The Qur'an and the Baha'i Faith

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Chapter 7

The Qur’an and the Baha’i Faith

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And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea were ink, with seven
more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted: for,
verily, God is almighty, wise.
(Q 31:27, Asad)

T
he Baha’i faith was born in Iran and for this reason it trails many
Iranian clouds of glory. One of these is the high degree to which
Islam and the Qur’an have had a great impact on the form and
contents of the Baha’i revelation and the Baha’i religion. The Baha’i
writings
are steeped in the Qur’an and, to a lesser degree, also steeped in hadith –
a
topic not pursued here. Qur’anic quotations in Baha’i scripture are indi-
cated in published works and manuscripts. However, Qur’anic diction and
vocabulary is such a pervasive element of the Baha’i writings that it would
be impossible to indicate every instance of influence or presence. The Qur’an
has had, down the centuries, an unparalleled influence on Muslim culture in
general and, from the earliest times, on Irano-Islamic culture in general, and
an even more intense impact upon specifically religious works, whether
mystical, philosophical, theological, or poetic, written by Iranians in both
Persian and Arabic.1 The Qur’anic content of the Baha’i writings is a
source
Lewis, ‘Persian Literature and the Qur’an.’

of pride and inspiration among Baha’is as it obviously was among the central
founding figures of the Baha’i faith: The Bab (d. 1850), Baha’ullah (d.
1892),
Abdulbaha’ (d. 1921) and Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957). Although, as long ago
as 1938, Shoghi Effendi had instructed the Baha’i community to study the
Qur’an thoroughly, it has not yet been completely and systematically tracked
and indexed throughout all Baha’i publications, even though some steps in

this direction have been made. One of the biggest factors in this comparatively slow progress has to do with the pervasiveness of the Qur'an throughout the Baha'i writings, the numerous different contexts and functions involved and, perhaps, most definitively, the truly vast literary terrain involved. The literary output of the founding figures mentioned above, in addition to a vast secondary literature in hundreds of languages, constitutes a textual base for such a study that is daunting in every way. Much of the Baha'i corpus has been published, but much more remains in manuscript form. However, it is possible to gauge the importance of the Qur'an in Baha'i
scripture by taking account of its influence and presence in the two earliest major compositions of the Bab. As we will see in what follows, these two works are in fact tafsirs, or Qur'an commentaries. One of these is considered the inaugural work of the Baha'i era.

From one point of view, the depth of the Qur'anic roots of the Baha'i faith is perfectly natural and unsurprising for, despite laughable attempts to cast the Babi and Baha'i religions as tools of foreign intervention and manipulation (British, Russian, American), no compelling evidence has been bought to bear to counter the clear and quite reasonable assumption that the Baha'i faith is an indigenous Islamicate development. In the course of its genesis it relied solely on the inner resources of Islamic intellectual and religious culture to configure its own distinctive religious identity. Obviously, the nineteenth century was a time of intense and burgeoning globalism, and this also figured in the process. But the Bab – an Arabic word meaning 'gate' or 'door,' and the title by which a sayyid from the Iranian
merchant class, Ali Muhammad Shirazi, has come to be most widely known – and Baha'ullah – an Arabic title meaning 'the glory or splendor of
God' and the honorific of Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri – both engaged with the Qur'an at the deepest levels of their writing. They adduced it as proof of their respective visions and claims, they commented upon it in both

traditional and modernist modes, and they clearly considered it an inviolable and sacred record of divine revelation.

Abdulbaha', the son of Baha'ullah, also clearly knew the Qur'an very well and quoted it frequently in his talks and writings, as did Shoghi Effendi.2 The Universal House of Justice, the administrative and spiritual authority for Baha'is today, also engages the Qur'an in its various communications and publications. The basic doctrinal position is that the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an and Islam represent essential, holy communication from God to humanity and that the Qur'an, apart from Baha'i sacred writings, represents the only fully authentic scripture to which humanity might turn. As mentioned above, Shoghi Effendi unambiguously instructed the Baha'is to study it with the aid of sources that are fair and unbiased, and to deepen their understanding of the similarities and differences

between Islam and the Baha'i faith:

[The Baha'is] must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islam – the source and background of their Faith – and approach reverently and with a mind purged from preconceived ideas the study of the Qur'an which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Babi and Baha'i Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God.3

It may be speculated that the young Baha'i community of the West had been at least partly attracted to the Baha'i message, either wittingly or unwittingly, by its significant and compelling Qur'anic content. This content gave that message a distinctive voice and doctrinal shape and caused it to distinguish itself as a new religion in the West, where, for example, what might be thought the Islamicate 'epic of humanity' was being

