

The Qur'an in Baha'i Writings

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Todd Lawson and Necati Alkan

The Qurʾan in Bahai Writings

1 Introduction

The Bahai faith sees itself as having grown out of Islam but as no longer Islamic in the

usual sense of the word. Bahais, therefore, do not consider themselves to be Muslims.

The “individuation” of the Bahai faith as a free-standing, distinctive, and, so to speak,

“independent” world religion from within the matrix of nineteenth-century Iranian

Shiite Islamic socio-religious culture appears to have been fully accomplished.

Para-

doxically, the Qurʾan is at the center of this process, one which developed over time

through two distinct but deeply related phases or movements. The first phase, from

1844/1260 to 1863/1280, can be thought of as the Babi period. The second phase, from

1863 to 1963 and later, can be regarded as the Bahai period. The Qurʾan is still an im-

portant, not to say indispensable, source and reference in Bahai religiosity, faith, and

practice. This perhaps raises the question of whether the Qur'an is of significance in

non-Muslim religious life. To attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to pro-

vide a brief historical outline of the growth and expansion of the Bahai faith.

The Bahai faith is now a worldwide religious phenomenon with its center in Haifa,

Israel. The founder of the Bahai faith proper, Baha'ullah (d. 1892/1309), had been exiled,

through a series of incarcerations, from his home in Iran to Ottoman Palestine, where

he and his family, together with a small band of followers, arrived as prisoners in

the year 1868/1285. According to the latest figures, there are between 5 and 6 million Bahais worldwide, with communities in hundreds (if not thousands) of localities around the globe. Membership in the Bahai faith is drawn from the planet's various religious, ethnic, national, and linguistic communities. The majority of Bahais, it would seem, come from non-Muslim backgrounds, even though the first Bahais were indeed mainly Iranian and Muslim, while Jewish and Zoroastrian Iranians also identified as Bahais from the earliest days. Bahai teachings about the Qur'an are clear and indisputable. The first and only holder of the Bahai title "Guardian of the Cause of God" (wali amr Allah), Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (Shawqi Afandi Rabbani; 1897–1957/1314–1377), made it clear as early as in 1939 that the Qur'an "constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God," aside from the scriptures of the Babi and Bahai revelation.¹ At the same time, Bahai teaching insists that "religious

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

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truth is relative not absolute,"² and that divine revelation will continue as long as God continues – that is, forever. The distinctive Bahai theory of "progressive revelation" states explicitly that religious truth is expressed according to the exigencies of the time and place of a given revelation, and that such a revelation is composed of two types of truth: 1) eternal "spiritual" teachings, such as the Golden Rule; and 2) social teachings that can be expected to vary according to the historical, social, and cultural circumstances of the time. Both aspects of a given revelation or dispensation of truth are binding during the period for which they have been revealed. For example, the laws and

social teachings of Moses were absolutely binding until the new revelation given through Jesus, while the laws and social teachings of Jesus were binding until the revelation brought by Muhammad. These laws and social teachings were binding until the revelation conveyed by the Bab, and his laws were binding until the coming of Baha'ullah's revelation. From the time of Adam until "the end that hath no end,"³ the divine spiritual teachings will continue, but the laws and regulations that reflect the conditions and exigencies at the time of revelation must change in order to accommodate the changing needs and aspirations of a living, human community, which is conceived of, in Bahai terminology, as "an ever-advancing civilization."⁴ Since one of the chief conditions and circumstances of the time and place of the Bahai revelation was, indeed, a highly developed Islamicate culture, the language of the Bahai writings is deeply conditioned by one of the more salient features of that culture's linguistic conceptual world, namely, the powerful Qur'anic component in all languages that may be thought of as having been "Islamic" at that time, with pride of place going to Arabic and Persian. Thus, Bahai writings are full of Qur'anic quotations, references, and tropes, whether they were originally expressed in Arabic or Persian (both languages are considered languages of revelation in Bahai teachings). However, the Qur'anic presence in the Bahai revelation should never be regarded as merely linguistic or accidental. It is obvious that the Bahai doctrine of progressive revelation is a continued development of the theory of revelation found in the Qur'an itself, a theory which states unequivocally that every community has had a divine messenger (Q 10:47), and that every divine messenger has spoken in the language of the community addressed (Q 14:4). As argued in a recent publication, in some ways, the very soul of

* Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing

Trust, 1961), v,
 accessed March 10, 2025,
<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/promised-day-come/>.
 ? Baha?ullah, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), LXXXIII, 165/110, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/gleanings-writings-bahauallah/>; see “The process of His creation hath had no beginning and can have no end.” The Bab, Selections from the Writings of the Báb, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre Publications, 1976), 125.
 ? “All men were created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization / jami? az baray-i islah ?alam khalq shudah-and.” Baha?ullah, Gleanings, CIX, 215/140.
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the Bahai faith is deeply and even existentially islamicate. But due to its radical alteration in social laws and teachings, it can no longer be considered Islamic.⁵

2 The Writings of the Bab

According to Bahai doctrine, the Bahai faith began with a 24-year-old Iranian merchant, Sayyid ?Ali Muhammad (the Bab), who was an avid Twelver Shiite, born in Shiraz on October 20, 1819/Muharram 1, 1235. The revelation he received should be read in the context of the intense messianism that pervaded his time and place. Shiite Iran was then electric with expectations of the return of the Hidden Imam and the ensuing concomitant events so minutely detailed in the distinctive body of Shiite Twelver exegetical hadith or akhbar: resurrection and judgment (qiyama), including the long-awaited battles and triumphs of the holy remnant of the helpers of the returned Imam, who, together, would restore justice to the world.⁶ It was on May 22, 1844/Jumada l-Ula 4, 1260 that the Bab proclaimed himself to be the center and wielder of all authority by claiming to “bring forth” (akhraja) a book entrusted to him by none other than the Hidden Imam. According to Twelver Shiism, the Imam was the embodiment or manifestation of such divine attributes as authoritative guardianship (walaya), dominion (mulk), sovereignty (saltana), and “political” power

(khilafa).⁷ In this book, the Bab announced that the longed-for, and simultaneously feared, eschatological denouement was now indeed at hand. By announcing the return through this distinctive composition, he was also participating in and appropriating those same divine attributes. Six years later, on July 9, 1850/Shawabān 28, 1266, he was executed by firing squad in Tabriz on the orders of Nasir ad-Din Shah (r. 1848/1264–1896/1313) and at the urging of a coterie of ulama. The role of the Qurʾān in Bahai writings begins with the above-mentioned book, which the Bab “received” from the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi and Qaʾim, Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-ʿAskari, who disappeared into sacred occultation in the year 874/260 and who, according to Twelver belief, has been in hiding ever since. And it is here that we encounter one of the first keys to understanding how Bahais might well be “Islamicate” but not Muslim. By claiming that they wait for the Hidden Imam’s return was over, the Bab and his followers, including those who would eventually explicitly identify as Bahais, also, as Henry Corbin judiciously observes, “put themselves quite

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

ʿ Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shiʿism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

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

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beyond the pale of Shiʿism”⁸ and therefore the Islam that they had known and lived.

