The Kitab-i Iqan: An Introduction to Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Certitude with Two Digital Reprints of Early Lithographs

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In addition to having been the most widely disseminated Bahá’í text in the early history of the faith, the Iqan was the first book Bahá'u'lláh himself authorized for publication (lithographed, Bombay, c. 1881-2). The first Bombay lithograph was followed by a second, dated Dhu‘l-Qa‘dah 1310 A.H./May-June 1893 C.E. in the hand of the celebrated Bahá’í calligrapher, Mishkin-Qalam. I have appended a facsimile of the Mishkin-Qalam Iqan as Appendix One, and the undated Bombay lithograph as Appendix Two. This is the first time these texts have been published since their original publication.

Circumstances of “Revelation”:

The Iqan focused on spiritual authority from an Islamic perspective, rationalizing the eschatologically conceived fulfillment of Islam in the advent of Sayyid ʿAli-Muhammad Shirazi (d. 1850), who was known as the Bab (the “Gate”). The Bab had created a firestorm of controversy following the declaration his prophetic mission at the end of the Shi‘i millennium (1260/1844), a millennium that dating from the occultation of the Twelfth Imam in the year 260 A.H. While Bahá'u'lláh maintained continuity with Islam at a doctrinal level, historically this claim of fulfillment was tantamount to a break from Islam. The Iqan also served to heighten the adventist fervor current in the Babi community, in anticipation of the advent of a messianic figure foretold by the Bab. Details of the circumstances of revelation are given in the present writer’s monograph, Symbol and Secret: Qur’an Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i Iqan. Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions, vol. 7 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1995).

The Book of Certitude may be among the first texts by Bahá'u'lláh explicitly designated as "revelation," since the colophon at the end of the book refers to it as having been "revealed" (al-manzul [British Museum MS., BL Or. 3116, foll. 78-127] or in some MSS al-munzal [Browne's MS.]), by the "Ba" and the "Ha", as Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne first pointed out (ET, 257). In Islamic thought use of such terminology is reserved for books written by prophets, and so it represents an early claim to such a theophanic status by Bahá'u'lláh.

That the reading “al-manzul” is the better one is apparent from the manuscript original at the Bahá’í World Centre Archives, in the hand of Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son ʿAbdu'l-Bahá (facsimile in Buck 1995, frontispiece), which was reviewed, with emendations and marginalia, by Bahá'u'lláh himself. Browne was at pains to reconcile this claim with Bahá'u'lláh's erstwhile disavowals of any spiritual station or authority, and so Browne supposed the colophon to have been a later interpolation (Selections, 253-4). Subsequent scholarship continues to debate the stages of Bahá'u'lláh's evolving messianic self-consciousness, but has moved beyond Browne in accepting the Iqan as reflecting the crystallization of Bahá'u'lláh's messianic vocation as intimated in the colophon.
An important source for an accurate reconstruction of the background to the writing of this book is to be found in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet, dated 27 Muharram 1306 A.H./3 October 1888, in honor of Aqa 'Abdu'l-Hamid Shirazi, a working translation of which was recently shared by Dr. Ahang Rabbani. Briefly, the initial revelation of the Iqan was occasioned by questions posed by the Bab's maternal uncle, Haji Mirza Sayyid Muhammad, on a visit to the holy shrines in Karbala in the Islamic year 1278 (1861-2), or possibly in 1277 A.H. The precise date of this visit will be discussed below. A facsimile reproduction of the original handlist of questions by Haji Mirza Sayyid Muhammad was published in Muhammad 'Ali Fayzi's Kitab-i Khandan-i Afnan Sidra-yi Rahman (Tehran: Mu'assasi-yi Milli-yi Matbu'at-i Amri, 124 B.E. [1970-1], inserted at p. 41. (See Denis MacEoin. "Questions of Sayyid Muhammad Shirazi, Uncle of the Bab"). The questions posed by the Bab's uncle may be summarized as follows: (1) The Day of Resurrection: Will it be corporeal? How will the just be recompensed and the wicked dealt with?; (2) The Twelfth Imam: How can traditions attesting to his occultation be explained?; (3) Qur'anic Interpretation: How can the literal meaning of the Qur'an be reconciled with the interpretations current among Babis?; (4) Advent of the Qa'im: How can the apparent lack of fulfillment of Imami traditions concerning the Resurrector be explained? (Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh, the King of Glory, 164-5; see also the working translation by Dr. Ahang Rabbani.). These questions typified the paradox precipitated by the advent of the Bab: the apparent contradiction between a realized eschaton (prophecy fulfillment) and unrealized popular expectations. Because the Iqan was revealed in direct response to these questions, the book was first known as the Treatise for the Uncle (Risala-yi Khal).

Style:

Shoghi Effendi describes Bahá'u'lláh's style as "a model of Persian prose, of a style at once original, chaste and vigorous, and remarkably lucid, both cogent in argument and matchless in its irresistible eloquence" (God Passes By 138-139). This assessment appears to be based on E. G. Browne, who wrote of the Iqan that "it is a work of great merit, vigorous in style, clear in argument, cogent in proof, and displaying no slight knowledge of the Bible, Qur'an, and Traditions" (Selections, 254). Bahá'u'lláh's choice of Persian for such a work as the Kitab-i Iqan optimized its diffusion among the Babi community. While the Babis are surely the immediate audience, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the world in such words as: "Sanctify your souls, O ye peoples of the world..." (ET, 3) and "Behold, O concourse of the earth, the splendours of the End" (ET, 168).

One of the striking expressive features of the Book of Certitude is its abundant use of what Persian grammar terms the "metaphorical" genitive (izafa-yi isti`ari). The izafa (Arabic: idafa) is a construct--an enclitic to be precise--used for possessive, partitive, and descriptive purposes. Bahá'u'lláh's use of this construct becomes, in itself, an important exegetical device. In the course of exegesis, Bahá'u'lláh interprets a verse, explicating a symbol by suggesting its referent. He then uses both symbol and referent together, bound grammatically by the Persian construct, to reinforce his exegesis. Bahá'u'lláh coordinates his various explications by means of extended metaphors, invariably drawn from nature:

"In like manner, endeavour to comprehend the meaning of the 'changing of the earth' [Matt. 24:29, variant]. Know thou, that upon whatever hearts the bountiful showers of mercy, raining from the 'heaven' of divine Revelation, have fallen, the earth of those hearts hath verily been changed into the earth of divine knowledge and wisdom. What myrtles of unity hath the soil of their hearts produced! What blossoms of true knowledge and wisdom hath their illumined bosoms yielded!...Thus hath He said: 'On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth' [Q. 14:48]" (ET, 46-47).

Here, eschatological "earth"--in a variant saying of Jesus--has come to signify knowledge and understanding and, generally, the capacity of the human heart to become angelic. According to Alessandro Bausani, who has remarked upon some of the difficulties raised by "the Bahá'í expressive style" for those unfamiliar with it, "the difficulty that Westerners experience in fully understanding the style of the Bahá'í writings lies in our having lost the living sense of the tripartition of reality: Unknowable God, World of Symbols, material world" ("Some Aspects of the Bahá'í Expressive Style," World Order 13 [1978-79], p. 43).

