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Herausgegeben von
Johann Christoph Bürgel
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Qur'ān Commentary as Sacred Performance: The Bāb's *tafsīrs* of Qur'ān 103 and 108, the Declining Day and the Abundance

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

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

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

¹ For a fuller discussion of this work see my, "Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'ān Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muhammad Shīrāzī, the Bāb," *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin. Oxford, 1988, pp. 223-253 & "The Terms Remembrance (*dhikr*) and Gate (*bāb*) in the Bāb's Commentary on the Sura of Joseph," *Bābī and Bahā'ī Studies in Honour of H.M. Balyuzi*, ed. M. Momen, Kalimat Press, Los Angeles, 1989, pp.1-63.

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

The Bāb wrote several *tafsīr* works; four stand out as major. 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). The last two works are of particular concern because they exhibit one of the more distinctive exegetical procedures of the Bāb. These commentaries, which are on two of the shortest chapters in the Qur'ān, are explained by the Bāb not only verse by verse, or word by word, but also letter by letter. In this way the quranic material is atomized or exploded by the commentator in an attempt to mine it for as much meaning as possible. And, it is argued, to make as much contact as possible with the text's spiritual or charismatic charge the divine presence. Recourse here to the technical language or ordinance is particularly apt not only because the claims of the Bāb were eventually to cause enormous upheaval within Iran, but also because it seems to capture or characterize the inner dynamics of his encounter with the text.

Both commentaries are quite long: the earlier of the two on Qur'ān 108 the *Sūrat al-Kawthar*, which is the Book's shortest *sūra*, runs to 115 folios in the Cambridge manuscripts. (Browne F.10, 19 lines per page), while the other commentary on Qur'ān 103, *Sūrat Wa'l-'Aṣr* (Browne F.9, 14 lines per page) consists of 85 folios. Both commentaries share another common element in that they were both written for specific high-ranking religious scholars, in their presence, and according to the accounts, in one sitting. It is this shared feature, perhaps more than even the style or contents of the works, to which I would like to draw attention. The *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Kawthar* was written for Sayyid Yahya Dārābī, a religious official at the court of the Shāh and the son of the illustrious Ja'far Kashfī (d.1850). Sayyid Yahyā had been sent by Muḥammad Shāh (r.1834-1848) to investigate the Bāb and as a result of this *tafsīr* converted to the new faith.² He was, at the time of his con-

² For details see Nabīl, 171-177. See, for example: A.-L.-M. Nicolas, *Seyyid Ali Mohammed dit le Bab*, Paris, 1905, p. 234.

"Certes le fait d'écrire *currente calamo* un commentaire nouveau sur une sourate dont le sens est si obscur, devait frapper détonnement Seyyid Yahya, mais ce qui le surprit plus étrangement encore, ce fut de retrouver, dans ce commentaire, l'explication que lui-même avait trouvée dans ses méditations sur ces trois versets. Ainsi il se rencontrait avec le

version, around 35 years old and apparently highly regarded in learned circles. His father, after all, has been described as "one of the most brilliant Imāmi thinkers and spirituals of the nineteenth century."³ Sayyid Yahyā, who was eventually surnamed Vaḥīd by the Bāb, was instrumental as a Bābī leader in the Yazd and Nayriz disturbances of 1850, the year in which both his father and the Bāb died.

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

In *Kawthar*, the actual letter commentary takes up approximately one third of the manuscript. The major portion of the work is devoted to citing an enormous number of *ḥādīth* complete with *isnād*, and numerous quotations from the Qur'ān pertaining to the advent (*ẓuhūr*) of the Qā'im. Bearing in mind that this commentary is considered to have been written after the Bāb's claims were articulated in the *Tafsīr Sūrat Yūsuf*, we should assume that these citations have been marshalled as evidence of the fact that the *ẓuhūr* has already occurred. This is so notwithstanding the Bāb's explicit statements in this work to the contrary.⁷ It seems that such statements are conditioned in this commentary by two factors: [1] the general practice of *taqīya* and [2] the fact that the person for whom this *tafsīr* was written was not a Shaykhī but a supporter of the religious status quo, Uṣūlism, if his connection to the Qājār

Reformateur dans une interprétation qu'il croyait avoir été le seul à imaginer et qu'il n'avait communiquée à personne.

