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Textual Resurrection: Book, Imam and Cosmos in the Qur'an Commentaries of the Bab

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Abstract

As a commentator on the canonical texts of Islam, the Bab was a highly innovative and creative reader. In what follows, the radical notions of textuality underlying the Bab's Qur'anic commentaries are discussed. Drawing upon categories from contemporary literary studies, a framework is provided for a discussion of textuality. The history of Qur'anic commentary in Islam is then discussed in light of these categories, focusing on elements in Akhbārī Shi'i religious thought that can be seen to underpin the Bab's novel approach to the Qur'anic text. Far from being traditional commentaries, it is then argued, the Bab's readings of the Qur'an were messianic performances, enunciations of an eschatological restoration of the Imam, the cosmos, and of the Qur'an itself.

In the first half of his prophetic career, textual interpretation loomed large as the principal focus of the Bab's writings.[1] From the early commentary on *Sūrat al-baqara*, to the reported nine full Qur'an commentaries written while he was imprisoned in Maku, the Bab returned again and again to explicating the scriptural sources of Islam.[2] No one has contributed more to our understanding of these commentaries than Todd Lawson, who in many fine studies has illuminated the Bab's relationship to the Shi'i exegetic tradition and drawn out the subtler points of what could be called the Bab's metaphysics of interpretation.[3] Building on Lawson's work, this study focuses on the notions of textuality implied in the Bab's commentaries, or the theoretical assumptions regarding reading and meaning that underpin the Bab's elevation of textual interpretation to the level of messianic act. I will first introduce a number of key concepts from modern literary theory regarding interpretation and

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Michigan 'Irfan Colloquium in October 2003 and subsequently published in *Lights of 'Irfan: Papers Presented at the 'Irfan Colloquia and Seminars* (book 5, ed. Iraj Ayman, Evanston, IL: Haj Mehdi Memorial Fund, 2004) 41–58. I would like to thank Dr Ayman for the kind invitation to participate in that gathering. Thanks are also due to the people who provided helpful feedback on the paper at various stages of its development, especially Sara Brown, William McCants, Khazeh Fananapazir, David Bikman, and Todd Lawson.

2 On the Bab's *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqara*, see T. Lawson, 'The Qur'ān Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad, the Bāb', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 1987, part one; on the (lost) Qur'ān commentaries penned at Maku, see D. MacEoin, *Sources for Early Bābī Doctrine and History: A Survey* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 88.

3 I refer extensively to Lawson's studies in subsequent footnotes, so will not list his publications here. Another important study relevant to the Bab's approach to interpretation is Armin Eschraghi, *Frühe Šaihī- und Bābī-Theologie: Die Darlegung der Beweise für Muḥammads besonderes Prophetentum (Ar-Risāla fī Ithbāt an-Nubūwa al-Khāṣṣa)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), which unfortunately appeared too late to be made use of in this paper.

reader-reception, and will then briefly explore Islamic exegesis in terms of these concepts. This will provide the critical context against which I will attempt to define the semiological contours of the Bab's messianic readings.

It would be useful to begin with a framework of textuality, a spectrum of the kinds of readings that can be and are produced. One way of defining such a spectrum is to invoke the concepts of the worlds behind and in front of the text.[4]

The world behind the text is the world that generated and produced the text, and of course the author looms large in this world. When our attention is focused on the world behind the text, our assumption is that the text *represents* a single authorial intention. The text is a surface of 'signifiers', and the author's communicative intention is 'the signified'. Any interpretive practice that starts from this assumption will look to various features of the world behind the text in order to test or confirm the success of the interpretive movement from the signifying text to the apprehension of the signified intention. Among the features of the world behind the text that this kind of interpretation would most likely attend to include the author's biography, the historical circumstances, the contemporary character of the language, and intertextuality (the allusive relationship between this text and other texts that came before it). These features might be thought of as boundaries of the author's intention, boxing in what we, as the interpreters, may legitimately assume to have been the author's intended meaning.

Interpretation centred on the world behind the text assumes weak readers, which is to say that it does not assign to readers a very active or strong role in the production of meaning. The *meaning* is what the author *meant* or intended to communicate, and thus the author and the text are the strong elements in the reader/text interaction. The text is a static structure, its referential, representational, and informative nature pointing to a meaning that is stable and determinate.

The world in front of the text is the world in which the text is received, and this world is populated by readers. It is the ever-changing world of readers in history, who successively encounter the text as well as the various 'imaginaries' that have accumulated around the text in the process of the previous readings. By 'imaginaries' I mean the nebulas or auras that surround a text at any given moment in the history of its reception, auras comprising such things as the book's fame, the concretized evaluation of its worth or general meaning, its assignment to genre and labelling as to literary conventions and so forth. Imaginaries are networks of symbols or associated ideas that serve as screens or lenses through which a text is experienced, and they create expectations in the reader as to what he or she is likely to find in a text. Take *Moby Dick*, for example. Its earliest critics could not decide what it was: a romance, a novel, a philosophical enquiry, an adventure tale. But in the course of its history, certain imaginaries have surrounded it, such that we now will 'know', even before picking it up, that it is, first of all, a novel, second, a great novel, and third, a great metaphorical novel. This imaginary of *Moby Dick* will impinge upon our reading of the book, and our reading of it will be very different from those of its earliest readers, who did not read it through the same screen as we do. As Moshe Idel puts it:

> Books, especially famous books, possess auras that may enwrap them long before most of their readers open them. The social imagination of certain elites prepares the ground for the acceptance, dissemination, and depth of influence of a book even before it has

[4] My definition and use of these concepts is inspired by, but not identical to, Paul Ricoeur's notion of the 'world of the text'. See his *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (ed. Mark Wallace, trans. David Pellauer, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 240f.