Qur'anic Exegesis in the Kitab-i Iqan:

The Book of Certitude is a work of symbolic exegesis of the Qur'an and, to a lesser extent, of the New Testament. Bahá'u'lláh advances arguments that are, in certain respects, analogous to the strategies of Sunni rhetoricians who demonstrated occurrences of figures of speech in the Qur'an as a feature of its eloquence and inimitability. In the Iqan, prior to his actual symbolic exegesis, Bahá'u'lláh logically demonstrates the presence of figurative language in the Qur'an, based largely on appeals to absurdities that result from literal readings. Once the symbolic valence of the Qur'an has been established, symbols in prophecy are interpreted and then contemporized within Bahá'u'lláh's own historical present, leaving the reader to accept or reject their fulfillment.

Exegetical Devices:

Interpretation of the Qur'an is technically known as tafsir. The most useful and comprehensive introduction to this literature is that of Rippin, "tafsir," Encyclopedia of Religion; the most comprehensive study in English is Rippin's edited volume, Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an (Oxford, 1988). Bahá'u'lláh's exegetical techniques are well attested in the classical tafsir
On the surface, this would seem to suggest that anyone with metaphoric competence is spiritually pure. But at the level of received 

reason why such recondite language has been revealed in the first place: “Know verily that the purpose underlying all these 

hands, and, on the other, spread out a new and highly exalted earth in the hearts of men, thus causing the freshest and loveliest 

how, in one hand, He hath, by His mighty grasp, turned the earth of knowledge and understanding, previously unfolded, into a mere 

Thus, the figurative reading of a verse must not lead to absurdity. Nor should a literal 

One example of a rhetorical-style argument is appeal to absurdity. This kind of demonstration points to a logical or 

phenomenological implausibility were a literal reading of a given text allowed. Following this, the case is made for a figurative 

interpretation, which would otherwise lead to absurdity. Bahá'u'lláh therefore advanced a figuratively based rationale to establish 

Qur'anic symbolism demonstratively. Bahá'u'lláh overrules the literal reading of most eschatological passages of the Qur'an, 

effectively excluding received interpretations. Upon demonstrating the absurdity of unwarranted literal readings, the author adduces 

Qur'anic passages of an anomalous, non-literal, or patently metaphorical character to attest the presence of figurative language in the 

Qur'an. Such non-transparent texts, which are in some sense "dark," may be intertextually interpreted in light of openly 

metaphorical texts.

Such an interpretive move often involves the verdict of absurdity after having overruled the surface meaning of anthropomorphisms 
in scripture. Hence, Bahá'u'lláh's exegetical procedure at Q. 39:67 overrules a literal reading of the eschatological hand of God, as 
it entails both impossibility and anthropomorphist entrapment: "And now, comprehend the meaning of this verse: 'The whole earth 
shall on the Resurrection Day be but His handful, and in His right hand shall the heavens be folded together ...'. ... And now, be fair 
in thy judgment. Were this verse to have the meaning which men suppose it to have, of what profit, one may ask, could it be to 
man? Moreover, it is evident and manifest that no such hand as could be seen by human eye could accomplish such deeds, or 
could possibly be ascribed to the exalted Essence of the one true God. Nay, to acknowledge such a thing is naught but sheer 
blasphemy, an utter perversion of the truth" (ET, 47-8).

So far, Bahá'u'lláh's reading of this verse was anticipated by al-Zamakhshari (Bonebakker, Some Early Definitions of the Tawriya, 
25-6). The point of adducing this passage is to show that, not infrequently, Bahá'u'lláh first dispenses with some received 
interpretations. Literal interpretations having thus been overruled, a positive interpretation follows: "On the contrary, by the term "earth" is meant the earth of understanding and knowledge, and by the "heavens" the heavens of divine Revelation. Reflect thou 
how, in one hand, He hath, by His mighty grasp, turned the earth of knowledge and understanding, previously unfolded, into a mere 
handful, and, on the other, spread out a new and highly exalted earth in the hearts of men, thus causing the freshest and loveliest 
blossoms, and the mightiest and loftiest trees to spring forth in the illumined bosom of man." (ET, 48). Bahá'u'lláh then states the 
reason why such recondite language has been revealed in the first place: "Know verily that the purpose underlying all these 
symbolic terms (kalimat-i marmuza) and abstruse allusions (isharat-i mulghaza), which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy 
Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be 
known from the perishable and barren soil" (ET, 49).

On the surface, this would seem to suggest that anyone with metaphoric competence is spiritually pure. But at the level of received
interpretation, such symbolic exegesis must first disencumber itself of the preponderant weight of centuries of traditional reading and the clerical authority with which such a reading is enforced. The act of replacing miracle with symbol, and anthropomorphism with metaphor, divests the interpreter of an essentially magical world view. Instead, such a reading places emphasis on ethics and interiority rather than on the miraculous. The reading Bahá'u'lláh rejects is a suspension of natural law. The reading he offers is an engagement of spiritual law, portrayed as vivifying the visionary landscape of the heart. The reader, open to a new interpretation, will be open to a fresh source of authority.

Shi'i Background:

Exegesis is typically far more than interpretation. Especially in post-classical works of tafsir, the exegete has a definite agenda. Interpretation thus becomes the vehicle for propounding that agenda. While the interpretation serves to elucidate the text, the inverse holds true, too. The interpreter invokes the authority of the Qur'an as revelation to validate a particular view. In such a case, exegesis is apology, written in defense of a position held. When the Iqan was revealed, the Qur'an remained inviolable as the primary authority in an erstwhile Islamic context. The interpretive strategies in Bahá'u'lláh's work are amply attested in the classical Sunni heritage, which have been taken up and assimilated to the Shi'i domain. Beyond the classical Islamic tradition, to what extent is the Book of Certitude prefigured by Shi'i tafsir? The answer is clear: The principles of exegesis found in Akhbari (referring to the Akbari sect of Shi'ism which lost out to the Usulis [mujtahid based tradition] in the 18th-century) works of Shi'i tafsir are manifestly present in the Kitab-i Iqan. These principles have more to do with the subject of exegesis than with its procedures.

There are sufficient formal similarities and thematic emphases between later Shi'i (those known as Akhbari) works of tafsir and the Book of Certitude to warrant comparison. Such a background study would present itself as the logical starting place for a foundational study of Bahá'u'lláh's work. To treat simply the Shi'i context of the text is too narrow, however, as such a focused study tends to atomize the text. While Bahá'u'lláh's conception of spiritual authority presupposes Shi'i structures, to regard the Book of Certitude as simply an extension of Shi'ism is reductionist. The pitfall of such an approach is that the presence of identifiable Shi'i features of exegesis in the text can elucidate but cannot "explain" the event of the Book of Certitude purely in terms of a natural extension or development of Shi'i tradition.

Twelver Shi'ism, the dominant form of Shi'ism today, views spiritual authority as vested in the Imamate. The very identity of Shi'ism is bound up with authority claims. Shi'i assertions of authority explicitly contest rival Sunni claims. The Qur'an, tradition (hadith) and especially the Imami oral legacy (khabar [pl. akhbar]) are invoked for legitimation. The selective and tendentious use of such authorities is meant to validate what Sunni Islam rejects. Arguably the most salient feature of Akhbari Shi'i interpretations of the Qur'an is how such commentaries reflect on issues of authority. According to B. Todd Lawson, what characterizes Akhbari Qur'an commentaries is the exegetical procedure of "finding the true reading of the verse in question through metonomy or metaphor for the Imam or some related topic such as walaya" (Lawson, "Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 175). Shi'i arguments are somewhat circular in this regard. Esteemed by both Sunni and Shi'i orthodoxies, Ja'far al-Sadiq, who was a truly universal figure in early Islam, is frequently cited in Akhbari Qur'an commentaries in what amounts to an Imamocentrism which is the hallmark of Akhbari exegesis.

