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II

Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad Shirāzī, the Bāb (1819–1850)

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THE writings of the Bāb are many; on his own estimate they exceed 500,000 verses.¹ In the past, these writings have been examined mainly for what they have to tell us about the history of the Bābī movement. The purpose of this discussion is to draw attention to the literature itself in order to begin an evaluation of what must surely be one of the most important questions to be raised not only by students of the Bābī and Bahā'ī religions, but also by those interested in the history of nineteenth-century Iran, upon which the dramatic events associated with the name of the Bāb made such a vivid mark. That question, how did the Bāb read the Holy Book of Islam, will automatically be of interest to those engaged in studying the history of the interpretation of the Qur'an. It should be mentioned that *tafsīr* represents only one of several types of exposition to which the Bāb applied himself. That it should be regarded as among the most important types is clear from the mere fact that it comprises a large percentage of his extant work and that it was by means of a *tafsīr* that he first made his claims known.

It was the *Tafsīr surat Yūsuf*, also known as the *Qayyūm al-āsmā'*, which the Bāb's earliest followers used to propagate his cause. It has been referred to by Bahā'u'llāh (1817–92) as 'the first, the greatest, and mightiest of all books', and by Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) as being 'universally regarded, during almost the entire ministry of the Bāb, as the Qur'an of the people of the Bayān'.² In addition to this work, there are three other major *tafsīrs*

¹ 'Alī Muḥammad Shirāzī, *Bayān-i fārsī = Le Béyan Persan*, trans. A.-L.-M. Nicolas (Paris, 1911–14), iii, 113. See also the discussion of the amount of the Bāb's work that has survived in Denis MacEoin, 'A Critical Survey of the Sources for Early Bābī Doctrine and History', unpublished thesis (Cambridge, 1976) (hereafter: MacEoin, 'Critical'), 8–10.

² Bahā'u'llāh, the title assumed by Mirzā Ḥusayn 'Alī-yi Nūrī, was the founder of

extant, and a series of shorter commentaries.³ It appears that all of these belong to the earliest period of the Bāb's career and are, therefore, important in themselves as a source for his earliest thought.⁴

As will be seen, some of this material represents a distinct type of scriptural interpretation; this is particularly apparent in the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*, excerpts from which will appear below. That there are problems connected with the proper categorization of some of these writings is something which Browne suggested long ago; in speaking of the above-mentioned *tafsīr* he said: 'A *Commentary* in the strict sense of the word it is not, but rather a mystical and often unintelligible rhapsody.'⁵

In the following pages an attempt will be made to show some aspects of this work and one other of the Bāb's *tafsīr* in an attempt to indicate, in however limited a form, some elements of the logic of structure and content of this important work while calling attention to the clear transformation of style and thought between it and the earlier *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*. Before proceeding directly to the texts, a brief outline of the life of the Bāb will help put the following discussion in perspective.

I. LIFE OF THE BĀB

The Bāb was born in Shirāz on 20 October 1819 (1 Muḥarram

the Bahā'ī faith. This comment is found in his *Kitāb-i iqān* (Cairo, n.d.), 180 = *Kitāb-i iqān: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, 1970), 231. The second statement is from Shoghi Effendi, great-grandson of Bahā'u'llāh and eventual Guardian of the Bahā'ī Faith (*walī amru'llāh*), *God Passes By* (Wilmette, 1970), 23.

³ All works of the Bāb referred to in this paper are, unless otherwise noted, still in MS. The following and the titles of his works which contain either the word *tafsīr* or *sharḥ* (the first four being in chronological order): (1) *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara* (actually the first *juz'* of the Qur'an); (2) *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* (Q. 12); (3) *Tafsīr sūrat al-kawthar* (Q. 108); (4) *Tafsīr sūrat wa'l-ʿaqr* (Q. 103); (5) *Tafsīr sūrat al-hamd* (Q. 1) (distinct from (1) above, which includes *sūrat al-fātihā*); (6) *Tafsīr sūrat al-tawhīd* (Q. 112); (7) *Tafsīr sūrat al-qadr* (Q. 97); (8) *Tafsīr bismillāh*; (9) *Tafsīr hā'* (commentary on the significances of the Arabic letter *hā'*, the 26th of the alphabet); (10) *Tafsīr āyat al-kursī* (Q. 2/255); (11) *Tafsīr āyat al-nūr* (Q. 24/35); (12) *Tafsīr hadīth Kumayl*; (13) *Tafsīr hadīth al-jārīya*; (14) *Tafsīr nahnu wajhu'llāh*. Not all of these works concern Quranic material.

⁴ E. G. Brown, 'Bāb, Bābīs', *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1909), ii, 305a.

⁵ E. G. Browne, 'Some Remarks on the Bābī Texts Edited by Baron Victor Rosen in Vols. I and VI of the *Collections scientifiques de l'Institut des langues Orientales de Saint Petersbourg*', *JRAS* 24 (1892), 261.

1235) into a family of fairly prosperous merchants. His father died when he was about 7 years old, and the responsibility for his upbringing devolved upon his uncle. His formal education consisted of six or seven years at a local *maktab* under the direction of one Shaykh 'Abid, who happened to be an adherent of the then somewhat popular Shaykhī school. It appears that the Bāb, whose name was 'Alī Muḥammad, was not particularly fond of school, although, according to some reports, this antipathy was not the result of any intellectual incapacity. On the contrary, the few reports which exist tend to show the Bāb at this early stage as the owner of a precociously inquisitive and outspoken nature.⁶

At age 13 the Bāb left the *maktab* and two years later moved with his uncle to Būshihir to pursue the family business there. After about four years of working in partnership with his uncle, the Bāb became independent. There is disagreement about what the Bāb's attitude to trade was, but so far no compelling evidence has been brought to light to support the statement that this basic attitude was negative.⁷ It was while the Bāb was in Būshihir that he began to write various religious works. Although it is not known exactly what these were, they probably included essays on various theological topics and eulogies of the Imāms. Some of these were apparently written at the request of certain of his fellow merchants. There is also an indication that even before voicing any particular claim to spiritual authority, the Bāb had aroused a certain amount of attention, and even ill will, by the production of these earliest works.⁸

In 1840, the Bāb closed his business and left Būshihir for the region of 'Atabāt (lit. 'thresholds', it refers to the holy cities of

⁶ H. M. Balyuzi, *The Bāb, the Herald of the Day of Days* (Oxford, 1973), 34-9. Other treatments of the Bāb's life are: Amanat Abbas, 'The Early Years of the Bābī Movement: Background and Development', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 1981), 100-47; now published, Cornell University Press. Denis MacEoin, 'From Shaykhism to Bābism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shī'ī Islām', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Cambridge University, 1979; available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor) (hereafter: MacEoin, 'Charismatic'), 137-42. An important discussion of the problems associated with the biography of the Bāb is Stephen Lambden, 'An Episode in the Childhood of Sayyid Ali Muhammad the Bāb', in Peter Smith, ed., *In Iran: Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History*, iii (Los Angeles, 1986), 1-31.

⁷ The Bāb's statement, cited by MacEoin, 'Charismatic', 138, that a dog belonging to a Jew is to be preferred to the people of the bazaar, because of the latter's lack of religious devotion, must be seen as an indictment of the people themselves, not their occupation.

⁸ See Balyuzi, p. 40; MacEoin, 'Charismatic', 138-9.

Karbala' and Najaf), where he remained for nearly a year.⁹ It was during this time that he attended lectures by Sayyid Kāzim Rashtī, the undisputed successor of Shaykh Aḥmad, founder of the Shaykhī school. It seems that the Bāb's family did not approve of his preoccupation with things religious and that his marriage, in 1842, was arranged in the hope of inducing him to concentrate his attention more on the practicalities of existence. Prior to his marriage, while he was still in Karbalā', it is said that the Bāb became acquainted with and attracted a certain amount of attention from a number of Shaykhīs, some of whom later became his followers.¹⁰ Even his arch-enemy, Muḥammad Karīm Kirmānī, says in his polemical *Izhāq al-bāṭil* that, although he himself never met the Bāb, it was true that he was held in respect in Karbalā' and that he did in fact meet and serve Sayyid Kāzim.¹¹

The picture that emerges, then, is of a pious young man, who, despite a lack of formal training in the higher religious sciences was nevertheless motivated to produce religious works, the nature of which was sufficiently impressive to win the respect of his readers. Indeed, it was undoubtedly the very fact of this lack of training, together with his status as a merchant, which called attention to his undeniable spiritual and literary gifts. Thus a variation on the Islamic theme of the 'unlettered prophet' begins to take shape. In this connection it is also interesting, and perhaps instructive with reference to the way in which Muḥammad's so-called illiteracy may be understood, to observe that the Bāb was manifestly not illiterate; in fact, many of his writings were produced before witnesses. That these works were written by one untutored, or at best self-taught, and perhaps even more convincingly, that they were written with astonishing speed and fluency, combined to present to some people at least an evidentiary miracle comparable, in every way, to the Qur'an itself.¹²

In 1844, shortly after the death of Sayyid Kāzim, the Bāb put forth his claim, in writing, to be in direct contact with the Hidden Imām and so a locus of tremendous spiritual authority. Mullā

⁹ Opinion is divided on just how long the Bāb stayed in Karbalā', where Kāzim Rashtī held his classes. The discussion appears rooted in polemic; sources favourable to the Bāb prefer a shorter length of time.

¹⁰ See Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, 'The Bābī Movement: A Resource Mobilization Perspective', in P. Smith, *In Iran*, iii, 60 and references.

¹¹ Cited by MacEoin, 'Charismatic', 140.