> been conceived by its author. Even more so in the case of books dealing with religious topics that already permeate the faith of many individuals and the praxis of groups and movements. These books, which are founding documents of a religion, ideology, or intellectual movement – that is to say, canonic – are rarely consumed as pure literature and only seldom are able to evince their 'proposed worlds' without the mediation of the imaginary that surrounds them and has been accumulated over the centuries and has conferred on them their particular status.[5]

Much has been written in recent literary theory about the world in front of the text and the role of the reader in the process of producing meaning in textual transactions. The significant trend in this literature is the shifting of focus from authorial intention and a view of the text as a static and determinative signifier toward a view of the ever-changing 'concretizations' (to use Ingarden's term)[6] of textual possibilities in the active and constitutive encounter between readers and texts. Whether in so-called reader-response criticism, deconstruction, or reception aesthetic, these theoretical strategies recognize that texts do, in fact, mean many different things in the course of their various receptions, and that the richness of language itself, in its constant historical flux, outweighs the mastery or manipulation of language held by any author. The author, in other words, may have had a single intention, but language itself cannot be so easily reined in. No reader can interact with an author's intention, but readers do interact with language in the text, and this language holds within it and in its dynamic history the possibilities of many, many meanings indeed.

To illustrate the idea of the world in front of the text, consider that, in modern Baha'i readings, a given work of Baha'u'llah is generally read with such questions as what 'Abdu'l-Baha, the appointed interpreter, said or wrote about it, what Shoghi Effendi wrote about it, what stories have been passed down from Hands of the Cause regarding the text, and so forth. The prior readings by these figures condition current Baha'i readings of the Tablets of Baha'u'llah but are not related, in the conventional sense, to the world behind the text, to authorial intention. They create horizons of expectation (to use Jauss's idiom)[7] within which a given Tablet of Baha'u'llah is situated in this act of reading. Modern Baha'is embody an interpretive community, operating in the world in front of the text, that is constituted by a set of imaginaries posterior to the text itself, and thus not likely to be involved in a reading of the Tablets of Baha'u'llah by another interpretive community.

I would like to turn now to the Bab's readings, and give here an illustrative example of the Bab's highly unusual approach to interpreting the Qur'an. Here then, are three passages: the first is the Sūrat al-'Aṣr from the Qur'an; the second is an abridgement of a classical Sunni commentary on this surah by Ibn Kathīr; the third is a provisional translation of a brief selection from the Bab's lengthy commentary on the same surah.

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5 Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) 112.

6 See Roman Ingarden, 'On the Cognition of the Literary Work of Art', in *The Hermeneutics Reader* (ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, New York: Continuum, 1997) 187–213 (see 193).

7 See Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Timothy Bahti, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). See also Jane McAuliffe, 'Text and Textuality: Q. 3:7 as a Point of Intersection', in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (ed. Issa Boullata, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000) 56–76 (see 69 and 75 n. 76).

A) *The Sūrat al-'Aṣr, Qur'an 103 (Rodwell translation)*

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1] I swear by the declining day!
2] Verily, man's lot is cast amid destruction,
3] Save those who believe and do the things which are right, and enjoin truth and enjoin steadfastness on each other.

B) *From Ibn Kathir's Commentary*

Verse 1: That is, the ages during which the deeds – both good and bad – of the sons of Adam take place. Malik said that it refers to the time of 'aṣr prayer, but the first explanation is more correct.

Verse 2: God swears by it (time) that mankind is in loss, that is misfortune and ruin.

Verse 3: God excludes those of mankind who believe sincerely with all their hearts and do good deeds with their hands. That is, in the face of misfortune or calamity, the things which have been decreed for us and the persecution by those who would seek to harm whoever orders the good and forbids the evil. According to aṭ-Ṭabarānī, whenever any two Companions of the Prophet met, they would not part, until one of them had recited to the other Surat al-'Asr and then delivered salutations upon him. Ash-Shafi'ī said: 'If the people were to ponder on this surah, it would be sufficient for them.'[8]

C) *From the Bab's Tafsīr wa'l-'Aṣr (min Sūrat al-'Aṣr)*
(These are commentaries on each of the three Arabic letters in the word *'Aṣr* –meaning 'time', 'age', and 'afternoon' or 'declining day' – which are *'ayn*, *ṣād*, and *rā'*, respectively. These are the fourth, fifth, and sixth letters of the first verse.)

Then the fourth letter is *'ayn*, [1] the loftiness [*'uluw* – which starts with the letter *'ayn*] of God's Exclusive Unity [*al-aḥadiyya*] in the station of the Realm of Divinity [*lāhūt*]; [2] then the loftiness of Inclusive Unity [*al-wāḥidiyya*] in the states of the Empyrean of Power [*jabarūt*]; [3] then the loftiness of Existentiating Mercy [*raḥmāniyya*] in the stations of the Kingdom and its Estates [*mulk wa'l-malakūt*]; [4] then the loftiness of Eternal Glory [*ṣamadāniyya*] in what God hath self-manifested unto all, in all, in the realities of the souls and horizons, of the earth of the Realm of Humanity [*nāsūt*].

Then the fifth letter is *ṣād*, [1] the stations of the theophanic Eternal Glory [*ṣamadāniyya*] in the essential inner-beings of the inhabitants of the Divine Realm [*lāhūt*]; [2] then the radiant, sanctified, and theophanic Eternal Glory in the abstract essences of the inhabitants of the Empyrean of Power [*jabarūt*]; [3] then the gleaming, wondrous Eternal Glory in the veridical identities of the inhabitants of the Kingdom and its Estates [*mulk wa'l-malakūt*]; [4] then that Eternal Glory which is reflected from the first of the four levels of the divine Act, and which God sent down as manifest apparitions into the spiritual realities of the inhabitants of the Realm of Earthly Humanity [*nāsūt*].

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[8] Abridged translation of Ibn Kathir's commentary on Surat al-'Asr, from *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm l-Ibn Kathīr*, online at <http://www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/tafseer/103.htm> (cited 9 December 2004).