Corbin bases his conclusion upon a rigorous phenomenological analysis, which finds

that inasmuch as Shiite Islam was deeply conditioned by the eschatological tension of

its teachings, the resolution of that eschatological tension would spell the

immediate

death of Shiism. A second key to understanding the paradox of Bahai identity has to do with the nature of this first “Bahai” revelation, the Bab’s Tafsir surat Yusuf, to which we now turn.

2.1 The Qayyum al-asma?

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

The work, which we will henceforth refer to as QA, goes by a number of titles, three of the most frequent being 1) Tafsir surat Yusuf; 2) Qayyum al-asma?; and 3)

Ahsan al-qasas (perhaps a short form of Tafsir ahsan al-qasas). As the first title indi-

cates, the book presents itself as a commentary, applying the classical islamicate ge-

neric category tafsir to sura 12, Yusuf (Joseph). The second title is a typically allusive

and veiled abjadi¹⁰ reference to the transcendence of God as the source and suste-

nance of (and therefore somehow also beyond) all names, while simultaneously em-

phasizing the importance of the Qur’anic prophet and messenger, Yusuf b. Ya?qub.

This is because both words (qayyum and Yusuf) have the same abjad value, namely

156. This number adds up to twelve, which is a symbol of completion or consumma-

tion in the context of Twelver Shiite Islam. The idea of consummation becomes in-

creasingly more compelling once we realize that this work actually claims to be not

only a commentary on the Qur’an but, in a “spiritual” (ma?nawi) sense, the true

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

? While many manuscripts of this work are readily available in various libraries and other collections, including online libraries, there has not yet been a scholarly edition. However, a relatively reliable edition of this work was published under the title *al-Ayat ash-Shiraziyya: an-nusus al-muqaddasa li-mu?assis al-haraka al-Babiyya*, ed. Qasim Muhammad ?Abbas (Damascus: Dar al-Mada li-th-Thaqafa wa-n-Nashr, 2009), 54–370, hereafter QAD followed by page number. In quoting from this work, the passages have been checked against an electronic collation of two early manuscripts kindly provided by Dr. Moojan Momen. For information on the many existing manuscripts, see Denis MacEoin, *The Sources for Early Babi Doctrine and History: A Survey* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 55–57, 195f. All translations of *Tafsir surat Yusuf* are by Todd Lawson.

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

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Qur?an that has been in occultation with the Hidden Imam until now. Thus, it simultaneously claims to be a wondrously new (*badi?*) and an imponderably ancient book,

akin to the *Umm al-kitab* (Q 3:7) itself.¹¹

QA is a long work that, according to its author, was completed over a forty-day period. It is, like the Qur?an, organized by suras and ayas (verses) connected from beginning to end by a truly mindboggling mastery of intertextual connections. The QA

consists of 111 suras, with each sura containing forty or forty-two verses, depending upon how the ayas are counted. This number itself is also symbolic. The number 40 is

the abjad value of the Arabic prepositional ligature “li” (to me) in Q 12:4: “When Jo-

seph said to his father, ‘Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw

them bowing down before me (li).”¹² The number 42 is the abjad value of the Arabic

intensive affirmative adverbial in Q 7:172, namely humanity’s response to God’s ques-

tion, “Am I not your Lord?,” to which all those assembled in that mythical spiritual

time and place, namely all humans who will ever exist, reply “Yea verily!” (bala).

Thus, both numbers are symbolic of authority recognized and submitted to – in short,

they are each in their own way the symbolic number of the divine covenant between

God and humanity as mediated by a prophetic figure, in the first case Joseph and in

the second Adam.

Except for the first, each of the Bab’s 111 suras is composed as an explanation or

commentary on a different verse from the twelfth sura of the Qur’an. The first sura,

as something of an introduction to the work as a whole, is structured around two the-

matic elements. The first is the book itself, echoing the Qur’anic theme of revelation

found at the beginning of many Qur’anic suras. This is reflected in such language as,

“This is the Book in which there is no doubt,” and in the many suras that start

with disconnected letters, such as sura 12: “These are the verses of the clear book.”

After the two-stage doxology wa-bihi nasta’in (In Him we hope for help”) and the Bas-

mala, bi-smi llahi r-rahmani r-rahim (In the name of God the Merciful the Compassion-

ate), the opening words of the first sura of the Bab’s composition are:

Praise be to God, He Who hath sent down, in truth, the Book upon His servant that it (or he)

might be a shining lamp unto all the worlds.¹³

The second thematic element around which this sura is structured is divine authority

or dominion, mulk. By virtue of the unassailable authority of the book given to the

Bab by the long-awaited Hidden Imam, as stated in the tenth verse of QA, the Bab,

supported by the strongest possible isnad of Shiite Islam, declares that God himself

?? In a prayer written by Baha’ullah during his incarceration in Edirne, he refers to the “book” of the

Bab as the Umm al-kitab. Baha’ullah, “Tablet of Ahmad,” in Bahai Prayers, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 210.

?? The Koran Interpreted, trans. Arthur J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1983), <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=12&verse=4> (accessed online March 10, 2025).

?? QAD, 55

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

Imam:

God has ordained that this book in explanation of the Most Beautiful Story be brought forth from

its safekeeping with Muhammad b. al-Hasan b. ?Ali b. Muhammad b. ?Ali

b. Musa b. Ja?far

b. Muhammad b. ?Ali b. al-Husayn b. ?Ali b. Abi Talib to His

servant that it/he might be an elo-

quent proof unto all the worlds from the Remembrance.¹⁴

In the course of this sura, the Bab, in the “garment” of the Hidden Imam, says that all

kings and sons of kings should now recognize the authority of this book and the one

who propagates it, i.e., the Bab.

O Assemblage of Kings and sons of kings! Gracefully abandon, all of you, your unlawful claim to

the dominion which rightly belongs to God in very truth!¹⁵

In the next chapter, the Surat al-?Ulama?, the pattern of placing a verse from sura 12 at

the head of each of the suras of the QA is established, as well as adding a combination

of disconnected letters following the Qur?anic phenomenon. Many of these sets of dis-

connected letters are quite un-Qur?anic, as can be seen in the provisional table of con-

tents reproduced below (Figure 1). Also, three of the Bab’s suras (not including the first

sura) do not exhibit this feature of disconnected letters. We will now reproduce the

opening lines of the second sura of QA16 in order to illustrate this important feature:

The Chapter of the Learned Divines (al-?ulama?)
(Forty-two verses)

In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate 1

Alif Lam Ra? – These are the signs of the perspicuous Book [Q 12:1] 2

Alif Lam Mim 3

This is the Book from God the Truth concerning the matter of the Remembrance,

indeed sent
down in truth about the fire 4
And indeed we have made these verses in this Book perspicuous 5
Made as a reminder and glad tiding for the servants of the Merciful for one who
is, in absolute
truth, trustworthy according to God and his verses. 6

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

Say “Our Lord is God, our Lord is the Truth, of Whom it is rightly said there
is no god but He.