Walaya as the Core Concept of Shi'ism:

Islam is founded on the conviction that Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets" and thus the last Messenger. In Shi'a Islam, however, this did not preclude the availability of divine guidance in salvation-history subsequent to Muhammad. After Muhammad, Shi'is have always maintained that walaya continued to manifest itself in the spiritual leadership of the Twelve Imams. Walaya (Persian: vilayat) refers to divine authority, residing in the notion of "Covenant" ("The Dangers of Reading," 190). Lawson is emphatic in asserting that: "There is, in Shi'ism, no more important a doctrine" ("The Dangers of Reading," 177).

When the twelfth Imam was said to have been occulted in the Islamic year 260, his absence was reconstituted as a mystical phenomenon. The reader, open to a new interpretation, will be open to a fresh source of authority. Phenomenologically speaking, revelation is somewhat tradition-bound. Shi'ism identified its messianic figure, the Qa'im, as the occulted Twelfth Imam. But, historically, both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá state that the Twelfth Imam never existed. Despite the historical improbability of a Twelfth Imam, the existence of traditions attesting his occultation and eventual return created a kind of messianic determinism, in which a body of speculation represented as Imami akhbar raised fantastic and thus unrealistic expectations about any future religious renewal. Thus, the Bab's identification with the Qa'im/Mahdi is purely formal. But the formality had to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Both the Bab's and Bahá'u'lláh's Qur'an commentaries followed some very
Principles of Shi‘i exegesis:

A recent study by Lawson has contributed to Western understanding of the principles of Shi‘i exegesis. For descriptive purposes, how does one systematize this material? Lawson has located such a systematization, ready made, and authentically Shi‘i: the prologues of works of Akhbari tafsir. Distinctively, Akhbari works of tafsir rely on "reports" of the sayings of the Imams from the "Holy Family" of Shi‘ism, and the corresponding Imamocentrism of such works. These commentaries are quite different from such classical Shi‘i commentaries as those of al-Tusi (d. 1067) and al-Tabarsi (d. 1144). The extensive corpus of Imami hadith that overburdened the Shi‘i world is technically referred to as akhbar ("reports"; sing. khabar). Lawson provides a useful summary of the prologues of four such works. Through Lawson’s enterprise, a comparison of the Book of Certitude with works of Shi‘i tafsir is greatly facilitated.

The methodological elegance of Lawson’s study is that he has presented representative, traditionally acclaimed systematizations of Shi‘i thought by Shi‘i authorities themselves. These systematizations, propounded in the tafsir prologues, are illuminating. These native programmatic statements reveal the extent to which Akhbari interpretations of the Qur’an are characteristically Imamocentric. In such commentaries, we are not sure if Imami reports are not so much used to explain the Qur’an (this is the formal procedure) as the Qur’an is used to legitimate a Shi‘i agenda. In any case, the Qur’an effectively becomes a Shi‘i text. Lawson’s “Akhbari Shi‘i Approaches to tafsir” crystallizes, perhaps more than any other single study, those structures that render works of tafsir both methodologically and ideologically distinctive. Lawson epitomizes four tafsir prologues, from the following Akhbari works: (1) Kitab tafsir nur al-thaqalayn by ‘Abd ‘Ali al-Huwayzi (d. before 1693); (2) al-Safi fi tafsir kalam Allah al-wafi of Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani (d. 1640); (3) Kitab al-burhan fi tafsir al-Qur’an by Hashim al-Bahrani (d. ca. 1695); and (4) Mir’at al-anwar wa-mishkat al-asrar fi tafsir al-Qur’an by Abu’l-Hasan al-Isfahani, al-Sharif al-'Amili (d. 1724). [B. Todd Lawson, “Akhbári Shi‘i Approaches to tafsir,” in Approaches to the Qur’án (ed. G. Hawting and A.-K. Shareef; London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 173-210.] What follows below is the present writer's summary of key principles of interpretation as defined in the fourth work, the Anwar.

Prologue I
* The Qur’an has esoteric dimensions.
* Its verses are susceptible of esoteric interpretation (ta’wil).
* The meaning of the Qur’an is not restricted to time or place. It pertains to all people at all times.
* The inner meaning of the Qur’an relates to the holy Imams, to their authority or continuing guidance (walaya), and to their followers.
* Harmonizing (tanassub) the interior and exterior dimensions of the Qur’an is an exegetical ideal.
* Belief in both dimensions of the Qur’an is imperative. So also is adherence to both the clear (muhkam) and the ambiguous (mutashabih) verses of the Qur’an.
* Complete knowledge of inner exegesis of the Qur’an (ta’wil) resides with the Imams.
* The anchor of faith (iman) is guardianship (walaya), love (mahabba), and obedience to the Imams.
* Confession of belief in the authority of the Imams is a necessary adjunct to profession of faith in the unity of God and in the authority of the Prophet.
* Walaya, together with belief in the unity of God (tawhid), was presented by God to the cosmos, physical and spiritual. God’s covenant regarding it was imposed on all creation. The conditions of walaya--of revelation and inspired guidance respectively personified in the Prophet and in his patrilineal successors, the Imams--was set forth in all scriptures and was made obligatory for all nations.
* The Prophets and Imams enjoyed a state of pre-existence. their walaya is the efficient cause of all creation and the core principle of obedience.

Prologue II
* Prologue II alleges alterations (taghyir) in the Qur’an. Such a textual, or anti-textual argument is not once adduced in the Book of Certitude. Bahá’u’lláh concedes corruption of scripture only insofar as it applies to interpretation. Thus, according to Bahá’u’lláh, this Shi‘i charge is baseless. There is no taghyir but rather corrupt tafsir.

Prologue III
* Certain verses in the Qur’an are figurative (batin).
* These are explained by pertinent Imami traditions (akhbar).
* Such traditions provide the true, hidden interpretation (ta’wil).
* This is done through recourse to through metonomy and allusion (majaz).
* Certain verses require metaphorical ("abstract"/"intellectual") interpretation (al-majaz al-aqlîyya).
* The figurative nature of certain other verses is self-evident. These are also elucidated through metaphorical ("linguistic")
In his early tafsir, but appears to have abandoned their explicit use in later similar works. In this later phase of commentary, it is see the 'logical' culmination of this process in the Qur'an commentaries of the Bab (d. 1850), who depended heavily on the akhbar

In the case of Bahá'u'lláh's immediate precursor, the Bab, this tendency becomes even more pronounced. Lawson remarks: "We

Thematical, and in good Shi'i fashion, concern over authority is of paramount interest in the Book of Certitude. This is thoroughly Shi'i. The same exegetical agenda--demonstrating the quranic basis of the authority of the Twelve Shi'i Imams--is invoked by Bahá'u'lláh not to validate Shi'i tradition but to effect a break from that tradition. A paradox of authority surfaces in the structure of Bahá'u'lláh's argument: the authority of the institution of the Imamate is confirmed, but not, as it were, the "apostolic succession"--to use a Christian term--that derives from it. In the Iqan, Shi'i exegetical principles are invoked in order to counter Shi'i authority, though formally it appears otherwise. The Book of Certitude shares Akhbari concerns over authority, but looks ahead in historical time and in sacred time to a post-quranic and post-Imamite Dispensation. Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on authority is equal to Shi'i concerns. Such concerns preoccupied the immediate audience at least. This agenda had to be addressed in order to facilitate a transfer of spiritual authority, mediated by faith--a transfer from Shi'i institutions to a new source of charisma--the Bab.