Then the sixth letter is *rā'*, [1] the universal mercy [*raḥmat al-kulliyya*] by which God created the Will by itself and before all things, which He then made to be the cause of the totality of the essences. [2] Next, it is the mercy of Inclusive Unity, by which God created the souls that are comprehended in the knowledge of the Book. [3] Next, it is the universal revealed mercy in the station of Determination [*qadar*], a billowing, surging, fathomless sea in which the judgements of character are marked out. The happy are gladdened by recognition of the abode which God hath created in the furthermost limits of this station, while the miserable are saddened by their incognizance of what God hath revealed in that billowing, surging and fathomless sea. [4] Next, it is the mercy which encompasses all things, which God made to be as a well of a hundred portions [*juz'*], just as is explained by 'Askari [the eleventh Imam] in his commentary on the name of God the Compassionate [*ar-raḥīm*]: 'Only a single portion of compassion is found in this world, and ninety-nine portions are God's mercy upon His servants on the day of Resurrection, according to what He hath Purposed and Determined in the Book.' This all-embracing mercy encompasses believers and infidels, and indeed all things. It is that mercy that existentiates and essentiates the essential substances of all possible beings. Verily, God hath made the bearer of that mercy at that station to be Husayn, and therefore he (may my spirit and those of all who dwell in the kingdoms of command and creation be his sacrifice) intercedes with God on the day of Resurrection with an intercession such as no one whosoever has its like. May God bestow upon me, and upon whomsoever desires the meeting with Him, his intercession on the day of Reckoning. Verily, He is the Ever-Forgiving, in the beginning and in the end.[9]

The Bab, from this example, may appear to us as a rather unusual reader (of the text of the Qur'an). What notion of text might lie behind such an approach to 'interpretation'; what, in other words, can we say about the Bab's textuality on the basis of passages like these? What, for the Bab, is the process of reading, and what place does *meaning* have in this interaction of reader and text? Obviously, the Bab's commentary is pursuing very different interpretive strategies from Ibn Kathir's, based upon entirely different semiotic assumptions. In order to provide some context from which to approach these questions, I would like at this point to explore very briefly and further define these different textualities with reference to the history of Qur'anic commentary (*tafsīr*). In what follows, my schematization of this history will be necessarily over-simplified.[10] My general characterizations of periods and phases of commentary literature would not hold for every author in the given period, but I think they are nonetheless true to the general trends in the history of this literature.

The classical Sunni commentary literature, exemplified first and foremost by Ṭabarī, and crystallized in its most conservative form in Ibn Kathir, was overwhelmingly concerned with the world behind the text. Every scrap of information or detail about the life of Muhammad and his nascent community that could be seen as relevant to a specific verse or surah was scrupulously sought out and gathered together. The *asbāb an-nuzūl*, or specific circumstances

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[9] Bab, Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, *Tafsīr Sūrat wa'l-'Aṣr*, University of Michigan British Manuscript Project Microfilm 745 (1). Digitally published in facsimile (Lansing, MI: H-Bahai, 1998) 36–39. Available at <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/bab/S-Z/sharhasr/asr.htm>. All references to the Bab's *Tafsir Surat wa'l-'Asr* will be to this MS. All translations are provisional and my own, unless otherwise noted.

[10] For a much richer exploration of the developments in *tafsīr* as a genre of Islamic letters, see Norman Calder, '*Tafsīr* from Tabari to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham', in *Approaches to the Qur'an* (ed. Gerald Hawting and Abdul-Kadeer Shareef, London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 101–40.

of the revelation of a given verse, were likewise of central importance to the interpretive project of these early commentators (*mufassirūn*), and the voluminous commentaries of these authors are teeming with them. Similarly, exempla of Arabic grammar and its lexicon were teased out of every available specimen of pre-Islamic poetry and Arabic literature, in an attempt to situate the linguistic usages of the Qur'an in their contemporary environment. These writers were following the assumption that the Qur'an was stable in meaning, that its *correct* interpretation could be obtained along the lines they pursued in their researches into the world behind the text. The early interpretation of a specific Qur'anic passage that well illustrates this is in the exegesis of Qur'an 3:7, of which I give here two translations:

> It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses [*muḥkamāt*] that are the Mother of the Book, and others that are ambiguous [*mutashābihāt*]. As for those in whose heart is deviation, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation [*ta'wīl*]; *and none knows its interpretation save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say*, 'We believe in it; all is from our Lord'; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.
>
> It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses [*muḥkamāt*] that are the Mother of the Book, and others that are ambiguous [*mutashābihāt*]. As for those in whose heart is deviation, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation [*ta'wīl*]; *and none knows its interpretation save only God and those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say*, 'We believe in it; all is from our Lord'; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds.[11]

These two translations of this verse are obviously very different, the meaning being radically dependent on how you divide up the semantic units (see sections in italics in the above two translations). The first version is the one that will be found in the vast majority of English translations of the Qur'an, and represents how the majority of Sunnis have read this verse. The second translation represents the predominant Shi'i (and, subsequently, Babi-Baha'i) reading. In the former, the Qur'an is acknowledged to have both clear and ambiguous verses, but the interpretation of the latter are known only to God. Given the classic Sunni approach to commentary, which assumed a stable and intelligibly signifying character to the Qur'an, it is not surprising that at-Tabari favoured an understanding of the ambiguous verses as meaning the isolated letters (*fawātiḥ*) that preface certain of the Qur'an's surahs.[12] As isolated letters, these are parasemantic in the first place, so it does not challenge the assumption of a stable structure of transparent intelligibility in the Qur'an to identify these as the ambiguous verses whose interpretation is known only to God.

In what has been called classical Shi'i commentary, represented by aṭ-Ṭūsī (d. 1067) and aṭ-Ṭabarsī (or Tabrisī, d. 1144), this narrow understanding of the ambiguous verses is set aside

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[11] Adapted from the two translations given by Stefan Wild, 'Self-Referentiality of the Qur'ān: Sura 3:7 as an Exegetical Challenge', in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (ed. Jane McAuliffe, Barry Walfish and Joseph Goering, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 422–36 (see 423), which he calls the 'majority' and 'minority' readings, respectively.