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

⁴ Sources, pp. 201-202.

⁵ Sources, p. 71.

⁶ Amanat, p. 313.

⁷ E.g., that those who say he claims divine inspiration (*waḥī*) are liars; or, those people who assert that he claims to be the "Gate of the Remnant of God" are wrong; or, whoever claims God's lordship, *walāya*, a Qur'ān or divine inspiration, has committed unbelief (*kufūr*) and that he himself has not claimed specific "gatehood". *Kawthar*, f.7a & 14b.

court and his parentage can tell us anything about his basic religious temperament and orientation.

On the other hand, we find other statements in the same work which suggest that the author is advancing some kind of special claim for himself: "Today the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) is a proof for no one except me."⁸ In the light of such a statement, it makes little functional difference whether the Bāb chooses to designate his obviously exclusive role by terms such as *bāb*, *imām*, *qā'im*, or *mazhar*. The point and message of the *Kawthar* is this same exclusivity, as is stated elsewhere in the same work. Addressing Sayyid Yaḥyā, the Bāb refers to the important Shaykhī doctrine of the hidden or fourth support. This was one of that school's most distinctive and controversial teachings.

It is important to emphasize here that Shi'ism and mysticism are intimately linked and not only in the Shaykhī teachings. The mystical vision associated with Ibn 'Arabī which is referred to as the vision of the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) had, since the thirteenth century, been applied to Shī'ī theology. The all-important perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who is the center-piece of Ibn 'Arabī's ontological mysticism, therefore comes to include for the Shī'a the entire family of God, the fourteen pure ones. In acquiring this doctrine, Shi'ism also appropriated the basic metaphysics which made it sensible. Briefly, this is that God is best thought of as Absolute Existence and that the rest of creation represents levels of existence at varying degrees of intensity, from the material world up through the divine world. These worlds or presences are thought of as five. Frequently they are referred to, from highest to lowest, as the worlds of *hāhūt*, *lāhūt*, *jabarūt*, *malakūt* and *mulk*, (sometimes called *nasūt*). In addition, another realm the imaginal world (*'ālam al-mithāl*) is sometimes posited between *malakūt* and *jabarūt*.⁹

Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī (d.1826), the founder of the Shaykhī school, had reformulated the basic pillars or supports (*arkān*, sing. *rukn*) of Shi'ism to accord, in some ways, with a revised theory of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Instead of the traditional five: divine unity (*tauḥīd*), prophethood (*nubūwa*), the return (*ma'ād*), imamate (*imāma*), and justice (*'adl*), Shaykh Aḥmad by combining justice with unity and the return with prophecy reduced these pillars to three. He then added another, the perfect shī'ī/shī'a the fourth or hidden support, a variation on Ibn 'Arabī's perfect

⁸ *inna al-yawm laysa al-ḥaqq la-yakūna li-aḥad hujjatun illā nafsī*. See Edward Granville Browne, "A Catalogue and Description of 27 Bābī Manuscripts," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 24 (1892), pp. 643-7.

⁹ For a more complete discussion see Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, Princeton, 1981, esp. pp. 360-363.

man.¹⁰ It is this Shaykhī topic of the fourth support that figures in the following passage addressed to Yaḥyā Dārābī:

Had you been one of the companions of [Sayyid] Kāzīm¹¹ you would understand the matter of the hidden support, in the same way that you comprehend the (other) three supports ... just as you stand in need of an individual sent from God who may transmit unto you what your Lord has willed, so you stand in need of an ambassador from your Imām. If you say that the 'ulamā' represent this function, I say how can they be regarded to represent a single position (*maqām wāḥid*) since some of them are more excellent than others? And if you say that they are all agreed upon the same basic principles, their own words and actions contradict your statement. If you say that some are better than others then it is necessary to abandon the inferior for the superior until you ultimately arrive at a single soul¹² ... in the case of two individuals, if you know that one is more excellent in a given matter, even to the extent of the black in the eye of an ant, you cannot possibly regard his inferior, for God has said: And which is worthier to be followed He who guides to the truth, or he who guides not unless he is guided? What then ails you how you judge? [Qur'ān10:35] ... so that you might comprehend that none but a single soul is capable of bearing the universal bounty from the Imām (*ḥayd al-kullīya 'an al-imām*).¹³

