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Qurʿān Commentary as Sacred Performance: The Bāb’s *tafsīrs* of Qurʿān 103 and 108, the Declining Day and the Abundance

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Commenting on the Qurʿān, particularly from within the distinctive Islam of esoteric Shiʿism is meant to be a spiritual encounter with, if not God himself, then with the closest thing to him, the Prophet and the Imāms. In the course of the quest something quite beyond the "meaning" of the text results. Quranic commentary played a major role in the formation of the Bābī movement. Among the Bāb’s earliest works were commentaries on the *Sūrat al-Baqara* and the *Sūrat Yūsuf*. The second commentary was particularly important in that it appealed to a number of young Mullās and seminarians and brought them to throw in their lot with the young messiah. These early disciples—the Letters of the Living—were apparently deeply impressed by the Bāb’s innovative interpretation of scripture, especially since the Bāb was not a professional religious scholar but rather was for the most part self taught.

I am interested in trying to refine an appreciation of the attraction the Bāb had for his early followers. What exactly was it about these works that moved the early followers to risk so much in upholding the new religion of the Bāb? In the case of the *tafsīr* on the Qurʿān’s Chapter of Joseph (*sūra 12, Yūsuf*), an important factor was undoubtedly the structure of the work: it was composed as a new Qurʿān complete with *sūras*, *āyāt*, and disconnected letters. Additionally the contents are very striking, a large portion of the work consists of daring paraphrase of the Qurʿān in which the canonical text is exchanged for the code words of Shiʿī, esoteric messianism, particularly as these figured in the lexicon of the Shaykhi movement from whose ranks came virtually all of the Bāb’s first followers.¹

As the Bāb’s claims began to be known outside this circle his language changed, becoming more and more explicit less esoteric. In the case of Qurʿān commentary, we can see how this circumstance caused a change in emphasis with regard to method as well. While the later commentaries are still connected to the

Shi'i exegetical tradition the connection is, in a sense, weaker. Most importantly, the way they were composed sheds light on the problem of their appeal. Two important later commentaries were done in a performance setting and for an audience that was outside the ShaykhI milieu. While, therefore, the code words of that intensely esoteric movement may not have been known in such settings, the Bab was nonetheless able to win the hearts of his audience by employing techniques that transcended a need to be familiar with such arcana.

The Bab wrote several tafsir works; four stand out as major. In chronological order they are: the commentaries on al-Baqara (sūra 2), Yāsuf (sūra 12), al-Kawthar (sūra 108), and Wa'l-ʿAṣr (sūra 103). The last two works are of particular concern because they exhibit one of the more distinctive exegetical procedures of the Bab. These commentaries, which are on two of the shortest chapters in the Qur'ān, are explained by the Bab not only verse by verse, or word by word, but also letter by letter. In this way the qur'anic material is atomized or exploded by the commentator in an attempt to mine it for as much meaning as possible. And, it is argued, to make as much contact as possible with the text's spiritual or charismatic charge the divine presence. Recourse here to the technical language or ordnance is particularly apt not only because the claims of the Bab were eventually to cause enormous upheaval within Iran, but also because it seems to capture or characterize the inner dynamics of his encounter with the text.

Both commentaries are quite long: the earlier of the two on Qur'ān 108 the Sūrat al-Kawthar, which is the Book's shortest sūra, runs to 115 folios in the Cambridge manuscripts. (Browne F.10, 19 lines per page), while the other commentary on Qur'ān 103, Sūrat Wa'l-ʿAṣr (Browne F.9, 14 lines per page) consists of 85 folios. Both commentaries share another common element in that they were both written for specific high-ranking religious scholars, in their presence, and according to the accounts, in one sitting. It is this shared feature, perhaps more than even the style or contents of the works, to which I would like to draw attention. The Tafsir Sūrat al-Kawthar was written for Sayyid Yalīya Dārbi, a religious official at the court of the Shāh and the son of the illustrious Jaʿfar Kashfī (d.1850). Sayyid Yalīya had been sent by Muhammad Shāh (r.1834-1848) to investigate the Bab and as a result of this tafsir converted to the new faith.2 He was at the time of his conversion, around 35 years old and apparently highly regarded in learned circles. His father, after all, has been described as “one of the most brilliant Imāmī thinkers and spirituals of the nineteenth century.”3 Sayyid Yahyā, who was eventually surnamed Yahyā by the Bāb, was instrumental as a Bābī leader in the Yazd and Nayriz disturbances of 1850, the year in which both his father and the Bāb died.