[12] For a wide-ranging, thematic survey of exegetical treatments of Q 3:7, see Leah Kinberg, '*Muḥhkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt* (Koran 3/7): Implications of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis', *Arabica* 35 (1988) 143–72. For a chronological survey of exegesis on this verse, see J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 149–53. Kinberg announced a separate study on the *mutashābihāt-fawātiḥ* equation at p. 156, n. 71 of her article cited here, but this has yet to appear.

in favour of a recognition of ambiguity throughout much of the Qur'anic text (the classical philosophical *mufassirūn*, such as ar-Rāzī and az-Zamakhsharī, also maintained this position). This phase of commentary shares a great deal with the classical Sunni phase; a significant amount of attention is given to grammar and lexical oddities, and the world behind the text is turned to for help in clarifying problems in these areas. Likewise, masses of Sunni hadith regarding occasions of revelation and so on are included in their commentaries. But there is a good deal more attention given to the world in front of the text in this phase of commentary, which could again be well illustrated by the approach taken to Qur'an 3:7. On this verse, at-Tusi, at-Tabarsi, and ar-Razi all take a remarkably similar approach. First, they assume that there are ambiguous verses in the Qur'an beyond just the isolated letters. Second, they read Qur'an 3:7 according to the second version, and generally identify 'those firmly rooted in knowledge' with the 'ulama. But they also attempt to explain the utility of the ambiguous verses, to explain why God would have ordained ambiguity in His Book. Their answer is very interesting, as it involves a direct turn to the world in front of the text and to an assumption of relatively strong readers. For brevity's sake, I quote from Jane McAuliffe's distillation of Razi's exegesis of Qur'an 3:7 and the utility of the ambiguous verses, an argument which recapitulates points advanced earlier by Tusi and Tabarsi:

> (1) The greater effort expended in trying to understand them [the ambiguous verses] will secure a greater reward. (2) They provide an opportunity to test and clarify diverse theological views. (3) The need to use reason frees one from 'the darkness of *taqlid* [blind imitation]'. (4) They require the cultivation of exegetical skills, such as knowledge of language, grammar, and *usul al-fiqh*. (5) Finally, and most importantly, the *mutashabihat* [ambiguous verses] suit the Qur'an to the differences in human capacity to receive it, allowing sufficient variety in the modes of revelation to accommodate both the learned and the ignorant.[13]

This view of the multiple unfoldments of textual meaning in the various reader encounters represents a fascinating medieval adumbration of modern reader-response criticism. The various elements of the world in front of the text are, in this phase of the development of commentary, bound up with the meaning of the text itself. The stability and transparency of the Qur'an as a surface of signifiers is a notion that clearly does not fit with this conception of textuality.

I would add, also, that in this phase the Qur'anic text has, in a sense, absorbed the social text; that is to say, the hierarchies that defined the social realities of these writers are found by them in their reading of the Qur'an; or, what amounts to the same thing, they read the social text *into* the Qur'anic text. The Qur'anic ambiguities will unfold in hierarchical readings – the commoners will understand what they need for their level, the learned will find more 'elite' stages of Qur'anic meaning – and thus the Qur'an, in its readings, will unfold the social hierarchy.

The last stage of the history of commentary that I would like to consider is that of later Shi'i exegesis, specifically Akhbari commentary, beginning in the late Safavid period and including, for all intents and purposes, the Shaykhi movement of more recent times. This trend represents a radical break with the previous two. Here there is absolutely no concern for the world behind the text, for the grammatical or lexical background to the Qur'an. The masses

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[13] McAuliffe, 'Text and Textuality' 65.

of early Sunni hadith which served to situate the Qur'anic verses in a context for earlier interpreters are generally absent from Akhbari commentary. The Akhbari interpretive innovation is grounded in a view of the Qur'an that begins to emerge in the famous *hadith ath-thaqalayn*, or 'the tradition of the two weighty legacies'. There are dozens of variants of this tradition, so I will quote from a composite form presented by Todd Lawson:

> The Prophet said: 'I am soon about to be received . . . I am telling you before I am taken up that I shall leave with you as representatives after me the Book of my Lord, and my progeny, the people of my household. The all-Gracious, all-Knowing told me that they [the two weights, *ath-thaqalayn*] shall not be separated until they meet me [on the Day of Resurrection] . . . Do not precede them, for you would go astray, and do not fall behind them, for you would perish. Do not teach them, for they are of greater knowledge than you.[14]

In this report, Muhammad's authority and guidance are seen as being carried into the future by twin representatives – the Qur'an and the Imams. It is the identification of these latter two entities in Akhbari commentary that is its defining characteristic. The commentary literature from this period is generally composed of two strata: voluminous citation of sayings of the Imams (*akhbār*, singular *khabar*, whence the designation Akhbari), and a reading of the Qur'anic text as a coded narrative of the Imams and their historical careers. For example, in the chapter of Sayyid Hāshim al-Baḥrānī's (d. ca. 1695) *al-Burhān* on the clear and ambiguous verses of the Qur'an, the following *khabar* from the sixth Imam is cited:

> al-Ṣadiq said: 'We are the people obedience to whom God has made obligatory. To us belongs the booty and to us belongs the best property, and we are *those firmly rooted in knowledge* [Q. 3:7], and we are the objects of envy alluded to in the verse: 'Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of his bounty?' [Q. 4:54].[15]

Akhbari commentary, relying on reports from the Imams such as this one, reads the entire Qur'an as ambiguous in itself, but capable of being disambiguated by reference to the Imams.[16] The resultant disambiguation is one that reads nearly every verse of the Qur'an as a hidden statement about the Imams, their followers, or their enemies. The tragic Qur'anic tales about the rejections faced by the pre-Islamic prophets are not really about pre-Islamic prophets; these tales are about the Imams and their lack of recognition from the Sunnis. The same formula is applied across the board, to an extent that the modern reader is left bewildered at what may seem to us as extremely arbitrary readings.

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[14] Todd Lawson, 'Akhbārī Shī'ī approaches to Tafsīr', in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. Hawting and Shareef 173–210 (see 178).

[15] Adapted from *ibid* 191.

[16] There is even a *khabar* from the sixth Imam according to which the Imams *are* the unambiguous verses: 'Abī 'Abd Allāh [Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq] said, with regard to God's saying – exalted be He – "*It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are clear verses* [muḥkamāt] *that are the Mother of the Book*", that these are the Commander of the Faithful ['Alī] and the Imāms; "*and others that are ambiguous* [mutashābihāt]", and these are So-and-so and So-and-so [i.e., Abu Bakr and 'Umar]. "*As for those in whose heart is deviation*", these are their companions and followers [i.e., the Sunnis]. "*They follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation* [ta'wīl]*; and none knows its interpretation save only God and those firmly rooted in knowledge*." These last are the Commander of the Faithful and the Imāms.' Muhammad b. Ya'qūb Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī* (ed. Shaykh Muhammad Ja'far Shams al-Dīn, Beirut: Dar al-ta'arif li'l-matbu'at, 1419 AH/1998 CE) 1:482; the text in italics is from Qur'an 3:7.

