The Báb and ‘Alí Muhammad, Islamic and Post-Islamic: Multiple Meanings in the Writings of Sayyid ‘Alí Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819–1850)

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Abstract: Instead of arguing whether or not Sayyid ‘Alí Muḥammad Shīrāzī (the Báb, 1819–1850) and his writings are Islamic, this paper suggests that they are simultaneously Islamic and post-Islamic. The Báb’s Qayyûm al-āsma‘, written at the outset of the Bábí movement in 1844, can be understood as a commentary on the Quran, the original Quran, and divine revelation. Although the Báb gradually disclosed his identity to the public, his status (associated with the Imám, Muḥammad, and a manifestation of God) is present in the Qayyûm al-āsma‘, in which he refers to himself as the Gate (Báb), Remembrance (Dhikr), Point (Nuqtah), ‘Alí, and Muḥammad. The Báb participates in the long tradition of Islamic literary culture by creating meaning through metaphorical, symbolic, and paradoxical language, which for the Báb ultimately point to post-Islamic revelation. The simultaneous absence and presence of Islam in the Báb’s writings created a real-world division between the Báb’s followers and his critics, many of whom were Muslim scholars. By focusing on multiple meanings in the Báb’s texts, this paper analyzes the interplay between the Báb’s identity and his writings as they relate to Islam.

Keywords: the Báb; Qayyûm al-āsma‘; Islam; Shi‘ism; Báb; Bahá‘í; Mahdí; Hidden Imám

1. Introduction

The writings of Sayyid ‘Alí Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819–1850), commonly known as the Báb, are central to the Bábí religion that began in Iran in 1844. Islam, which is associated with one of the most beautiful, influential, and profound literary traditions in the world, is ubiquitous in the Báb’s writings. The Báb’s texts are the defining feature of the Bábí movement, and they remain integral to the Bahá‘í faith. These writings attracted followers to the Báb’s cause and were instrumental in giving their lives meaning. In fact, Bábís referred to themselves as the people of the Bayájn (ahl al-bayájn), after the Báb’s principal book (Browne 1889, p. 907). Since the Báb refers to his writings collectively as bayájn, the Báb’s followers can also be understood as “the people of the Báb’s writings”. In the Persian Bayájn (Báb n.d.a, 2:1), the Báb told his adherents that “your glory lieth in your belief in these holy verses”, which will lead to “true knowledge” and “humankind’s highest station” (Báb 1978, p. 88). The Bábí religion, therefore, is a movement rooted in the Báb’s texts. Iran’s Qajar government and many Shi‘í clerics used the Báb’s writings as evidence for apostasy, which led to his execution and the persecution of his Bábí followers. These same writings have enthralled and mystified scholars in the West. The British orientalist E. G. Browne (1862–1926), who was engrossed with the Bábí movement and attracted to the Báb’s “gentle spirit”, states that “the style of the Báb’s writings is too remarkable to be easily mistaken” (Browne 1889, pp. 897, 993). Browne also refers to one of the Báb’s works as a “mystical and often unintelligible rhapsody”, which indicates that he did not always find meaning in the Báb’s writings (Browne 1892a, p. 261). Indeed, Bábís, Shi‘í clerics, Qajar government officials, and Western scholars have derived different meaning from the Báb’s words, and they have disagreed about the station or identity of the Báb. In addition to the...
complexity of his writings, the Báb claimed a station, or multiple stations, which are also complex and have led to confusion about his identity and his authorial voice(s).