While Shoghi Effendi was still a baby, his grandfather Abdulbaha', the head of the Baha'i faith
at the time, arranged for weekly visits from a local Qur'an reciter to chant to the future Guardian
of the Cause of God. Rabbani, Priceless Pearl, p. 9.
Shoghi Effendi, Advent of Divine Justice, p. 49.

heard with new ears.4 It is possible that Shoghi Effendi, in making the study of the Qur'an obligatory for the Baha'is, wanted them to come to terms with this fact, to study the genetic, umbilical relation between the Qur'an and the Baha'i scripture in order for them to be able to distinguish,
precisely, what was Islamic from what was Baha'i.

The distinguishing watchword of the Baha'i message, from the beginning, has been: One God, One Religion and One Humanity. To a Muslim, such a statement is unremarkable and unexceptionable. However, during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth, in the major centers of Europe and North America where this Baha'i message was being actively promulgated, it was received as a refreshing and much-needed religious orientation for the new, burgeoning and quite heady modernity that was rapidly transforming the planet into a global village. To those who became followers of the religion of Baha'ullah, this watchword had the metaphysical heft of a perfectly timed divine intervention which some saw as a metaphor for the return of Christ and others saw, less figuratively, as simply the return of Christ in the person of Baha'ullah or, in some cases, his son Abdulbaha'. Other Baha'i teachings promoted at this time, especially by Abdulbaha' during his travels to Europe and North America during the pre-World War I years, 1911–13, were: the abolition of war, including 'holy war'; the equality of men and women; the independent investigation of truth, and the condemnation of

taqlid – ‘blind imitation’ in matters of religion; the abolition of the clergy;
the establishment of a universal auxiliary language; that religious truth is not absolute but relative; that there have been messengers from God since the beginning of creation and there will always be messengers from God; the purpose of divine revelation is the promotion of an ‘ever-advancing civilization’; the centrality of consultation (shura) for problem-solving; compulsory education; and, the harmony of science and religion. All these ideas and principles (and many others) were presented by Abdulbaha’ as spiritually mandated religious law about which there could be no

Recent scholarship on the early growth of the Baha’i community in the West, from the last
decade of the nineteenth century onward, tends to support this. See Osborn, Religion and
Relevance; Stockman, ‘Abdu’l-Baha in America; Stockman, Thornton Chase. On the Islamic ‘epic
of humanity,’ see Lawson, Qur’an, Epic and Apocalypse, pp. 1–26.

disagreement. Thus, unity of belief and practice was also a key teaching of the Baha’i faith, and continues to be so. Disagreement among the Baha’is has always been forbidden, and so we see another example of how the Islamic doctrine of tawhid has truly irradiated and given a distinct identity to the Baha’i faith. Those who became Baha’is did so, and those who continue to become Baha’is do so, because they are convinced that God had spoken to humanity once again through Baha’ullah and because they see in such a God-given spiritual regime great potential for healing the ills that beset humanity.

Those familiar with the Qur’an, Islam and the history of Islamic thought (especially theology, philosophy and mysticism) will immediately see the many connections and derivations from Islam these principles indicate. And, in many cases, such as the equality of the sexes and the importance of consultation, many could immediately cite specific Qur’anic verses which first suggested such religious verities. One could say that the Qur’an provides much of the DNA and molecular structure of the Baha’i vision and to fully understand the Baha’i reception of the Qur’an therefore requires tools and methods that are in some ways analogous to those recently developed for use in physics, biology and even archeology. The suggestion here is that the Baha’i faith presents itself as both problem and tool in such an investigation.

The connection between the Qur’an and the Baha’i faith is literary (for lack of a better word) and so it is a living one. There can be no question of arriving at some immovable, permanent conclusion for the question because the question itself is in motion. The Qur’anic molecules are Suras, Ayas, words and ideas connected to other concepts that shape culture and behavior and are in turn shaped by culture and usage. Ultimately, the Baha’i faith represents a striking example of how it is possible to be a community

of the Qur'an and not be Muslim – in short, it demonstrates how the Qur'an is the property of humanity.5

The Baha'i faith came to be in two major phases: the first was the Babi phase (1844–63); the second, the Baha'i phase (from 1863). In both phases the engagement with the Qur'an was key. In the Babi phase the first two

On the Qur'an as the property of humanity, see Buck, 'Discovering.'