Corbin has referred to this as 'Imamocentric hermeneutics', even as a process of the 'Imamization' of the Qur'an,[17] but we must, following Lawson's insight, go further; we are dealing here with a 'fusion of Imam and text'.[18] That is, it is not simply that the Qur'an is read here as being a cryptic Shi'i mytho-history. It is also the case that the Imams are understood to be, in a certain sense, Qur'anic. The Qur'an and the Imams are assimilated to one another, they are mirrors of one another, and they complement one another. Consider, for example, this verse of the Qur'an and the commentary on it attributed to the seventh Imam, Mūsā al-Kāẓim:

> '*Ḥā Mīm. By the Perspicuous Book! Verily, We have sent it down on a blessed night, to forewarn mankind; on a night when every precept was made plain as a commandment from Ourself.*' [Q. 44:1–4] The letters '*ḥā mīm*' are Muhammad . . . The '*Perspicuous Book*' is the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali.[19]

Not only are the Imams found in the Book – they *are* the Book, this being the implication of identifying references to the *kitāb al-mubīn* in the Qur'an with 'Ali. Furthermore, as is well known, 'Ali identified himself with the very textual essence of the Qur'an, in that famous statement wherein he says that all of revelation is contained within the point beneath the Arabic letter *ba'*, the first letter of the Qur'an, and that he is that point.[20]

The complementarity of the Qur'an and the Imams is heightened by the Akhbari belief that the Qur'an, as they had it, was not the entire, or indeed the entirely true, Qur'an as it had

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17 See, for example, Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 1:95; see also the discussion in Todd Lawson, 'Qur'ān Commentary' 21.

18 Lawson, 'Akhbārī Shī'ī approaches' 203, where he further alludes to the 'culmination of this process in the Qur'ān commentaries of the Bāb'. See also Lawson, 'The Dangers of Reading: Inlibration, Communion and Transference in the Qur'ān Commentary of the Bāb', in *Scripture and Revelation* (ed. Moojan Momen, Bahā'ī Studies, vol. 3, Oxford: George Ronald, 1997) 171–215, and idem, 'Reading Reading Itself: The Bab's "Sura of the Bees", A Commentary on Qur'an 12:93 from the Sura of Joseph', *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies* 5 (November 1997) <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol1/nahl2.htm>.

19 From Kulayni, *Usūl al-Kāfī* 1:552.

20 These traditions are not found in mainstream Shi'i collections, although the Bab quoted them frequently in his writings, as did Shaykh Ahmad before him and Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha after him. See, for example, *Bayān-i Fārsī*, vāhid 3, bāb 12, for 'I am the Point beneath the *bā*', and the *Tafsīr Ḥurūf al-Basmala*, Iranian Baha'i National Archives series, vol. 14, p. 57, for the longer version, in which 'Ali is quoted as saying: 'the essence of the basmala is in the *bā*', and the essence of the *bā*' is in the point, and I am the Point beneath the *bā*'. The statement 'I am the Point beneath the *bā*' is commonly attributed to Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 945) in such well-known Sunni works as Ibn al-'Arabi's *Futuḥāt al-Makkiyya* 83, al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* 1028, and Qushayrī's *Risāla* 69 (page numbers are for the online editions of these books at <www.alwaraq.com>). The earliest source that I am aware of in which this saying is put into the mouth of 'Ali is Rajab Bursi's 14th-century *Mashāriq Anwār al-Yaqīn* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami lil-Matbu'at, 1970) 22. There is a complete form quoted by Qundūzī (d. 1877) in his *Yanābī' al-Mawwada* (Najaf: Matbu'at al-Hadariyya, 1965) 79: 'Know that the essences [*al-asrār*] of all of the heavenly books are contained in the Qur'ān, and all that is in the Qur'ān is within [Sūrat] al-Fātiḥa, and all that is in al-Fātiḥa is in the basmala, and all that is in the basmala is in the *bā*', and all that is in the *bā*' is in the point, and I am the Point beneath the *bā*'. A very similar version appears in a Babi treatise in Iranian Baha'i National Archives series, vol. 80, 293f. The anonymous 'al-Qatīl' also quotes a similar form of the extended version of this tradition in his/her *Risāla*, in *Zuhūr al-Ḥaqq*, 3:518. See also William McCants, 'Grammar of the Divine: Translation, Notes, and Semi-Critical Edition of the Bab's *Risāla fī al-naḥw wa al-ṣarf* (A Treatise on Grammar)', *Syzygy* 1:1 (2003), online at <http://www.hurqalya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/SYZYGY/syzygy-03-yes/SYZYGY3.htm>, note 2; Todd Lawson, 'Coincidentia Oppositorum in the Qayyum al-Asma: the terms "Point" (*nuqta*), "Pole" (*qutb*), and "Center" (*markaz*) and the Khutbat al-tatanjiya', *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies* 5:1 (2001), online at <*http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/bhpapers/vol5/tatanj/ tatanj.htm*>; and idem, 'Reading Reading Itself', subsection titled 'Contemporary Gloss on the Bab's Commentary'.

been revealed by God.[21] This very early Shi'i contention – that verses of the Qur'an which unambiguously referred to the authority of 'Ali and the family of Muhammad were taken out, certain non-revealed verses were added, and the original ordering of the Qur'anic text was violated – was suppressed during the Buwayhid period, but re-emerged in Akhbari thought.[22] It was subsequently rejected anew in Uṣūlī-inspired twentieth-century Shi'i thought, as can be seen by the polemics *against* the notion of a corrupted Qur'an in the modern commentaries of Ṭabāṭabāūī and al-Khū'ī.[23]

Obviously, there is a great deal at stake in such a belief. If the Qur'an is not entirely as it should be, and even when it *is* correct it is all codes and secrets, how is the faithful Shi'i to go about his business of being faithful? The Akhbari answer is that the Imams knew the whole of the Qur'an, that where they have spoken the path is clear, and that what we do know about the Qur'an is just going to have to be sufficient for the time being. This complementarity was symbolized by the terms 'Silent Book' (the Qur'an) and 'Speaking Book' (the Imams). In itself, the coded and, indeed, corrupted Qur'an was mute, but the Imams spoke with the voice of the Qur'an – they were the Qur'an speaking to the community in history.[24]