Two things are important here: 1) that the Bāb was claiming to be the bearer of the universal bounty, and 2) the sophisticated and highly placed Dārābī eventually accepted this claim. I believe that it was the letter commentary in this *tafsīr* and the way in which it was composed, that played a significant role in the conversion. Before looking at this feature more closely, we should say a few words about the other commentary.

The *Tafsīr Sūrat wa'l-'aṣr* (hereafter *Wa'l-'aṣr*) was written for the Imām Jum'ah of Iṣfahān, Mīr Sayyid Muḥammad Sulṭān al-'Ulamā¹⁴, sometime between September 1846 and March 1847.¹⁵ Since the powerful religious office of Chief

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

¹¹ Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī (d.1843) was the successor of Shaykh Aḥmad.

¹² *nafs wāḥida*, cf., Qur'ān 4:1; 6:98; 7:189; 31:28; 39:6, probably an allusion to the Shaykhī idea of the *nātiq wāḥid*, on which see *Ell*, vol.4, pp.281-286.

¹³ *Kawthar*, ff.36a-b. See the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation of D. MacEoin, "From Shaykhism to Bābism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shī'ī Islam," Cambridge University, 1979, p. 170, from where come the first two sentences of this translation.

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

¹⁵ See also Nabīl, pp. 201-202; Sources, pp. 70 & 76.

Judge or Chancellor had been abolished by Nādir Khān (or Shāh; r.1736-1747), the Imām Jum'ah was the principal religious figure in the city. The Bāb arrived in Iṣfahān at the end of the summer of 1262/1846 and was welcomed by the Sultān al-'Ulamā himself whose home was then opened to him. During his stay under the roof of this important personage, which lasted forty days, the Bāb met many of the religious scholars of Iṣfahān. The commentary which was produced at this time has not been published but ten manuscripts of this work exist.¹⁶ The entire work was completed in one sitting. According to one account, one evening after dinner the Bāb's powerful host requested him to comment on the *Sūrat wa'l-'aṣr*. The scene is described as follows:

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

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

¹⁷ Nabīl, 201-2. Why this particular *sūra* was chosen by the Imām Jum'ah can be speculated upon with some certainty. 'Aṣr means afternoon and can mean time or era. The word can also be translated as "the declining day". Apart from the various traditions which treat the word 'aṣr as indicating either the time of the afternoon prayer, or the lifetime of the Prophet, such as those found in Ṭabarī, and some Shī'ī commentaries, there is a tradition which speaks of the 'aṣr or time of the *Qā'im*—the Shī'ī messiah. The Bāb quotes, for example, the entire relevant contents of the famous *akhbārī Tafṣīr al-Ṣāfi*, compiled by Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d.1680), which preserves many of these traditions. But there can be no doubt that the one which inspired him was the following preserved by Ibn Bābūyah (d.991) on the authority of the sixth Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d.765). In the following translation the words of the Qur'ān are between {}:

{The Declining Day} is the time ('aṣr) of the coming forth from hiding of the Qā'im, upon whom be peace. As for the words {Indeed, mankind is in a state of loss} they refer to our

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

enemies. {Except those who believe} means in Our signs/verses (*āyātunā*). {And perform good works} means consoling/being charitable towards the brethren. {And exhort one another to accept the truth} means [to accept] the Imāmate. {And exhort one another to be steadfast} means [in their faith in] the Holy Family (*al-'itira*). (See volume 5 of the 1980 Beirut edition.)

¹⁸ *Wa'l-'aṣr*, ff.2b-4b.

¹⁹ *Wa'l-'aṣr*, ff.4b-5a.