At one time, the Tafsir Sūrat al-Kawthar (hereafter Kawthar) was thought to have been completely destroyed; today we know of twelve separate manuscripts.4 It has been described by others as the most important work written by the Bāb during his residence in Shiraz after his pilgrimage (from July 1845 to September 1846)5, and pointed out that it was widely used by Bābī teachers in Tehran, Kirmān and Iṣfahān, and that Tāhirih herself preached from it in Kermānsāh.6

In Kawthar, the actual letter commentary takes up approximately one third of the manuscript. The major portion of the work is devoted to citing an enormous number of ḥadīth complete with isnād, and numerous quotations from the Qur'ān pertaining to the advent (gaḥīr) of the Qāʾīm. Bearing in mind that this commentary is considered to have been written after the Bāb's claims were articulated in the Tafsīr Sūrat Yāsuf, we should assume that these citations have been marshalled as evidence of the fact that the gaḥīr has already occurred. This is so notwithstanding the Bāb's explicit statements in this work to the contrary.7 It seems that such statements are conditioned in this commentary by two factors: [1] the general practice of taqīyya and [2] the fact that the person for whom this tafsir was written was not a Shūṭikhī but a supporter of the religious status quo, Ḫusayn, if his connection to the Qāʾīm was thought to be a Qur'ān or divine inspiration, has committed unbelief (kufr) and that he himself has not claimed specific "gatehood". Kawthar, 76 & 14b.

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2 For details see Nabil, 171-177. See, for example: A.-L.-M. Nicolas, Seyyid All Mohammad dit le Bab, Paris, 1905, p. 234.

3 See Henry Corbin, En Islam iranien, 4 Vols., Paris, 1971-72, vol. 3, pp. 215-216, for a discussion of this non-Shaykhī theosopher and his dooraine herméneutique. He was an upholder of the Ḫūlī approach to the sources of religious law, and wrote a large number of books in both Arabic and Persian. The sobriquet Kashfī became his invariable of his widely acknowledged talents within that distinctively Shi'i mystical discipline known euphemistically as ṣufism. Interestingly, he is said to have gone on the same pilgrimage from which the Bāb himself had just returned (indeed, they are said to have travelled in the same vessel to the Arabian Peninsula). To what extent Sayyid Yalīya's defection from his father's religion represents the perennial dynamics of cross-generational discourse is a question I will leave for others.

4 Sources, pp. 201-202.

5 Sources, p.71.

6 Amanat, p.313.

7 E.g., that those who say he claims divine inspiration (waḥdah) are liars; or, those people who assert that he claims to be the "Gate of the Remnant of God" are wrong; or, whoever claims God's lordship, waḥdah, a Qur'ān or divine inspiration, has committed unbelief (kufr) and that he himself has not claimed specific "gatehood". Kawthar, 76 & 14b.
court and his parentage can tell us anything about his basic religious temperament and orientation.

On the other hand, we find other statements in the same work which suggest that the author is advancing some kind of special claim for himself: "Today the Truth (al-ßaqq) is a proof for no one except me." In the light of such a statement, it makes little functional difference whether the Bab chooses to designate his obviously exclusive role by terms such as bûb, îmâm, qâ'in, or maqâfîr. The point and message of the Kâwhâr is this same exclusivity, as is stated elsewhere in the same work. Addressing Sayyid Yahyâ, the Bab refers to the important Shaykhî doctrine of the hidden or fourth support. This was one of that school's most distinctive and controversial teachings.