Therefore, forgive us through Thy mercy and be merciful to us. Verily, Thou art
our Master.

?? Ibid., 55.

?? Ibid., 56.

?? Ibid., 58.

?? Ibid., 59.

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Then write for us the Return to Thee, in reality the true place of refuge and
Return.18 39

God, He of Whom it is rightly said there is no god but He, has ordained that
the Alif, His servant,
according to the divine command be very strong. 40

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

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

Thus, the general pattern and structure of this proclamatory or annunciatory
com-

mentary is established, which can be described as follows:

1) Introductory section: title of the sura with the number of verses. In some
manu-

scripts, the place of revelation is also mentioned. When this occurs, the place
is

invariably Shiraz. Then comes the standard Islamic Basmala; the Qurʾanic
verse

of sura 12, Yusuf (Joseph) – that is, the (at least ostensible) topic of the
given sura

by the Bab. This is followed by the Bab’s own set of disconnected letters

and

a second, or possibly third, verse, depending on whether the Basmala is counted as a separate verse. A word should be said here about how to count the set of disconnected letters. It is unclear whether they should be counted as a single verse alone (as in Q 2:1) or counted as a verse together with the ensuing language

of the verse (as in Q 12:1). In either case, what occurs is a declamation or announcement of revelation, as seen throughout the Qurʾan, such as “That is the

Book” (Q 2:2), “It is He who sent down to thee, in truth, the Book” (Q 3:3), or similar verses. These likewise appear regularly in the twenty-nine suras of the Qurʾan

that open with a set of disconnected letters. Another question raised by any attempt to count the verses of each sura is the status of the Qurʾanic verse that

serves as the lemma of the particular “exegetical” sura at hand. There is reason to think that it should also be accounted for as a distinct verse in this composition.

To do so would highlight one of the more scandalous features of this text: its claim to reveal anew that which has already been revealed. So, taking all this into

consideration, the first section of a sura typically consists of four verses.

2) The middle sections of the chapters are quite varied among the 111 suras. Space constraints do not permit us to explore this further; it must therefore suffice to

?? Ar-Rujuʿ also has a special technical meaning in Shiism, “to return to the authority (walaya) of

ʿAli,” the first Imam, presumably after having abandoned his cause and breaking the covenant established at the Oasis of al-Ghadir by the prophet Muhammad on his way back to Medina from the Fare-

well Pilgrimage in 632/10. Abu l-Hasan al-ʿAmili l-Isfahani, *Muqaddimat-i tafsir-i mirʿat al-anwar wa-mishkat al-asrar ba tarjamah wa-sharh-i hal-i muʿallif wa-fihrist-i kitab* (Tehran: Matbaʿah-yi Aftab, 1374 [1955]), 161.

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say that it continues in the Bab’s sajʿ Qurʾanic Arabic as in the examples above,

bringing together previously quite separate Qurʾanic segments that are now joined together in a “wondrously new” (badiʿ) revelational prose.¹⁹ This

prose consists almost entirely of Qurʾanic words or verse segments, artistically rearranged by the Bab to speak about the Hidden Imam's impending return. So intense is this language that the return seems to occur as one is reading the text. This was clearly no accident. Thus, the Bab emerges from such "literary activity" as the one who warns of the return and is also the embodiment of the eschatological return itself.

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

This, then, is the way in which the Qurʾan figures in the Bab's proclamatory and initiatory composition, which the Bahais consider to be a divine revelation. Furthermore, the status of this unusual work in Bahai sacred literature could not be higher. Bahaʾullah, in his first important doctrinal work, which also happens also to be a commentary on the Qurʾan, as will be seen below, unequivocally sealed its uniquely high status by calling this revelation from the Bab "the first, greatest and mightiest of all books."²⁰ While it is also a book that might easily be thought change to naive in Qurʾan scholarship, it is important to recognize that this work had a great impact on the earliest followers of the Bab, the majority of whom were not merchants or "laity" but young seminarians who were deeply schooled in the traditional Qurʾanic sciences.

It is important to try to imagine what it was about this composition that caused them to view the Bab as the promised one of the Shiite eschaton and the new divine manifestation (mazhar ilahi). A number of features can be singled out:

- In contrast to his first followers, almost all of whom were devoted

students of

Sayyid Kazim Rashti (1259/1843 or 1844), the second “Shaykhi” leader,²¹ the Bab

was virtually unschooled in the formal curriculum of Shiite religious sciences.

?? See now: Todd Lawson, “The Role of Wonder in Creating Identity,” *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023): 6.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060762>.

?? Va avval va a?zam va akbar jami? kutub ast. Baha?ullah, *Kitab-i Iqan*. The Book of Certitude, trans.

Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 1989), 231/180, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/kitab-i-iqan/>.

?? On the intellectual link between the Babi religion and the Shaykhi school, see Armin Eschraghi,

Frühe Šaihi- und Babi-Theologie: Die Darlegung der Beweise für Muhammads besonderes Prophetentum

(*Ar-Risala fi Itbat an-Nubuwa al-Hassa*) (Leiden: Brill, 2004). For

a more purely sociological and histor-

ical analysis, see Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran,*

1844–1850 (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2005), 109–207, 260–94.

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– This work demonstrates truly impressive mastery of the Qur?an, for example, in

the manner in which its author combines various Qur?anic words, verses, and verse segments in a remarkably fluent, somewhat hypnotic and musical recital.

– Just one example among hundreds is how he combines existing Qur?anic elements

with the concerns about the expectations of the return of the Hidden Imam with his equally long-awaited retinue, the establishment of justice, and the dramatic

theological performance of demonstrating the truth of key Qur?anic verses, such

as “On that day the kingdom will in truth belong only to (God) the most merciful.

And it will be a day of dire difficulty for the unbelievers (Q 25:26: *al-mulk yaw-*

ma?idhin al-haqq li-r-Rahman wa-kana yawman ?ala l-kafirin ?asiran).”