At the time that these attitudes and approaches were developing, however, the Imams were *not* speaking to the community in history. This is 17th–19th century Iran, the time of the Greater Occultation. The Book is entirely ambiguous, and the Imams are themselves silent. The implication is clear: not only is the community awaiting the return of the Hidden Imam, it is waiting also for the return of the Hidden Qur'an. The two have been identified with one another to such an extent in Shi'i discourse that they have become, in a sense, a single messianic figure. So, for example, this Tradition from the fifth Imam is cited by Muhsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1680) in his Akhbari commentary, *aṣ-Ṣafī*: 'Al-Baqir said: "If the Book of God had not been added to and subtracted from, our right (*ḥaqqanā*) would not be obscure to anyone with understanding. When the Qa'im arises, he will correctly read the Qur'an."'[25] Kashani himself, after affirming in his own words that the Qur'an has been excised, altered, and rearranged, has this to say: 'The Qur'an which is in our hands must be followed during the occultation of the twelfth Imam. It must be assumed that the true Qur'an is with him.'[26]

To reflect for a moment on the kind of textuality implicit in these Akhbari approaches to the Qur'an, I would first of all emphasize that the world in front of the text has swallowed up the text, as it were. There is no world behind the text in any meaningful sense, nor is the text

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21 On the history of Shi'i beliefs about the corruption of the Qur'anic text, see Etan Kohlberg, 'Some Notes on the Imamite Attitude to the Qur'an', in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented to R. Walzer* (ed. S. M. Stern, A. Hourani and V. Brown, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 209–24; T. Lawson, 'Note for the Study of a "Shi'i Qur'an"', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 36:2 (1991) 279–95; and H. Modarressi, 'Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur'an: A Brief Survey', *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993) 5–39.

22 See Lawson, 'Qur'ān Commentary' 3; Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 39–45 and 218–19, on the 'censorship' of anti-Sunni material in Shi'i commentaries during this period.

23 See, for example, al-Khū'ī's (d. 1992) *Prolegomena to the Qur'ān* (trans. A. A. Sachedina, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) ch. 7, 'The Protection of the Qur'ān from Alteration', where he presents a point-by-point refutation of earlier Shi'i beliefs in the alteration or corruption of the Qur'anic text.

24 On this see M. Ayoub, 'The Speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imami Shi'i Tafsir', in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (ed. A. Rippin, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 177–98.

25 Lawson, 'Akhbārī Shī'ī' 183.

26 Ayoub paraphrasing Kashani, in Lawson, 'Akhbārī Shī'ī' 187.

seen as a stable semiotic structure. Pulsing *beneath* and *within* the surface of signs that make up the Qur'an, the tragic salvation history of the Shi'a is unfolding. I remarked earlier how classical Shi'i and philosophical approaches to the text led to an absorption of the social text by the Qur'anic text, of the hierarchical social reality being activated by the history of the text's readings. With Akhbari textuality, the Qur'an has continued to expand beyond the covers of a book, and is now a mirror of the community of its readers. The Qur'an and the Shi'a are living a shared experience of loss, of oppression, of abuse at the hands of the Sunni majority. Only the messianic age can alter this reality, and the One that is promised, awaited, and prayed for is not simply a returned Imam – it is just as much a renovated Qur'an.

There is one other element of Akhbari Shi'i thought that must be noted before we turn to considering the Bab's readings of the Qur'an. This is what could be called the divinization of the Imams. This was especially developed in the Shaykhi movement, wherein the Imams were seen not simply as the legitimate leaders and guides of the community and the knowers of the true Qur'an; they were seen by the Shaykhis as nothing less than the creators of the cosmos. Shaykh Ahmad, as is well known, was considered to have been skirting the lines of heresy in his belief that the Imams were the four Aristotelian causes of the universe.[27] The pre-existent lights of the Fourteen Infallibles – Muhammad, Fatima, and the twelve Imams – were understood as the generative energies of the coming-into-being of all things, as the substratum of all existence, as the inmost essence of reality by which all things subsisted. The Imams, then, are not simply persons, they are cosmic powers. The primordial essence of the Fourteen Infallibles is identified with the Primal Will, a concept which functions in Shaykhi thought in much the same way that it functions in Baha'i theology.[28]

I would argue that there are then three imaginaries coming from this Akhbari – and ultimately Shaykhi – milieu which provide the context for understanding what appears, at first blush, to be the Bab's strange reading.

1. The imaginary of the Imam/Qur'an assimilation. The Imams and the Qur'an are identified with one another. The idiom used to indicate this connection is textual rather than personal. That is, according to this imaginary, it is more that the Imam is seen as a Book than it is that the Qur'an is seen as a person.
2. The messianic imaginary that enwraps these two identified entities of Imam and Qur'an. As the Imams are textualized – imagined in terms of points, letters, books – so the messianic return will be a textual eschaton, the renovation of a clear and speaking Book. Also, as the Qur'an is corrupted, incomplete, the messianic expectation for the Imam is bound up with an expectation for a restored Qur'anic text.

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27 'The Imams are the four causes of the created things. They are the efficient cause; they are the material cause – that is, their [primordial] lights and shadows [are the material from which all things were made]; they are the formal cause, in the apportioning of the capacities of all things for good and for evil; they are the final cause, inasmuch as all things were created for their sake.' From Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī, *Sharḥ al-ziyāra*, quoted in Muhammad Hasan Āl al-Tālaqānī, *al-Shaykhiyya: nash'atuha wa tatawwuruha wa masādir dirāsatiha* (Beirut: al-Amal lil-Matbu'at, 1420 AH/1999 CE) 288.

28 For a brief exploration of the notion of 'Primal Will' (*mashiyya*) in Baha'i theology, see Vahid Brown, 'The Beginning that Hath no Beginning: Baha'i Cosmogony', in *Lights of 'Irfan: Papers Presented at the 'Irfan Colloquia and Seminars* (book 3, ed. Iraj Ayman, Evanston, IL: Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund, 2002) 21–40.

29 On these seven, see Mehrān Jadhbānī, 'Marātib-i sab'ah-yi takavvun', *Payām-i Bahā'ī* 202 (1996) 38–41; 203 (1996) 31–34; see also note 30.