major works of the Bab were Qur'an commentaries, the second of which is considered the first work of the Baha'i era or dispensation. In the Baha'i phase, the first major doctrinal work by Baha'ullah, the Kitab-i Iqan, was a Qur'an commentary in the sense that the author explained various Qur'an verses that spoke of Judgment Day, the Hour and the Afterlife. In this work, written in both Persian and Arabic, Baha'ullah also explained numerous prophetic, messianic or apocalyptic hadiths and also engaged in some Bible interpretation. Whether from the point of view of Qur'anic exegesis or from the point of view of hadith commentary, the purpose was two-fold. First, it was to demonstrate to the reader that the Qur'an and hadith had fully predicted the appearance (zuhur) of the Bab, his proclamation (da'wa), claims and the activities of his followers. The second purpose of the book was to establish the credentials of Baha'ullah, then a follower of the Bab, in preparation for his eventual claims to be a divine manifestation (mazhar-i ilahi).6 This book, known in English as The Book of Certitude, has been translated into countless languages and it is primary scripture for the global Baha'i community. One scholar has called it the world's most widely read non-Muslim Qur'an commentary.

Both in principle and in practice, The Book of Certitude helped crystallize Baha'i identity and lent considerable impetus to its missionary expansion. By virtue of its diffusion in 205 or more sovereign and non-sovereign countries and territories, the Kitab-i Iqan emerges as the most influential work of Qur'anic exegesis outside of the Muslim world. Though the Qur'an is not, strictly speaking, part of the Baha'i scriptural corpus, the importance of this fact of non-Muslim Qur'anic exegesis may be instanced in the parallel diffusion of Jewish scriptures (the so-called Old Testament) at the hands of Christian missionaries. What began as a Babi text has ended up to be the principal doctrinal work of a nascent world religion.7

What Christopher Buck says here about the relationship between the Qur'an and what has been described as Baha'ullah's most important doctrinal work could – with some necessary adjustment and nuance – apply to the entire corpus of all his published works. These works may be thought

Buck, Symbol and Secret, esp. pp. 257–74 on the 'messianic secret' the text conceals.

Buck, 'Kitab-i-Iqan.'

to culminate, at least theologically and doctrinally, with his book of laws, al-Kitab al-Aqdas / Kitab-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book, composed in the prison city of Akka (Acco), Ottoman Palestine, 1873. As mentioned, research on the second phase of the Baha'i reception of the Qur'an is in the
early stages, but already it is obvious that it holds much promise for a deeper understanding of the relation between the Baha'i faith and its parent, Islam. This has become quite clear in Buck's pioneering and innovative book referred to above and the work of others, such as Franklin D. Lewis, whose lucid and deeply informed discussion of this and related problems in several academic articles is essential reading for the question at hand.8

The role the Qur'an played in the birth of the Baha'i faith during the first phase of its development is noteworthy for several reasons. This phase is represented by the two earliest extended written works by the Bab: the Tafsir surat al-baqara (hereafter Baqara) and the Tafsir surat yusuf, also known widely as the Qayyum al-asma' (hereafter QA). The QA has been characterized by Baha'ullah as the most important book of the new dispensation, and the greatest . . . of all books.'9 Shoghi Effendi described it as having been universally regarded 'the Qur'an of the Babis' during the Bab's
lifetime.10 Some insight into the relationship between the Qur'an and Baha'i scripture is to be gained by observing here the interesting literary phenomenon of a commentary acquiring primary importance over the object of the commentary.11

The Bab was born in 1817 in Shiraz into a sayyid family of merchants. His childhood is marked by an extraordinary interest in the religious life, the reading of the Qur'an, his devotion to prayer and to the sacred examples of the lives of those he refers to as The Family of God (Al allah): the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and the remaining members of the group known in Persian as the Fourteen Pure Ones (chehardeh ma'sum),

Beginning with Lewis, 'Scripture as Literature.'

Baha'ullah, Kitab-i mustatab-i Iqan, p. 180. 'In His Book, which He hath entitled '"Qayyumu'l-
Asma'' – the first, the greatest and mightiest of all books – He prophesied His own martyrdom,'

Baha'ullah, Kitáb-I-Íqán, 231.

Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 23.