In Defense of the Bab and the Babi Qur'an:

The Qur'an is said to contain coded language. The Bab's spiritual precursor, Sayyid Kazim Rashti, wrote: "When you have understood that the true meaning, the spiritual idea (haqqa) of the Qur'an is a code (ramz) which only God Most High, the Prophets and the members of His House understand, ...then it will be clear that our understanding of this code varies according to the diversity of our faculties of understanding" (Lawson, "Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 204). This "code" (ramz) obviously requires decoding. The Book of Certitude reinforces this view of the Qur'an, that it has a symbolic dimension that only an inspired interpreter might accurately demystify. In Akhbari Shi'iism, the Qur'an as a text is functionally inseparable from its valid interpretation. Although interpretation is still a human enterprise, the methodological guarantor of accuracy is reliance upon traditions ascribed to the Imams. In this respect, the sacred text is imbued with the charisma of both the Prophet and the Imams. "Because of the fusion of the Imam and text," Lawson observes, "the Qur'an is experienced as a charismatic text" ("Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 203).

The Grand Prayer of Visitation, composed by the Bab's other spiritual precursor, Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (d. 1826), as Lawson notes, "may have achieved in his own lifetime something of the status of an alternative Qur'an, being arranged in 114 verses" (Lawson, "Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 203). Lawson concludes: "This points to one of the most remarkable results of the Akhbari project, namely the transformation of the Qur'an text into 'another Qur'an.' That is, the Qur'an of the Akhbaris becomes something of a New Testament for Islam" (Lawson, "Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 203-204).

In the case of Bahá'u'lláh's immediate precursor, the Bab, this tendency becomes even more pronounced. Lawson remarks: "We see the 'logical' culmination of this process in the Qur'an commentaries of the Bab (d. 1850), who depended heavily on the akhbar in his early tafsir, but appears to have abandoned their explicit use in later similar works. In this later phase of commentary, it is

- * Many things God says of Himself also apply to the Prophet and Imams (Lawson, "Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 196-200).
- * Past refers to present (the "people of Moses" signify the "people of Islam").
- * In some passages, for one person outwardly addressed, another is meant: "By contrast, what is ascribed to God about Himself by majaz is related to His near servants...."
- * By ta'wil, many pronouns in the Qur'an are allusions to the Imams.
- * Past events may be interpreted as last events.
- * Many things God says of Himself also apply to the Prophet and Imams (Lawson, "Akhbari Shi'i Approaches to tafsir," 196-200).

This systematization of Akhbari exegetical principles illuminates the immediate context of the Book of Certitude. Lawson's study has made it possible to explain the Book of Certitude as representing, in effect, the logical trajectory of Shi'i exegetical tendencies, which are ultimately, if carried to their logical conclusion, self-transcending. The validity of this explanation depends entirely on the reader's theoretical acceptance of one crucial substitution: the authority of the Bab (in the shadow of whose authority stands Bahá'u'lláh) as the eclipse of traditional authority: Qur'an and Imamite tradition, Prophet and Imam. The revelation of the Bab simply constitutes the new locus of spiritual authority, an authority-transfer cast in terms of eschatological prerogative. This transfer is legitimated in terms of prophetic "fulfillment."

Two images of Shi'ism in Bahá'u'lláh's discourse thus emerge. The first is historical and doctrinal. It is nostalgic and purist. The Imams are revered. Various traditions ascribed to them are adduced as proof texts. In the Book of Certitude, the frequency of Bahá'u'lláh's recourse to Imami akhbar is second only to his appeals to the Qur'an. This is a patently Akhbari procedure. The second picture of Shi'ism Bahá'u'lláh portrays is one of the perceived failings of Shi'ism, particularly in its contemporary (nineteenth century) setting. This critique of Shi'ism is not revisionist. There is no agenda for restoring Shi'ism to its pristine state. It would appear that in Bahá'u'lláh's view of salvation history, Shi'ism had run its course. It was institutionally spent. Bahá'u'lláh's critique of contemporary Shi'i authority is more than "protestant." It is tantamount to a shared Shi'i concern over authority, but a reversal of its legitimation as invested in the clerical order of his day. Bahá'u'lláh's exegesis may therefore be overstated as a kind of counter-Shi'iism, due to the rivalry of authority claims.
The Qur'an signifies Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets" (Q. 33:40). In the earliest currents of Islamic consciousness, this honorific was by no means understood uniformly (see Yohanan Friedmann, "Finality of Prophethood in Islam," Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 7 [1986]). The concept of Muhammad being the final messenger of God was firmly entrenched in Islamic doctrine, both Sunni and Shi'a. In Shi'ism, however, the concept of walaya, as stated above, allowed for a continuation of divine guidance after the death of the Prophet. Such guidance was considered subordinate to the revelation of the Qur'an. But the Bab had dared to proclaim himself more than an Imam, and a messenger equal to or greater than Muhammad, with a revelation that surpassed the Qur'an in scope and authority. This, obviously, challenged the very foundations of Islam.

From the perspective of classical Sunni Islam as well as Shi'ism, Bahá'u'lláh achieved the seemingly impossible: to show that God could reveal a prophet after Muhammad. In a masterful feat of exegesis, Bahá'u'lláh applied Qur'anic concepts of the oneness of the prophets to relativize the idea of the "Seal of the Prophets." He shows that orthodox claims to Muhammad's finality as having traded on notions of triumphalism unmitigated by the clear, Qur'anic teaching of prophetic unity. Affirming that Muhammad was indeed the last prophet within the "Prophetic Cycle" or Adamic Cycle (kur-i Adam), a new epoch of human history was said to have commenced with the advent of the Bab. In Bahá'í parlance, this is the "Cycle of Fulfillment" or Bahá'í Cycle (kur-i Bahá'í).

While the accepted notion of the "Seal" as meaning "Last" is kept intact, Bahá'u'lláh stresses the transcendent importance of the term "Seal" over considerations of historical sequence. Wedding the Qur'anic doctrine of the oneness of the Prophets with Muhammad's distinctiveness as the "Seal," Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Viewed in this light, they [the Prophets] are all but Messengers of that ideal King, that unchangeable Essence. And were they all to proclaim: "I am the Seal of the Prophets," they verily utter but the truth..." (ET, 179). Through an associative equivalence, Muhammad's uniqueness as the "Seal of the Prophets" is distributed among all other Messengers of God as an equally applicable title, relatively speaking.

The Qur'anic encounter with God:

The Qur'anic encounter forms an exegetical leitmotiv in the Book of Certitude. Maintaining an exegetical constant, Bahá'u'lláh takes pains to distance God from all anthropomorphisms, Qur'anic or otherwise. The author extends his purge of anthropomorphism to Qur'anic eschatology as well, such that God never makes a personal appearance in the apocalyptic drama (except by proxy), but rather directs it. Since God cannot otherwise be "seen" or even "known," in God's stead stands the theophany referred to by the Bahá'í technical term, "Manifestation of God." Thus understood, the Qur'an's reiterative threat of (except by proxy), but rather directs it. Since God cannot otherwise be "seen" or even "known," in God's stead stands the theophany referred to by the Bahá'í technical term, "Manifestation of God." Thus understood, the Qur'an's reiterative threat of annihilation to the "Seal of the Prophets." (Q. 33:44). To this attainment to the presence of the immortal King testify the verses of the Book... The one true God is My witness! Nothing more exalted or more explicit than "attainment unto the divine Presence" (liqa' Allah) hath been revealed in the Qur'an...And yet, through the mystery of the former verse, they have turned away from the grace promised by the latter..." (ET,
In this remarkable passage, Bahá'u'lláh suggests that what became the most definitive prophetological proof-text in Islam had totally ignored the implications of theophanic language appearing just four verses later.