It is important to emphasize here that Shi'tism and mysticism are intimately linked and not only in the Shaykhî teachings. The mystical vision associated with Ibn 'Arabi which is referred to as the vision of the oneness of being (waßdat al-wujûd) had, since the thirteenth century, been applied to Shi't theology. The all-important perfect man (al-insân al-kâmil), who is the center-piece of Ibn 'Arabi's ontological mysticism, therefore comes to include for the Shi'a the entire family of God, the fourteen pure ones. In acquiring this doctrine, Shi'tism also appropriated the basic metaphysics which made it sensible. Briefly, this is that God is best thought of as Absolute Existence and that the rest of creation represents levels of existence at varying degrees of intensity, from the material world up through the divine world. These worlds or presences are thought of as five. Frequently they are referred to, from highest to lowest, as the worlds of hâhût, lâhût, jabarût, malakût and mulk, (sometimes called nasût). In addition, another realm the imaginal world ('âlâm al-mithâl) is sometimes posited between malakût and jabarût.

Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsâ'î (d.1826), the founder of the Shaykhî school, had reformulated the basic pillars or supports (arkân, sing. rûbûn) of Shi'tism to accord, in some ways, with a revised theory of waßdat al-wujûd. Instead of the traditional five: divine unity (tawâjûd), prophethood (nubûwa), the return (ma'âd), imamate (imâma), and justice ('âdî), Shaykh Ahmad by combining justice with unity and the return with prophecy reduced these pillars to three: He then added another, the perfect shi'ti'sha't the fourth or hidden support, a variation on Ibn 'Arabi's perfect

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10 This fourth support was thought of in two ways: either it was a single, more or less infallible individual, a Perfect Shi'tî, who was inspired directly by the hidden Imam, or it was a community of inspired faithful, a Perfect Shi'tî. It is also quite possible that Shaykh Ahmad intended both readings, but this is another subject.

11 Sayyid Kâ'im Radîd (d.1843) was the successor of Shaykh Ahmad.

12 naßî waßîdâ, cf., Qur'ân 4:1; 7:119; 31:28; 39:6, probably an allusion to the Shi'î idea of the nîzîq waßîd, on which see Ell, vol. 4, pp. 281-285.


14 On this figure see Hannid Algar, Religion and State in Iran, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1969, pp. 107 & 180.

15 See also Nabît, pp. 201-202; Sources, pp. 70 & 76.
Judge or Chancellor had been abolished by Nadir Khan (or Shah; r.1736-1747), the Imam Jum’ah was the principal religious figure in the city. The Bab arrived in Isfahān at the end of the summer of 1262/1846 and was welcomed by the Sultan al-‘Ulamā’ himself whose home was then opened to him. During his stay under the roof of this important personage, which lasted forty days, the Bab met many of the religious scholars of Isfahān. The commentary which was produced at this time has not been published but ten manuscripts of this work exist.16 The entire work was completed in one sitting. According to one account, one evening after dinner the Bab’s powerful host requested him to comment on the Sūrat wa-l-‘asr. The scene is described as follows:

"His request was readily granted. Calling for pen and paper, the Bab, with astonishing rapidity and without the least premeditation, began to reveal, in the presence of his host, a most illuminating interpretation of the aforementioned Surah. It was nearing midnight when the Bab found himself engaged in the exposition of the manifold implications involved in the first letter of the Surah. That letter, the letter vav, upon which Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsā’i had already laid such emphasis in his writings, symbolized for the Bab the advent of a new cycle of Divine Revelation, and has since been alluded to by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Áqdas in such passages as the Great Reverse and ‘the Sign of the Sovereign.’ The Bab soon after began to chant, in the presence of his host and his companions, the homily with which He had prefaced His commentary on the Surah. Those words of power confounded His hearers with wonder. They seemed as if bewitched by the magic of His voice. Instinctively, they started to their feet and, together with the Imam Jumih (sic), reverently kissed the hem of His garment. Mullá Muhammad-Taqí-yi-Hartā, an eminent mujtahid, broke out into a sudden expression of exultation and praise. "Peerless and unique," he exclaimed, "as are the words which have streamed from this pen, to be able to reveal, within so short a time and in so legible a writing, so great a number of verses as to equal a fourth, nay a third, of the Qur’ān, is in itself an achievement such as no mortal, without the intervention of God, could hope to perform. Neither the clearing of the moon nor the quickening of the pebbles of the sea can compare with so mighty an act."17

16 Sources, p.202. The one consulted here is of medium length, extending to 87 folios of 14 lines per page one line, and assumed, for each member of the Holy Family).

17 Nabil, 201-2. Why this particular sūra was chosen by the Imam Jum’ah can be speculated upon with some certainty. ‘Asr means afternoon and can mean time or era. The word can also be translated as "the declining day". Apart from the various traditions which treat the word ‘asr as indicating either the time of the afternoon prayer, or the lifetime of the Prophet, such as those found in Ṭabarī, and some Shi’i commentaries, there is a tradition which speaks of the ‘asr or time of the Qa‘im—the Shi’i messiah. The Bab quotes, for example, the entire relevant contents of the famous akhbār Taftir al-Sofi, compiled by Muhṣin Fayd Kāshānī (d.1680), which preserves many of these traditions. But there can be no doubt that the one which inspired him was the following preserved by Ṣaḥib-i Kāshānī (d.991) on the authority the sixth Imam Ja‘far al-Sādiq (d.765). In the following translation the words of the Qur’ān are between {}: {The Declining Day} is the time (‘asr) of the coming forth from hiding of the Qa‘im, upon whom be peace. As for the words (Indeed, mankind is in a state of loss) they refer to our

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This passage conveys the important mood attending the act of composition—a mood so special and rarefied that the Bab’s followers had no difficulty in calling the act revelation. The text of his commentary may be divided into five sections of varying lengths. It opens with a doxology of the Imams,18 followed by an introduction in which it is stated that this work is by the command of Sultan al-‘Ulamā’,19 and an explanation of the way in which the commentary is to be written which includes various statements on the nature of taftir itself. The remaining three sections are the actual commentary, the first part of which is a letter by letter commentary, and it comprises folios 19a - to 50b. This is the portion of the commentary that may have had a heretofore unappreciated or wrongly-assessed role as a proof of the Bab’s claims. The next section is more conventional in that the various interpretative statements are centred on the key words of the verse being commented upon.20 The final section is a simple citation of the commentary on this verse from the highly regarded Shi‘ī Taftir al-Sofi of Muhṣin Fayd Kāshānī (d.1679).21 The two basic types of Qur’ān interpretation are exoteric, known in Arabic as zâhir, and esoteric, bâṭîn. For the Bab, and safe to say most of his Shi‘ī audience, the zâhir meaning of the text is really the standard Imāmī interpretation: the sūra contains direct references to the superiority of ‘Ali and the Imams and the enemies of the early Shi‘ī are condemned.22 It is important to observe that this interpretation of the text is highly sectarian and relies upon extra qur’ānic references, analogies and even allegories. The Bab wishes to go beyond this standard reading. To do so he resorts to the most minute consideration of the text by examining the meaning of each individual letter. The Bab says that he plans to comment on the sūra letter by letter according to the inner or esoteric meaning (bâṭîn), and that this is the most important way of reading the Qur’ān but it depends upon a special kind of spiritual knowledge which he calls here experimental knowledge.23

Enemies. (Except those who believe) means in Our signs/verses (̲f̲a̲l̲a̲h̲u̲d̲a̲). (And perform good works) means consulting/becoming charitable towards the brethren. (And exhort one another to accept the truth) means [to accept] the Imām. (And exhort one another to be steadfast) means [in their faith in] the Holy Family (al-‘a‘rūd). (See volume 5 of the 1980 Beirut edition.)