The Báb’s writings intentionally include multiple meanings, metaphors, and metonymy to (re)interpret or (re)define Islamic concepts, to move beyond Islam, or to appeal to many audiences at once. The Báb advises seekers of knowledge to understand complex realities in the following manner: “Beseech thou God to open, through His grace, the gate (báb) of the heart unto thee, inasmuch as, without the light of that sanctuary, man is unable to conceive of contrary attributes within one and the same thing” (Saiedi 2008, p. 177). For the Báb, therefore, the heart is capable of understanding dynamic realities through the grace of God. Stephen Lambden has explained that the Báb’s writings are both crystal clear (bayān, mubīn) and bewilderingly abstruse (sa'b, mustasa'b), and that they often contain syzygies or seek to unify opposites (Lambden 2020, p. 157). He further explains that the motif of “coincidence of opposites” is evident in the Báb’s Qayyūm al-asmā’ in a distinctly Shi’ī form as the Báb invokes opposing elements (such as fire and water) to refer to himself as the Imām (Lawson 2001, pp. 1, 8). Todd Lawson suggests that the Báb’s early writings are metaleptic and apocalyptic in their relation to Islam (Lawson 2012b, pp. 4–5). He further explains that the eloquence of the Báb’s writings is in their uniqueness, which is not measured by the standards of the past, and although the Báb’s writings are comprehensible to everyone, the uninitiated may find them difficult because they are unfamiliar with the style, context, and terminology of the Báb’s texts (Behmardi and McCants 2007, pp. 118, 135). While the Báb’s writings are certainly unique, much of the context and terminology is Islamic, which makes them more comprehensible to those familiar with Islam. Additionally, Nader Saiedi rightly states that “the most important reason for the complexity and difficulty of His [the Báb’s] writings is the intense creativity and symbolic nature of the Báb’s thought” (Saiedi 2008, p. 27). A critical aspect of the Báb’s creativity is his symbolic use of Islamic terminology to point in multiple directions simultaneously.

Decoding symbolisms in the Báb’s writings, therefore, is a key to understanding his words or assigning meaning to them, which has resulted in a variety of different interpretations of the Báb’s many works. Through the creative use of rich symbolism, it appears that the Báb’s very intention was to inspire readers to unravel the many layers, meanings, riddles, paradoxes, and mysteries of his words. The Báb states in his Qayyūm al-asmā’ (chp. 57) that “the Mystery of this Gate (Báb) is shrouded in the mystic utterances of His Writ and hath been written beyond the impenetrable veil of concealment by the hand of God, the Lord of the visible and the invisible (Báb 1978, p. 57)”. The Báb’s identity, therefore, is a mystery that is interconnected with his writings, which he associates with “the hand of God”, described here paradoxically as the visible and the invisible. Reality, according to the Báb, is fundamentally spiritual and created by God. Although the inmost reality of God’s essence is “beyond human conception”, truths and attributes related to God are made known to humans through the word of God, which is divinely revealed to prophets and manifestations (Báb 1978, p. 203). The Báb clearly indicates that his Persian Bayān (Báb n.d.a, 2:1) and other writings are revelations from God, which are the first to appear since the Quran. According to the Bábī tradition, then, the Báb’s writings are a new chapter in the book of divine revelation. This idea permeates the Bábī understanding of religion, which is progressive, dialectical, and rooted in history. The Báb refers to himself in an epistle to Muhammad Shāh (r. 1834–1848) as a “sustaining pillar” of the “word of God” (Báb 1978, p. 9). Therefore, the Báb and his words are reflections of God in this world.

The Báb’s writings are multifaceted and dynamic in the sense that he often refers to himself as multiple figures or personages synchronously, and he metaphysically merges what are often perceived as different realities into one. Put differently, the Báb seeks to unify diverse realities through his self and his writings. Reality in the Báb’s writings, therefore, is multidimensional and complex, yet singular and simple. This requires readers of the Báb’s works to see multiple meanings as part of a holistic system, instead of confused, divergent truths. As Nader Saiedi has pointed out, the principle of unity in diversity is central to the Báb’s message and theology (Saiedi 2008, p. 19). Unity and diversity are...
also central to the Islamic tradition. In addition to the Báb’s writings and his multiple stations, this principle of unity and diversity also applies to the Báb’s relationship with Islam. Rather than assuming that at the heart of Islam is a kernel that can be essentialized as a legal system, a set of values, a particular Quranic exegesis, a biography of Muḥammad, or even a civilization or culture, I follow the lead of scholars who define Islam in the broadest of terms. In his quest to answer the question of What is Islam?, Shahab Ahmed has articulated that Islam is as vast as the people interpreting and living it, and that Muslims are simultaneously contradictory and coherent in their hermeneutical engagement with Islam and the revelation associated with it, which often embraces metaphor, paradox, and ambiguity (Ahmed 2016, chp. 5). The Báb’s writings engage and reflect this tradition of finding meaning in metaphor, paradox, and ambiguity through revelation.