3. The imaginary of the cosmic or divinized Imams, or what I would call the ontological imaginary of the Imams. The Imams, according to this view, are the creators and sustainers of the cosmos, and are thus assimilated to other concepts of cosmic creativity, such as the Primal Will, or the seven instrumental stages of coming-into-being (i.e., Will, Purpose, Determination, Decree, Permission, Fixed Time, and Book).[29]

With these concepts in hand, I think we can find a way into the Bab's notion of texts, reading, and meaning. They combine, in the context of the Bab's declaration of messianic fulfilment, into an ontological imaginary of the *messiah as text*, which leads, in the Bab's messianic Qur'anic commentaries, to a world-renovating cosmicization of the non-semantic units of the text. This may seem an impossibly obscure way to put things, so let me attempt to unpack this statement. The three imaginaries are explicitly linked together in a lengthy introduction to the Bab's commentary on the Surat al-'Asr, in which he provides the following schema for the homologous unfoldment of the cosmos, of the text, and of sacred history:

Cosmic Levels	***Textual Levels***	***Historical Manifestations***
Primal Will	Point	Muhammad
Purpose	Soft Alif	'Ali
Determination	Occulted Alif	Hasan
Decree	Upright Alif	Husayn
Permission	Letters as such	The Imams
Fixed Time	Joined Letters	The Remnant of God, the Promised One
Book	Word	Fatima

This is what the Bab says by way of introduction to the seventy-three individual letter commentaries that he proceeds to give in this commentary, one for each letter of the Surat al-'Asr:

> Verily, in every letter of the Qur'an there are many stations. Rather, God hath created in one verse the reality of all that hath been given the name 'thing' . . .

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[30] The stations or levels of the Act (*marātib al-fi'l*): this is a technical term of esoteric Shi'ism, and is found throughout the writings of Shaykh Ahmad and the Bab, wherein it refers to the seven levels of the coming into being of all things mentioned by the sixth Imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq, in the following tradition: 'Nothing on earth or in heaven comes into being but by these seven qualities: will (*mashiyya*), purpose (*irāda*), determination (*qadar*), decree (*qaḍā'*), permission (*idhn*), book (*kitāb*), and fixed time (*ajal*)' (Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī* 1:200). The order of the last two was for some unknown reason reversed by Shaykh Ahmad, and this tradition was invariably quoted by the Bab with *kitāb* as the last of the seven. In another tradition, from the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, we learn: '"Nothing comes into being but that God willed it, purposed it, determined it, and decreed it." ['Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Hashimī] asked: "What does will (*mashiyya*) mean?" He said: "It means the beginning of the Act (*ibtidā' al-fi'l*)"' (Kulayni, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī* 1:201). These two traditions provide a classical Imami basis for the Shaykhi and Babi usage of the phrase *marātib al-fi'l*. For Shaykh Ahmad's usage, see for example, *Sharḥ al-Ziyāra al-jāmi'a al-kabīra* (4 vols, Beirut: Dar al-Mufid, 1460 AH/1999 CE) 2:110f. The Bab defines his own usage later in the *Tafsīr wa'l-'Aṣr* itself, where he writes: 'Faith in the levels of the Act and the manifestations of the acted-upon has been made obligatory for all, according to the command of as-Sadiq, regarding the allotments of the basis of the Act: "Nothing on earth or in heaven comes into being but by the following seven: will, purpose, determination, decree, permission, fixed time, and book, and whoever maintains that they are one less than these has thereby become an infidel."' (*Tafsir wa'l-'Asr)* 124.

> – Among the stations of the letters of the Qur'an is the level of the Point in the stations of the Act [= Will].[30] This station hath been specialized unto Muhammad, the Messenger of God, the blessings of God be upon Him and His family.
> – Among them is the level of the 'soft *alif*', that is the station manifesting the second level of the levels of the Act [= Purpose]. Truly, God, in the subtleties of His wisdom and the greatness of His providence hath made that station to be specialized unto the regent [*waṣī*] of His Beloved [Muhammad], [that is,] 'Ali, upon him be peace.
> – And among them is the level of the 'occulted *alif*', the pure theophanic and eternal glory [*ṣamadaniyyah*], the light of divinity, the letter of the manifestation of the divine ipseity, the sign of Exclusive Unity in the human reality. Verily, in that station this letter is for Hasan – upon whom be peace – and indicates the level of the manifestation of trinity in the level of Determination [*qadar*].
> – And among them is the 'upright *alif*', which is the station of the manifestation of the Name of God, the Slayer [*al-mumīt*] in the levels of the Act, and the beginning of the cause of Decree [*qaḍā'*]. Verily, God hath decreed that the bearer of that station be Abu 'Abd Allah al-Husayn, upon whom be peace. Verily he/it [Husayn, the upright *alif*] is the letter of command by which the heavens and the earth were established in a manner which none knows but God and whomsoever He has created in a level above those of Husayn's grandfather [i.e., Muhammad], his father ['Ali], and his brother [Hasan] – the blessings of God be upon them. How luminous are the wonders!
> – And [further,] among them is the letter in the station of Permission [*maqām al-idhn*]. It is the station of letters as such and is specially designated for the Suns of Grandeur [the Imams], the blessings of God be upon them.
> – And among them is the letter in the station of the assembled letters, the level of Fixed Time [*ajal*], and is the light of the Remnant of God . . .
> – And among them is the letter in the station of the word, and it is the level of the Book in the sense of the conclusion of judgements [*khitab*]. Verily God hath determined the status of that letter unto Fatima – the blessings of God be upon her.[31]

This explicit identification of the imaginaries of book, cosmos, and manifestation is essential to the Bab's messianic performance. The reading of Surat al-'Asr that it leads into is consistently cosmic in its concerns, each letter being treated as a reality or spiritual force operating at each of the four levels of the Bab's universe.[32]

The Bab's 'commentaries' – with the exception of the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqara*, which was written prior to his declaration of mission – are distinct from any previous tradition of Qur'anic commentary in that they enunciate the inauguration of the messianic moment; they simultaneously enact the renovation of the world and the restoration of the Qur'an.[33] They were not simply written as expositions of the Qur'anic text, with the ostensible purpose of clarifying the meaning of the words and phrases used in that Book. Three of his lengthiest Qur'anic commentaries – the *Qayyūm al-Asmā*', the *Tafsīr Sūrat wa'l-'Aṣr*, and the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Kawthar* – were all 'written' in public, they were 'performances' that had as their

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31 *Tafsir wa'l-'Asr* 12–18; my provisional translation is abridged.