18 Mu‘a‘l.‘asr, f.2b-4b.
19 Mu‘a‘l.‘asr, f.4b-5a.
20 Mu‘a‘l.‘asr, f.50b-56b.
21 Mu‘a‘l.‘asr, f.86b-87b. See above, footnote 15.
22 See above, footnote 15.
23 Mu‘a‘l.‘asr, f.5b. ‘Im al-‘awqāt probably means knowledge obtained through spiritual or mystical/ visionary experience. The Bab’s fellow Iranian, the Kuhārī shaykh ‘Ali ‘uddawā Simdānī (d.1336) uses the word in this way. See Hermann Landolt, "Simnani on waIidat al-wujūd", Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism, Mohaghghēb & Landolt, eds., Tehran, 1971, pp. 96-
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This is so because the forms in this world are confusing, and the only way for anyone to distinguish between them in this world of multiplicity is by turning to the Divine Essence through the disavowal of all allusions and veils of glory and arrive at the world of principles by the disavowal of all names and attributes.\textsuperscript{24}

Letter commentary, then, takes up a significant portion of both commentaries. It seems likely that these portions were the centre-piece of the Báb’s response to his two interlocutors inasmuch as they display his religious virtuosity most dramatically. For the Báb it seems that the sacred text represents a kind of musical score or even scale (maqâm) which in good eastern style is meant to be improvised upon. It is the stunning quality of his improvisation that impressed his audience. The Báb’s minute attention to the text, the desire to encounter the charisma of the holy word by literally deconstructing it, is remarkably intense. Letter commentary is certainly not new with the Báb. It has a long tradition in Islam. But the kind of absorption in this work is also reminiscent of the attitude towards scripture of Abulafia and other Kabbalists whose “reading” of text resulted in what Scholem called a “music of pure thought.”\textsuperscript{25} The music of thought in the Báb’s commentary is arranged around a few major themes: advent (zuhūr), charismatic authority (walāyā), the pillars of religion (arkān), the Imāms, God’s self-manifestation (tejālī), the four worlds, the amr or cause of God, and so on. Such typical Islamic subjects as jamāʿ are also discussed, together with more mystical and philosophical topics, ranging from the various levels (sing. haṣra) of existence to the colors of the pillars of the divine throne to meditations on the general theme of the coincidence of opposites. The exposition employs the technical terminology of high Shi‘I mystical philosophy (“ilm/fzikmat-i ilāhī).

Each letter is commented upon in turn and each letter, though it might be duplicated in the šīrā itself, is given special consideration in its various places. The basic pattern of explanation is to treat each letter as the initial for a word which represents a concept important to the overall message, e.g. wāw is almost always related to walāyā\textsuperscript{26}, or as the initial of an attribute of God, e.g. rā’ is usually related to rahma (mercy); or, as the initial of a substantive which is transformed into a metaphor, lāw is frequently interpreted as standing for pearls (la’āf) as in “pearls of divine knowledge”.

These elements are then assigned four different modes or intentions which correspond to the four worlds of the cosmos, viz: ihāt, qabar, malakāt, and finally nāsūt. While these four certainly appear to represent a metaphysical hierarchy, none of them is devoid of the particular quality being discussed. The preoccupation with this tetradic structure is conditioned by the Báb’s concern with the Shaykhī doctrine of the four supports, mentioned above. The Báb wants to illustrate the interdependence or unity of creation by describing the way in which a given quality or attribute pervades it throughout all possible realms or levels of being, whether exoterically or esoterically. Here the music becomes symphonic.