To say whether or not the Bábí movement is Islamic would require us to first define Islam and the Bábí religion, which has proven to be an elusive undertaking. Generally speaking, religions are too complex to neatly classify or essentialize and should not be restricted by pithy definitions. Scholars have certainly debated whether or not the term religion is useful, given the vast diversity of what might be characterized as religion. Therefore, instead of arguing whether or not the Báb’s writings and his personage are Islamic or not, I conclude that the Báb and his writings are simultaneously Islamic and post-Islamic. Ahmed suggests that “Islam is a shared language”, the “means by which an experience is given meaning, as well as the meaning which the experience is given by that means”. And Islam is the “end-product of meaning” (Ahmed 2016, p. 323). For the Báb, Islam is often the means, sometimes the meaning, and the end-product is simultaneously Islamic and post-Islamic. Therefore, Islam makes up more than the context for the development of the Bábí movement, especially because much of what might be considered Islamic remains part of the Bábí religion. In other words, the Báb separated his religion from many practices, beliefs, ideas, laws that might be considered Islamic, while he continued other Islamic markers, including specific concepts related to language, revelation, and monotheism. Although the Báb’s writings criticize or disagree with interpretations of Islam, the Quran, and Muḥammad, he does not criticize Islam, the Quran, or Muḥammad. Instead, the Báb’s writings hold Islam, the Quran, Muhammad, (and the Imāms) in the highest regard.

The remainder of this paper is composed of three sections, each of which analyzes the Báb’s writings in Islamic contexts. The aim here is that this method of reading the Báb’s writings metaphorically, symbolically, and from multiple perspectives, will add to a clearer understanding of the relationship between the Bábí religion and Islam. The first section is an analysis of the Báb’s writings as post-Islamic and purely Islamic. The second section focuses on the Báb’s Qayyūm al-asma’, which is an inexhaustible source for understanding the Báb’s relationship with Islam. This text can be understood as a commentary on the Quran, the original Quran, and post-Quranic divine revelation. In this text, the Báb identifies himself as the Gate, the Imām, Muḥammad, and a manifestation of God. To illustrate how the Báb identifies himself with these figures, the third section analyzes the titles of the Báb found in his writings (“the Gate” (Báb), “the Remembrance” (Dhikr), “the Point” (Nuqtah), “Ali”, and “Muḥammad”) by placing these titles in Islamic contexts, especially with reference to Quranic verses. Although perceptions of the Báb evolved as his claims became more explicit over time, these multiple meanings and stations are present in his Qayyūm al-asma’, which represents the beginning of the Báb’s manifestation (zuhūr) in 1844. This book, also entitled Tafsīr surat Yūsuf (Commentary on the Surah of Joseph), is the most influential of the Báb’s early writings. Bahá’u’lláh, who was an early follower of the Báb and his successor, refers to the Qayyūm al-asma’ as “the first, the greatest and mightiest of all books” (Bahá’u’lláh 1983, p. 231).1 Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í faith, writes that “the Bábís universally regarded” this book “during almost the entire ministry of the Báb, as the Quran of the People of the Bayán” (Shoghi Effendi 1995, p. 23). In the Persian Bayán (Báb n.d.a, 4:18), the Báb notes that the Qayyūm al-asma’ “had, in the first year of this Revelation, been widely distributed” (Báb 1978, p. 90). For his early followers and antagonists, this book
was their introduction to the Báb and his cause. It is the trumpet blast through which the Báb announced his revelation, which is intimately associated with Islam and was meant to appeal to Muslims. In addition to this source, the following is based on the Báb’s additional writings, including the Persian Bayân, which is the most influential of the Báb’s writings and is characterized by its explicit discussion of laws and norms, which differ drastically from Islamic laws and norms.