– Clearly, its form and contents, stretching over 4,662 verses composed, according

to witnesses, with astonishing speed, present something extraordinary. The mix-

ture of genres and the blurring of the lines between text and commentary may also have been received as something akin to what in the European cultural tradi-

tion might have been seen as an avant-garde modernist gesture and critique of the status quo. The scandalous outrage and uncompromising claim to artistic liberation presented with the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* nearly eighty years later, in a time and place quite different from the Bab's, offers clues as to the vision of spiritual liberation that inspired his first followers. Both of these historical and cultural contexts were being shaped by a process of new identity formation, in conversation with and in rebellion against tradition.²²

2.2 Other Qurʾan Commentaries by the Bab

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

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

?? Todd Lawson, *Tafsir as Mystical Experience: Intimacy and Ecstasy in Quran Commentary; The Tafsir Surat al-Baqara by Sayyid ʿAli Muhammad, The Báb (1819–1850)* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

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tively Shiite spiritual office, principle, and institution of *walaya* is both

center and circumference – an institution that is, in turn, illuminated by the distinctive Akbarian-Safavid Shiite cosmogonic process of divine self-manifestation, *tajalli*. In addition to this *tafsir*, the Bab composed several other works in exegesis of the Qurʾan. Unfortunately, there is no space here to examine these, even cursorily, beyond saying that, in several of them, the Bab returns to a slightly more traditional style in which his words and the words of scripture are easily distinguished. Two examples of these are his later *Tafsir surat al-Kawthar* and the *Tafsir surat al-ʿAsr*. Both works have been studied in some detail.²⁴ All in all, there are over thirty titles by the Bab that contain the word *tafsir* or *sharh*.²⁵ The Bab produced a remarkably large body of work in Persian and Arabic. It is safe to say that the Qurʾan never ceased being important in his writing. Even in his last and, according to some metrics, most doctrinally important work, the two *Bayans* (one in Arabic and one in Persian), the Qurʾan radiates through the discourse like the sun. In his *daʿwa* (“mission,” “summons”), there was never a desire to disassociate his truth from the truth of the Prophet, the Qurʾan, and the twelve Imams of Shiism. His love for these three central, interrelated essentials of his religion seemed to grow, even as his own vision veered or swerved away from traditional Islam.

3 The Writings of Bahaʾullah and ʿAbd al-Bahaʾ

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

?? Todd Lawson, “The Dangers of Reading: Inlibration, Communion and Transference in the Qurʾān

Commentary of the Bab,” in *Scripture and Revelation: Papers Presented at the First Irfan Colloquium* Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, December 1993 and the *Second Irfan Colloquium* Wilmette, USA, March 1994, ed. Moojan Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), 171–215; and Todd Lawson, “Qur’an Commentary as Sacred Performance: The Bab’s Tafsirs of Qur’an 103 and 108, the Declining Day and the Abundance,” in *Iran im 19. Jahrhundert und die Entstehung der Baha’i-Religion*, ed. Christoph Bürgel and Isabel Schayani (Hildesheim: G. Olms Verlag, 1998), 145–58. ?? See the index in MacEoin, *Sources*. ?? Baha’ullah, *Kitab-i Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992), n. 130, 192/221. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/kitab-i-aqdas/> (English translation, accessed March 10, 2025), <https://www.bahai.org/fa/library/authoritative-texts/bahaullah/kitab-i-aqdas/> (the original Arabic, accessed March 10, 2025).

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Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abd al-Bahá’s grandson, chosen successor, interpreter (mubayyin), and “Guardian of the Cause of God” (wali amr Allah),²⁷ urged Western Bahais “to make a thorough study of the Qur’an, as the knowledge of this sacred Scripture is absolutely indispensable for every believer who wishes to adequately understand and intelligently read, the writings of Bahá’u’lláh.”²⁸ Despite the few competent Bahais at that time (1935/1354) who would have been “capable of handling such a study in a scholarly way,” Shoghi Effendi encouraged the Bahais “to get better acquainted with the Sacred Scriptures of Islám” so that “there will gradually appear some distinguished Bahá’ís who will be so well versed in the teachings of Islám as to be able to guide the believers in their study of that religion.”²⁹ These words, in fact, suffice to emphasize the importance of Islam and the Qur’an for the Bahais. Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi highlighted that “[i]t is certainly most difficult to thoroughly grasp” the Qur’an since “it requires a detailed knowledge of the social, religious and historical background of Arabia at the time of the appearance of

the Prophet.”³⁰ He suggested studying it with the help of commentaries and explanatory notes as found, e.g., in the translation produced by George Sale.³¹ As this would require much thorough study and would be a slow process, he told the Bahais to study the Qurʾān according to subjects “and also in the light of the Bab, Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretation, which throw such floods of light on the whole of the Qurʾān.”³² It is this last statement that we will elaborate upon here, discussing examples of Bahai commentaries on suras and verses from the Qurʾān and hadith. At the center of Bahai tafsir is Baha’ullah’s book *Kitab-i Iqan* (KI, “The Book of Certitude”),³³ his preeminent doctrinal work. KI has been characterized by Christo

?? ‘Abd al-Bahá, *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette: US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990 reprint), 11; *Alváh-i Vasáyá-yi Mubárah* (Mona Vale: Australian Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1992), 11.

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

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

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

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

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

?? The English translation by Shoghi Effendi is available online at the new official Bahá’í Reference Library of the Bahá’í World Centre, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authorita>

tive-texts/bahauallah/kitab-i-iqan/. Major studies on the KI include Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret: Qurʾan Commentary in Baháʼuʼlláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004); and Sholeh A. Quinn and Stephen Lambden, “Ketab-e Iqan,” in *EIr*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, last updated March 15, 2010, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ketab-iqan>.

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pher Buck as “arguably the world’s most widely-read non-Muslim Qurʾanic commen-
tary,” in which Bahaʼullah “advanced an extended Qurʾanic and biblical argument to
authenticate the Bab’s prophetic credentials.”³⁴ According to Buck, Bahaʼullah uses ex-
egetical techniques that include most of the twelve “procedural devices” that are at-
tested in the classical commentaries as well as various others. Like Abu Hamid al-
Ghazali (1111/505) before him,³⁵ Bahaʼullah also stresses the need to harmonize literal
and figurative interpretations and “states that eschatological verses should be under-
stood through esoteric interpretation (taʼwil), whereas Qurʾanic laws are to be under-
stood by their apparent (zahir) sense.”³⁶ Buck describes KI as “a work of symbolic exe-
gesis of the Qurʾan and, to a lesser extent, of the New Testament.”³⁷ In KI, Bahaʼullah, who composed it in Baghdad in 1862/1278, advances his pro-
phetic claim in a subtle way, foreshadowing the imminent declaration of his mission
(which occurred in 1863/1280) in a fashion that Bahai scholars have referred to as
“messianic secrecy.”³⁸ In a pivotal passage of his book, Bahaʼullah, in a “most signifi-
cant exegetical move,” relativizes the Muslim claim about the final prophethood of
Muhammad as “Seal of the Prophets” expressed in Q 33:40.³⁹ He does so by turning
the reader’s attention to the “attainment of the presence of God” (liqaʼ Allah) on the
Day of Resurrection – which, from the Bahai viewpoint, occurs spiritually, not physi-
cally – at Q 33:44, which he deals with earlier by quoting and discussing Q 29:23, 2:46,

2:249, 18:111, and 13:2. In his seminal work on the Kitab-i Iqan, Buck proposes that Baha'ullah intended the verses Q 33:40 and Q 33:44 to be read together:

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

?? Christopher Buck, “Baha'is [Supplement 2016],” in EQ, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed August 24, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_050505.