¹² See, e.g., A.-L.-M. Nicolas, *Seyyed Ali Mohammed dit le Bāb* (Paris, 1905), 234.

Ḥusayn and seventeen other young Shaykhīs, including the famous poetess Ṭāhira, gave their allegiance to him, and the Bābī movement was born. Some months later the Bāb departed on his pilgrimage, returning to Shirāz in March 1845. As a result of the activity of his followers, he was now arrested for the first time and shortly released. In 1846, the Bāb took up residence in Iṣfahān where he remained from September of that year until March 1847, shortly after his powerful protector, the *mu'tamid-i dawla*, Manuchir Khān, died, on February 21. At this time he was arrested by government troops and escorted to the western frontier of Iran where he was to spend the rest of his life in secluded imprisonment.

During this last stage of his career, the Bāb continued to experience and record revelations. It was at this time that his Persian *Bayān* was written, together with many prayers, *ajwiba*, and other correspondence to his by now numerous following throughout Iran. According to Nabil, the Bāb, during the nine months he was held in the castle at Māh-kū, produced no less than nine complete commentaries on the Qur'an.¹³

As is well known, the Bāb's literary activity came to an end on 9 July 1850, when he was publicly executed in Tabriz.¹⁴

2. THE SHAYKHĪ SCHOOL

In a 'Foreword' to his account of the first hundred years of the Bābī/Bahā'ī religion, Shoghi Effendi asserts the significance of the Shaykhīya in Bābī and Bahā'ī history:

I shall seek to represent and correlate, in however cursory a manner, those momentous happenings which have insensibly, relentlessly, and under the very eyes of successive generations, perverse, indifferent or hostile, transformed a heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot of the Shaykhī school of the Ithna-'Ashariyyih sect of Shi'ah Islam into a world religion.¹⁵

The 'seemingly negligible offshoot' here mentioned is of course the

¹³ Mullā Muḥammad Zarāndī (Nabil), *The Dawnbreakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahā'ī Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, 1932) (hereafter: Nabil), 31.

¹⁴ There is some disagreement about the exact date; see Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford, 1981), 77-82.

¹⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. xii.

Bābī religion. It has already been mentioned that the Bāb's teacher, Shaykh 'Ābid, was a follower of this Shaykhī school. It is also known that several of the Bāb's merchant relatives were attracted to the teachings of this movement.¹⁶ As was mentioned above, the Bāb himself attended the lectures of Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī and in at least two works directly refers to him as 'my teacher' (*mu'allimī*).¹⁷ It is therefore important that at least some brief statement on the history and teachings of the Shaykhī school be offered so that a better understanding may be gained of the context in which the Bāb wrote his Quranic commentaries.

The founder of the Shaykhīya, or the Kashfiya as its adherents preferred to be designated, was Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-Dīn ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Ṣaqr ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Dāghir al-Aḥsā'i. He was born in 1752 in a small village in Baḥrayn (namely al-Aḥsā) apparently of pure Arab lineage, and his family had been followers of the Shī'i version of orthodoxy for five generations. From his early childhood, it was clear that Shaykh Aḥmad was strongly predisposed to the study of religious texts and traditions. By the age of 5 he could read the Qur'ān, and during the remainder of his primary education he studied Arabic grammar and became exposed to the mystical and theosophical expressions of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and the less well-known Ibn Abī Jumhūr (d. c. 901/1495-6), author of the *Kitāb al-mujlī*. In 1772, Shaykh Aḥmad left his home to pursue advanced religious studies in the area of the 'Atabāt in Iraq. He received his first *ijāza* from the renowned scholar Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī Baḥr al-'Ulūm (d. 1797), and eventually six others from various recognized teachers.¹⁸

Shaykh Aḥmad remained away from Baḥrayn for about a year, and then returned to pursue his studies, presumably independently, for the next twenty-five years. As a result of the Wahhābī attack on his native al-Aḥsā, he travelled to Baṣra in 1797 and remained in the religious centres and other localities of Iraq and Iran until the

¹⁶ Nabīl, p. 30.

¹⁷ The two works are *Risālat al-sulūk* and *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*; they are, as it happens, probably the two earliest of the Bāb's works remaining to us.

¹⁸ The most recent detailed account of the Shaykhīya is: Vahid Rafati, 'The Development of Shaykhī Thought in Shī'i Islam', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (UCLA, 1979). Other important discussions of this subject are: Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago, 1984), see index, 'Shaykhism'; Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, 1982), 37-58; Henri Corbin, *En Islam Iranien* (Paris, 1971-2), iv, 205-300.

end of his life. He died on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1825 and was buried in the famous Baqī cemetery of Medina. The work of Shaykh Aḥmad was continued by his favourite student, Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī (1798-1844). After the death of Sayyid Kāẓim, his students divided into several groups, one centred around the personality of Muḥammad Kārim Khān Kirmānī, another around Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad, the Bāb.

3. SHAYKHĪ TEACHINGS

The distinguishing features of this school, as is the case with most Muslim religious sects, are related to the manner in which spiritual authority was to be defined. At this time, the Shī'i world was experiencing an active controversy carried on by the followers of two groups called the *uṣūliya* and the *akhbārīya*. These terms refer to the way each group tended to support its statements on Islamic law and theology. The debate was based on the question of whether *ijtihād*, 'exerting individual effort to form an opinion', rather than wholesale acceptance of the guidance contained in the preserved statements (*akhbār*) of Muḥammad and the Imāms, was the best way to resolve the questions of religion, which would of course include questions of law. Finally the *uṣūliya*, those in favour of *ijtihād*, won the day and for the last 200 years this basic attitude towards the written sources of the Islamic religion has held sway over most of the Shī'i world.

Shaykh Aḥmad grew up in one of the last bastions of the *akhbārī* approach, and his synthesis may be seen as a radicalization of this method. By means of propounding a doctrine of the Perfect Shī'a, an obvious adaptation of the Sūfi idea of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), Shaykh Aḥmad was able, at least in theory, to circumvent the restrictions imposed by either of the two above methods and arrive at a much less fettered and independent position *vis-à-vis* the reinterpretation of the raw material of the Islamic religion—the Qur'ān, the *sunna*, and the teachings of the Imāms which were preserved in the *akhbār*. In short, this doctrine held that the Perfect Shī'a was always present on earth as a direct link to the Hidden Imām, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, the twelfth Imām of the Shī'a, who disappeared from the public ken at the age of 6 after succeeding his late father as Imām, and whose occultation had now

lasted nearly 1,000 years. While neither Shaykh Ahmad nor Sayyid Kāzim ever publicly claimed the rank of Perfect Shi'ī, it seems fairly certain that their followers considered them as such.

Shi'ism has traditionally based itself on five main principles: divine unity (*tauhīd*) prophethood (*nubūwa*), return (*ma'ād*), the imamate (*imāma*), and divine justice ('*adl*'). Shaykh Ahmad reduced these to three by combining 'justice' with 'unity' and placing the 'return' in the category of 'prophethood'. To these three, Unity, Prophethood, and the Imamate, was added the idea of the Perfect Shi'a sometimes referred to by the Shaykhis as the Fourth Support (*al-rukn al-rābi'*) of religion, an allusion, in parallel, to the four pillars of God's throne ('*arsh*, *kursī*).¹⁹ Other distinguishing characteristics of the beliefs held by the Shaykhis pertained to eschatology, in which a corporeal resurrection was denied in favour of a somewhat complex recourse to a separate reality in which a resurrection of one's spiritual or subtle (*latīf*) body underwent a process designated by the familiar terminology of *ma'ād*, *qiyāma*, and so forth. Surely the emphasis here is on the denial of the scientifically untenable bodily resurrection which so many Muslim philosophers prior to Shaykh Ahmad also found impossible to believe.²⁰ Shaykh Ahmad's contribution on this matter is in the form of a sufficiently detailed and appealingly possible alternative—even the most hard-bitten sceptic would never completely deny the possibility of the totally spiritual process which Shaykh Ahmad propounded. These three features, the doctrine of the Perfect Shi'a, the extreme veneration of the Holy Family, and the denial of bodily resurrection are perhaps the most important with regard to the relationship of Babism to Shaykhism.

The doctrine of the Perfect Shi'a was inseparable from the

Shaykhī apophatic theology and implied a virtual deification²¹ of the Fourteen Pure Ones (*chēhardah ma'sūm*) of orthodoxy: Muḥammad, Fāṭima, 'Alī, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and the remaining Imāms of Twelver Shi'ism. God here is eternally unknowable (rather than remote), and makes His will known through various stages. Eternally crucial to this process is the twofold institution of prophecy/imamate, and whenever any positive statement about divinity is made, its proper reference is to this institution. The Prophet and Imāms are a different order of creation as mediators between God and humanity. The Perfect Shi'ī acts as mediator between the Imāms, represented by the twelfth, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, and humanity. Therefore when the Bāb claimed to have received the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* from the Imam (see below), even though he did not explicitly claim for himself the title of the Perfect Shi'ī, those Shaykhis who were his first readers were already convinced of the necessity for such a link as a *bāb* ('gate'), even if they were not agreed as to who was best qualified to act as such, or, less important, what the exact name for such a link should be.