2. Purely Islamic and Post-Islamic

There has been a scholarly emphasis on the Bábí movement’s incongruence with Islam, no doubt resulting from historical tensions between Bábís and Muslims in Iran. Abbas Amanat states that Bábís hoped “to initiate a new prophetic cycle that aimed to bring to an end the Islamic epoch” (Amanat 2005, p. xii). While this statement is true, it should be pointed out that although the Báb claimed to represent a post-Islamic era defined by new laws and norms, he never claimed to put an end to Islam itself. Additionally, Nader Saiedi has argued that the Báb criticized Islamic traditionalism by reexamining “traditional concepts of religion and religious identity”, which are based on the “belief in the finality of the Islamic revelation” and allowed “no change in the religious law” (Saiedi 2020). Indeed, already in the Qayyûm al-asma’ (1:37), we find the following statement, which indicates the Báb’s claim on laws: “Be obedient to that which God hath revealed unto us from the laws of the Báb in this Book, submissive (muslim) to God and to His cause in truth, content”.2

The Báb’s later writings, especially the Persian Bayân, explicitly detail new laws that differ drastically from any conception of Islamic law. Although Islamic traditionalism and Islamic legalism are not the same thing as Islam, the Báb’s change of laws associated with Islam created a distinction between Bábís and Muslims. According to Meir Litvak, the Bábí movement “posed the most serious ideological and social threat to the Shi‘í ulama’ in Iran and the shrine cities [in Iraq] during the nineteenth century by offering a messianic alternative to the orthodoxy at a time of growing socio-economic difficulties” (Litvak 1998, p. 144). This is partially because Usuli Shi‘í clerics, who were the dominant representatives of Shi‘ism in nineteenth-century Iran and Iraq, primarily interpreted Islam in legalistic terms. Additionally, their authority as interpreters of the law was rooted in their assumed status as deputies of the Imám.3

As will be discussed in further detail below, the Báb also associated himself with the authority of the Imám, which meant that the Báb and Usuli Shi‘í clerics had competing visions for representing the authority of the Imám. Browne has noted that the Báb’s Ziyārat-namah is particularly striking because of “the utter humility” and “diffidence with which he addresses himself to the Imám” (Browne 1889, p. 900). In his analysis of the Báb’s Tafsîr sîrat al-baqarah (Commentary on the Surah of the Cow), Todd Lawson concludes that the Báb “makes his love of the Imám demonstrably reasonable and understandable largely as a result of the apotheosis in the tradition of the intellect” (Lawson 2018, pp. 176–77). Henry Corbin argues that Bábism “can only appear as the negation of” Shi‘ism (particularly the Shaykhí school) because “Whoever proclaims himself publicly to be the báb of the Imám, has automatically put himself outside Shi‘í Islam” (Corbin 1972, p. 283; Lawson 2012b, p. 80; 2005). More precisely, Shi‘í Muslims who recognized the Báb as the Mahdí saw him as the negation of the Imám’s hiddenness. The implication, then, is that the negation of the Imám’s hiddenness results in the negation of Shi‘ism. For Bábís who believed that the Báb fulfilled prophecies associated with the Mahdí, the era of waiting was over and they had arrived at the era of fulfillment. Belief or disbelief in the Báb as a manifestation of the Imám, therefore, is the point of divergence between Shi‘is and Bábís. Because the Báb aligned his authority with the Imám, Browne explains that the Bábí movement was “wholly Muḥammadan in outward origin, and ultra-Shi‘ite in their earlier stages of development” (Browne 1919, p. 100). Like Browne, Hamid Algar suggests that Bábism took “its starting point within Islam and then swiftly [went] beyond its bounds” (Algar 1973, p. 59). These statements are not particularly accurate, partially because the Báb’s earliest writings were already outside of Islam. This idea that the Bábí movement evolved from Islam to post-Islam is a prevalent
perspective which is partially based on the Báb’s statements in his later writings that point to distinctions between Bábís and Muslims. However, these distinctions are already evident in the Báb’s earliest writings, and Islam is never fully absent from the Báb’s writings.