²⁰ *Wa'l-'aṣr*, ff.50b-86b.

²¹ *Wa'l-'aṣr*, ff.86b-87b. See above, footnote 15.

²² See above, footnote 15.

²³ *Wa'l-'aṣr*, f.5b. 'Ilm al-wāqī' probably means knowledge obtained through spiritual or mystical/visionary experience. The Bāb's fellow Iranian, the Kubrāwī shaykh 'Alā'uddawla Simnānī (d.1336) uses the word in this way. See Hermann Landolt, "Simnānī on waḥdat al-wujūd", *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, Mohaghhegh & Landolt, eds., Tehran, 1971, pp. 96-

This is so because the forms in this world are confusing, and the only way for anyone to distinguish between them in this world of multiplicity is by turning to the Divine Essence through the disavowal of all allusions and veils of glory and arrive at the world of principles by the disavowal of all names and attributes.²⁴

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

Each letter is commented upon in turn and each letter, though it might be duplicated in the *sūra* itself, is given special consideration in its various places. The basic pattern of explanation is to treat each letter as the initial for a word which represents a concept important to the overall message, e.g. *wāw* is almost always related to *walāya*²⁶; or as the initial of an attribute of God, e.g. *rā'* is usually related to

97. The Kubrāwī order has continued in Iran until the present day but under the name Dhahabīya. This order was quite active in Shīrāz during the Bāb's lifetime. The most important religious institution in Fars, the Shāh Chirāgh mosque, was under Dhahabī supervision (see Amanat, p.79.). To what extent the Bāb was influenced by the Sufis is a question which remains to be fully studied.

²⁴ *Wa'l-'aṣ*, f.6a.

²⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1965, pp. 130-135. It is also known that the Kabbala was being practiced in Shiraz during the nineteenth century.

²⁶ Divine authority, to be discussed at greater length below.

rahma (mercy); or, as the initial of a substantive which is transformed into a metaphor, *lām* is frequently interpreted as standing for pearls (*la'ālī*) as in "pearls of divine knowledge".

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

A single example will have to suffice. Commenting on the letter *wāw* of the word *al-kawthar*²⁷, the Bāb arranges the commentary in the characteristic four parts:

Concerning the wāw:

[1] In the forest of the earth of yellow²⁸, it signifies the Absolute Universal Pre-Eternal *walāya*;

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

[3] then there is the *walāya* which has been individuated shining, luminous, glittering, paradisaic, unique - glimmering with the light of the secondary pre-eternity which alludes to and warbles subtleties in this lamp (*fī daqā'iq tilka al-zujāja*) that which has not been heard by any but God and whoever He desires. It is visible in the number of the letters of *lā ilāh illā llāh* (i.e., 12 = the Imāms) and appears from the tree which grows upon the earth of green;

²⁷ That is, the letter represented by "aw" in the English transliteration.

²⁸ Mention of the colours yellow here and green later is in line with a colour science taught by the Shaykhīs and subscribed to, it seems, by the Bāb. A preliminary study is in my unpublished PhD thesis "The Qur'ān Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muhammad, the Bāb," McGill University, Montreal, 1987, pp.115-186. Usually four colours signal the levels of the hierarchy of being, from highest to lowest they are white, yellow, green and red. (ibid., p.142. The subject awaits a fuller treatment. Cf. Sayyid Kāzīm's colour hierarchy in *EII*, vol. 1, p.203. See also the excellent study by Wahid Rafati on this subject).

[4] then there is the *walāya* which has dawned from the splendours of the light of the morning of eternity, which has spoken in the heart (*fu'ād*) of this bird (*hādihā al-ṭayr*, i.e. the Bāb himself) whom the Satans have cast into prison and waxed proud before²⁹, even though none of them were able to understand a single letter of the manifestation of the traces of His power. Verily the practice (*sunna*) of God is governed by His rule (*ḥukmiḥ*), ordained by Truth. And on that day the *walāya* will belong to God, the Truth. He is the best of rewarders and the best of punishers. [Q.18:44]³⁰

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

It is through the contemplation, elaboration and systematizing of the central problem of religious authority – *walāya* or *wilāya* – that Shi'ism has acquired its

²⁹ It is not clear to what this imprisonment refers; perhaps by "this prison" he is referring to the arrest which occurred on his way back to Shiraz from his pilgrimage, or the humiliations he suffered after his return home. See Amanat, pp. 254-259.