Establishing the Bab as the Mahdi/Qa'im:

To have ventured the logical possibility of revelation after Muhammad is one thing. To argue the authenticity of a latter-day revelation is quite another. Bahá'u'lláh turns the reader's attention to a specific eschatological figure, who is clearly not Muhammad, and whose work is that of a revelator and no mere renovator.

Shi`i as well as Sunni traditions presage the advent of an messianic figure, known to both traditions as the as the Mahdi, and to Shi`ism as the Qa'im. In Sunni Islam, the Mahdi (literally, the "Guided One") is a restorer who is to reestablish a just theocracy under Islamic law. In Shi`ism, the Qa'im (literally, "Riser") is more of a redresser of wrongs, an avenger. The Bab identified with this figure. Bahá'u'lláh elaborates on the Bab argument, already formulated by the Bab, in defense of the Bab's mission.

Oblique self-disclosures:

The Bahá'í technical term for the period of Bahá'u'lláh's messianic secrecy is ayyam-i butun ("Days of Concealment"), a term used by Bahá'í chroniclers and evidently by Bahá'u'lláh himself, a term that connotes the image of embryonic development. A concept traceable to the Bab (text cited by Denis MacEoin, "Hierarchy, Authority and Eschatology," 123), ayyam-i butun must be factored into any contextual reading of the Book of Certitude, if Bahá'u'lláh's retrospective testimony is to be admitted.

What Bahá'u'lláh termed the "delay" and the "set time of concealment" (cited in Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By [1944], p. 151) is intimated in several self-referential passages in the Book of Certitude, such as: "Say: O people of the earth! Behold this flamelike Youth that speedeth across the limitless profound of the Spirit, heralding unto you the tidings: "Lo: the Lamp of God is shining," and summoning you to heed His Cause which, though hidden beneath the veils of ancient splendour, shineth in the land of 'Iraq above the day-spring of eternal holiness" (ET, 147). The translator, Shoghi Effendi, succeeds in capturing a vigorous sense of mission on the verge of disclosure. The many hints to this effect in Bahá'u'lláh's writings during the Baghdad period are in fact not, in the final analysis, all that subtle. Such hints were not missed. Doubtless, there were at least a few Babis perceptively alive to these hints, who "recognized" Bahá'u'lláh before his Declaration. Thus, on a thematic level, Bahá'u'lláh has articulated an eschatologically conceived break from Islam. Soon after the revelation of the Book of Certitude, Bahá'u'lláh would, in effect, transform Qur'anic eschatology into messianic authority. The Author's exegetical techniques, therefore, played a key role in preparing his readers for such an eventuality.

Relationship of the Bab to Bahá'u'lláh:

In Bahá'í thought, the relationship of the Bab to Bahá'u'lláh is complex and multivalent. The Bab's mission was both universal and particular: While the Bab's mission was rhetorically addressed to the rulers and peoples of the entire planet, the revelation of the Bab exhibited a decidedly Islamic focus. In the Persian Bayan (II, 7), the Bab writes: "He [the Bab] appeareth not, save for the purpose of gathering the fruits of Islam from the Qur'anic verses which He [Muhammad] hath sown in the hearts of men" (SWB 108). The eminent Bahá'í scholar Fadil Mazandarani explained: "The Bab declared that he had brought in but the Lesser Resurrection because his message was circumscribed, limited to the Islamic people and to one part of the world. But there would arise a new consciousness, a universal resurrection, and this new spiritual consciousness would sweep over the entire world" ("The Life of the Bab," in Star of the West 14.7 [Oct. 1923] 202). Within Bahá'í salvation-history, the advent of the Bab, in eschatological terms, therefore inaugurated the "Lesser Resurrection" (qiymat-i sughra) while Bahá'u'lláh's advent precipitated the "Greater Resurrection" (qiymat-i kubra), or, as in the Bab's second Tablet to He Whom God Shall Manifest, "the Latter Resurrection" (SWB 7).

However, the revelation of the Bab can scarcely be reduced to a renovation of Islam. In the Kitab-i Asma' (XVI, 18), the Bab stated: "My Revelation is indeed far more bewildering than that of Muhammad" (SWB 139). While the Bab spoke in terms of the rejuvenation of Islam, Bahá'u'lláh largely abandoned that approach, while `Abdu'l-Bahá further distanced the Faith from its Islamic orbit. The Bab's primary Islamic focus notwithstanding, the scope of his religion was universal. Bahá'u'lláh later took up these universal features and incorporated much of the principles and precepts of the Bab into the Bahá'í religion. Considerations of Shi`i, Babi, and Bahá'í boundaries apart, the Islamic "content" of both the Bab's and Bahá'u'lláh's revelations needs to be appreciated as foundational. The Islamic ground of Babi and Bahá'í thought can best be appreciated if only we can distinguish the distinctive "innovations" effected by the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh.

Advance legitimation of Bahá'u'lláh's own mission:
In the Book of Certitude, a subtext may be discerned, in which Bahá'u'lláh intimates his own mission in the same terms of reference, through a new messianic paradigm employing the old symbols of Shi'ism. To the extent that Bahá'u'lláh succeeded in vindicating the messianic status (Qa'imiya) of the Bab, he succeeded, by implication, in legitimating his own authority as well. The Book of Certitude thus doubles as an apology for two eschatological figures: explicitly, as an apology for the Bab (as Qa'im) and, implicitly in anticipation of Bahá'u'lláh's own mission, "He Whom God shall manifest" (Man yuzhiruhu Allah). From this vantage, the Iqan may be thought of as a work of covert revelation, during the period of Bahá'u'lláh's messianic secrecy (1852-63), when initiation preceded proclamation. In actual usage, the Book of Certitude--within a year or two of its circulation among the Babi community--reflexively legitimated Bahá'u'lláh's own spiritual authority.

In the course of foreshadowing his own authority through a defence of the Bab, Bahá'u'lláh sought to enchant, through a persuasive suspension of disbelief, popular anticipation of the eschaton, while disenchanting clerical speculations, which tended to focus on miraculous preconditions of apocalyptic fulfillment. This analysis of the Iqan has heuristic value in discerning the structure of Bahá'u'lláh's argument, in following how the author surmounted theoretical obstacles to a realized eschaton, the most formidable of which was Islam's doctrine of revelatory finality.

Significance and Influence:

Nineteenth-century Islam saw the rise of several Islamic movements, of which only one broke decisively with Islam: the Bahá'í Faith. Though overtly Islamic in its hermeneutical enterprise, the new ethos of a post-Qur'anic revelation which the Book of Certitude defends makes it unique in its role as, paradoxically, a non-Muslim work of Qur'anic exegesis. Exegesis established a doctrinal foundation for the Faith Bahá'u'lláh was to create, in which eschatology was transformed into spiritual and legislative authority.