Before leaving the subject, it is important to point out that up until the period of time in which the Bāb wrote, the Shaykhiya were probably not yet seen as a separate sect of Twelver Shi'ism. According to Rafati:

Although the terms 'Shaykhī,' 'Posht-i Sarī,' and 'Kashfiya' refer to a certain group of people, and were intended to distinguish them from the rest of the Shi'a, the group solidarity and identity of the Shaykhis was in fact not so distinct as to sharply separate them from the rest of the Shi'ī community of Iran as an independent sect or even branch of Twelver Shi'a. The Shaykhis considered themselves true Shi'a who thought and behaved in accordance with the teaching of the Shi'ī imāms; they did not consider themselves innovators. It is difficult to believe that during Shaykh Ahmad's lifetime he was considered the founder of a new school within the Shi'ī framework. However, as time went on and the nature of his ideology received greater intellectual attention, a group of fundamentalist '*ulama'*' perceived a radical distinction between his views and the established doctrines of the Shi'a and increasingly differentiated themselves from the Shaykhis. This Shaykhī school, then, gained more group solidarity as it

²¹ This statement must be tempered by reference to the innumerable assertions of the servitude of Muḥammad and the Imāms to the essence of God. It would be misleading in the extreme to suggest incarnationism. See a characteristic statement on this question by the Bāb himself in his *Risalah-ye i'tiqādāt* in *Majmū'ah-yi alihār-yi bāzrat-i 'Alā*, Iran National Baha'i Archives, Tehran, lxix (1976), 411-16.

¹⁹ Concern with the doctrine of the Fourth Support is, therefore, one of the most convincing evidences that the Bāb was writing his first *tafsīr* in a Shaykhī milieu. Early in his commentary on *sūrat al-baqāra* he says that the Fourth Support is, in fact, the main body of the Shi'a. That the Bāb understood the Fourth Support in this way is also evidence that at this time he either did not harbour any claims to the special spiritual authority implied by other uses of this term, or he did not want to be perceived as doing so. Cf. the way in which later Shaykhis were to eventually discuss the idea of the Fourth Support (viz., as *ecclesia spiritualis*), in Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, iv, 274-86, esp. 285. Also see D. MacEoin, 'Early Shaykhī Reactions to the Bāb and his Claims', in M. Momen, *Studies in Bābī and Bahāī history*, 1 (Los Angeles, 1982), 1-42.

²⁰ See Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1985), 17.

developed historically, reacting as a group against the main body of the Shi'a when it encountered social and intellectual opposition.²²

4. TAFSĪR WORKS

Among the Bāb's writings there are numerous works of *tafsīr*.²³ Some of these are commentaries on such important traditions as the *ḥadīth al-jārīya* or the *ḥadīth Kumayl*. Most of the others are commentaries on either a complete *sūra* of the Qur'ān or one of the more notable verses, such as the light verse (Q. 24/35) or the throne verse (Q. 2/255). These commentaries present a broad range of ideas and exegetical techniques—to such a degree that any attempt to discuss all of them here would ultimately be meaningless. This is so in spite of the fact that they all seem to come from the same general period, usually referred to as early Babism.²⁴ Despite the astonishingly varied nature of the style and content of these commentaries, or more accurately because of it, they are of course extremely valuable for a study of the development of the Bāb's thought. Collectively they represent a unique individual corpus of Islamic scriptural commentary.

Of the numerous titles in this genre, however, four stand out as major works. In chronological order they are the commentaries on *al-baqara* (*sūra* 2), *Yūsuf* (*sūra* 12), *al-kawthar* (*sūra* 108), and *wa'l-aṣr* (*sūra* 103). In the following discussion attention will be focused exclusively on the first two of these commentaries.²⁵

²² Rafati, pp. 48–9. For a helpful summary of the points which came to be regarded as representing the most important differences between the Shaykhīs and the Shi'a, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: the History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (Oxford and New Haven, 1985), 226–8; on the importance of the doctrine of the Perfect Shi'i, see Browne, 'Bāb, Bābis', in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ii. 300a–b.

²³ See n. 3, above.

²⁴ Browne, 'Bāb, Bābis', *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ii. 305a.

²⁵ The other two works deserve some brief mention at this time, inasmuch as they both exhibit one of the more distinctive exegetical procedures of the Bāb, and one which is not applied by him to the two *sūras* under detailed discussion here. Both of *sūras* 108 and 103, which are among the shortest chapters in the Qur'ān, are explained by the Bāb not verse by verse, or even word by word, but rather letter by letter. In this way, the Quranic material is 'exploded' by the commentator in an attempt to mine it for as much meaning as possible. See B. T. Lawson, 'Exploded Commentary', paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Anaheim, California, 1985, for a study of this method and its antecedents, *ḥurūfi*, *ṣūfi*, and others.

i. Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara

The Bāb was just under 25 when he completed the first volume of this work in Muḥarram 1259.²⁶ The work was therefore completed a few months before he made his momentous claim to Mullā Ḥusayn, the young Shaykhī, on the evening of 22 May 1844 (4 Jumāda I, 1260). In corroboration of this dating, Mullā Ḥusayn is reported to have noticed this *tafsīr* resting on a shelf in the Bāb house during the course of that very evening.²⁷ This earliest sustained religious work of the Bāb's includes a brief commentary on *al-fātiḥa* (*sūra* 1), which is prefaced, in some manuscript copies, by an introduction which is noteworthy for the reference it makes to the date on which composition was begun. Here the Bāb says that the night before he began the work, he had a dream in which the entire city of Karbalā' (*ard al-muqaddas*) rose bit by bit into the air and came to rest before his house in Shīrāz, whereupon he was informed of the approaching death of Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī, the Shaykhī leader, to whom he here refers as his revered teacher.²⁸

The way in which *sūrat al-fātiḥa* is treated is in some ways characteristic of the rest of the commentary. For the Bāb, meaning may be derived from the book chiefly by way of relating its contents to the Holy Family (Muḥammad, Fāṭima, and the twelve Imāms). To this end, each of the seven verses of the opening *sūra* is

²⁶ Numerous MSS of this work, which represents a commentary on the complete first *juz'* of the Qur'ān, exist; five copies have been consulted for this discussion: Cambridge, Browne F. 8; Teheran Bahā'ī Archives 6014 C (hereafter: TBA); the privately published limited edition, in xerox, found in *Majmū'ah-yi athār-yi hazrat-i A'lā*, Iran National Bahā'ī Archives, Teheran, lxix (1976), 157–410; two uncatalogued MSS in the Princeton University 'Bābī Collection'. Many thanks to Mr James Weinberger, curator of the Near Eastern Collection, Princeton University, for access to these last two items. All references in this paper are to TBA, which has been paginated in a xerox copy.

A word should also be said about the notorious vol. ii of the *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*. According to Nicolas (n. 12), this was among those works by the Bāb which were stolen from him during his pilgrimage (see pp. 45–6). However, MacEoin, 'Critical', 36, lists a MS of the Bibliothèque Nationale which he says may be this missing volume. An examination of BN Or. 5805 indeed discloses that it is a commentary on the 2nd *juz'* of the Qur'ān. At this time, however, it is not possible to ascribe its authorship to the Bāb with complete confidence. The MS in the British Library (BL Or. 7845) is a similar case. Finally, a few pages of a commentary on this 2nd *juz'* are found in the *Majmū'a* (mentioned above), 377–410. There seem to be some important stylistic differences between this material and the preceding *tafsīr*, one example being a much more frequent use of the first person.

²⁷ See the *Tārīkh-i jadīd* as quoted by E. G. Browne, 'Catalogue and Description of 27 Bābī Manuscripts', *JRAS* 24 (1892), 496.

²⁸ TBA 6.

designated as a writing (*kitāb*) of one of these sacred figures. Beginning with Muḥammīd, these include (in this order) 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, Ja'far (al-Ṣādiq), and finally Mūsā ibn Ja'far. As will be seen below, the number seven plays an important part throughout this work.²⁹ In this instance, the seven names represent the different names by which each of the fourteen Pure Ones are known. That is, each of the names Muḥammad, 'Alī, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn may be applied to more than one figure. The names Fāṭima, Ja'far, and Mūsā, however, may only be used once. The name Muḥammad is applicable not only to the prophet himself but also to Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the fifth Imām (d. 113/731-2), Muḥammad al-Jawād, the ninth Imām (d. 220/835), and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī, the twelfth Imām, also known as al-Mahdī (disappeared 260/873-4). The name 'Alī may properly designate not only the first Imām (d. 40/661), but also his grandson the fourth Imām, 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 94/712-13), the eighth Imām, 'Alī al-Riḍā (d. 202/817-18), and 'Alī al-Hādī, the tenth Imām (d. 254/868). The name al-Ḥasan may be applied to both the second Imām (d. 50/670) and the eleventh (d. 260/873-4). The result is that although there are fourteen different personalities involved, it may be said that there are in reality only seven different names. That the Bāb has chosen to associate each verse with one of these seven names has, as will be seen, implications for the way in which he understood one of the more common names for this *sūra*, namely, *al-sab' al-mathānī* (cf. Q. 15/87), the meaning of which is

²⁹ The question, often raised, of Ismā'īlī ('Sevens') influence on the Bāb is probably best answered by emphasizing the importance of Shaykhī influence on his writings (see Rafati, p. 167). The better question to ask would be about the Ismā'īlī influences on the writings of Shaykh Ahmad and the later elaboration of his school, especially by Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī. Following Amanat, the Shaykhī movement may best be understood as a synthesis of three major trends of thought in post-Safavid Shi'ism; the theosophic school of Isfahān (*hikmat-i ilāhī*), which itself benefited from the theoretical Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi and the "Oriental" theosophy (*hikmat-i isbrāq*) of Suhrawardi, the Akhbārī "traditionalist" school of Bahrain which traced its chain of transmission to the early narrators of *hadūth* mostly by the way of "intuitive" perception and the Gnosticism which was diffused in the Shi'ī milieu and was strongly influenced by crypto-Ismā'īlī ideas as well as other heterodoxies of southern and southwestern Iran' (Amanat, p. 29). It would appear that Browne's advice and hope, written nearly one hundred years ago, that 'a full and critical study of the Shaykhī doctrines would . . . form an indispensable preliminary to such a philosophical history of the Bābis as must some day be written' (Browne, 'Bāb, Bābis', *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ii, 300b) remains to be completely acted upon.