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

?? Buck, “Baha'is.”

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

?? Armin Eschraghi, “Promised one (maw'ud) or imaginary one (mawhum)? Some notes on Twelver Shi'i Mahdi doctrine and its discussion in writings of Baha' Allah,” in *Unity in Diversity: Mysticism, Messianism, and the Construction of Religious Authority in Islam*, ed. Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 112.

?? Buck, “Baha'is.”

?? Ibid.

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Baha'ullah argues that, since a direct encounter with God is impossible, there needs to be a future theophany with a new messenger of God as his representative. This, he

states, has been manifested through the revelation of the Bab, but he also implies that the “messianic secret” of his own mission will be declared soon. There are other Qurʾan commentaries by Bahaʾullah from the early years of his mission; however, after he publicly declared his divine mission, Islamic topics, especially tafsirs, seem to have become less frequent in his writings as Bahaʾullah started laying the scriptural foundations of his new religion by introducing specific Bahai doctrines and praxis.⁴¹

One of Bahaʾullah’s other major tafsirs is “The Commentary on the Sura of the Sun” (tafsir surat ash-Shams, Q 91), which was composed late in his ministry in

Akka.⁴² Its importance lies in the fact that this is where he says how religious scripture should be interpreted. Bahaʾullah advocates a balanced interpretation, neither stressing the “outer” (zahir, exoteric) nor the “inner” (batin, esoteric) meaning:

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

It can be said that Bahaʾullah opposed literalism or, in modern terms, fundamentalism. At the same time, he disapproved of mystics and Sufis who disregarded the plain or common-sense meaning of the Qurʾan in favor of wild speculation. This is best expressed in his “Most Holy Book,” the Kitab-i Aqdas (KA), where he states, Amongst the people is he who seateth himself amid the sandals by the door

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

Baha'ullah regards the KA – the “book of laws” of the Bahais – and
in fact all of his
revelation, as the “choice wine” (rahiq makhtum) that the Qur'an
promises the righ

?? Eschraghi, “Promised one (maw'ud) or imaginary one (mawhum)?”
112.

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

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

?? Baha'ullah, Kitab-i Aqdas #36.

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teous believers (Q 83:25), disclosing spiritual truths that were previously
unknown.

Those who drink it will “discern the splendors of the light of divine
unity” and “grasp
the essential purpose underlying the Scriptures of God.”⁴⁵ Baha'ullah's
statement

“Think not that we have revealed unto you a mere code of laws (al-ahkam).
Nay,

rather, we have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and
power”⁴⁶ is a

rejection of both a purely legalistic and an antinomian approach to sharia,
because

both see law as a “mere code.” Nader Saiedi states that “unsealing” the
“choice wine”

affirms the centrality and significance of Baha'ullah's laws, and because
the symbol of

“wine” means emancipation from limits, he “is arguing that his laws
should be under-

stood not as repressive or constraining limits, the way some Sufis understood
law, but

as the essence of liberation.”⁴⁷ In other words, Baha'ullah criticizes

those who devalue the importance of divine laws and interpret them away esoterically. He observes some “who call themselves dervishes” claiming that they do not need to perform the Islamic obligatory prayer, having been “born into a state of prayer,” meaning that they have “already performed the ‘true’ obligatory prayer.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, as we have seen, Baha’ullah also criticizes a purely legalistic approach to divine laws, whereby said laws gain importance to the detriment of spiritual principles. In many of his writings, Baha’ullah makes clear references to the well-known Qur’anic distinction at Q 3:7 between metaphorical verses (mutashabihat) that can be interpreted individually through ta’wil on the one hand and, on the other, commands, ordinances, or religious observances that are clear, binding, and to be followed by believers (muhkamat). At first glance, it would seem that he prohibited the flagrantly antinomian interpretation of normative verses as expressed in the following: “Whoso interpreteth (yu’awwilu) what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning (yukhrijuhu mina z-zahir), he, verily, is of them that have perverted (harrafa) the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book.”⁴⁹ However, he does not categorically forbid interpretation. Obviously, Bahais are free to engage in the study of their religion and thereby arrive at their own personal understanding or interpretation. In the introduction to the official translation of the Kitab-i Aqdas, the Universal House of Justice (the highest governing Bahai institution) states that interpretations of the Bahai teachings of ‘Abd al-Baha’ and Shoghi Effendi are considered divinely guided and binding on the Bahais, giving the following explanation of individual interpretation:

“Baha’ullah, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), 105, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/>

tablets-bahauallah/.

?? Baha?ullah, KA, 5.

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

?? Baha?ullah, trans. and cited in Saiedi, *Logos*, 218.

?? Baha?ullah, KA, 105.

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

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

The purpose of figurative interpretation (*ta?wil*) is not that one be deprived of the outward sense of the verse, nor that its intent be veiled. For instance, let us say that from the heaven of the divine will the command is revealed, "Wash your faces" [*fa-?ighsilu wujuhakum*, Q 5:6]. Do not interpret it figuratively (*ta?wil*), saying that the intent is that one should wash the countenance of one's inner self (*wajh-i batin*), cleansing it with the water of mystical insight (*ab-i ?irfan*), and so forth. For in this manner a person might, by reason of such a figurative interpretation, continue

to have a malodorous face soiled with dirt, yet be convinced in his own mind that he had carried out the very essence of God's decree. For in this station it is clear and obvious that the intent is that the face be washed with physical water (ab-i zahir).⁵²

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

?? Ibid., n. 130, accessed March 10, 2025,

<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/kitab-i-aqdas/12#704803062>.

?? Baha'ullah, *Iqtidarāt va chand lawh-i digar* (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.), 279–86,

accessed March 10, 2025, [https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/b/\(no. 22\)](https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/b/(no.22)). Here, we are citing the unofficial

draft translation by Juan Cole, who gives the Persian text by Baha'ullah the title *Lawh-i Ta'wil*. Juan

Cole, "Tablet on the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture (Ta'wil)," accessed August 27, 2020, [https://](https://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_tawil_cole)

bahai-library.com/bahauallah_lawh_tawil_cole.

?? Translated in Cole, "Tablet," from Baha'ullah, *Iqtidarāt*, 279.

I have added the original Arabic/Persian words.

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

Cole erroneously refers to Q 2:272.