Therefore, the absence and presence of Islam in the Báb’s writings are constant and simultaneous. Despite the very real division that emerged between Bábís and Muslims along the lines of norms and practices, Islamic language, metaphors, and symbols are constants in the Báb’s oeuvre. In fact, without knowledge of Islam, the Báb’s writings could prove exceedingly difficult to comprehend or find meaningful. After all, many of the Báb’s followers were Muslim scholars who found the Báb’s writings profoundly meaningful precisely because they had been trained in Islamic studies. Todd Lawson, who has particularly focused his attention on the continuity of Islam in the Báb’s writings, points out that the Báb’s Quran “commentary is distinguished by the frequent use of such terminology from the lexicon of classical Sufism”. At the same time, Lawson continues, “the mystical experience of the word as theophany represents a highly personal process of revelation” for the Báb (Lawson 2018, p. 5). Abbas Amanat argues that the most vivid part of the *Qayyûm al-asmâ* is the Báb’s “attempt to initiate a new prophetic system modeled on Islamic religion but deliberately independent from it” (Amanat 2005, p. 205). The Báb’s earliest writings, therefore, are both Islamic in terminology and post-Islamic (or purely Islamic) as revelations from God associated with the personage of the Báb.

From a Bábí perspective, the Báb’s Quran commentaries express a deep love and respect for the Quran. In the *Qayyûm al-asmâ* (chaps. 81, 48), the Báb states “I swear by your Lord, this Book is verily the same Quran which was sent down in the past”, and this religion “is indeed, in the sight of God, the essence of the Faith of Muhammad [Islam]” (Báb 1978, pp. 67, 71). Because of the centrality of the Quran and Muhammad to Islam, these statements suggest that the Báb’s writings are Islamic, or at least that the Báb viewed his writings as directly associated or aligned with Islam. However, the Báb’s later writings are explicitly critical of Muslims (but not Islam, the Quran, Muhammad, or the Imams). For example, the *Persian Bayân* (Báb n.d.a, 2:7) states that not “one of the followers of Shi‘ī Islam hath understood the meaning of the Day of Resurrection” (Báb 1978, p. 106). Additionally, in his *Kitâb al-asma* (17:2, Báb n.d.b), written a year or so before he was executed, the Báb criticizes those who have “debarred themselves from his revelation” by saying that “they have indeed failed to understand the significance of a single letter of the Quran, nor have they obtained the slightest notion of the Faith of Islam” (Báb 1978, p. 140). Such statements might be interpreted to indicate that the Báb’s views are not aligned with Islam. However, these assessments assume that the Báb and his writings are either Islamic or not Islamic, which is a binary that is not useful in assessing the Báb’s relationship with Islam.

A more nuanced reading of the Báb’s writings suggests that the Báb aligns himself with what he interprets as pure Islam or pure religion, and that he disagrees with what he suggests are misinterpretations of the Quran or are simply not Islamic (even if many Muslims might think that his interpretations of Islam are not Islamic). The Báb’s use of the Quranic phrase “pure religion” (*al-dīn al-khālis*) is a good example of the way in which he engages with Islam and pure religion simultaneously. In the first chapter of the *Qayyûm al-asmâ*, the phrase “al-dīn al-khālis” is used four times to announce that the book makes significant claims on religion. The Báb states (1:12) “The Pure Religion (*al-dīn al-khālis*) of this Remembrance (*Dhikr*) is well preserved (*sâlim*). Whomsoever desireth Islam, let him submit to his Cause (*al-amr*) so that God will inscribe him in the book of the righteous as a Muslim and of the pure religion (*al-dīn al-khālis*), which God in truth hath praised”. Utilizing a whole repertoire of Quranic vocabulary in this verse, the Báb explains that he is articulating the pure religion of God, which is both Islam and the Cause (*al-amr*) associated with him, both of which are God’s pure religion. The Báb clearly references a religion associated with himself here twice. First, he refers to “the pure religion of this Remembrance (*Dhikr*)”. As will be discussed in more detail below, *Dhikr* is one of the most prominent titles that the Báb uses to refer to himself (Lawson 1988, p. 11). Second, the Báb uses the phrase “his Cause”, which is both the same as and different from Islam. For the Báb, his Cause is
the same as pure Islam, but different from how many people have interpreted Islam. This concept is also prevalent in the Quran as the term *islam* (literally submission to God) is universalized to refer to the religion of Muhammad and past religions; *Muslim* refers to those who submit to God, including Muhammad and previous prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc.). Therefore, the Báb’s writings are Islamic and post-Islamic in the same way that the Quran is Christian and post-Christian, and Jewish and post-Jewish. In fact, the Báb’s writings are also Christian and post-Christian, and Jewish and post-Jewish, a topic that is simply beyond the scope of this paper.