Lawson, 'Interpretation as Revelation.'

the Twelve Imams recognized by Ithna-'ashari Shi'ism. His formal education was minimal, but as an extraordinarily pious young man he was attracted to a recent development in Iranian intellectual circles known widely as the Shaykhi school.12

The Bab, who studied briefly in Karbala with the second leader of this school, Sayyid Kazem Rashti, wrote an astonishing number of works in

both Persian and Arabic. His literary activity dates from at least his teenage years and carried on until his tragic death in 1850 when he was killed in front of a firing squad by the combined order of equally inimical state and religious officials, at the age of thirty. He wrote prayers, letters, responses to questions, books of spiritual meditation and instruction, books of law for the new dispensation, commentaries on prayers, Qur'an and hadith.13 Emblematically for the general question of this discussion, it is the composition of a Qur'an commentary that officially marks the beginning of the Babi zuhur or dispensation and the Baha'i era. The commentary was on the twelfth Sura of the Qur'an, the Sura on Joseph referred to above by its distinctive title, Qayyum al-asma' (QA). Before describing this work in detail, it will be important to discuss briefly the writings of the Bab which were composed prior to this epoch-making commentary, what has been referred to by Baha'ullah as 'the first, the mightiest and the greatest of books.'

We do not know exactly how many works the Bab wrote before he composed the QA, which he began on the evening of May 22, 1844/5 Jumada al-Awwal, 1260. Two works stand out because they are datable from internal information. The older of these two, 'The Epistle on Spiritual Wayfaring' (Risalat al-suluk) is a relatively brief presentation of the crucial elements of living a godly life. It contains numerous quotations from the Qur'an in support of its main argument and also numerous hadiths, largely

In fact, this is a term of odium theologicum coined by their opponents. The school itself prefers Kashfiyya as a designation. Kashf is a Qur'anic term that means disclosure and is meant to convey a method of knowing that combines reason and suprarational modes. One may translate it as 'the Intuitionists.' The derisive intent of the term Shaykhiyya depends upon the mistrust of Sufism and its shaykhs in the immediate milieu and implicitly charges that the Imam has been replaced by a mere shaykh by the 'Shaykhyis.' Nonetheless, scholars continue to refer to the Shaykhis, the Shaykhiyya and so on instead of the Kashfiyya. MacEoin, Sources for Early Babi Doctrine.

from the Shia-akhbar corpus. Thus, the various speakers of the text are: God, through the Qur'an, the Prophet and the imams, through the hadith, and the Bab, as author of the brief epistle. Another voice is also referred to and possibly evoked in the process – that of the aforementioned Sayyid Kazim Rashti. The author, the Bab, counsels his reader to look to the writings of his 'dear teacher' for a more complete discussion of the matters at hand.14

In the next work, Baqara, the method is quite traditional.15 And its traditional structure, form and content will stand out in marked contrast later when we describe the Bab's next major work, the QA, a work that could not be more different from the standard works of tafsir. Baqara represents a distinctively Shia version of the category known as tafsir bi'l-ma'thur.16

Three central themes of the work have been identified: (1) religious authority – walaya; (2) divine self-manifestation – tajjali; (3) resurrection and the Day of Judgment – qiyama. Each of these themes is discussed in the tafsir by seizing upon key Qur'anic terms. Frequently, the explications of the Qur'an are ranged over a series of hierarchies, both ontological and sacerdotal – if one may use such a word. The hierarchies may consist of seven, four or three stages in most cases, with a few exceptions. Not every verse produces a commentary that contains a hierarchy, but virtually every verse is read to speak to walaya in some way or another. The work also preserves a certain degree of Shia/Sunni communalism, a feature that is largely absent from the second work of interest here – the QA. A central concern in both works, however, is the covenant, the Day of Alastu, and its renewal. Even though the locus classicus for this important Islamic teaching is not encountered until Q 7:172, the Bab makes sure here in his tafsir on Sura two that the reader never loses sight of its essential and non-negotiable importance.

L awson, 'The Bab's Epistle.'

What follows is a brief, very general summary of this important pre-advent work by the Bab.

For a more complete discussion of this unpublished Arabic work, including a description of the manuscripts, see Todd Lawson, Intimacy and Ecstasy in Tafsir: The Earliest Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab (1819–1950), Leiden: Brill, in press.

Lawson, 'Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to Tafsir.'

In support of the Bab's own words, which carry something of the expressive style of the Shaykhi school, he quotes numerous hadiths or Akhbar which are seen to bear directly upon the Qur'anic verse at hand. Occasionally, he provides the isnad, but more frequently he does not. However, a thorough study of the tafsir discloses that virtually all of the traditions adduced in it are found in widely known books of tafsir, especially those composed in Safavid times, or in other standard works of Shi'ism. Some hadiths, such as those found in the works of Rajab Bursi (1411), became a cause for later condemnation by critics on the charge of 'extremism' (ghuluw). This charge was also leveled at the founders of the Shaykhi school on similar grounds.