disputed by the classical exegetes.³⁰ Later in the commentary, the Bāb states that one of the results of the process of creation is that seven becomes fourteen.³¹ Thus this opening chapter, which is also known as the 'Mother of the Book' (*umm al-kitāb*) because in it is contained the essence of the entire Qur'an, may be likened to the divine will which, in Shaykhī thought, is represented by the pleroma of the Holy Family, and may be understood as containing, *in potentia*, all creation.³²

One of the main concerns of this *tafsīr* is in fact the propounding of this particular metaphysical notion. This, together with the method adopted for such constant reference to the Holy Family as the principle of this process—is the most distinctive and distinguishing feature of the work and may be designated by the rather awkward term 'imamization'. It is unlikely that this represents, at the time and place it was written, a polemic in the context of an immediate Sunnī-Shi'ī debate.³³ Rather, it would seem that this method of interpretation is linked to at least two factors. The first is that it reflects the extreme veneration in which the Imāms were held by the Shaykhīs,³⁴ and, of course, the Shaykhī influence on the author of this work. But perhaps more importantly, especially for under-

³⁰ See below, p. 241; also see Mahmoud Ayoub, 'The Prayer of Islam: A Presentation of *sūrat al-fātiha* in Muslim Exegesis', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Thematic Issue*, 47 (1979), 635-47; esp. 638.

³¹ TBA 112-13, ad Q. 2/29: 'It is He who created for you all that is in the earth, then He lifted Himself to heaven and levelled the seven heavens; and He has knowledge of everything.' The Bāb's Arabic is: *wa'l-sab' idhā karrarat fi'l-ibdā' wa'l-ikhṭirā' s̄arat arb'a 'ashar*.

³² For the idea of *tajallī* much used by the Shaykhīs, but which as a technical term in Muslim discussions of ontology and metaphysics has a much longer history, see Rafati, 69-101. For one of the major antecedents for this usage, see Toshihiko Tzutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, 1984), 152-8.

³³ This 'imamization' is reflected in most *tafsīr* works of Akhbārī Shi'ism. See, e.g., Muḥsin Fayz al-Kāshānī (d. 1092/1680), *al-Safī fi tafsīr kalām Allāh al-wāfi* (n.p., 1283), and Sayyid Ḥāshim al-Bāhrānī (d. 1107/1695), *Tafsīr al-biḥrān* (Tehran, 1334 Shamsī). On these authors and the Akhbārī hermeneutic, see Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, i, chs. 4 and 5.

³⁴ See sect. 2, above. This veneration was one of the main reasons that the Shaykhīya ran foul of the more orthodox interpretations of Shi'ism, which did, in fact, denounce the group as extremists (*ghulāt*) on several occasions. In his *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara* it is clear that the Bāb was sensitive to such charges: Very early on in the work he cites the following tradition from al-Bāqir, the fifth Imām: 'O concourse of the Shi'a . . . Be the true Shi'a—a middle position (*al-nuwwāqat al-wustā*) so that even the extremist (*al-ghālī*), might return to you and the one who lags behind (*al-tālī*) might catch up to you.' See TBA 20.

standing the eventual development of the Bāb's teaching, it allows the Bāb to assert his complete independence from all others, including Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kāzīm (who are not mentioned in the main body of the *tafsīr*³⁵), apart from the Holy Family, and, of course, the Qur'ān itself.

A ready example of this allegorical method is found at Q. 2/26: 'God is not ashamed to strike a similitude even of a gnat, or aught above it.'³⁶ Here the 'gnat' is explained as being 'Alī himself, while 'aught above it', *mā fauqahā*, is none other than Muḥammad. This interpretation is not new with the Bāb; it is found in at least three other well-known Shī'ī commentaries where it is ascribed to the sixth Imām, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. Unlike his practice in similar instances in the commentary, the Bāb cites no authority here. The adoption of this interpretation must therefore be seen as an example of the abundantly attested and universally approved process of selection from the overall tradition (rather than 'creation') as a means of offering an 'original' interpretation, which is so characteristic of Muslim religious scholarship.³⁷ That the Bāb was creative in the modern sense as well will be seen in what follows.

A more extended allegory is found at Q. 2/49-51 in the Bāb's reading of the story of Moses in the wilderness with his troublesome retinue:

(49) And when We delivered you from the folk of Pharaoh who were visiting you with evil chastisement, slaughtering your sons, and sparing your women; and in that was a grievous trial from your Lord. (50) And when We divided for you the sea and delivered you, and drowned Pharaoh's folk while you were beholding. (51) And when We appointed with Moses forty nights then you took to yourselves the Calf after him and you were evildoers.

The Bāb says the verse 49 is being addressed to (*mukhāṭabat*^{an} li-) Fāṭima, her husband, and her father.³⁸ 'Pharaoh' stands for

³⁵ They are, however, referred to in the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*, as e.g., 'the two gates' (*bābayn*). It is just this kind of terminological association which, of course, represents a doctrinal or philosophical affinity that was so instrumental in the Bāb's winning to his cause a number of Shaykhīs.

³⁶ All translations of the Qur'ān are from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford, 1964). In some cases the translation has been adapted slightly.

³⁷ Al-Bahrānī, *al-Burhan*, i. 70; 'Abd 'Alī al-Huwayzī, *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn* (Qom, [1382-5/1962-5]) i. 37-8; al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 1380/1961), i. 38.

³⁸ Two of the MSS add 'and her grandfather' (*jadd*), although this word is not quite so clear in TBA 179.

'Umar,³⁹ while his 'folk' stands for 'wherever *kufr*, *shirk* or *sharr* exist, because these are the various places where he appears (*maẓābir nafsihi*). In this place the specific reference is to Yazīd, the Umayyad caliph responsible for the killing of Ḥusayn, while 'slaughtering of your sons' is a direct reference to 'the sons of the Messenger and their lord, Abū 'Abd Allāh-al-Ḥusayn' (the third Imām).

At this point, the Bāb embarks upon a rather lengthy discussion to justify why God would allow such a heinous deed as the murder of one of the Holy Family to take place. During the course of this discussion, the Bāb compares the killing of Ḥusayn with the sin of Adam. The main point seems to be that this apparent victory of evil over goodness, the murder of an Imām, was not due to any weakness in Ḥusayn. On the contrary, the Imām, because of the strength of his perfect (*mu'tadil*: 'harmonious') body, would have been able to destroy the whole world had such been the divine purpose.

At verse 50 the 'sea' is the 'sea of divine power'. Those being addressed are the 'People of Infallibility' (*ahl al-iṣma*), another name for the Holy Family. The meaning of the second "Pharaoh", says the Bāb, 'is the one who rejected the signs of 'Alī, upon him be peace, which exists in all things.' 'Moses,' at verse 51, 'according to the primary meaning (*fa'l-murād bi'l-ḥaqīqat al-auwalīya*) is Muḥammad.' 'Forty' is understood as referring to 'Alī and the ten proofs (*ḥujaj*) from his progeny. The Bāb explains as follows: 'Alī stands for thirty since he lived for thirty years after the death of Muḥammad. 'Forty' is arrived at when reference is made to the ten remaining Imāms (who were allowed to fulfil their mission, the mission of the last or twelfth Imām being at this time still incomplete and therefore the number 'ten' would not pertain to the length of time spent in the wilderness precisely because the *parousia* of the last Imām will signal the end of this spiritual banishment).⁴⁰ But 'nights' alludes to the concealment of the glory of the Imāms by the darkness of disbelief. One of the evidences of this disbelief was the choosing of the 'calf' which was actually Abū Bakr (*al-auwal*) as a legatee (*waṣī*). Therefore the 'evildoers' are those who gave their allegiance (*bay'ā*) to him.

³⁹ The actual name in the text is *abū'l-shurūr*, 'father of iniquities', a way of referring to one who, in the estimation of the Shī'a, was one of the arch-villains of history. See Goldziher, *Richtungen*, 288, 298.

⁴⁰ Cf. Q. 7/142 where God extends the desert sojourn from 30 to 40 days.

This section is concluded with a reference to the *qā'im*, whose return will cause all that has been alluded to in the foregoing to appear.⁴¹ This is an example of the idea that each divine manifestation (*zuhūr*) sets in motion a replay of the major events of a kind of primal sacred history. Later, in some of his other writings, the Bāb refers to his very first followers, the eighteen 'Letters of the Living', as the reappearance of the fourteen Pure Ones and the four *abwāb*—those leaders of the Shi'a who are believed to have been in contact with the Hidden Imām, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, during the so-called Lesser Occultation.⁴²

In the course of this interpretation, the Bāb alludes to the metaphysics from which it ultimately springs. Repeated reference is made, for example, to the process of divine self-manifestation—*tajallī*. Once again, the commentary on *sūrat al-fātiḥa* provides a characteristic example. The third verse of the opening *sūra* is characterized by the Bāb as the 'book (*kitāb*) of Fāṭima'. He continues by saying that:

God has put in it all that is hers and all that pertains to her. This verse is the Garden of Grace. God has provided its shade for whoever believes in her and loves her after he has properly recognized her—according to what she manifested to him (*li'l-ārif*) by means of his own capacity for understanding. At this time this Garden will open to him.⁴³

The operative phrase here is: *kamā tajallat li'l-ārif labi' bihi*.⁴⁴ An interesting parallel to this usage is found in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikām* of the great mystic Ibn 'Arabī. Here the author discusses *tajallī*, or the way in which God makes himself known to humanity, with these words: *fa-waṣafa nafsahu lanā binā*, 'He has described Himself to us by means of us', or, less concisely: 'He has described Himself to us by means of our own ability and willingness to perceive His description.'⁴⁵ It is not intended to go into great detail here on the relation of the Bāb's thought to that of Ibn 'Arabī, nor is it intended to go into great detail about the nature of the Bāb's thought *per se*; attention is drawn to this subject only by way of indicating the kinds of ideas which find expression during the task

⁴¹ TBA 179–84.