The Book of Certitude provided an eschatological bridge into a new religious world view. It started from the shore of Islam, crossing reformist currents through the gate of the Babi movement, progressively distancing itself from Islam. Already the Babi movement had mediated a formal break from Islam by means of a "new Qur'an" and a new law code, though the latter was scarcely implemented. On the other side of the bridge stood the Babi messiah, the mystery figure of "He whom God shall manifest" (man Yuzhiruhu'llah), who would appear at the time indicated by the cabbalistic code word, mustaghath. Subsequent to his writing of the Book of Certitude, Bahá'u'lláh successfully identified himself as this figure.

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

The Kitab-i Iqan and the "Sun of Iqan":

Doctrinally, had there been no walaya, there might have been no Bab or Bahá'u'lláh.) At once an agent of evolution and revolution, the Bab pushes the possibilities of Shi' concepts of authority to their "logical" extremes. The Bab revealed laws that could scarcely be fulfilled. Effecting a formal break from Islam by purporting to renew it, the Bab's laws were part of his rhetoric, not enduring institutions. In the twilight of the eschaton, the Bab was the "voice crying in the wilderness"–like John the Baptist–and yet was the wilderness itself, beyond the cultivated plains of traditional Islam. If one deconstructs his rhetoric, one can see that the Bab was not a mujaddid (renovator), in the Sunni sense. The Qa'im (Riser), after all, is supposed to inaugurate the Qiyama (Resurrection). This eschatological end of history presupposes the formal end of Islam.

Thus a distinction obtains between renovation and fulfillment. "Fulfillment" of Islam, while expressed in terms of renewal, is tantamount to a break from it, from both directions. The Bab had shifted the Shaykhi doctrinal kaleidoscope in ways that only a trained Islamicist can fully appreciate. Todd Lawson's work fills a lacuna--a chasm actually--in Babi and Bahá'í studies, by carefully nuancing the Bab's own originality against its nearly seamless continuity with Shaykhi thought. After the Bab's martyrdom, Bahá'u'lláh filled the charismatic vacuum, and eventually revealed laws that totally dissolved traditional Islamic distinctions between the non-Muslim Dar al-Harb ("the Realm of War") and the Muslim-ruled lands of Dar al-Islam. Bahá'u'lláh's "Great Peace" was inherently transconfessional, which Juan Cole terms a "metareligion" (1998, p. 150). This paradigm-shift required the authority of a messiah--actually, of two messiahs.

Associated with Bahá'u'lláh's messianic claims are his teachings. If one were to plot a "trajectory" of the Iqan in terms of its influence and the body of teachings with which it became associated, one might say that the authority to reveal presupposes the revelation itself. In his "Sura of Our Name, the Sender" (AQA IV, p. 313), Bahá'u'lláh refers to himself as the "Sun of the Iqan" (shams al-Iqan). The Iqan was the dawn of that Sun. The Most Holy Book (Kitab-i Aqdas) and the constellation of texts known collectively as "Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas" represent its zenith.
In fine, the Kitab-i Iqan focused on spiritual sovereignty, on the moral and spiritual authority of the prophets of God, particularly on the authority of the Bab and, by implication, of Bahá'u'lláh himself. Later, Bahá'u'lláh sacralized the temporal authority of just governments and stressed the need for temporal authority to draw upon religion as an indispensable resource, from which moral authority could best be derived. Considering that religious virtue is potentially superior to purely civic virtue, Bahá'u'lláh's system of religious governance, symbolized as "the Crimson Ark" (safina al-hamra'--the quaternary set of colors--snow-white, emerald green, crimson-red and golden yellow--forms an important tetrad in Babi and Bahá'í thought, as Todd Lawson and Stephen Lambden have shown), is designed to spiritualize humanity in ways that are simply beyond the power of the state. Religion can ideally exercise a sovereignty that derives its power from the spiritual King, the prophet of the age. This is one of the key themes of the Kitab-i Iqan, as Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Verily, He Who is the Day-Star of Truth and Revealer of the Supreme Being holdeth, for all time, undisputed sovereignty over all that is in heaven and on earth, though no man be found on earth to obey him. He verily is independent of all earthly dominion, though He be utterly destitute. Thus We reveal unto thee the gems of divine wisdom, that haply thou mayest soar on the wings of renunciation to those heights that are veiled from the eyes of men" (ET 97; Persian/Arabic 72).

Unresolved Textual Issues: Dating the Text

Having surveyed the style and content of the work, let us now turn to some difficult issues surrounding the history of the text. Internal evidence would appear to fix the date of the revelation of the Kitab-i Iqan in the Islamic year 1278 A.H. (hezar o devist o hashtad o hasht), which corresponds to 9 July 1861 through 29 June 1862. However, as Frank Lewis points out in his review [Bahá'í Studies Review 6 (1996): 76-92] of my book, Symbol and Secret (1995), some manuscripts of the Kitab-i Iqan indicate the time of its revelation to have been year1280 A.H. (hezar o devist o hashtad o hasht), which manuscript variant appears to have been followed by Shoghi Effendi in the authorized Bahá'í translation of the text. Lewis theorizes that Bahá'u'lláh, when reviewing the master copy of the Iqan that his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá had transcribed, had either updated the text to reflect the time during which he had later added marginalia and made other editorial changes, or had rounded off the date 1278 A.H. to a more "general, rather than specific date" of 1280 A.H. (80-1). Moreover, as Lewis also points out, no less an authority than the great Bahá'í scholar Fazil Mazandarani (Asrar al Asrar, s.v. "Iqan," pp. 266-84) discusses the problem of dating the time of revelation on the basis of internal evidence and proposes his own solution by venturing the year 1279 A.H. as the date of revelation! This, in the present writer's opinion, is clearly an effort harmonize the dates, without adequately accounting for the manuscript variants themselves.

Thomas Linard (personal communication) drew attention to the 1280 date as a manuscript issue with regard to the French translation of the Iqan. In Symbol and Secret, I had speculated that Shoghi Effendi was rounding off the 1278 date to 1280. My reason for saying this (which is not spelled out in Symbol and Secret) was that Shoghi Effendi, in a letter published in Unfolding Destiny, mentions the 1278 date as internal evidence for dating the revelation of the Iqan in 1861. (A later letter on behalf of the Guardian mentions 1862, presumably because 1278 A.H. falls within both those years.) Moreover, in the first English translation of the Iqan, published as The Book of Assurance (1904), translator Ali-Kuli Khan evidently worked from a manuscript that read 1278 as well. As scholarship is a learning process, as well as a community of discourse, I now agree with Thomas Linard and Frank Lewis that the 1280 figure is indeed a manuscript issue that needs to be addressed. In Symbol and Secret, I have spoken of Bahá'u'lláh's "editing of revelation" as a feature of the manuscript and publication history of the Iqan. Clearly, a redaction history of the Iqan needs to be written. This could only be done if all of the master copies as well as lithographed and printed editions of the Iqan could be collated for comparison. This is why I have submitted copies of both Iqan lithographs to H-Bahai for as appendices to the electronic publication of this paper.

Fresh evidence for the dating of the Iqan has been brought to light by Dr. Ahang Rabbani, in a draft manuscript, "Conversion of the Great Uncle of the Bab," submitted for publication in World Order Magazine. Dr. Rabbani has translated a letter published in Khandan-i Afnan, pp. 42-3, written by Haji Mirza Sayyid Muhammad to his eldest son, Haji Mirza Muhammad-Taqi, known as the Vakil-Dawla, recounting the former's visit to the Shriners of the Twin Imams at Kazimayn. This letter was written from the "Atabat by the Bab's "Great Uncle" (Khal-i Akbar) after he had visited Bahá'u'lláh and had received the Kitab-i Iqan. The letter is dated 5 Rajab 1277 A.H. (17 January 1861). The letter, in part, reads: "Praise be God, for what I have to write you is that we attained the presence of His Holiness Baha, upon Him be God's peace. Your place was indeed empty. He showered us with utmost affection and kindness and asked that we stay for the night and we remained in His presence. The evident truth is that to be deprived of the blessing of His presence is a mighty and evident loss. May God bestow His grace upon us so that we would everlastingly attain unto the blessing of His presence" (translated by Ahang Rabbani).