The key Qur'anic term walaya is as good a place as any to begin to

understand such condemnation. It is a word uniquely suited to the religious (spiritual and administrative) program of Twelver Shi‘ism. It stands for loyalty to the original covenant, which the Bab says was re-enacted on the Day of al-Ghadir when Ali was appointed mawla of the Muslim community by Muhammad. It is also useful in articulating the nature of the relation between the individual or common believer and the imam, as well as the relation of the imam to God. And, as the Qur’an itself says, it also characterizes to a very high degree the basic relation between God and humanity: God is the wali of the believers par excellence. Walaya has a simultaneously rich and restricted semantic field. It stands for allegiance and loyalty; it is glossed as ‘love,’ pure and simple, in Shia works. It denotes,
moreover, intimacy and mutual yearning in the playing out of the more purely devotional and mystical aspects of the religion. The mutuality of the word is of great significance because it guarantees that the true religious or devotional attitude depends upon acknowledging love from a higher source and returning the same love in gratitude and yearning. One of the basic meanings of the term is also ‘friendship’ and this, again, highlights and emphasizes the mutuality inherent in the religious duty indicated in the term walaya. This religious duty, furthermore, helps to limit the structure of sanctity and prophetic intimacy it houses.
A Qur’anic trope that is very much at home in the Babi and later Baha’i scripture is the poetic use of water to stand for divine love, knowledge, mercy and revelation. In Baqara, the Bab loses no opportunity to speak

about the inestimable value of walaya by identifying it with water through a series of images expressive of life-giving, restorative and overwhelming qualities. The word has simultaneously consoling, nurturing, purifying and protective connotations.17 Thus, according to the Bab, walaya is spiritual water; it circulates through the cosmos the way water circulates through ‘heaven and earth.’ The other two themes most frequently encountered require some mention, however limited, to form a picture of this work which may be thought a harbinger for what would ultimately be recognized as the Baha’i faith. In turn, the Baha’i faith may be thought to continue a distinctive exegetical conversation on the meaning of such key Qur’anic lexical items as walaya, tajalli, qiyama and ‘ahd/mithaq (covenant).
The Babi reception or reading of the Qur’an is apocalyptic and eschatological. In this, the Qur’anically derived term tajalli plays a dramatic role.
The term is frequently translated as ‘divine self-manifestation,’ but consid-
ering its etymology, usage and attendant philological richness, this is a fairly bland rendering. It leaves unstated and unremarked the all-important notion of divine glory that the term obviously carries in its original Qur’anic

context in Surat al-A‘raf, Q 7:143, as is captured in the Yusuf Ali translation (slightly revised):

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, he said: ‘O my Lord! Show (Thyself) to me, That I may look upon Thee.’ God said, ‘By no means canst thou see Me (direct); but look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me.’ When his Lord manifested His glory on the Mount, He made it as dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his senses he said: ‘Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe.’

If we consider the spectrum of Qur’anic usages of the triliteral root J-L-L (cf. Q 7:143, 187; 55:67–8; 91:3; 92:2), we note that it combines the ideas

Lawson, Intimacy. On water and walaya, see Lawson, ‘Friendship.’ On walaya in general, see
Hermann L andolt, ‘Walayah’; Amir-Moezzi, ‘Notes’; Dakake, Charismatic Community.

of luminosity, brightness, greatness, strength, beauty and power, as in the divine name al-Jalal. Thus, we might even be so bold as to translate the above verse as: ‘When the Lord caused His glory to overwhelm the mountain.’ We dwell on this idea because it is an important element in the specific
religiosity of Shi‘ism, in the religion of the Bab more pertinently, and perhaps most obviously in the tonality of the religious ethos of the Baha’i faith, whose founder, after all, is called, the Glory of God, even though a different, and as it happens non-Qur’anic word is used in the Arabic title Baha’ullah.18 It also helps us to understand the nature of the Babi/Baha’i apocalypse, especially when we bear in mind that among the several distinguishing characteristics of the genre of apocalypse isolated by contemporary scholarship, glory, whether as event or object of contemplation, is a standard feature and as such may be traced as a significant motif in the Qur’an itself.19

The imminence of qiyama (a frequent Qur’anic word), or perhaps even its presence, was conjured in this tafsir through the use – whether conscious or not – of the venerable exegetical tool known as typological figuration. This is the process whereby current or recent events are seen as the repetition of ancient sacred history in which, for example, spiritual or political and cultural heroes are seen to reappear, along with their friends and supporters on the one hand, and their enemies on the other.20 Indeed, in a work composed later in his short life, the Persian Bayan, the Bab explicitly states that his earliest followers, the sodality of eighteen persons known as the Letters of the Living (huruf al-hayy) were actually the return (ruju‘) of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones mentioned above and the four Gates (abwab) or Deputies (nuwab) who collectively formed a link between the hidden imam and his community during the period known as the Lesser

