally. It then becomes a *nefs-i levvame*, a still unsubmitive soul that blames itself for its own shortcomings. At the end of his journey, man reaches the station of *nefs-i mutmaine*, an obedient soul at peace.⁶⁹

In her study on the puzzling oaths at the beginning of sura 95, Johanna Pink refers to Necati Alkan’s paper on ‘Abd al-Bahā’s *tafsīr*, remarking ‘Abd al-Bahā’ “presents his interpretation as a Muslim one, without any mention of the Bahā’ī faith.” However, because he emphasizes the Holy Land as the site of a number of unspecified prophets, she says, this easily allows for the inclusion of his father Bahā’ullāh, “without being specific enough to offend Muslims.” In Pink’s view, ‘Abd al-Bahā’s commentary “is not simply a veiled attempt to legitimize a new religion and connect it to Islam” but is part of the zeitgeist of “a renewed and original entanglement with the Qur’ān” by Muslim scholars and intellectuals in an atmosphere of intense interreligious debate and polemics in the historical context of British and French imperialism in the Middle East, Christian missionaries proselytizing in that region, and new interpretations of the origins of Islam by Western Orientalists.⁷⁰

‘Abd al-Bahā’ often took the mystics’ approach when interpreting *aḥādīth* or Qur’ānic verses, as we have seen in relation to his commentaries above. Another short example is his (likewise) Turkish *tafsīr* of the hadith “God doth give victory to this religion by means of a wicked man” (*inna llāha yu’ayyidu hādihā d-dīna bi-rajulin fajir*), recorded as the words of Muḥammad in Muḥammad b. Ismā’īl al-Bukhārī’s (870/256) collection of hadiths.⁷¹ In his commentary on this hadith, ‘Abd al-Bahā’ seems to ignore its negative context – the fact that the Prophet Muḥammad is referring to this person, though he fights alongside the Muslims, as one of the people of hell-fire (i.e., a person destined for hell) – and puts forth a more positive interpretation of the words. ‘Abd al-Bahā’s *tafsīr* here stands in the Islamic tradition of reading the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) of the words. At first glance, it may seem puzzling that ‘Abd al-Bahā’ is taking not a doubtful, but rather what is regarded as an “authentic” (*ṣaḥīḥ*) hadith from no less a source than al-Bukhārī, and is not questioning its authenticity but giving it a completely new and unexpected meaning. He is making the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) take the opposite of the manifest meaning (*ẓāhir*).

The main point of interest in our context is that, in ‘Abd al-Bahā’s commentary, the word *fājir*, usually translated as “disobedient,” “evil,” or “wicked,” suddenly becomes positive, meaning *fāriq* – that is, “distinguishing” and “rich.” Whereas in the hadith it is a man who claims to be a Muslim fighting for God’s religion, though he is described by Muḥammad as *fājir* and a “man of hell-fire,” ‘Abd al-Bahā’ elucidates the

69 Ibid., 123–25.

70 Pink, “The Fig,” 325f.

71 Necati Alkan, “Abdu’l-Baha’s Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘God Doth Give Victory to This Religion by Means of a Wicked Man’ – a Provisional Translation and Notes,” *The Bahā’ī Studies Review* 11 (2003): 53–57.

word *fājir* alone, rather than commenting on the entirety of the hadith. Muḥammad's intended meaning in his use of the word *fājir*, says 'Abd al-Bahā', is a person rich in the spiritual sense who will aid the cause of God by discriminating between good and evil, forbidden and lawful, truth and error – in short, someone who has knowledge of the divine mysteries.

Overall, in 'Abd al-Bahā's brief commentary, we see two themes that recur in Bahai *tafsīr*. The first is the emphasis placed on the Islamic hermeneutic presupposition of a multiplicity of meanings in scripture and the prominence given in Bahai *tafsīr* to allegorical interpretation. The second theme is the great extent to which Bahai interpretation focuses on the ethical and spiritual development of humankind.

4 Conclusion

It is fair to say that the Qur'an plays a role in the Bahai faith that is analogous to the way in which the Hebrew Bible functions in Christianity. Christians are patently not Jews, but they nonetheless revere the sacred scripture of what they consider to be the Old Testament (cf. the Arabic *al-'ahd al-qadīm*), precisely because they understand the covenant that lives at the center of that book as having been renewed within the scope of Jesus' mission in the New Testament (*al-'ahd al-jadīd*). This discussion should be considered something of an introduction to the role and function of the Qur'an in the Bahai faith, which similarly sees itself as renewing the covenant that is at the heart of Islam, Muḥammad's mission, and, of course, the Qur'an. There are many other works of Bahai scripture to explore, including the Most Holy Book itself, the *Kitāb-i Aqdas*, whose Qur'an-like status in the Bahai faith is reflected in its Qur'anic diction and, sometimes, content.⁷² It is hoped that this brief exploration will encourage further research into this fascinating topic.

Finally, it can be observed that Bahai readings of the Qur'an, from their historical beginnings until today, revolve around the guiding Bahai aspiration and struggle for universal peace. The Bāb chose to "rewrite" the Qur'an so that the peaceable and forgiving prophet, messenger, and, in Bahai terminology, divine manifestation (*mazhar ilāhī*), Joseph, son of Jacob, would assume central importance. Joseph, after all, is distinguished in the Islamic tradition for his beauty (both moral and physical), for his ability to interpret and bring order to chaos, for combining both worldly and spiritual authority, and, finally, for forgiving his brothers, who sold their young brother, Joseph, into slavery due to their own jealousy and greed while betraying their broken-hearted father, Jacob. Joseph could have behaved differently but, even after they rec-

⁷² On the *Kitāb-i Aqdas*, see now: Omid Ghaemmaghami, and Shahin Vafai, *Exploring the Kitāb-i Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755606283>).

ognized him and Joseph had the power to do whatever he deemed just, he said to his perfidious brothers, “No reproach shall be uttered today against you. May God forgive you your sins: for He is the most merciful of the merciful” (Q 12:92). Indeed, according to the *Sīra*, the prophet Muḥammad addressed the formerly inimical Meccans with the following verse after the conquest of Mecca: “I say to you what my brother Joseph said ‘No blame will be upon you this day. God will forgive you!’”⁷³ This admiration for Joseph’s peacemaking ministry is particularly salient in the context of the terrible animosity that, with depressing regularity, has characterized the relations between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Undoubtedly, it is this context that at least partly explains why the deeply mystical (and Shiite) Bāb chose to compose his commentary on the sura of Joseph as a fitting announcement for the return of the Hidden Imam who would, as the Shiite traditional prophecy has it, restore justice to a deeply unjust world. And this may be one of the reasons why Bahā’ullāh honored the *Qayyūm al-Asmā’* as “the first, greatest, and mightiest of all books.” However, as we well know, it is not only the Muslim world that has been plagued and exhausted by mutual hatred and animosity. One might say that it is now a worldwide pandemic. And it is for this reason that this same veneration of what might be called a Josephian and, frankly, Qur’ānic dedication to peace and harmony among all peoples was spread by Bahā’ullāh and ‘Abd al-Bahā’, going far beyond the traditional geographic and cultural borders of the Qur’ān’s audience, to the point that it is now a permanent and essential part of the ethos of the worldwide Bahai community.⁷⁴

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⁷³ Alfred-Louis de Prémare, *Joseph et Muhammad, le chapitre 12 du Coran: Étude textuelle* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 1989), 175.

⁷⁴ Todd Lawson, “The Return of Joseph and the Peaceable Imagination,” in Lawson, *Being Human*, 11–35.

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