⁴² MacEoin, 'Charismatic', 146. See also Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 32.

⁴³ TBA, 7–8. The Quranic verse thus explained is *al-rahīmān, al-rahīm*—'the Beneficent and Merciful'.

⁴⁴ My thanks to Dr Afnan for suggesting the above translation.

⁴⁵ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikām*, ed. Afifi (Cairo, 1946), i, 53.

the Bāb has set for himself (and which is the subject of this discussion), namely, the interpretation of the Qur'ān. Suffice it here to say that both the Bāb and Ibn 'Arabī appear to rely for the ultimate justification of such a view on Q. 41/53: 'We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that this is the truth.' The frequency with which this idea is encountered in the *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara* throws into sharp relief the curious fact that there seems to be no mention of it at all, at least in the above terms, in the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*.

This metaphysics is related also to ethical concerns in one interesting passage of the commentary on *sūrat al-baqara*, ad Q. 2/3: '[Those] who believe in the unseen, and perform the prayer, and expend of that We have provided them.' Here the Bāb chooses to comment on the significance of 'faith' (*imān*) represented in the above citation by the verb 'believe'. In his introductory remarks to this lengthy section he says the following:

If man knew how God had created His creation, no one would ever blame another. This means that God has created mankind (*khalq*) according to the creature's already existing propensities for acceptance or rejection [of the truth]. The cause of rejection is the same as the cause of acceptance, namely, choice (*ikhtiyār*). God has given to each what he deserves according to his already existing propensity (*bi-mā huwa 'alayhi*). This divine knowledge is the knowledge of potentialities.⁴⁶

The object of the discussion is an extended treatment of the problems surrounding the perennial puzzle posed by the ideas of an individual's freewill and God's role in determining a person's fate. Once again, statements of the Bāb appear to have much in common with the views of Ibn 'Arabī, in particular his notoriously difficult idea of *al-'ayān al-thābita*.⁴⁷ It is probably the case here, as in the above comparison with Ibn 'Arabī, that these coincidences are due more to the traces of Ibn 'Arabī's thought existing in the teaching of the Shaykhis (which, as has been said, is acknowledged to be the single most formative influence on the way in which the Bāb expressed his ideas) than to any direct borrowing by the Bāb from Ibn 'Arabī himself. Indeed, in one of his later *tafāsīr*, the Bāb makes

⁴⁶ TBA 22.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Izutsu, p. 159, where the author defines *al-'ayān al-thābita* as the 'eidetic realities' of possible things. A possible thing becomes actualized in the phenomenal world, each according to the requirements of its own personal archetype.

it clear that he does not agree with Ibn 'Arabī at all on at least one point.⁴⁸

Continuing with the Bāb's commentary on this same verse, we are soon in the presence of another major pattern in the work. The importance of the number seven has already been mentioned and briefly illustrated; a few more brief examples are added here for emphasis.

In his discussion of *imān*, the Bāb speaks of seven different levels or grades (*marātib*). The first is applied to the people of the garden, or paradise, of the Divine Will (*ahl jannat al-mashbūya*). The remaining six grades are respectively applicable to the people of the heaven of the Divine Purpose (*al-irāda*), the sea of the Divine Decree (*baḥr al-qadr*), Eden (*ʿadn*), Divine Permission (*idhn*), Eternity (*kbuld*), and finally Refuge, or Repose (*ma'wā*). Other examples of this seven-fold structure of spirituality may be found in the *tafsīr* at Q. 2/1, where eight gardens, or paradises, and seven hells are described. Here, each hell is but the shadow of the heaven above it. The reason that there are only seven is because the highest heaven casts no shadow, in fact, it is completely isolated from the rest of the structure. The highest heaven represents the Absolute of this apophatic theological model.⁴⁹ At Q. 2/2 we are introduced to seven classes of people;⁵⁰ at Q. 2/5 we read of seven different grades of lordship (*rubūbīya*).⁵¹ A final example is at Q. 2/22, where seven heavens and seven earths are enumerated.⁵²

Another example of the Bāb's exegesis may be taken once again from Q. 2/3, which is divided into two parts for the purposes of the commentary: '[Those] who believe in the unseen, and perform the prayer.' *Ghayb* ('unseen') is interpreted the following way. The Bāb says that it represents Muḥammad because he is truly known only by himself and only God knows his true nature (*kunh*). The particular place (*wa maḥall tafṣīl hādihā'l-ghayb*⁵³) is none other than the currently concealed *Qā'im*, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan. The Bāb then quotes a tradition from the sixth Imām, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, wherein several stages of *ghayb* are enumerated.⁵⁴ It has already been explained how for the Bāb, who at the time of writing this

particular commentary was making use of the terminology and thought of the Shaykhīs,⁵⁵ the number seven represents the totality of the Holy Family. While it may be of some interest to try and determine other influences apart from the Shaykhī school, to insist on such would be to miss this most important point. One of the more pertinent lessons to be learned here, it would seem, is how the number seven can have importance for both the *Ithnā 'Ashariya* ('Twelvers') and the so-called *Sab'iya* ('Sevensers'), or the *Ismā'iliya*.⁵⁶

To conclude this somewhat random sampling from this earliest of the Bāb's commentaries, attention will be paid to his reading of the word *ṣalāt* (prayer, divine service) in this same verse, Q. 2/3. First of all, its performance symbolizes obedience to Muḥammad and his legates and progeny—which in turn represents absolute *walāya*. From the beginning to the end of its performance, it is the 'form of divine aloneness' (*ṣūrat al-tafīd*), the shape of divine unity (*ḥaykal al-tawḥīd*), and the 'outward representation of love or allegiance' (*shabah al-walāya*). However, none but Muḥammad and his Family performs it properly, because *ṣalāt* is the foremost station of distinction between the lover and the Beloved (God). The Holy Family is the collective bearer of this love and as such is the object of the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, 'I was a hidden treasure and desired to be known, therefore I created mankind [*khalq* here refers specifically to the Imāms, according to the Bāb's interpretation] in order to be known.' Thus it is through the Imām that 'lordship' (*rubūbīya*) appeared and 'servitude' (*marbūbīya*) was perfected. The perfect performance of *ṣalāt* by the Imāms is therefore an ability or quality directly from God (*wasf Allāh*) which they have been endowed with by means of their own innate capacities (*lahum bihim*), while in the case of others who perform the *ṣalāt*, this ability comes from the Imāms. This is a perfect example of the Shaykhī imāmology referred to above.⁵⁷

The Bāb then states that the Imāms are in fact the seven *mathānī*. This becomes clear when the worshipper recites the *fātiḥa*, in each

⁵⁵ See, e.g., the description of Shaykh Aḥmad's ontology and his 'absolute distinction between Possible Being and Necessary Being', which is illustrated by a seven-stage hierarchy, Rafati, pp. 103-4.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., one of the four Shī'ī canonical books of *ḥadīth*, al-Kulīnī (d. 328/939 or 329/940), *al-Uṣūl min al-kāfi* (Tehran, n.d.), i. 149, no. 27; one of its chapters is headed: *bāb fī annaḥu lā yakūn shay' fī'l-samā' wa'l-arḍ illā bi-sab'a*.

⁵⁷ See sect. 2, above.

⁴⁸ *Tafsīr sūrat wa'l-'aṣr*, MS Cambridge, Browne F. 9 (6), fo. 71^r.

⁴⁹ In the Bāb's words: *lā dīd lahā [al-jannat al-ulā] wa lā zill, bal fī'l-ḥāqīqa khalwa min al-jinān wa'l-jinān khalwa minhā; wa hiya jannat al-tawḥīd*. TBA 9.

⁵⁰ TBA 14.

⁵¹ TBA 38-40.

⁵² TBA 81-2.

⁵³ TBA 23 has *tafḍīl*, an obvious mistake.

⁵⁴ TBA 23-4.

verse of which God has described one of the Holy Family by means of the tongue of the servant, who, in the course of two prostrations, will have uttered the seven verses of the *fātiha* twice, which is, of course, an affirmation of the sanctity of the Fourteen Pure Ones. If the prayer is performed in this spirit, then the worshipper has succeeded in performing it as properly as he can. The prayer has then become a meeting with the Beloved and the Face of the worshipped One—a true means of spiritual elevation, *mi'rāj*, for the individual believer.⁵⁸

Having briefly examined this very early work of the Bāb, which, it must be remembered, was written before his declaration in which he claimed special spiritual authority and is therefore concerned more with the Shī'ī tradition than with any new system, we will now turn to a *tafsīr* of a very different order.

ii. *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*

Approximately four months after the completion of the commentary on *sūra* 2, the Bāb began his commentary on the Qurānic story of Joseph (*sūra* 12). This *tafsīr* is utterly different in all of its aspects from the *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*. Unlike the previous commentary, this work contains no direct references to doctrinal discussions on such important Shaykhī topics as the Fourth Support, and no architectonic metaphysical representations.⁵⁹ Although allegory and typological exegesis are still among the chief methods of the actual interpretation, they are of a somewhat different character. Indeed, direct interpretation of the verses represents only a portion of the material. In one way, the work is much more structured, taking as its model the Qur'an in its use of *sūra* divisions, and in another way it is much less 'logical', in that it is difficult many times to see just how the text is tied to the Qurānic material itself. It is

⁵⁸ TBA 26. The use of the word *mi'rāj* here brings an association with another distinctive aspect of Shaykhī theology. While the mainstream of both 'orthodoxies', Sunnī and Shī'ī, interpret the account of Muhammad's ascent, *mi'rāj*, through the seven heavens as an actual journey, the Shaykhī school taught that the story should be taken rather more figuratively. Therefore the journey was indeed accomplished, but in the spiritual realm of *hūrqalyā* and not in the world of mundane experience; see Rafati, p. 115. On the Shaykhī understanding of worship, see Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, i. 194.