A single example will have to suffice. Commenting on the letter wāw of the word al-kawthar\textsuperscript{27}, the Báb arranges the commentary in the characteristic four parts:

Concerning the wāw:

[1] In the forest of the earth of yellow\textsuperscript{28}, it signifies the Absolute Universal Pre-Eternal walāya;

[2] then the walāya which has been individualized in the soul of the form of abstraction, which claims for itself to itself the [divine] Ipseity, to be also the moon of the [divine] light and the sun of [divine] manifestation and the tree of al-kāfār and the wine of manifestation and the source of the river of al-kawthar and the name of God the Living the Forgiving, and it is he who speaks in the forest of the earth of “yellow”;

[3] then there is the walāya which has been individuated shining, luminous, glittering, paradisaic, unique - glistening with the light of the secondary pre-ternity which alludes to and warbles subtleties in this lamp (ft daqā’iq tilka al-zujoja) that which has not been heard by any but God and whoever He desires. It is visible in the number of the letters of īā ilāh īlih īīlāh (i.e., 12 = the Imāms) and appears from the tree which grows upon the earth of green;

\textsuperscript{97} The Kuhārī order has continued in Iran until the present day but under the name Dhaḥābīya. This order was quite active in Shīrāz during the Báb’s lifetime. The most important religious institution in Fars, the Shāh Chirīgh mosque, was under Dhaḥābī supervision (see Amanat, p.79.). To what extent the Báb was influenced by the Sufis is a question which remains to be fully studied.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Wālī}-\textit{ʾ}, L\textsuperscript{6}a.

\textsuperscript{25} Gershom Scholem, \textit{Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism}, New York, 1965, pp. 130-135. It is also known that the Kabbala was being practiced in Shīrāz during the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{26} Divine authority, to be discussed at greater length below.

\textsuperscript{97} That is, the letter represented by “aw” in the English transliteration.

\textsuperscript{28} Mention of the colours yellow here and green later is in line with a colour science taught by the Shaykhs and subscribed to, it seems, by the Báb. A preliminary study is in my unpublished PhD thesis “The Qur’\textsuperscript{in} Commentary of Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad, the Báb,” McGill University, Montreal, 1987, pp.115-186. Usually four colours signal the levels of the hierarchy of being, from highest to lowest they are white, yellow, green and red. (ibid., p.142. The subject awaits a fuller treatment. Cf. Sayyid Kāẓim’s colour hierarchy in \textit{Ell}, vol. 1, p.203. See also the excellent study by Vahid Rafati on this subject).

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The immediate context for the Báb’s commentary was twelver Shi’ism. Shi’ism, however it may be characterized, represents an attempt on the part of its leaders and followers to extend the presence of divine authority (waḥiy wa’ilayya)31 in the Islamic community beyond the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Other non-Shi’i leaders and groups also attempted this such as the Umayyads, the Abbasids, and the Sufis. But in Shi’ism we see perhaps the most explicit and uncompromising assertion that divine authority, waḥiy wa’ilayya, was passed on by the prophet Muhammad. The first recipient was his cousin and son-in-law ’Alí who then passed on this special divine vocation to, in twelver Shi’ism, each of the remaining eleven Imáms. While the Prophet’s death meant to the Shi’a the end of divine legislative authority or prophethood (nubūyta), divine authority, waḥiy wa’ilayya, continued through the Imáms.32 Some sources speak of the cycle (dawr) of prophecy ending and the cycle of guardianship beginning with the death of the Prophet. Included in the special charismatic group is Fátima, who while not recognized as an Imám, is certainly seen as one of the awliyá. This word is derived from the above substantive waḥiy wa’ilayya, and although it is often translated as “friends of God” it carries the meaning of guardianship and spiritual authority. So for twelver Shi’ism, there are fourteen holy figures. First is the Prophet, who in addition to being a nabi or exponent of nubīwa, is also a waḥiy wa’ilayya. The logic is that all prophets are also guardians, but not all guardians are prophets. Next come ’Alí and his wife (the Prophet’s daughter) Fátima, and then the remaining eleven Imáms.