?? Baha'ullah, *Iqtidarāt*, 279f., 283f.

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ferentiating between mutashabihat and muhkamat, he adds that verses containing commands or prohibitions (awamir wa-nawahi), such as rituals, the payment of

blood
 money to the victim's relatives for manslaughter, crimes, and so forth, are intended to be implemented according to their literal meaning (zahir). But the divine verses concerning the Resurrection and the Hour, whether they were revealed in past scriptures or in the Qur'an, are for the most part to be interpreted figuratively. He quotes the verse "And none knows its interpretation, save only God" (wa-la ya'lamu ta'wilahu illa Allah, Q 3:7) to make it clear that human beings are not in the position to offer ta'wil of allegorical verses such as those mentioned.⁵⁵ The message behind this is that, even though such verses are to be interpreted figuratively, only those who have been chosen by God for this purpose may actually perform universally binding ta'wil. Like in the discussion in his "Commentary on the Sura of the Sun," Baha'ullah, on the one hand, heavily criticizes antinomian Sufis for their allegorical interpretation of ordinances and divine laws as well as, on the other hand, the famous Sunni Qur'an commentator 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar al-Baydawi (685/1286) for his too-literal approach. Commenting on the Qur'an verse "It behooves not the sun to overtake the moon, neither does the night outstrip the day" (Q 36:40), Baha'ullah says,

The clergy ('ulama'), ancient and modern, have commented upon and interpreted figuratively (tafsir wa-ta'wil) this blessed verse, and each derived its meaning from their own beliefs (i'tiqad).

But these are the stations of delusion and idle fancy, whereas this is the station of knowledge.

The individual whom they call the king of scripture commentators (sultan al-mufasssin), Qadi

Baydawi, asserted that this verse was revealed in refutation of those who worshipped the sun.

Note how far he is from the spring of knowledge, despite the assertion of the people that he was profoundly learned. The reins of the branches of knowledge are in the grasp of the divine power.

He bestows them upon whomever he desires.⁵⁶

When Baha'ullah says "this is the station of knowledge" in the passage above, he is

referring to himself as the divinely ordained messenger, the “beloved of the mystics”

(mahbub al-ʿarifin) who has brought true knowledge in the form of God’s renewed re-

ligion, asking the reader to be thankful to him: “Indeed, today that which can cleanse

the people of defilement, and can deliver them into true repose, is the faith of God

(madhhab Allah), the religion of God (din Allah), the Cause of God (amr Allah). Thus

has the invisible discourse rained down from the heaven of mystical insight (samaʿ al-

ʿirfan), as a grace upon you.”⁵⁷

?? Ibid., 284.

?? Ibid., 284f. Obviously, this single example of al-Baydawi is given for rhetorical purposes. Bahaʿullah

is not presenting a detailed history of tafsir, which undoubtedly holds a wide variety of interpreta-

tions for this particular verse.

?? Cole’s translation, cf. Bahaʿullah, Iqtidarat, 285f.

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In a similar vein, ʿAbd al-Bahaʿ wrote Qurʾan and hadith commentaries⁵⁸ in which

he confirms that the word of God has various meanings, from external and literal to

mystical and hidden. One of his important commentaries is a lengthy text about sura

30, ar-Rum (The Romans), where he expounds upon the name ar-Rum and the first words “The Byzantines have been overthrown” (ghulibat ar-Rum). This is a reference

to the overthrow of the Byzantines in Syria by the Persians during the time of the

prophet Muhammad (614 CE).⁵⁹

Moojan Momen, who brought this Arabic writing (“tablet”) by ʿAbd al-Bahaʿ to

light and produced an unofficial translation of it, says that it is

a manual or guide to Bahai mysticism in that it lays out the pathway or stages for the ascent of

the soul from its lowest state of abasement and preoccupation with the things of the world to its

highest state, where the human qualities are effaced and only the divine attributes are manifest

in the individual, the state where it becomes aware of the secrets of hidden and invisible real-

ities.⁶⁰

In his commentary, ‘Abd al-Bahá gives nine esoteric interpretations of ar-Rum and ghulibat ar-Rum. In the ninth of these, he says that ar-Rum signifies the stages of the soul (nafs; mineral, vegetative, animal, and human), its states (an-nafs al-ammara bi-s-su? Q 12:53, an-nafs al-lawwama Q 75:2, an-nafs al-mutma‘inna, Q 89:27), degrees, elevation, ascent, and descent. Momen summarizes the commentary thus:

In relation to his commentary on the overthrow of “Rum,” ‘Abd al-Bahá says that it means, in this context, that as the human soul ascends stage by stage, it overthrows the conditions of the lower stage in order to attain the higher stage. It can thus be seen that not only has ‘Abd al-Bahá given nine spiritual or esoteric interpretations of this sentence of the Qur‘an, but he has done so in relation to only one event – the coming of the Manifestation of God. Presumably ‘Abd al-Bahá could have given further interpretations of this verse relating to other aspects of spiritual reality.⁶¹

Among ‘Abd al-Bahá’s noteworthy commentaries, his tafsir of the hadith qudsi, which he wrote in his youth, stands out: “I was a Hidden Treasure and loved to be known.

?? For a selection with introductions and context, see Vahid Rafati, *Badayí-i ma‘ani va tafsir: Majmu‘ah-yi az asar hazrat ‘Abd al-Bahá dar tafsir-i ayat-i Qur‘ani a ahadis-i Islami* (Darmstadt: ‘Asr-i Jadid, 2012).

?? Moojan Momen, “‘Abd al-Bahá’s Commentary on the Qur‘anic Verses concerning the Overthrow of the Byzantines: The Stages of the Soul,” *Bahai Studies Review* 12 (2004): 67–90; and in *Lights of Irfan* 2 (2001): 99–118, accessed March 10, 2025, https://bahai-library.com/momen_byzantines. The Arabic text of the commentary was published in *Makatib-i hazrat-i ‘Abd al-Bahá* (Tehran: Mu‘assasah-yi Milli-yi Matbu‘at-yi Amri, 1910), 1: 62–102, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MA1/ma1-61.html>; see also *Min Makatib-i hazrat-i ‘Abd al-Bahá* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bahai Brasil, n.d.), 1:12–31, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MMAB/mmab-10.html>; see also, Rafati, *Badayí?*, 86–117.

?? Momen, “ʿAbduʿl-Bahá’s,” 67.

?? Momen, “ʿAbduʿl-Bahá’s,” 72.