⁵⁹ There are on occasion lists of 'spiritual types' such as are found in the *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*. See, e.g., the Haifa MS, *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*, 226, where nine types are detailed. Oblique reference to the 'Fourth Support' may also be found, e.g., p. 107.

also a very long work and one in which a variety of concerns, images, terminology, laws, exhortations, and prayers are presented. Interestingly, there seem to be no *ḥadīth*. What is offered in the next few pages is merely a very brief description of the work. The intention is to give some idea of the kinds of problems which the *tafsīr* presents to the student of the history of Qur'an commentary, to point out the dramatic difference between the two works which are the subject of this discussion, and to make some very general conclusions.

The *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*, also known widely as the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*⁶⁰ and the *Aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*, which is of course the name which the Qur'an gives to the *sūra* of Joseph (Q. 12/3), was described in some detail by Rosen in 1877, and discussed by Browne in 1889 and again in 1892.⁶¹ Since then, it has received a certain amount of attention from scholars concerned chiefly with the social history of the Bābī movement.⁶² Several manuscripts of the work exist, two of which have been consulted for the purposes of this study.⁶³ The older of the two, and perhaps therefore the most reliable, was transcribed in 1261/1845 and differs from the later manuscript in many details. The work itself is quite long, the manuscript of 1261 running to 234 pages, with each 9.5 × 17.5 cm.⁶⁴ page bearing 25 lines of closely written text; this copy is today found in Haifa.

The text is modelled after the Qur'an, with its use of disconnected introductory letters, *sūra* divisions, and verse divisions. In fact, the older Haifa manuscript, in imitation of the *sajdat al-tilāwa* tradition in the Qur'an, carries the instruction *sajda wājiba* at various places on the margin of the text where the word *sajada* or some derivative occurs, to indicate that a prostration should be

⁶⁰ 'Colui che s'erge sugli Attributi', as translated by Alessandro Bausani, *Persia Religiosa, da Zarastustra a Bahā'u'llāh* (Milan, 1959), 460.

⁶¹ In the study cited above, n. 5. For the 1889 discussion see Browne, *JRAS* 21 (1889), 904-6.

⁶² Moojan Momen, 'The Trial of Mulla 'Ali Bastami: A Combined Sunni-Shī'ī Fatwa against the Bab', *Iran* 20 (1982), 113-43. This important article contains the translation of several excerpts from the *Tafsīr*. See also Amanat, pp. 264-7 and *passim*; MacEoin, 'Charismatic', 157-62.

⁶³ For a fairly complete list of MSS see MacEoin, 'Critical', 46. The two used by me are xerox copies of the Cambridge, Browne F. 11 (9), dated 1891, and the Haifa copy, dated 1261, which according to MacEoin, 'Critical', p. xxxviii n. 213, was discovered only recently. An addition to MacEoin's list would be the Princeton University 'Bābī Collection', no. 55 (uncatalogued). All further references are to pages of a xerox of the Haifa MS, hereafter cited as QA.

⁶⁴ Dimensions are of the area covered by the text, not the actual size of the page.

performed while reading the particular verse. In addition, the Haifa manuscript supplies at the head of the 111 *sūras* (each chapter of the commentary is called a *sūra* by the Bāb) the number of verses, which in this manuscript is invariably forty-two and the Cambridge manuscript, where the verses number forty, indicates the place of revelation, which is invariably Shīrāz.⁶⁵ The number of verses is thought to represent the *abjad* value of the word *balā*, which according to the Qur'ān, was the word used to convey man's assent to the primordial divine covenant (Q. 7/172).⁶⁶

Immediately following this comparatively technical information comes the standard Islamic *basmala*: 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'. This occurs without exception at the beginning of each chapter and is followed by the verse from the Qur'ān which is to be the subject of the commentary. However, the first *sūra* of the *Tafsīr* does not contain such a citation, and is anyway of a slightly different order from the rest, being something of an introduction.

Continuing this imitation of the form of the Qur'ān, the Bāb has placed between the *āya* to be commented upon the main text of each *sūra* (except four⁶⁷), a series of disconnected letters, some of which are Quranic. Thus chapter 3, *sūrat al-imān*, bears the two letters *tā'-hā'*, while the *sūra* immediately following, *al-mādīna*, carries the un-Quranic *alif-lām-mīm-tā'-hā'*. While the vast majority of these sets of letters must remain at this stage somewhat mysterious, it is interesting to note that at the head of *sūras* 108 and 109, the following combinations occur: *'ayn-lām-yā'* and *mīm-hā'-mīm-dāl*, giving the names 'Alī and Muḥammad. The titles of these two *sūras* are respectively *al-dhikr* and *al-'abd*, both of which represent titles assumed by the Bāb in the course of his commentary.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Thus a typical chapter heading in the Cambridge MS would appear as follows: *Sūrat al-imān, wa hiya Shīrāziya, wa hiya arba'ūn āya.*

⁶⁶ Dr Muhammad Afnan, personal communication. Concerning the Cambridge MS, Browne notes in 'Some Remarks', *JRAS* 24 (1892), 262, that the *abjad* value of the Quranic *li*, 'to me' or 'before me', is 40. The prepositional phrase refers of course to the dream of Joseph: 'Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon: I saw them bowing down before me (*li*)' (Q. 12/4). In either case, the number of verses is taken to be symbolic of either the acceptance, or the assertion, of spiritual authority.

⁶⁷ *Sūras* 1, 2, 52, and 95 in QA. Incidentally, there are many blank spaces at the heading of the *suwar* in the Cambridge MS. It appears that the scribe intended to insert rubrications in these blanks which would carry such information as the number of verses, and so on.

⁶⁸ QA 223 and 225, respectively.

It is likely, therefore that these two names pertain first of all to the Bāb himself (Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad) and indirectly to the first Imam and the Prophet Muḥammad. Needless to say, the ambiguity was no accident.

Following the disconnected letters there are usually one or perhaps two verses (terminations of which are marked in QA by the typical Quranic verse-marker, an independent *hā'* '*marbūta*, and in the Cambridge manuscript by means of a space), which offer some variation on the frequent Quranic introductory formula: *dhālika al-kitāb . . .* (Q. 2/2), or *kitāb^{un} unzila ilayka . . .* (Q. 7/2), which has been shown to be one of the common elements shared by those *suwar* which bear disconnected letters.⁶⁹ A few examples will serve as illustrations.

Sūra 1, *al-mulk*, begins after the title material described above and the respective Quranic verse as follows:

(1) *al-ḥamdu li-llāh alladhī nazzala al-kitāb 'alā 'abdihi bi'l-ḥaqq li-yakūna li'l-'ālamīn sirāj^{an} wabhāj^{an}.*⁷⁰

Sūra 2, *al-'ulamā'*: (1) *alif lām mīm, dhālika al-kitāb min 'indi Allāh, al-ḥaqq fi shān al-dhikr qad kāna bi'l-ḥaqq ḥawl al-nār manzūl^{an}; (2) wa inna nahnu qad ja'alnā'l-āyāt fi dhālika'l-kitāb mubīn^{an} [sic].*⁷¹

Sūra 3, *al-imān*: (1) *tā' hā'*; (2) *Allāh qad anzala al-Qur'ān 'alā 'abdihi li-ya'lama al-nās anna Allāh qad kāna 'alā kulli shay' qadīr^{an}.*⁷²

Sūra 37, *al-tā'bir*: (1) *fā' 'ayn sīm nūn*; (2) *al-ḥamdu li-llāh alladhī anzala 'alā 'abdihi al-kitāb li-yakūna 'alā'l-'ālamīn bi'l-kalimat al-'alī shahīd^{an}.*⁷³

The slightly variant *sūra* 59, *al-afīda*, just as one example has the following, which, is however still concerned with the way God communicates to mankind:

(1) *kāf hā' 'ayn šād*; (2) *Allāh qad akhbārā'l-'ibād bi'l-ism al-akbar: an lā ilāh illā huwa al-ḥayy al-qayyūm.*⁷⁴

Finally, the example of *sūra* 111, *al-mu'minin*, is offered by way of emphasizing the more or less standard pattern which obtains throughout the work:

(1) *alif lām mīm*; (2) *innā nahnu qad ja'alnā baynakum wa bayna al-qurā'l-mubāraka min ba'd al-bāb hādihā unās^{un} tāhirīn yad'ūna al-nās ilā dīn Allāh al-akbar wa lā yakhāfūna min dūn Allāh al-ḥaqq 'an shay'*,

⁶⁹ Alford Welch, 'al-Kur'ān, EI² v. 414a.

⁷⁰ QA 3.

⁷¹ QA 5.

⁷² QA 6.

⁷³ QA 67.