Other frequent markers of glory as light in Baha'i writings, near-synonyms of tajalli, are
derived from these roots: L-M-', L-W-H, N-W-R, SH-R-Q.
Lawson, Qur'an, pp. 19, 27, 37–41. 'Glory – Herrlichkeit –
theology' is also a central feature of
contemporary Roman Catholic thought through the influential work of Hans Urs von Balthasar
(d. 1988). A comparative study of the 'sacramental value' of glory in the two traditions, Islam
and Christianity, might disclose previously unsuspected channels of communication, mutual
understanding and commonality.
Typological figuration, long recognized as an important factor in biblical interpretation,
begins with the Qur'an for Islam. See Lawson, Qur'an, esp. chs. 3 and 4.

Occultation from (874–941).21 Here we see a kind of Shia variation on the well-known Sufi institution of the 'substitutes' (abdal). Thus does the spiritual reality of the original friends of God (awliya'ullah) recur through-
out history in subsequent generations in worthy individuals who are then enabled to carry on the promulgation (tabligh) of the cause of God (amr allah).22

THE TAFSIR SURAT YUSUF, KNOWN AS THE QAYYUM AL?ASMA' ?QA?

To call the QA a 'swerve' may be something of an understatement; but in the present context it is at least accurate. It may be that the spiritual visions
and encounters experienced by the Bab around this time account for the profound shift. This is especially the case with the powerful vision said to have occurred in April 1844 that may have diverted his attention from completing the full tafsir he had been contemplating, leaving us with Baqara as fragmentary evidence of an original desire to write a commen-
tary on the entire Qur'an. This is one swerve. Another swerve, and a more significant one, is indicated by the way in which this later work simultane-
ously maintains and breaks with the tradition of tafsir, most specifically Shia tafsir. It should be noted, however, that even though this work nomi-
nally concerns the twelfth Sura, it actually represents a commentary on the entire Qur'an due to its innovative structure.23
The overwhelming import of this work, which must be thought of as disguised in tafsir, is to call attention to a new cycle of history. Accordingly,
the long-awaited resurrection (qiyama) was now at hand, and this book represents the 'True Qur'an' expected to be in the possession of the Qa'im

upon his return (ruju‘). It focuses on the Qur’anic Sura on the biblical patriarch Joseph, and is divided into 111 Suras, each with 42 verses, the abjad value of the word bala, ‘Indeed!’ which was the response of humanity

MacEoin, Messiah, p. 171.
On the Sufi phenomenon, see Chodkiewicz, Seal of the Saints.
For details, see Lawson, Gnostic, pp. 4, 6 and 39.

to the question posed by God on the Day of the Covenant, before the creation of the universe: ‘Am I not your Lord?’ The most frequent exegetical device encountered is paraphrase and the typological figuration introduced in the earlier commentary. The overall effect, the composition being entirely in rhymed prose (saj‘), is somewhat hypnotic and calls to mind dhikr sessions with the added overlay of a definite, non-negotiable – if at times bewilderingly multivocal – messianic discourse of mission and summons.24 The following excerpt is from chapter 108 of QA.25 It is written as a commentary on Q 12:109. As in the other 110 Suras of the Bab’s composition, it is structured according to four sections. First is the opening and title
of the Sura, the Qur’an verse as lemma for this Sura of the commentary introduced with the standard basmala. The second part is the actual composition, which is almost always introduced with a distinctive set of disconnected letters as the first verse. Some of these disconnected letters – as in the present case – spell a word when joined (here ‘Muhammad’), while others are more along the lines of the Qur’anic exemplar.26 The third section of the Sura includes this second verse of the Bab’s versified commentary. It continues for the majority of the verses and represents the main substance of a given Sura. The final or fourth section is usually marked by a reiteration of the lemma, only this time paraphrased to emphasize the main message of the third section. In this example, however, such reiteration and paraphrase of the lemma is sparse. We have attempted to distinguish the Bab’s words from words of the Qur’an by casting the latter in small caps.

The Sura of the Servant
in the name of god the merciful the compassionate
nor did we send before thee [as messengers] any but men
whom we did inspire – men living in human habitations. do
they not travel through the earth and see what was the end
of those before them? but the home of the hereafter is best,
for those who do right, will ye not then understand?