It is through the contemplation, elaboration and systematizing of the central problem of religious authority – waḥiy wa’ilayya – that Shi’ism has acquired its most distinctive features. In Shi’ism no doctrine is more important.33 By invoking the term waḥiy wa’ilayya various powerful denotations and connotations are stimulated to life. In Shi’ism this life is pre-eminent tragi-historical, from the betrayal of ’Ali’s waḥiy wa’ilayya after the death of the Prophet to the cheating of Fátima out of her inheritance, to the most tragic event of all, the martyrdom of the 3rd Imám Husayn. But all of the Imáms, according to strict doctrine, were betrayed and murdered and all are martyred heroes of the very highest degree. They are also bearers of the divine substance known as the Muhammad Light or Spirit. This has endowed each one with supernatural knowledge in all spheres, particularly Qur’anic exegesis.

Shi’i Qur’ān commentaries are replete with quotations from the group known as the friends of God, or the bearers of the divine authority – the awliyá. Another feature that distinguishes a good portion of Shi’i exegesis is what I have referred to as the Imamization of the Qur’ān.34 That is, much of the interpretation of the Qur’ān, and this always on the authority of one of the awliyá, seeks to demonstrate that their authority is fully validated in the Qur’ān text. This is taken to such extremes that for certain otherwise unlikely words and ideas are said to be references not merely to the authority of the Imáms, but to the Imáms themselves. Prayer, fasting and pilgrimage are said to be code words for the Imám whom the Qur’ān commands the believer religiously to “observe”. Thus runs an important stream of Shi’i esoteric or bīfī interpretation (taw’īf) as distinct from Sunnī esoteric or Ẓahirī exegesis (tafṣīr).35

From the above translation, it is clear that the Báb lays claim to some kind of special rank, which we may assume to be associated with the idea of the fourth support, given that the reference to himself occurs at the fourth or lowest exegetic level of the letter waḥiy wa’ilayya. This is the discursive message of the commentary.37 The formal message of the commentary is the insistence on the unitary or integral and inter-

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31 See my “Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur’ān Commentary of Sayyid ’Alī Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab,” p.235.


34 It should also be noted that the Báb refers to Muhammad as the “seed of the prophets” just before the section translated above.
dependent structure of the several layers of being, physical and metaphysical, with the major "exoteric" theme of the verse, the appearance of the Qā'īm.

The response of the audience indicates that it was not the discursive and formal messages alone which impressed them. After all, anyone could claim to be a holy soul. What impressed the audience was the Bāb’s extraordinary ability to improvise on the Qur'ānic text in a way that created a previously unheard holy music. By commenting on each individual letter and this in four parts, a certain rhythm is imparted to the work within which the variations on each letter may be elaborated. The effect upon the auditors has been recorded. Thus the circumstances of composition, particularly of the second letter commentary, resemble something of an after-dinner musical recital where the Bāb, a young spiritual prodigy, was asked to "perform". Unfortunately, the above translation is woefully inadequate to the task of conveying to the reader the phonic and intellectual richness of this recital. A brief digression on the general subject of the charismatic nature of the Qur‘ān may help.

The word "inlibration" has been coined in an attempt to account for the profoundly logocentric – or perhaps better – bibliocentric piety of Muslims.39 This piety focuses, in varying degrees of intensity, on the Book as the central religious authority within the community. The Book is for all Muslims, Sunnī or Shi‘ī, the uncreated, that is to say coeternal, Word of God. Speech or utterance can represent the most intimate, characteristic, distinctive identity of a given individual – the more so as it is borne upon the very breath/nafs (or soul/nafs). And in the communication of these words something of the soul of the individual is also communicated. So it is with God and the Qur‘ān – His Word. In the presence of His Word a believer feels that he or she is as close to God as possible, and that He is as close to them as possible. This closeness, as said earlier, is personified by Muhammad and the Imāms. As the Qur‘ān itself has it: We are closer to him than his jugular vein. (50:16). What is closer to one than the life vein but that inner space defined and described in the very act of reading, hearing or listening?