⁷⁴ QA 116.

ulā'ika hum qad kānū aṣḥāb al-riḍwān fī umm al-kitāb maktūb^m; (3) *wa innā nahnu qad ja'alnā hādihā'l-kitāb āyāt li-ulī al-albāb alladhīna yusabbihūna al-layl wa'l-nahār wa lā yasturūna* [cf. Q. 21/20] *min amr. Allāh al-ḥaqq min laday al-bāb 'alā dharra min ba'd al-shay' qitmir^m*.⁷⁵

This then gives some idea of the Bāb's conscious desire to make his *Tafsīr* structurally resemble or 'imitate' the Qur'ān. It is doubtful whether one of the reasons *sūra* 12 was chosen was because the number of its verses closely approximates the total number of Quranic *suwar*,⁷⁶ although the effect of this coincidence was undoubtedly not lost upon the readers of the commentary. The Quranic story of Joseph is a favourite among Muslims because it contains within the confines of a single sustained narrative many subjects of importance to Islam including its link with past religions.⁷⁷ The *sūra* had also been the subject of earlier commentaries and elaborations; thus, the renowned Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) composed a somewhat mystical *tafsīr* on this *sūra*.⁷⁸

The great mystic, Ibn 'Arabī also took up the Quranic Joseph in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as a basis for his discussion of the spiritual imagination.⁷⁹ It would seem also that the choice of the *sūrat Yūsuf* as the subject of this commentary of the Bāb's is connected with a long tradition which reveres the story of Joseph as representing the spiritual mystery of *taqīya*, or cautious concealment, which is so important to Shī'ī religiosity in general,⁸⁰ and Shaykhī religious thinking in particular. According to Nabil, Mullā Ḥusayn, the young Shaykhī who was the first to accept the Bāb's claim, had once asked the Shaykhī leader, Sayyid Kāzim Rashtī, to write a commentary on *sūrat Yūsuf*. His teacher responded that such a task

⁷⁵ QA 231.

⁷⁶ *Sūra* has 112 verses, while 17 and 12 both have 111. No *sūra* has 114 verses, the number which corresponds exactly to the total number of *suwar* in the Qur'ān.

⁷⁷ According to al-Tha'labī (d. 437/1036), *Qisāṣ al-anbiyā'*, the story of Joseph is the most beautiful (*ahsan*) 'because of the lesson concealed in it, on account of Yūsuf's generosity and its wealth of matter, in which prophets, angels, devils, jinn, men, animals, birds, rulers and subjects play a part'. See B. Heller, 'Yūsuf ibn Ya'qub', EI², ad loc.

⁷⁸ Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī, *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* (Tehran, 1895). The work has virtually nothing in common with the Bāb's, except of course the Quranic citations from the *sūra* of Joseph.

⁷⁹ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, i. 99-106.

⁸⁰ As when Jacob warns Joseph not to tell his dream to his brothers (Q. 12/5). The concealment (*ghayba*) of the Imām is considered a kind of *taqīya*. See R. Strothmann, 'Taḳīya', EI¹, ad loc.

was beyond his abilities, but that the 'great One, who comes after me will, unasked, reveal it for you. That commentary will constitute one of the weightiest testimonies of His truth, and one of the clearest evidences of the loftiness of His position.'⁸¹ Rashtī's response here would appear to be conditioned by numerous *ḥadīths* which say that the *qā'im* will resemble Joseph in several respects.⁸² Throughout the Bāb's commentary it seems clear that he is seeing himself as Joseph, in that the Quranic story is read as a prefiguration, however allegorical, of the Bāb's own mission.

After the disconnected letters and the above-mentioned introductory verses which claim divine revelation, the next section of a given *sūra* begins. It is this section which is most difficult to characterize because of the variety of concerns which may appear in it. Generally speaking, the last section of a *sūra* is where the Bāb turns his attention directly to the verse of the Qur'ān under which his commentary is written. The method of exegesis, then, is usually simple paraphrase of the Qur'ān in which the Bāb makes various substitutions with words which give a meaning much more specific to his own claims and situation. In the course of his exegesis, there is never recourse to the usual markers of an interpretative statement such as *ay* or *ya'nī* ('that is'), or *aqūlu* ('I say'). Rather, the exegetical equivalences are offered by the Bāb as much closer to the Quranic material than would be the case if the above words, along with the semantic distance to be travelled that their use implies, were used.⁸³ Before giving examples of this kind of commentary, it may be of interest to discuss in some detail the first *sūra* of the *Tafsīr*.

The *sūrat al-mulk*, which is in fact the part of the work which was written in the presence of Mullā Ḥusayn on the night of 22 May 1844, forms a kind of introduction to the whole, and is unusual in that it is not written under a verse of Qur'ān *sūra* 12.

⁸¹ Nabil, 59.

⁸² Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Qummī ibn Bābūya, *Ikmāl al-dīn wa itmām al-ni'ma fi iḥbāt al-raja'a* (Najaf, 1369/1970), 18.

⁸³ This method may be a reflex of the idea contained in the famous Shī'ī *ḥadīth* which quotes the Imām al-Bāqir as: 'It is we who are the meanings (*ma'ānī*). We are the Hand of God, His vicinity, His tongue, His command, His decision, His knowledge, His truth. We are the Face of God which is turned toward the terrestrial world in your midst. He who recognizes us has certitude for an *imām*. He who rejects us has Hell as an *imām*'; cited in Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, i. 194. The interesting statement 'we are the meanings', among other things, takes for granted the absolute spiritual authority implied in the act of paraphrase.

Evidence that it is indeed part of a commentary on the Qur'ān does not occur until well into the text, where the following statement is found:

God hath decreed that this book, in explanation (*fī tafsīr*) of the 'best of stories' . . . should come forth from Muḥammad, son of Ḥasan, son of 'Alī, son of Mūsā, son of Ja'far, son of Muḥammad, son of 'Alī, son of Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī, son of Abū Tālib, unto his servant [the Bāb] that it may be a proof of God on the part of the Remembrance (*dhikr*) reaching the two worlds.⁸⁴

The title of this *sūra* is related to the fact that the entire chapter, rather than dealing with subjects connected to an understanding of the twelfth chapter of the Qur'ān, is a sustained and impassioned challenge first to Muḥammad Shāh, the reigning monarch of Iran at that time, and then to his Prime Minister, Ḥājī Mīrzā Aqāsī, to submit to the command of the Remembrance (*dhikr*, that is, the Bāb). In the course of this *sūra* we see several elements which are, however, characteristic of the whole book. The first of these is the proclamation of the Bāb's spiritual rank, either as *bāb* or *dhikr*, to name only two of the several different designations which are used throughout the text.⁸⁵ Then there are the fluent paraphrase of the Qur'ān, the call to absolute obedience, the summons to the world beyond Iran, the reference to laws (*aḥkām*), the language, and the imagery which is striking in the extreme. An example of this last is the Bāb's juxtaposition of opposites. In the *sūrat al-mulk*, one reads, for example: *inna al-nār fī nuqtati'l-mā' li'llāh al-ḥaqq sājid^{an} 'alā'l-ard* ('the fire which is in the drop of water is itself prostrate upon the earth before God, the Reality').⁸⁶ This may, of course, be a simple case of an echo of basic alchemical imagery, particularly in this instance; in later *suwar*, however, this combining of opposites appears to take on original characteristics which seem to somehow designate the source of the Bāb's inspiration.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Trans. Browne, *JRAS* 21 (1889), 908.

⁸⁵ Some others are the word (*kalīma*), *qā'im* of the year one thousand, the blessed tree in Sinai, and the resurrection. For a discussion of these and other designations of spiritual authority, see M. Afnan and W. S. Hatcher, 'Western Islamic Scholarship and Bahā'ī Origins', *Religion*, 15 (1985), 29–51.

⁸⁶ In this same *sūra* the following statement occurs: *wa inna qad sayyarnā'l-jibāl 'alā'l-ard* (cf. Q. 18/47) *wa'l-nujūm 'alā'l-arsh ḥawl al-nār fī qutb al-mā' min ladā'l-dhikr bi'llāh al-ḥaqq* ('We have set the mountains in motion upon the earth, and the stars upon the Throne around the fire which is in the point [lit. axis] of water in the presence of the Remembrance in God (*bi'llāh*), the Reality').

⁸⁷ Another more dramatic example of this 'figure' is: 'We have apportioned

This third section of a given *sūra* may also consist of a running exegetical paraphrase of extended sections of the Qur'ān. For example, chapters 52 and 53, *al-faḍl* and *al-ṣabr*,⁸⁸ present a detailed rewriting of the first fifty or so verses of the second *sūra* of the Qur'ān, *al-baqara*.

At Q. 2/2–5, for example, we have:

Qur'ān

That is the book wherein there is no doubt, a guidance to the godfearing who believe in the Unseen, and perform the prayer, and expend of that We have provided them; who believe in what has been sent down to thee and what has been sent down before thee, and have faith in the Hereafter; those are upon guidance from their Lord, those are the ones who prosper.

Bāb

By thy Lord! Thou [the Hidden Imām, and by implication, the Bāb himself] art the Book wherein there is no doubt, and thou art praiseworthy in the estimation of God. Those who believe in the Remembrance of God, in his *ghayba*, and rule among mankind with truth by means of his verses, we will, in very truth,⁸⁹ bestow upon them, as a blessing from Our side, a great reward. Those are upon a guidance with the Remembrance of God, and those are the ones who hastened first, in truth, in the Book of God.⁹⁰

Another more extended example of this running paraphrase may be found in *sūras* 80 to 95 inclusive,⁹¹ which treat most of the Quranic material from Q. 10/57 up to the first few verses of Q. 17. A random example is the Bāb's rewriting of Q. 10/87.