This simultaneous unity and diversity of the Báb’s religion and previous religions is a prominent theme in the writings of the Báb and is associated with his concept of progressive revelation in which prophets or manifestations were representatives of divine truth in their different historical contexts. Referring to the prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, himself, and the future manifestation, the Báb in his *Dala’il al-sab’ah* says “what shineth resplendent in each one of Them hath been and will ever remain the one and the same sun” (Browne 1889, p. 914). In this way, each prophet or manifestation of God is a multidimensional figure, characterized by their individuality and their oneness, like the sun, which is at once singular and different as it (re)appears each day as a new and old sun. The Báb suggests that each of these prophets or messengers are the same in the sense that they are manifestations of God, but that they are also different as a result of the distinctions of their personality. Their message is also the same divine call, but differs relative to the time, place, and culture of the people to whom they deliver their message. The Báb appears to be saying the same thing about the relationship between each of the religions represented by these divine figures. That is, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bábism are pure religions of God, yet they differ in time, place, laws, norms, and culture. Therefore, the Báb views his religion as the “essence” of Islam because it is the same sun associated with Muhammad. Similarly, the Báb views his writings as the same as the Quran, like a new chapter of God’s book.

The *Qayyūm al-asmā’*, therefore, intentionally delivers a pure Islamic and post-Islamic message in a package familiar, yet new, to Muslims. At the same time, the Báb appeals to a broader audience beyond Muslims to encompass all of humanity. The Báb’s intended audiences become explicit as he specifically addresses Muslims and Iranians in the following ways: “O people of the Quran”, “O concourse of Shi’as”, “O concourse of divines”, and “O people of Persia”. The Báb directly refers (chp. 27) to the founders of the Shaykhí school, with which many of his followers were associated, by addressing Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kazim, whom only the “pure in heart” have followed (Báb 1978, p. 51). The Báb also globalizes his audience as he addresses humankind many times throughout the text in the following terms: “O people(s) of the earth” and “O peoples of the East and West”. He calls for his verses to be spread to Turkey, India, and to the East and West. Further, he refers to himself in the *Qayyūm al-asmā’* as the secret of the Bible, Torah, and Quran. Therefore, although Muslims (especially Shaykhis) are the Báb’s immediate audience, his message is ultimately universal.

The *Qayyūm al-asmā’* was partially responsible for convincing the Báb’s early followers (many of whom were Muslim clerics) of his identity and developing the terminology associated with this station (Zarandi 1996, p. 61; Browne 1892b, p. 499). This book also prompted Muslim clerics to condemn the Báb and his followers. Therefore, as Lawson has described it, the *Qayyūm al-asmā’* can be “thought of as an apocalypse of separation and reunion” (Lawson 2012b, pp. 3–4, 21). In his *Kitāb al-asmā’* (18:13), the Báb explains this apocalypse of revelation by saying that there are two groups of people in the world who “sail upon two seas: the sea of affirmation and the sea of negation”. The first group chooses to believe in “God and in His signs” and “in every Dispensation faithfully obey that which hath been revealed in the Book”. The second group chooses to believe in “God and in His signs” and “in every Dispensation faithfully obey that which hath been revealed in the Book”. The second group chooses not to recognize the divine messenger “at the time of His manifestation”, and God will transform their light into fire (Báb 1978, p. 147). In the *Persian Bayān* (Báb n.d.a, 2:1), the Báb writes that “no fire hath been or will be fiercer for them than to be veiled from the Manifestation of My Self
and to disbelieve in My Words” (Báb 1978, p. 87). Additionally, he states (5:4) that “true knowledge” is “the knowledge of God”, which is “the recognition of [God’s] manifestation in each Dispensation” (Báb 1978, p. 89). For the Báb, therefore, the Day of Resurrection is not the end of history, but the transition to a new stage of history, which is defined by a new revelation from God. In practice, the Qayyūm al-āsmā’ (and the rest of the Báb’s writings) created a division between those who recognized the Báb’s manifestation and those who did not. The Báb’s revelation also caused a division between the previous and current stages of history. The Báb’s followers would be led to God’s knowledge by the light of his revelation, and those who rejected the Báb would suffer from hellish fire as a result of not following his divinely revealed words. As light and fire are meant to be interpreted symbolically here, the apocalypse for the Báb is a spiritual matter, which separates those who believe in his revelation and those who do not. This recalls the Surah of Hūd in the Quran, which recounts Mūhammad’s call to idolaters to believe in God, and it describes the stories of prophets prior to Mūhammad (Noah, Hūd, Sālih, Lot, Abraham, and Moses) who called their people to follow God’s will.