Ibid.
The following is excerpted and adapted from Lawson, ‘Súrat al-’Abd.’ The opening Qur’an
translation is that of Yusuf Ali.
A chart of these disconnected letters is in Lawson, Qur’an, pp. 144–5.

Verse 1
Mim Ha Mim Dal

Verse 2
O People of the throne!27 Listen to the call28 of your Lord, the merciful,29 He who there is no god except him (huwa),30 from the tongue of the remembrance,31 this youth (al-fata),32 son of the Sublime (al-‘aliy)33, the Arab to whom [God has] in the mother book34 testified.35

Verse 3
Then listen36 to what is being revealed to you from your lord:37 verily verily i am god38 of whom there is no god but him.39 nothing is like unto him40 while He is God, Lofty (‘aliyan) Great (kabiran).41

Verse 4
O People of the Earth! hearken42 to the call43 of the birds44 upon the trees45 leafy and perfumed46 with the camphor47 of Manifestation

Q 27:2 and passim.
Cf. Q 19:3.
Q 20:90.
Q 2:163 and passim.
Q 15:9 passim.
Cf. Q 21:60.
Q 2:255 and passim. A frequent instance of paronomasia in QA associating the Bab with ‘Ali
and God which derives from a cognate theme in Ithna-’ashari Shi‘ism.
Q 3:7; 13:9; 43:4.
Cf. Q 17:78.
Q 20:13.
Q 33:2
Q 28:30: inní aná ’lláh is frequent in QA. It suggests that the Bab is claiming revelation.
Q 2:163 and passim.
Q 42:11. See Lawson, ‘Súrat al-’Abd,’ p. 137 for the identification of the hadith evoked here.
Q 4:34.
Q 2:93 and passim.
Cf. Q 19:3.
Cf. Q 27:16 and passim.
Cf. Q 7:19; 24:35; 28:30.
Cf. Q 6:59; 7:22; 20:12.
Cf. Q 76:5.

(kafur al-zuhur) describing this young man (ghulam)48 descended from the Arabs, from muhammad,49 from ‘Ali, from Fatima, from Mekka, from Medina, from Batha’,50 from ‘Iraq with what the merciful51 has manifested (tajalla)52 upon their leaves, namely that he is the sublime

(al-‘aliy)53 and he is God, mighty,54 praised.55

Verse 36
O People of the Cloud! listen56 to my call from the lamp57 in this whitened lamp,58 this is the glass59 in this reddened glass60 who was spoken to (mantuqan) in truth by the sea of the Earth of Saffron61 in the house of the gate.62

Verse 37
verily verily i am god,63 he whom there is no god except him.64 indeed, i have established the heavens and the earth around this Word65 through a single letter like it. So obey My Word. for verily verily i am the truth. There is no god except Me, the Exalted (al-‘aliy)66 who am by God the comprehender of all the worlds.67

Q 12:19.
Q 3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29.
Name of the hollow or center of Mecca where the Ka’ba is located.
Q 1:1 and passim.
Q 7:143.
Q 2:255 and passim.
Q 48:19.
Q 4:131.
Q 2:93 and passim.
Q 24:35.
Q 24:35.
Q 24:35.
Q 24:35.
Ard al-za‘farán, a spiritual realm referred to by, for example, Ibn Arabi in his major work the
Kitáb futúhát al-Makkiyya. For further details, see Lawson, Intimacy.
Cf. Q 2:58; 4:154; 5:23; 7:161; 9:25.
Q 28:30.
Q 59:22, 23 and passim.
Cf. Q 3:39 and passim.
Q 16:2; 20:14; 21:25. For variations in the mss. here, see Lawson, ‘Súrat al-’Abd,’ p. 144.
Cf. Q 4:108 and 126.

Verse 38
and listen68 to this Most Mighty interpretation69 from the tongue70 of this man made great, he whom I have brought up in My presence. no human desire touched him71 in Reality. Verily, he is the Truth72 upon the Truth.73 And his significance, by the law of fire,74 has been fully recorded in the mother book.75

Verse 39
And Say, by the Truth, we have sent before you no men [as

messengers] except we inspired them; be ye the people of that blessed township,76 and conceal yourselves in the earth of the heart (fu'ad) in order to help him. Know that for those who deny him (mushrikin bihi),77 they will suffer the dire punishment of the Hereafter78 over the Fire79 in the Fire,80 and this has been written81 with Fire.82

Verse 40
And He is God, over all created things a Witness.83

Verse 41
And verily, God is Comprehender of all the worlds.84

Q 7:204; 22:73.
Ta'wil, cf. Q 3:7; 12:6 and passim.
Cf. Q 20:27.
Cf. Q 3:47; 3:174; 19:20; 24:35.
Q 2:91 and passim.
Q 27:79.
Cf. Q 27:8; 2:24 and passim.
Q 3:7; 13:39; 43:4.
Cf. Q 12:109.
Q 9:7 and passim.
Q 11:103 and passim.
Cf. Q 27:8; 2:24 and passim.
Cf. Q 27:8; 2:24 and passim.
Cf. Q 7:157.
Cf. Q 27:8; 2:24 and passim.
Q 4:33; 33:55.
Cf. Q 4:108, 126.