Qur'ān

And We revealed unto Moses and his brother, 'Take you, for your people, in Egypt certain houses;

Bāb

And We revealed to Moses and his brother, 'Take you, [or "set aside"] in the Egypt of the hearts, for the

mountains on the earth, and placed the earth upon the water, and the musky air [we have caused to come forth] from under the hot coldness (*al-harr al-bard*)', QA 137. Numerous other examples could be cited. The coincidence of opposites is a frequent topos in this work; the Bāb's use of it is undoubtedly influenced by such important traditions as the *khutbat al-tatanjīya*. For a fuller discussion see B. T. Lawson, 'The Qur'ān Commentary of the Bāb', Ph.D. thesis, McGill University (1987).

⁸⁸ QA 100–5.

⁸⁹ 'In very truth' translates a frequent 'refrain' throughout this work: *'alā'l-ḥaqq bi'l-ḥaqq*. The translation does not carry the all-important allusion to God, *al-ḥaqq*, 'The Truth' *par excellence*.

⁹⁰ QA 100.

⁹¹ QA 160–95.

Qur'ān

make your houses a direction for men to pray to; and perform the prayer; and do thou give good tidings to the believers.

Bāb

people of the earth, houses consecrated to the exclusive unity (*ahādīya*) of the Most Great Remembrance of God, the Living, and He is God, the Knowing, the Judge. And verily God made them [houses] a direction for men to pray to, and to perform all the prayers in, so give good tidings to the sincere servants of God.⁹²

As mentioned above, the fourth section of a given *sūra* usually returns to the verse of the Qur'ān under which it is written. The method again is paraphrase, of which the last two of the following three examples are characteristic. The second chapter, *sūrat al-'ulamā*, is written under Qur'ān 12/1, '*alif-lām-rā*'; these are the verses of the Manifest Book'. The passage thus ends with a commentary on these three disconnected letters. The Bāb says that God created the letter *alif* to represent that servant of His [the Bāb himself?] who is strong in the divine cause (*amr*). The letter *lām* signifies the ascendancy of his rule over the rule of the book [the Qur'ān?]. The letter *rā* was made by God for the spreading (*inbisāt*) of His cause according to the way it has been ordained in the Mother of the Book.

Sūra 71, *al-qalam*, is written under Qur'ān 12/70: 'And when he had equipped them with their equipment, he put his drinking-cup into the saddlebag of his brother. Then a herald proclaimed, "Ho, camel-riders, you are robbers!"' The Bāb's paraphrase of the verse is as follows:

Verily, We command the angels to place the drinking-cup of the Remembrance in the saddlebag of the believers, by the leave of God, the Exalted, and God is Knower of all things. O crier (*al-mu'adhdhin*), cry out! O camel-riders, you are robbers. Indeed the cup of the Remembrance is concealed from you in the highest station, in very truth. And God is the Preserver of all things. And God is powerful over all things.⁹³

The metaphors in the above commentary (drinking-cup/Remembrance; saddlebag/believers) are similar to the previously cited 'Egyp't of the hearts'. In this instance, however, they refer to a

⁹² QA 161.⁹³ QA 145.

subject raised in the *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqāra*, namely one's innate, and in a sense predetermined, capacity for accepting or rejecting the Imām as the locus of divinity, in this case represented by the Bāb. The believers are therefore privileged to be so because they hold within themselves the 'signs' of the Remembrance, here represented by 'drinking-cup'. Likewise, the 'robbers' are prevented from accepting the truth because these signs have been withheld from them.⁹⁴

The *sūrat al-hajj*, number 103, is written under Qur'ān 12/102: 'This is of the tidings of the Unseen that We reveal to thee; thou wast not with them when they agreed upon their plan, devising.' The Bāb's paraphrase is as follows:

This (*dhālika*) *tafsīr* is of the tidings of *al-'amā*, written upon the leaf of the heart by the permission of God, the Exalted, in the vicinity of the sacred fire. Verily, God has revealed to you the tidings of the Unseen while you were the most Great Truth, when their word conflicted, lying. God is, in very truth, Witness over you.⁹⁵

5. CONCLUSIONS

In order to account for the triggering of the interpretative process, we must assume at the outset that the production and reception of discourse . . . obey a very general rule of pertinence, according to which if a discourse exists there must be a reason for it. So that when at first glance a given discourse does not obey this rule, the receiver's spontaneous reaction is to determine whether the discourse might not reveal its pertinence through some particular manipulation. 'Interpretation' . . . is what we call this manipulation.⁹⁶

The examples of the textual concerns of *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* which have been provided here, along with the general description of the work, are sufficient to make possible a few very general observations. While it is clear that the work is most unusual *vis-à-vis* the *tafsīr* tradition, or for that matter any other genre of Arabic literature, it

⁹⁴ On this idea see Corbin's discussion of *isomorphisme* in *En Islam Iranien*, iv, 286-300.⁹⁵ QA 212. *Al-'amā* is a frequent term in this work. For a treatment of its spiritual significance, see Stephen Lambden, 'An Early Poem of Mirza Husayn 'Alī Bahā'u'llāh: The Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing (Rashh-i 'Amā)', *Bahā'i Studies Bulletin*, 3, no. 2, pp. 4-114, esp. 42 to end.⁹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolism and Interpretation*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca, 1982), 28.

would appear that by categorizing the work as *tafsīr* the author wished it to be read and judged in this context. This, of course, raises the question of what in fact distinguishes *tafsīr* from other types of literature. It should not be assumed that since the Bāb was not a typical religious scholar that he was therefore unaware of the standard works of *tafsīr*,⁹⁷ or that he thought this work of his should be received as a continuation of that tradition. Rather, the contrary would seem to be the case, particularly in view of the earlier *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*, which, however different from the main sources of orthodox Shī'i Qur'ān commentary it may be, exhibits many of the usual approaches and methods found in those works. In composing the later commentary, the Bāb was attempting a break with a tradition which he perceived as moribund, particularly so in the context of the advent of a new order of which he himself claimed to be the herald. In addition, as was noted earlier, there seems to have been a certain amount of eschatological expectation centred on the appearance of one who would produce a commentary on the twelfth *sūra* of the Qur'ān.

Browne's statements that the work is inappropriately titled notwithstanding, it is abundantly clear that not only does it offer interpretative statements on the *sūra* of Joseph, but comments on a large portion of the rest of the Qur'ān in the process, albeit usually by means of paraphrase. Unusual, there is no doubt. To say that it is not interpretative, or that it does not make clear what the Qur'ān meant, at least to the Bāb, is either not to have read it, or to have imposed upon it too rigid a notion about what constitutes *tafsīr*, which is after all fundamentally only 'explanation'. Given the method of allegorical and typological exegesis which is fluently and ceaselessly expressed in the constant use of such rhetorical devices as metaphor and simile, in addition to the 'heresy of paraphrase' and the exploitation of ambiguity—all of which have been cast in an unabashed imitation of the Qur'ān⁹⁸—the work is clearly one of

⁹⁷ e.g., one of the few mentions of any but an Imām in the *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara* is a reference to 'the author of *al-Sāfi*', i.e., Muḥsin Fayd Kāshānī, author of the *Tafsīr al-sāfi*. The reference itself is not flattering; see *Majmū'a*, 402. Kāshānī is criticized for his purely superficial (*qishr mahd*) interpretation of Q. 2/143. In addition, the Bāb says that he has not referred to the *tafsīr* of the '*ulama*' because 'such is not worthy of the purpose of this book'. It must be noted that this reference comes in the course of the commentary on the second *juz*' of the Qur'ān, the authorship of which is open to debate.

⁹⁸ The Bāb repeatedly asserts that the work is in fact the *same* Qur'ān that was

interpretation. The work itself is the result of a re-ordering of the basic elements of the scripture of Islam which have been fully internalized and finally transformed by the apparently opposite processes of imitation and inspiration to become finally an original 'act' of literature. Taken as a whole, this remarkable work of the 25 year-old merchant from Shirāz, representing as it does a text within a text which strives to interpret itself, offers a concrete and literary example of a singularly heroic attempt to transform what became known much later, and in a culture quite alien to his own, as the hermeneutic circle,⁹⁹ into a hermeneutic spiral.

By comparing these two works, which were written at about the same time, we see how differently the act of interpretation, yet springing from the same mind, is capable of expressing itself. And with the second work, not only do we have a new example for the history of *tafsīr*, but because the work itself is a call to action, we also have the rather startling example of *tafsīr* directly affecting history—in a sense, becoming history.¹⁰⁰

revealed to Muḥammad; see, e.g., Adib Taherzadeh, *et al.*, *Selections from the Writings of the Bāb* (Haifa, 1978), 67.

⁹⁹ Cf. Mohammed Arkoun, 'Lecture de la Fātiḥa', in his *Lectures du Coran* (Paris, 1982), 41–67, esp. 49. Here the author, who appears to be speaking from a Sunni standpoint, makes a reference to Ricoeur's definition of the 'cercle herméneutique' in setting forth what he considers to be the eight principles, either explicit or implicit, of classical exegesis. I stress the Sunni nature of the schema because in it he presents his seventh principle in the following terms: 'La disparition du prophète a enfermé tous les croyants dans un cercle herméneutique; chacun est confronté, désormais, au texte qui re-présente la Parole; chacun doit "croire pour comprendre et comprendre pour croire".' By comparison, it would appear that the same thing occurred within Twelver Shī'i Islam, or at least was perceived later to have occurred, with the disappearance of the twelfth Imām.

¹⁰⁰ I am grateful to Prof. H. Landolt, McGill University, for his interest, encouragement, and assistance with this paper.