As with Islam, belief and disbelief are integral to Báb theology. In the Persian Bayān (Báb n.d.a, 2:7), the Báb fixes the date of his manifestation (mazhar) on 22 May 1844—when Mulla Husayn Bushrū’ī (1813–1849) recognized the Báb’s station (Báb 1978, p. 107). The Báb, therefore, gave Mulla Husayn the title “Báb al-Báb” (Gate of the Gate). Prior to this moment of belief, the Báb shared the first chapter of his Qayyūm al-āsmā’ with Mulla Husayn. About this occasion, Mulla Husayn is reported to have stated the following: “Not for one moment did He [the Báb] interrupt the flow of the verses that streamed from His pen”. Mulla Husayn was “enraptured by the magic” of the Báb’s voice, and he states that the “sweeping force of His revelation” “came as a thunderbolt which, for a time, seemed to have benumbed my faculties . . . the knowledge of His Revelation had galvanized my being” (Zarandi 1996, pp. 61–65; Amanat 2005, p. 172). Mulla Husayn was eventually killed by Qajar government forces. Like Mulla Husayn’s experience, the Báb’s writings convinced many Shi’i clerics and laypeople that the Báb was the promised one, and many of these Bábís also engaged in revolutionary activities.

The Báb’s words had the opposite effect on the Báb’s detractors who rejected his book and his claims, which led to the persecution of the Báb and his followers. The first major example of Báb suppression is illustrated by another Shi’i scholar who became a Bábī, namely Mulla ‘Ali Baṣṭāmī (d. 1846), to whom the Báb gave the title “the second who believed”. Sunni and Shi’i clerics in Baghdad issued a rare, jointly authored fatwa against the Báb after Baṣṭāmī’s trial (Momen 1982, p. 113; Amanat 2005, pp. 211–38). Baṣṭāmī had traveled to the Shi’i shrine cities of Najaf and Karbalā’ in southern Iraq to deliver the Qayyūm al-āsmā’ to Shi’i scholars living in these centers of Shi’i learning, which he did at public gatherings. The assembly of clerics in Najaf included Mūhammad Ḥasan al-Najaftī (d. 1850), one of the most prominent Shi’i scholars of the nineteenth century. According to the Iraqi historian ‘Alī al-Wardī, Baṣṭāmī stated the following at this meeting: the Báb is the Promised One, whose “proof is his verses, his miracle is the same miracle by which Islam is recognized as being the truth”, namely the revelation of divine verses in the Qayyūm al-āsmā’. Al-Wardī concludes that “These words were like a cannon-ball exploding that assembly and all those present rose up against Baṣṭāmī” (al-Wardī 1978; Momen 1982, p. 116). As a result of this proclamation and similar pronouncements in Karbalā’, Baṣṭāmī was taken to Baghdad for trial. These events resulted in calls for the death penalty for those who believed in the Báb’s writings, and many Bábís were killed as a result. However, it appears that Baṣṭāmī was sentenced to hard labor by Ottoman officials. The inter-sectarian fatwa signed by Shi’i and Sunni clerics on this occasion condemns the Báb on account of his elevated claims in the Qayyūm al-āsmā’. The fatwa concludes that the Báb was “making a mockery of religion”, which is the point of contention between the Báb’s followers and his critics, as his followers concluded that the Báb was (re)establishing or (re)affirming true religion. Additionally, the fatwa denounces the Báb for referring to himself as the Gate (Báb) and the Remembrance (al-Dhikr), for composing the Qayyūm al-āsmā’ in the same style
as the Quran, and for claiming to receive divine revelation (Momen 1982, p. 119). Indeed, these points accurately represent the Báb’s claims, which were embraced by his adherents. It is to these questions that we now turn.