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Therefore, I created the Creation that I might be known” (Kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan fa-ahbabbtu an uʿrafa fa-khalaqtu al-khalq).⁶² Shoghi Effendi mentions that he composed “while still in His adolescence in Baghdád” and “at the suggestion of Bahá’u’l-láh,” a “superb commentary on a well-known Muhammadan tradition.”⁶³ ʿAbd al-Baha wrote it at the request of Ali Sevket (ʿAli Shawkat) Pasha, an Ottoman official and, apparently, a Sufi. The commentary is one of the most important sources for the study of Bahai mysticism and metaphysics, according to Momen, and ʿAbd al-Baha’s “clearest and fullest exposition of many important points.”⁶⁴ The phrases on which ʿAbd al-Baha’s comments are “Hidden Treasure,” “Love,” “Creation,” and “Knowledge,” all themes in the works of the great Muslim mystic Muhyi d-Din b. al-ʿArabi (638/1240), to whom ʿAbd al-Baha alludes in his commentary. Ultimately, the gist of this commentary is that it is impossible for humans to ever fully acquire or attain knowledge of God. ʿAbd al-Baha argues that the most that human beings can ever hope to know of God is to discern fully the signs of God within themselves. In support of this, he quotes Q 17:14: “Read your own book, your self/soul is sufficient to give an account against you this day.” Momen explains that ʿAbd al-Baha compares this verse to “the point of a compass. However far human beings may travel in their search for knowledge of God, ultimately they are only travelling in a circle around the implications of this verse.”⁶⁵ These “signs of God” within human beings are best and most fully uncovered through the guidance of one of the Manifestations of the Divinity (messengers of God) who appear upon the Earth from time to time. Hence, the “knowledge of God” referred to in this tradition is recognition of the

Manifestation of God, under whose guidance the new and fuller knowledge of the signs of God within each individual human being is revealed.

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

?? Moojan Momen, “Commentary on the Islamic Tradition ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure . . .,’” Bahá’í

Studies Bulletin 3, no. 4 (December 1995): 4–35, revised version available online, accessed March 10,

2025, https://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_kuntu_kanzan_makhfiyyan; Arabic text:

‘Abd al-Bahá, “Taf-

sir kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan,” in Makatib-i hazrat-i ‘Abd al-Bahá,

ed. Farajullah Zaki l-Kurdi (Cairo:

Kurdistan al-‘Ilmiyya, 1911/12), 2: 2–55, available online, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MA2/ma2-55.html>; see also Rafati, Badayi?, 174–218.

?? Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust,

1979), 241, accessed March 10,

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<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/god-passes-by/16#055478979>. Re-

cent research has established that the place of composition was Edirne in Turkey. See Baha’ullah’s

and ‘Abd al-Bahá’s own statements in Safinih-yi-‘Irfán 6: 10; Masumian 2021; and Makátib 2: 55; see also

Rafati, Badayi?, 179.

?? Momen, “Commentary,” 4.

?? Ibid., 7.

?? On ‘Abd al-Bahá’s Turkish and his renown among Ottoman literati, see Necati Alkan, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá

‘Abbás,” in The World of the Bahá’í Faith, ed. Robert H. Stockman (London: Routledge, 2021), 78f.

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minology used by Ibn al-‘Arabi. In this tafsir of sura 95, at-Tin (The Fig),⁶⁷ in which

‘Abd al-Bahá discusses the words “fig” and “olive” (az-zaytun), he explains that the

interpretation of the fig and the olive as fruits is problematic in the context of the

passage, which continues with the terms “Mount Sinai” (tur sinin) and “secure city”

(al-balad al-amin). He informs the addressee that, although the “people of truth” (ehl-i

hakikat) do accept the famous Muslim commentators’ traditional interpretations of

the first verse of sura 95, they “have carefully examined this blessed verse

and unraveled therein other far-reaching meanings.” He identifies the “fig” as Mount Tina and the “olive” as Mount Zita/Zayta?, “two blessed mounts” in the vicinity of Jerusalem where God has honored his prophets and appeared to them. Mount Sinai is the “day-spring of God’s boundless grace,” where the divine signs were disclosed to Moses. Contrary to his own and traditional Islamic interpretations, ‘Abd al-Baha? says that “the City of security” is Medina (Medine-i münevvere), where Muhammad had migrated, “the centre of the manifestation of Islam and the designated point where the Word of God had been raised.”⁶⁸

In ‘Abd al-Baha?’s summary of sura 95 in his Turkish commentary, God swears by Mount Tina, Mount Zayta?, Mount Sinai, and “this City of security” that he has created the reality and temple of man in the “best of forms” (ahsan taqwim Q 95:4). Although other creatures and all of creation are the manifestations of various signs (of God), only man embodies the totality of signs and the reality of divine perfection collectively. Man is the greatest demarcation (barzakh; Turk. berzah), the archetype of the macrocosm – i.e., of all the worlds of God. ‘Abd al-Baha? states that only humankind has the privilege of receiving divine messengers who hold the station of prophethood. And the reality of all things in creation, the intrinsic worth of human beings, and the mysteries in creation, first hidden in the imaginary world, will be discovered and appear in the visible realm through the power of human mental faculties and talents. That human beings have been created in the “best form,” that they are a barzakh, “demarcation” or “barrier,” and, perhaps paradoxically, an essential “link” between two worlds is indicative of their destiny. Creation, according to ‘Abd al-Baha?, is collectively a manifestation of clear signs (ayat-i beyyinat), but only human beings are the focal points (cf. mazahir) of divine perfections. If spiritual powers are

victorious over
 physical constraints, individuals can become heavenly, a source of love. But,
 if the
 sensual side and carnal senses dominate, human beings become a mine of
 darkness, a
 source of deceit, a manifestation of ignorance and wickedness. As in Sufism,
 ?Abd al-
 Baha? here also states that man, by attaining spiritual perfection on his
 path to God,

?? Necati Alkan, “‘By the Fig and the Olive’: ?Abdu’l-Bahá’s
 Commentary in Ottoman Turkish on the
 Qur?anic Sura 95 – Notes and Provisional Translation,” *The Bahai Studies
 Review* 10 (2001/2002):
 115–128; cf. Johanna Pink, “The Fig, the Olive and the Cycles of
 Prophethood: Q 95:1–3 and the Image of
 History in Early 20th-Century Qur?anic Exegesis,” in *Islamic Studies Today:
 Essays in Honor of Andrew
 Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 317–38.
 ?? Alkan, “‘By the Fig and the Olive,’” 123.
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first has a *nefs-i emmare*, a “lower” soul that commands him to behave
 immorally. It
 then becomes a *nefs-i levvame*, a still unsubmitive soul that blames itself for
 its own
 shortcomings. At the end of his journey, man reaches the station of *nefs-i
 mutmaine*,
 an obedient soul at peace.⁶⁹
 In her study on the puzzling oaths at the beginning of sura 95, Johanna Pink
 refers
 to Necati Alkan’s paper on ?Abd al-Baha?’s tafsir, remarking ?Abd
 al-Baha? “presents his
 interpretation as a Muslim one, without any mention of the Baha’i faith.”
 However, be-
 cause he emphasizes the Holy Land as the site of a number of unspecified
 prophets, she
 says, this easily allows for the inclusion of his father Baha?ullah,
 “without being specific
 enough to offend Muslims.” In Pink’s view, ?Abd al-Baha?’s commentary
 “is not simply a
 veiled attempt to legitimize a new religion and connect it to Islam” but is
 part of the
 zeitgeist of “a renewed and original entanglement with the Qur’an” by
 Muslim scholars
 and intellectuals in an atmosphere of intense interreligious debate and
 polemics in the
 historical context of British and French imperialism in the Middle East,