The auditory experience of the Qur‘ān is felt in a rarefied realm in which time and place are transformed and the very atmosphere surrounding the listener becomes a new reality by virtue of its vibrating with the sacred sounds: the ‘divine presence in the form of the Divine Peace (sakīna)’ mentioned in the Qur‘ān40, and the experience of which is so frequently adduced by believers as an irrefutable proof of the divinity of the Qur‘ān. God, therefore, is made present to the believer in the Qur‘ān. He is "inlibrated" there just as for Christians He was incarnated in Jesus. Thus to partake of the Quranic experience is to "partake" of divinity – to participate in the Divine through a symbol that is utterly drenched in divinity.

The idea of communion has been used to describe the relationship between the Qur‘ān and its faithful reader.41 Communion in the usual context involves the ultimate act of appropriation, participation, interiorization, internalization through the agency of the symbolic ingestion of the body and blood of Jesus. Such a sacrament serves the participant by opening a door to the divine through an extraordinary covenant played out in extraordinary circumstances. What happens to the accidental bread and wine once ingested is a matter of some debate within the Christian tradition and one that need not detain us here. Possibilities for comparison exist in Islam in the analogous act of ‘reading’ – ingesting – the "body and blood" of God, i.e. the Qur‘ān.

The holiest thing in Islam is the Qur‘ān. By participating in this Qur‘ān then, one "touches" holiness and holiness touches one. Participation may take many forms: reading; listening; copying in calligraphy; viewing calligraphy for its harmonic and rhythmic beauty, its literal content or both; citing the Qur‘ān in the course of discussion or argument; uttering passages at times of joy, sorrow or danger; giving a copy of the Book or receiving it; cherishing it and caring for it; protecting it through memorization or otherwise; teaching it; learning it; studying it; contemplating it; intoning it; and of course commenting upon it. This last activity can combine much of the above and therefore may be seen as something of a virtuoso religious act, a comprehensive gesture of engaging the numinous.

In the example of the Bāb, the act of encountering the text is enriched in important ways by virtue of his distinctive tradition, that is to say esoteric Shi‘īsm, that provides the immediate and overwhelming context for the act of reading. The scriptural tradition to which the Bāb belonged heard not only the Prophet Muhammad in the words of the Holy Book, but also the chorus of the remaining thirteen members of the Family of God, the Infallible Immaculates. Nonetheless, the fire is the same. It is suggested that this chorus was made present during the Bāb’s improvisation upon the Quranic score before an initially sceptical but eventually receptive audience. The charismatic content of the text was released in the musical explosion as an affective charge. The sensibility was one in which beauty of expres-

38 N.b. the well-known and distinctively Iranian predilection for religious performance.

39 Harry A. Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kalām, pp. 244-263.

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sion and other aesthetic considerations were seen to supplement the actual or discursive meaning being expressed—the one was a vehicle for the other. Unfortunately there are no recordings of these sacred performances. We can only imagine the full effects of the Báb’s celebrated physical beauty and delicacy together with his obvious mastery of the difficult and arcane language of high religious philosophy—a mastery which enabled him to transform scholasticism into divine poetry with a Shírāz accent.

Abbreviations


Der Messianismus des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts und die Entstehung der Bahá‘í Religion

Kamran Ekbal


Als im Jahre 1831 der britische Missionar Joseph Wolff Persien bereiste, um bei persischen Juden das Evangelium zu predigen, stieß er bei diesen auf eine ausgeprägte Naherwartung des Messias. Wolff, selbst ein zum Christentum konvertierter Jude, hielt in seinen Tagebuchaufzeichnungen die Begegnung mit einem