The date of this letter provides a terminus ad quem, which enables us to bracket the time of the revelation of the Kitab-i Iqan, placing the date of the Iqan squarely in 1277 A.H. rather than 1278, and probably just a few days prior to 17 January 1861. This new finding may be decisive in arriving at a nearly precise date for the revelation of the Iqan. Dr. Rabbani is to be credited with unearthing this new (and possibly conclusive) evidence, even though I may have been the first to realize its implications for dating the Iqan. The discovery requires further investigation, as it would appear to overrule the internal evidence of 1278 A.H. given in the Iqan itself, upon which evidence Shoghi Effendi based his own dating of 1861-62 (see discussion in Symbol and Secret). Dr. Rabbani has written to the Universal House of Justice to locate the original of this important letter, in order to verify its date.
A work of some two hundred pages in Persian and Arabic admixed, the Kitab-i Iqan was probably the most copied, widely circulated and influential of all Bahá’í works, and was, as stated above, the first Bahá’í text to have been authorized for publication. Except for the later marginalia, emendations and subsequent editing authorized by Bahá'u'lláh (esp. in aligning Qur'anic citations with the textus receptus) prior to the publication of the text, the entire book was dictated extemporaneously, at an extraordinary pace, reportedly within the span of forty-eight hours. (One authority, Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani, claimed the text was revealed within twenty-four hours! See introduction to Ali-Kuli Khan's The book of Assurance [1904]) It is not certain but probable that Bahá'u'lláh dictated the Kitab-i Iqan to his amanuensis Mirza Aqa Jan who was the most likely scribe to have taken it down, while, as stated above, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then eighteen years of age, produced, with marginal additions by Bahá'u'lláh himself (on internal grounds, added in the year 1280 A.H.), what is now considered the manuscript original and master exemplar.

A distinction should be made between the original manuscript and the manuscript original. The original manuscript was the actual transcript of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitab-i Iqan--the text as recorded in the scribal shorthand known as "revelation writing"--taken down in great haste, in an effort to keep pace with the celerity of Bahá'u'lláh's dictation. As the actual record of the revelatory event of the Iqan, this "revelation writing" is not extant and is presumed lost. Therefore, what is here termed the manuscript original (the first master copy) is actually a decipherment, reconstitution and redaction of the original manuscript, which, as stated, is no longer extant. Thus, the authority of the latter supersedes that of the former, although the differences between the two are indeterminate. Simply put, the Iqan is a case in which the revealer has "re-revealed" a major revelation by editing it.

For decades, the manuscript original of the Kitab-i Iqan was an heirloom in the family of Haji Mirza Sayyid Muhammad, until, in 1948, his great-granddaughter Fatima Khanum-i Afnan presented it to the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, Shoghi Effendi (A. Taherzadeh, Revelation, I, 159). This manuscript is now preserved in the International Bahá’í Archives on Mount Carmel. Other manuscript copies of the Kitab-i Iqan are preserved in the same archives in Haifa, and in various Oriental collections in Europe, such as British Museum manuscript, BL Or. 3116, foll. 78-127, of which Dr. Juan Cole (University of Michigan), has kindly provided me a copy.

The Problem of Defective Manuscripts:

For around two decades following its revelation, the Iqan circulated by hand transcription, the customary means of reproduction. Textual errors were known to have been made during the process of copying, resulting in defective manuscripts. In an unpublished Tablet, dated 1298 A.H., revealed for Mulla 'Ali-Akbar Shahmirzadi (Haji Akhund, whom Bahá'u'lláh had appointed a "Hand of the Cause"), Bahá'u'lláh states that "some of the copies of the Kitab-i Iqan are extant in this land ['Akka], but all are not correct" (text in Iran National Bahá’í Archives [INBA], no. 28: 193; personal communication, Dr. Nosrat M. Hosseini). In order to rectify this problem, Bahá'u'lláh oversaw the production of several authoritative master copies. In a tablet to Jamál-‘l-Burújírdí, Bahá'u'lláh mentions having entrusted one such authoritative manuscript of the Iqan to Mulla 'Ali-Akbar-i-Shahmirzadi (Monjazeb, op. cit.; cf. Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to Mulla 'Ali-Akbar Shahmirzadi, in Iran National Bahá’í Archives, no. 15 [132 B.E.]: 424 [reference provided by Dr. Nosrat M. Hosseini, personal communication, 11 July 1993]). This need to standardize so important a text may have been a contributing factor in Bahá'u'lláh's decision to authorize publication of the work in Bombay.

The First Bombay Lithograph:

As stated before, it is thought that the Iqan was the first Bahá’í text officially authorized for publication. The second such text was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Treatise on Civilization (Risala-yi Madaniya), written in 1875 and presumed to have been lithographed in 1882. If this is true, then a terminus ad quem is possible to fix, in view of the fact that Rosen attests to the existence of a "lithographed book published in 1299 A.H. in Bombay 'al-Asrar al-ghaybiyyih al-sabar al-madaniyyih' pp. 94-101, about which see Collections Scientifiques VI, 253-5." (p. 175, note 1, translated from the Russian by Michael McKenny). Momen states that The Secret of Divine Civilization (as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise was known in the West) was printed in 1882 ("Bahá'í Influence," 52 and 62, n. 17). Thus, the undated Iqan lithograph cannot have been published later than 1882. Corroboratively, Balyuzi states that the Iqan circulated in the early 1880s (Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory, 165).

A handsome lithographed edition of 151 pages of 15 lines each, and bearing no date, is arguably the first lithograph of the Iqan. E. G. Browne was shown such a copy on 15 July 1888 in Kirman (A Year Amongst the Persians, 554). A copy of the undated lithograph is preserved in the Bahá’í World Centre archives, catalogue no. BP362.K8.1893 (based on tentative dating when catalogued). It matches Najafi’s facsimile (Bahá’íyan, 469), the so-called 1308 A.H. edition. Three other copies of this edition are known to exist: (1) the undated Bombay lithograph described by Baron Rosen, donated in 1890 to the Library of the Institute of Oriental Languages of St. Petersburg by M. Gamazo; (2) one held in the private Afghan Library, Los Angeles; (3) and another privately auctioned in Chicago (Frank Lewis, personal communication, 25 Oct 1996). Presumably other unattested, undisclosed copies are held in private hands.