³⁰ *Kawthar*, f.17a-b.

³¹ In Persian: *walāyat/wilāyat*.

³² The scriptural support for the elevation of *walāya* above *nubūwa* is Qur'an 18:44, precisely the passage quoted by the Bāb in the above translation.

most distinctive features. In Shi'ism no doctrine is more important.³³ By invoking the term *walāya* various powerful denotations and connotations are stimulated to life. In Shi'ism this life is pre-eminently tragi-historical, from the betrayal of 'Alī's *walāya* after the death of the Prophet to the cheating of Fāṭima out of her inheritance, to the most tragic event of all, the martyrdom of the 3rd Imām Ḥusayn. But all of the Imāms, according to strict doctrine, were betrayed and murdered and all are martyred heroes of the very highest degree. They are also bearers of the divine substance known as the Muhammad Light or Spirit. This has endowed each one with supernatural knowledge in all spheres, particularly Qur'anic exegesis.

Shi'i Qur'an commentaries are replete with quotations from the group known as the friends of God, or the bearers of the divine authority – the *awliyā'*. Another feature that distinguishes a good portion of Shi'i exegesis is what I have referred to as the Imamization of the Qur'an.³⁴ That is, much of the interpretation of the Qur'an, and this always on the authority of one of the *awliyā'*, seeks to demonstrate that their authority is fully validated in the Qur'an text. This is taken to such extremes that for certain otherwise unlikely words and ideas are said to be references not merely to the authority of the Imāms, but to the Imāms themselves. Prayer, fasting and pilgrimage are said to be code words for the Imām whom the Qur'an commands the believer religiously to "observe". Thus runs an important stream of Shi'i esoteric or *bāṭinī* interpretation (*ta'wīl*) as distinct from Sunnī exoteric or *ẓāhirī* exegesis (*tafsīr*).³⁵

From the above translation, it is clear that the Bāb lays claim to some kind of special rank, which we may assume to be associated with the idea of the fourth support, given that the reference to himself occurs at the fourth or lowest exegetic level of the letter *wāw*.³⁶ This is the discursive message of the commentary.³⁷ The formal message of the commentary is the insistence on the unitary or integral and inter-

³³ For example, Khomeini rose to prominence, in part, through his treatise entitled: *The Spiritual Authority of the Jurist (Wilāyat-i faqīh)*.

³⁴ See my "Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, the Bab," p.235.

³⁵ For details see my, "Akhbari Shi'i approaches to *tafsīr*," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, edited by G.R. Hawting & Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, London & New York, Routledge, 1993, pp.173-210.

³⁶ See also the related discussion in my "The Structure of Existence in the Bab's Tafsir and the Perfect Man Motif" in *Studia Iranica: Cahiers 11: Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religions from Mazdaism to Sufism*. Proceedings of the Round Table held in Bamberg (30th September - 4th October 1991). Association pour l'avancement des Études iraniennes, 1992, pp. 81-99.

³⁷ It should also be noted that the Bab refers to Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets" just before the section translated above.

dependent structure of the several layers of being, physical and metaphysical, with the major "exoteric" theme of the verse, the appearance of the *Qā'im*.

The response of the audience indicates that it was not the discursive and formal messages alone which impressed them. After all, anyone could claim to be a holy soul. What impressed the audience was the Bāb's extraordinary ability to improvise on the Qur'ānic text in a way that created a previously unheard holy music. By commenting on each individual letter and this in four parts, a certain rhythm is imparted to the work within which the variations on each letter may be elaborated. The effect upon the auditors has been recorded. Thus the circumstances of composition, particularly of the second letter commentary, resemble something of an after-dinner musical recital where the Bāb, a young spiritual prodigy, was asked to "perform".³⁸ Unfortunately, the above translation is woefully inadequate to the task of conveying to the reader the phonic and intellectual richness of this recital. A brief digression on the general subject of the charismatic nature of the Qur'ān may help.