Christian missionaries proselytizing in that region, and new interpretations of the origins of Islam by Western Orientalists.⁷⁰

ʿAbd al-Bahá often took the mystics’ approach when interpreting ahadith or Qur’anic verses, as we have seen in relation to his commentaries above. Another short example is his (likewise) Turkish tafsir of the hadith “God doth give victory to this religion by means of a wicked man” (inna llaha yuʿayyidu hadha d-dina bi-rajulin fajir), recorded as the words of Muhammad in Muhammad b. Ismaʿil al-Bukhari’s (870/256) collection of hadiths.⁷¹ In his commentary on this hadith, ʿAbd al-Bahá seems to ignore its negative context – the fact that the Prophet Muhammad is referring to this person, though he fights alongside the Muslims, as one of the people of hell-fire (i.e., a person destined for hell) – and puts forth a more positive interpretation of the words. ʿAbd al-Bahá’s tafsir here stands in the Islamic tradition of reading the inner meaning (batin) of the words. At first glance, it may seem puzzling that ʿAbd al-Bahá is taking not a doubtful, but rather what is regarded as an “authentic” (sahih) hadith from no less a source than al-Bukhari, and is not questioning its authenticity but giving it a completely new and unexpected meaning. He is making the inner meaning (batin) take the opposite of the manifest meaning (zahir). The main point of interest in our context is that, in ʿAbd al-Bahá’s commentary, the word fajir, usually translated as “disobedient,” “evil,” or “wicked,” suddenly becomes positive, meaning fariq – that is, “distinguishing” and “rich.” Whereas in the hadith it is a man who claims to be a Muslim fighting for God’s religion, though he is described by Muhammad as fajir and a “man of hell-fire,” ʿAbd al-Bahá elucidates the

?? Ibid., 123–25.

?? Pink, “The Fig,” 325f.

?? Necati Alkan, “ʿAbduʿl-Bahá’s Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘God Doth Give Victory to This

Religion by Means of a Wicked Man' – a Provisional Translation and Notes," *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 11 (2003): 53–57.

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word fajir alone, rather than commenting on the entirety of the hadith.

Muhammad's

intended meaning in his use of the word fajir, says 'Abd al-Baha', is a person rich in

the spiritual sense who will aid the cause of God by discriminating between good and

evil, forbidden and lawful, truth and error – in short, someone who has knowledge of

the divine mysteries.

Overall, in 'Abd al-Baha's brief commentary, we see two themes that recur in

Bahai tafsir. The first is the emphasis placed on the Islamic hermeneutic presupposi-

tion of a multiplicity of meanings in scripture and the prominence given in Bahai taf-

sir to allegorical interpretation. The second theme is the great extent to which Bahai

interpretation focuses on the ethical and spiritual development of humankind.

4 Conclusion

It is fair to say that the Qur'an plays a role in the Bahai faith that is analogous to the

way in which the Hebrew Bible functions in Christianity. Christians are patently not

Jews, but they nonetheless revere the sacred scripture of what they consider to be the

Old Testament (cf. the Arabic al-'ahd al-qadim), precisely because they understand the

covenant that lives at the center of that book as having been renewed within the

scope of Jesus' mission in the New Testament (al-'ahd al-jadid). This discussion should

be considered something of an introduction to the role and function of the Qur'an in

the Bahai faith, which similarly sees itself as renewing the covenant that is at the

heart of Islam, Muhammad's mission, and, of course, the Qur'an. There are many

other works of Bahai scripture to explore, including the Most Holy Book itself, the

Kitab-i Aqdas, whose Qur'an-like status in the Bahai faith is reflected in its Qur'anic

diction and, sometimes, content.⁷² It is hoped that this brief exploration will

encour-

age further research into this fascinating topic.

Finally, it can be observed that Bahai readings of the Qurʾan, from their historical

beginnings until today, revolve around the guiding Bahai aspiration and struggle for

universal peace. The Bab chose to “rewrite” the Qurʾan so that the peaceable and for-

giving prophet, messenger, and, in Bahai terminology, divine manifestation (mazhar

ilahi), Joseph, son of Jacob, would assume central importance. Joseph, after all, is dis-

tinguished in the Islamic tradition for his beauty (both moral and physical), for his

ability to interpret and bring order to chaos, for combining both worldly and spiritual

authority, and, finally, for forgiving his brothers, who sold their young brother, Jo-

seph, into slavery due to their own jealousy and greed while betraying their broken-

hearted father, Jacob. Joseph could have behaved differently but, even after they rec

?? On the Kitab-Aqdas, see now: Omid Ghaemmaghami, and Shahin Vafai, Exploring the Kitáb-IAq-

das: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá’í Faith (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755606283>).

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ognized him and Joseph had the power to do whatever he deemed just, he said to his

perfidious brothers, “No reproach shall be uttered today against you. May God forgive

you your sins: for He is the most merciful of the merciful” (Q 12:92).

Indeed, according

to the Sira, the prophet Muhammad addressed the formerly inimical Meccans with

the following verse after the conquest of Mecca: “I say to you what my brother Joseph

said ‘No blame will be upon you this day. God will forgive you!’”⁷³ This admiration for

Joseph’s peacemaking ministry is particularly salient in the context of the terrible ani-

mosity that, with depressing regularity, has characterized the relations between

Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Undoubtedly, it is this context that at least partly explains

why the deeply mystical (and Shiite) Bab chose to compose his commentary on the sura of Joseph as a fitting announcement for the return of the Hidden Imam who would, as the Shiite traditional prophecy has it, restore justice to a deeply unjust world. And this may be one of the reasons why Bahaʿullah honored the Qayyum al-Asmaʿ as “the first, greatest, and mightiest of all books.” However, as we well know, it is not only the Muslim world that has been plagued and exhausted by mutual hatred and animosity. One might say that it is now a worldwide pandemic. And it is for this reason that this same veneration of what might be called a Josephian and, frankly, Qurʾanic dedication to peace and harmony among all peoples was spread by Bahaʿullah and ʿAbd al-Bahaʿ, going far beyond the traditional geographic and cultural borders of the Qurʾan’s audience, to the point that it is now a permanent and essential part of the ethos of the worldwide Bahai community.⁷⁴

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