The St. Petersburg lithograph is evidently the one of which Baron Rosen speaks (Collections scientifiques 6:142-4; cf. "Novuiya copies are held in private hands. Privately auctioned in Chicago (Frank Lewis, personal communication, 25 Oct 1996). Presumably other unattested, undisclosed copies are held in private hands. Privately auctioned in Chicago (Frank Lewis, personal communication, 25 Oct 1996).
Printed Editions: The Kitab-i Iqan

First edition: Early 1880's Bombay Lithographed
Second edition: 1310/1893 Bombay Lithographed

Suspension of Publication:

In the epistle to Mulla `Ali-Akbar, we learn that Bahá'u'lláh, for an undisclosed period of time, had suspended dissemination of the Kitab-i Iqan some twenty years after it had first circulated, owing to the threat of even greater dangers posed to the Faith if too many copies of this work were to have fallen into the hands of its enemies. Taherzadeh states: "...Bahá'u'lláh advised caution and prudence. He explained that it was not wise at that time to print books, because should a large number of books become available, the enemies of the Cause (who were waiting for an excuse) could be provoked into bringing about an upheaval in that land. Bahá'u'lláh intimates that it was for the same reason that He had stopped the dissemination of the Kitab-i Iqan which had been printed [sic] some twenty years before" (A. Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, 4: 321-22, citing Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to Mulla `Ali-Akbar, from INBA, No. 15, pp. 423-424.) The term "printed" here is problematic, and probably should be construed as "reproduced" or "disseminated." The reference to twenty years prior should be understood "publication" of the Iqan by transcription.

The Second Bombay Lithograph (= First Dated Lithograph):

The first dated lithograph of the Kitab-i Iqan is the Dhu'l-Qa`dah 1310 A.H. (1893) edition in the hand of the celebrated calligrapher Mishkin-Qalam, in nasta'liq script, 214 pages. The text is possibly based on the master copy Bahá'u'lláh entrusted to Haji Akhund. This edition is catalogued as BP 362.KB.1892 in the Bahá'í World Centre Library, Department of Library and Archival Services. Three copies are archived at the Bahá'í World Centre. A facsimile of the first page of this edition appears on p. xviii of Symbol and Secret, but is not, as the caption indicates, privately held in the Afsharian Library. A facsimile of the final page is correctly shown on page 108 of Symbol and Secret, but is not, as the caption indicates, privately held in the Afsharian Library. A facsimile of the entire text of the 1310 lithograph is posted at the end of this article (see Appendix One).

The relatives of the Bab, known collectively as the Afnan, ran a successful printing house, called Naseri Press, in Bombay (Balyuzi, Eminent Bahá'ís, 121). If Hasani Zivar Press was not in fact the publisher of the undated Bombay lithograph, then it could well have been Naseri Press.

Printed Editions:

It should be noted that Bahá'u'lláh's colophon at the end of the text read manzul rather than munzal.

On the basis of this information, I believe that that the undated Bombay lithograph of the Kitab-i Iqan archived in the Institute of Oriental Languages library in St. Petersburg is likely to have been printed by the same publisher either in Rabi' I'January-February 1882 or slightly before. The aforementioned importers are not likely to have been the publishers. The undated Bombay lithograph of the Iqan was most likely published c. 1299/1881-82 (cf. Balyuzi, King of Glory, 165) by Hasani Zivar Press, and that it was likely that the publication was arranged by al-Hajj Muhammad-Husayn al-Hakim al-Bahá'í, and that the lithograph is in the hand of Mirza Muhammad-`Ali Shirazi. I am basing this identification on the assumption that the first Bombay Iqan was published prior to or concurrent with the publication of `Abdu'l-Bahá's Risala-yi Madaniyah (cf. Rosen, Collections scientifique 6:253). A caveat is in order here. The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice comments: " 'al-Hakim al-Bahá'í and also 'Shirazi' are cognomens that mask, rather than reveal, the identities of these men involved with the production of Bahá'í books" (letter dated 9 March 1995). An alternative suggestion has been made that Bahá'u'lláh's son Mirza Muhammad-`Ali, who was personally sent by Bahá'u'lláh to Bombay to transcribe books for publication, was the one in whose hand the undated lithograph was written. The memoirs of Syed Mustafa Roumie may perhaps answer this very question. However, I have my doubts that Mirza Muhammad-`Ali did so, as the first Bombay lithograph lacks a colophon in the "Khatt-i Badi" "(the New Writing" which Mirza Muhammad-`Ali designed as the script for a new universal language), which seems to have been his calligraphic trademark. A facsimile of the undated Bombay Iqan lithograph is provided in Appendix Two.
A new edition of the Kitab-i Iqan, commissioned by the Universal House of Justice and edited by Fereydun Vahman (University of Copenhagen) is currently in press (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’í-Verlag). It is based on a master copy transcribed by the celebrated amanuensis, Zayn al-Muqarrabin. This raises an interesting question: Why would the manuscript original of the Iqan, in the hand of Abdu’l-Bahá with Bahá’u’lláh’s own emendations and marginal additions, be set aside in favor of a copy from Zayn al-Muqarrabin? Since my request to Haifa for a copy of Iqan original was declined, except for facsimiles of the first and final pages, which the Universal House of Justice kindly gave permission to be published in Symbol & Secret, I have therefore not been able to compare the lithographed versions with the original. However, my educated guess is that Bahá’u’lláh’s later editing of the Iqan for publication (aligning Qur’án citations with the textus receptus, and effecting minor stylistic changes) resulted in a new master copy(ies) which, strange to say, rendered the original Iqan MS obsolete!


SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

The present writer’s forthcoming book. Complementary historical and structural analyses of Bahá’u’lláh’s sociomoral teachings are provided in order to show a pattern whereby Bahá’u’lláh had selectively “sacralized the secular” developments in the West with the greatest institutional potential for world reform. At the same time, Bahá’u’lláh’s creation of consultative Houses of Justice at local/intermediate and international levels suggests what in some ways may be seen as a parallel system of religious governance, with a mandate to exert an equally reciprocal moral influence on the state. The notion of “separation of church and state”, argued for by Cole, is thus counterpoised by the pervasive influence of religion that Bahá’u’lláh advocated.

This book by Cole is an important and controversial analysis of Bahá'u'lláh's political and humanitarian teachings—the first academic monograph on the subject. In it, Cole intends to "link Bahá'í millenarianism with social reform motifs" (205, n. 4). Adducing an array of Bahá'í primary sources, contextualized and interpreted in light of key political terms of reference that prevailed in the 19th-century Middle East, Cole argues that the separation of church and state was clearly advocated by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.
digitized TIFF images, I am making a complete facsimile of this rare manuscript available on H-Bahá’í. There are no illuminated pages. While the text of the Iqan is in Mishkin-Qalam's hand, it is not calligraphic art, strictly speaking.

The box containing the microfilm had a label, on which is written: "Microfilm of Kitab-i Mustatab-i Iqan, label, on which is written: "Microfilm of Kitab-i Mustatab-i Iqan, Lithograph is kept in the St. Petersburgh Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. 108 frames." in the upper left corner of the box containing the microfilm is the number (I presume a catalogue number): "PS II 164". The microfilm is not in very good shape, with spills, scratches, and dust on it. It did not come on a spool--just loose, wound film.

For archival preservation, an ISO 9660 CD-ROM of 110 TIFF images (the 108 microfilm frames plus two start/end frames) has been mastered. The size of the images is 4512 (pixel width = 22.56") x 3360 (pixel height = 16.8"), at a resolution of 200 dpi, in B/W 1-bit depth. The file format is TIFF (B), with a compression ratio of 1:23. For Web presentation these tifs have been converted to compressed graphic image files (gif) and each page has been cropped for presentation as a single image file.

APPENDIX TWO (offsite):

FACSIMILE OF UNDATED IQAN LITHOGRAPH

Undated Bombay lithograph (c. 1882), obtained from the Afsharian Private Collection (Los Angeles), with the kind permission of Mr. Payam Afsharian, co-founder of Kalimat Press.