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

The auditory experience of the Qur'ān is felt in a rarefied realm in which time and place are transformed and the very atmosphere surrounding the listener becomes a new reality by virtue of its vibrating with the sacred sounds: the divine presence in the form of the Divine Peace (*sakīna*) mentioned in the Qur'ān⁴⁰, and the experience of which is so frequently adduced by believers as an irrefutable proof

of the divinity of the Qur'ān. God, therefore, is made present to the believer in the Qur'ān. He is "inlibrated" there just as for Christians He was incarnated in Jesus. Thus to partake of the Quranic experience is to "partake" of divinity – to participate in the Divine through a symbol that is utterly drenched in divinity.

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ Qur'ān 48:4 & 18; 26.

⁴¹ Wilfred C. Smith made this comparison years ago, but to my knowledge the implications have never been completely worked out. See his *The Faith of Other Men*.

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

Abbreviations

Amanat = Abbas Amanat. *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca & London, 1989.

EII = Henry Corbin. *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols. Éditions Gallimard: Paris, 1971-72.

Nabīl = Nabil Zarandi. *The Dawnbreakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahā'ī Revelation*. Trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi. Bahā'ī Publishing Trust: Wilmette, Ill., 1932.

Sources = Denis MacEoin. *The Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History: A Survey*. E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1992.

Der Messianismus des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts und die Entstehung der Bahā'ī Religion

Kamran Ekbal

Das fieberhafte, weltumfassende messianische Naherwartungsklima Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts dürfte zu den phänomenologisch spannendsten Kapiteln der Menschheitsgeschichte gehören. So weiß man zwar aus dem Schrifttum der verschiedenen Religionen und deren Darstellungen von Personen oder Personengruppen, die am Vorabend der Entstehung der jeweiligen Religion diesen Vorgang vorhergesehen und auf mystische Weise erfahren bzw. angekündigt haben – die drei Weisen aus dem Morgenland, die sich aufgrund ihrer astronomischen Berechnungen auf den langen Weg nach Bethlehem machten (Matt. 2:1-12), die Schafhirten, die von Jesu Geburt durch den Engelchor erfuhren (Luk. 2:8-20), die Lichtstrahlen, die von der Mutter Muhammads kurz vor seiner Geburt ausgingen und in denen sie die Schlöser von Busra erblickte, oder der Mönch Bahīrā, der im jungen Propheten des Islam das erwartete Zeichen des neuen Offenbarers erkannt haben wollte.¹ Aber alle diese und ähnliche Darstellungen sind eher von der Legende als von historischer Überlieferung geprägt und bestenfalls der Sphäre der Religiosität, des individuellen Glaubens und der Volksfrömmigkeit zuzuordnen. Historisch lassen sie sich jedenfalls kaum belegen. Eine Ausnahme stellt in dieser Hinsicht die Genesis der Bahā'ī-Religion, der jüngsten der Offenbarungsreligionen, dar. Sie hebt sich allein schon durch die Fülle ihrer historisch überprüfbaren Entstehungs- und Entwicklungsdaten von allen vorangegangenen Sendungen ab, so auch hinsichtlich der Feststellung des globalen messianischen Erwartungsklimas, das am Vorabend ihrer Entstehungsgeschichte an den unterschiedlichsten Ecken und Enden der Welt festzustellen war, größtenteils auch in kulturell und religiös völlig unterschiedlichen Milieus und ohne erkennbaren sachlichen Zusammenhang. Mit dem zeitgleichen Erscheinen einer Reihe solcher messianischer Bewegungen des 19. Jahrhunderts und der Geburt der Bahā'ī-Religion wird sich der folgende Beitrag befassen.

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

¹ Ibn Iḥāq: *Das Leben des Propheten*. Aus dem Arabischen übertragen und bearbeitet von Gernot Rotter, Stuttgart u. Wien 1986, S. 28, 34ff.