Verse 42
And verily thou art, through God, self sufficient, able to dispense with all the worlds.85

With this excerpt, we gain some appreciation of the manner in which the Bab mined the apocalyptic substrate in the rich metaphorical, figurative and tropic terrain of the Qur'an. He did this in order to generate, through metalepsis, a new scripture – a new apocalypse. Many of these tropes and metaphors, similes and allegories became symbols of the returned imam, and his retinue whose task was, among other things, to usher in the Day of Judgment. The symbolism and structure of this composition bespeaks a singular literary accomplishment in which the primordial Day of the Covenant and the Day of Judgment are understood to be joined in a single gesture of revelation as simultaneous events.

A NON?MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF THE QUR'AN

The Baha'i reception of the Qur'an disturbs the traditional, and some would say comforting 'us and them,' paradigm so common to much of post-

Qur'anic Islamicate discourse, despite clear attempts on the part of the Prophet, the Qur'an and countless creative Muslim exponents to vitiate this age-old and deleterious tendency afflicting humanity. Indeed, the Qur'anic pronouncement in Q 7:172 would seem to trump all past, present and future attempts, and such othering. This is the much referred to and beloved controlling myth or metaphor of primordial unity in which all future generations of the Children of Adam – a Qur'anic synonymn for humanity – were brought forth from the loins of Adam and presented with the ultimate question from God, in whose divine and peaceful presence this same humanity was now gathered: 'Am I not your Lord?' The gathering immediately responded in unison with the strongest possible affirmation: 'Yes indeed!' In addition to this primordial and eschataologically charged event, during which both consciousness and history are born,

Cf. Q 3:97; 29:6.

there are numerous other Qur'anic passages which insist upon the unity of humanity, the oneness of God and the oneness of what we, writing in English, are inclined to call 'religion.' These three unities have characterized
what may be thought of as the Baha'i da'wa from its very inception. They remain, moreover, a prominent watchword in Baha'i self-identity, ethos and doctrine. Unity is the central ideational sacrament in the Baha'i faith, just as it is in Islam.

The Baha'i faith may be seen, then, as a non-Muslim community of the Qur'an. I venture to say that this is a unique identity found nowhere else on the planet but in the Baha'i community. Such uniqueness demands critical analysis and patient study. The anomaly has been explained in the Baha'i writings by comparing the relation of the Baha'i faith to Islam with a model provided by a specific understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. As with many communities of the Qur'an before them, the Babi/Baha'i reading of the Qur'an depends upon a figurative reading of the Qur'an. (One may well ask, can there be any other kind?) The result here, as with other communities, is an innovative and creative application of the Qur'an to specific concerns in a specific historical and cultural context. From the literary angle, this may be referred to as metalepsis in that the resulting reading carries the focus far beyond accepted boundaries by, for example, using existing metaphors in ever-new figurative constructions and transforming the habitual hermeneutic circle into a spiral. It seems that the guardian of the Baha'i faith, Shoghi Effendi, was referring to the effects of this metaleptic process in the introduction to his history of the first century of the Baha'i faith:

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 Shaykhi school of the Ithna'ashariyyah sect of Shia Islam into a world religion.86

Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, God Passes By, p. xii.

With the above examination of the place of the Qur'an in the Baha'i faith we have a clearer idea of the earliest stages of such a process and we see that the Qur'an plays a major role in it. Much work remains to be done to acquire a complete understanding of the Qur'an in the Baha'i faith. For example, one of the more interesting ways in which the faith venerates and promulgates the Qur'an is in prayer. Prayer comprises an enormous amount of Baha'i literature. This would appear to be a relatively untouched area of inquiry. The Baha'i celebration of the Qur'an as a non- or post-Islamic religious gesture says, among other things, that the Qur'an belongs to humanity. Perhaps, as the Baha'i community progresses in carrying out Shoghi Effendi's instruction to thoroughly study the Qur'an, the community itself will become more and more aware of its debt to the Islamic revelation and therefore be more and more able to seriously consider in which ways it is and is not an Islamic religion.

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