32 Todd Lawson translates a number of these letter-commentaries and puts them in historical and philosophical context in his 'Dangers of Reading'.

33 For a discussion of what might be called the irony of the Bab's utilization of such a traditional genre as the tafsir (commentary) in announcing his messianic claims, see Todd Lawson's preface to his 'Reading Reading Itself'.

purpose the communication of the Bab's messianic claims.[34] They were thus written in settings such that the Bab's 'readings' of the Qur'an were simultaneously messianic enunciations.

The Shi'i eschatological imagination is a rich and many-splendoured thing. There were a great many roles and expected deeds that the community assumed the Promised One would fulfil in his restoration of justice to a world plunged into injustice and oppression. The pre-messiah world, in a sense, was seen as broken, the cosmic order in disarray, the Qur'an corrupted, and the Qa'im alone, at some long-awaited time, was going to put things back in order. The way in which he was going to do so was worked out in advance, in detail, and these details constituted the imaginary of the end, expectations that filled the minds of the Shi'a to whom the Bab spoke. What I would like to emphasize here is that the Bab, in choosing to express his self-consciousness as the Promised One in such a textual way, engaged these eschatological expectations by shifting them into a textual register. This shift, as I tried to show above, had already started with the imaginary of the Imamized Qur'an, but the Bab took this much, much further.

The Qur'anic text, for the Bab, will not fit so well into our schema of readings, with the worlds behind and in front of the text. It is not primarily a surface of signs, pointing to extrinsic meanings, so the question of whether meaning is in the author, the text, or the reader is in a sense totally irrelevant. The Bab's Qur'an is a cosmic Qur'an. Its letters are generative, primordial substances that create and sustain the universe. The text lies behind all possible worlds, so if there is any 'meaning' to be extracted from it, it is cosmographic. Since the text unfolds in a way homologous to the cosmos, the cosmic structure can be described in terms of the Qur'an's structure. Babi semiotics is thus not meaningfully distinct from its cosmology. The 're-revealing' of the Qur'an, through the Bab's commentaries and other writings, is a textually-mediated recreation of the cosmos. The same is true of the unfoldment of the human being, of time, of religious communities, all of which are enwrapped in textual symbolism in the Bab's writings.

As seen in the Imami traditions quoted above, the Promised One was expected to restore not only the cosmos, but the Qur'an as well. In the words of the fifth Imam: 'When the Qa'im arises, he will correctly read the Qur'an' (see above). In the *Qayyūm al-Asmā'*, the text which signalized the Bab's arising as the Qa'im, there is a passage closely patterned after Qur'an 3:7:

> Verily, We have sent down unto Our servant this Book, from the presence of God and in Truth, and have made therein clear verses [*muḥkamāt*], and no ambiguous verses [*ghayr mutashābihāt*]. None knoweth the interpretation [*ta'wīl*] thereof save God, and whomsoever We have willed from among the sincere and devoted servants of God. So ask of its interpretation from the Remembrance, for He, by the grace of God, is knowing with regard to God's verses and in accordance with the decree of the Book.[35]

The Bab declares here, in the midst of what is outwardly a commentary, a reading, that his reading is itself a re-revealing of the Book, and that this Book has *no* ambiguous verses. The oppression of the Book is ended.

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[34] On the Bab's commentaries as 'performances', see T. Lawson, 'Qur'an Commentary as Sacred Performance', in *Iran im 19. Jahrhundert und die Entstehung der Baha'i-Religion* (ed. C. Bürgel and I. Schayani, Hildesheim: Olms, 1998) 145–58.

[35] Bāb, *Qayyūm al-Asmā': Tafsīr Sūrat Yūsuf* (MS dated 1 Muharram 1323 AH/8 March 1905 CE, in author's possession), sura 3 (*al-Īmān*) 9.

The Bab combined both of the expected redemptive functions into one act. He textualized his own messianic identity, assuming the title of Primal Point – the point from which all things, cosmic and textual, emerge. This is of course an identity drawing from the primordial sentence of the Qur'anic text, the *basmala*, which consists of four words, totalling 19 letters, the first of which begins with a point. Each of these 19 letters, according to the Bab, spawned 6 surahs, giving us the total 114 surahs of the Qur'an.[36] In the same way, he, the Point, and the 18 Letters of the Living, brought into being the members of his community, which were further identified by the Bab with textual realities. A similar unfoldment of this Qur'anic symbolism can be seen operating in every aspect of the religious world that the Bab created, from the Badi' calendar to ritual practice, from talismanic magic to the expectations of the Promised One of the Babi dispensation. The latter – 'He Whom God will make manifest' – was to be the 'Speaking Book' to the 'Silent Bayan', was to reveal the complete Bayan, left unfinished by the Bab, and was to produce an ordering of the Bayanic text that Shoghi Effendi interpreted as a re-ordering of the world.[37]

The sense in which the Bab is a 'strong reader' should by now be obvious. The Bab recognizes no constraints in the Qur'anic text that would limit the direction his reading would go. Neither sentences, nor phrases, nor even words are seen by the Bab as ultimately significant. The focus of the Bab's 'readings' is not the signifying, semantic units of the texts, but rather what he sees as their substantive, cosmic reality. The individual letters, having in themselves no semantic content, are nonetheless the essence of the text and indeed of the world. His reading is strong or active in the most radical sense. His readings not only reconstitute the text, they recreate the world in which that text will be read.

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[36] See the Bab's *Bayān-i Fārsī*, wahid 2, bab 2, online at <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/bab/A-F/bayanf/bayan020.jpg> (cited 9 December 2004).

[37] Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā'u'llāh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991) 146f, and idem, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1995) 25f. For a discussion of this interpretation, with reference to previous treatments in the secondary literature, see Ismael Velasco, 'Fixing the Gaze: Reflections on the "Order of Bahā'u'll