3. *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* as Commentary, Quran, and Revelation

Through the Báb’s unique style, the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* can be understood as a meditation on multiple meanings. In terms of its relationship with Islam, the title of the book suggests that it maintains and transcends (*qayyūm*) the divine names (*‘asrā‘*) of God as found in the Quran. The *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* is simultaneously written as a commentary on the twelfth chapter of the Quran, the original Quran, and a newly disclosed divine revelation. Therefore, the Báb presents us with what may appear as a paradox. These different interpretations of the book are also equivalent to the Báb’s claims of being the Imám (who provides commentary), Muḥammad (who receives revelation), and a new manifestation (who discloses a new revelation), which will be discussed in more detail below. E. G. Browne states that the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* was not a commentary “in the strict sense of the word” (Browne 1892a, p. 261). Lawson goes further by saying that it “bears virtually no resemblance” to any work in the Islamic *tafsīr* tradition, and is thus completely unique (Lawson 2012b, pp. 3–4, 21). The Báb states that the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* is “the commentary (*tafsīr*) of everything (*kull al-shay‘*)” (Lambden 2020, p. 182). This book is a commentary in the sense that it fully engages with the Quran and seeks to unlock or elucidate its meanings. In other words, the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* is a commentary on the Quran that is radically different from the Islamic tradition of Quran commentaries.

At the same time, the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* is written in a style and structure that resembles the Quran, and it consistently interprets the Quran to unveil the Báb as the mystery of God now made manifest in this new (and old) revelation. As noted already, the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* (chp. 71) states that it is “verily the same Quran which was sent down in the past” (Báb 1978, p. 67). It is the original “uncorrupted Quran”, which had been safeguarded by the Hidden Imám (Lawson 2012b, p. 4; Amanat 2005, p. 173). Lawson sums up the relationship of this book to Shi‘ism when he says that “The message to the Shi‘a was: this is the true Quran that has been in hiding with the 12th Imám until now and its appearance also entails the appearance of the hidden Imám” (Lawson 2018, p. 1). In his *Dalā‘l al-sab‘ah*, the Báb states that some of his Quran commentaries are written in the mode of divine verses, of which the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* stands out as the prime example (Behmardi and McCants 2007, p. 123). Browne, therefore, concludes that in the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* “a distinction claim to a divine mission is put forward” (Browne 1889, p. 906). Stephen Lambden states that the Báb’s writings “initiated a new eschatological age of inner (*ta‘wil*, *‘irfān*), deep-level (*batin*) revelation from God (*wahy*), intended to herald a new era of inclusive, yet post-Islamic, religious evolution” (Lambden 2020, p. 153). There are many explicit and implicit textual references in the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘* indicating that the book itself is a divine revelation from God. Indeed, the whole book is written in a mode, language, and style of divine verses modeled after the Quran, which itself is entirely written in the mode of divine revelation. This imagery of revelation gets to the heart of how multiple meanings and symbolism are used in the Báb’s writings, which are achieved through the creative use of Quranic language. These references connect revelation back to the Quran by commenting on it.

An analysis of several examples will illustrate how revelation, the Quran, and commentary are interconnected in the *Qayyūm al-‘asrā‘*. One emphatic statement in the first chapter is as follows: “This is indeed the eternal Truth which God, the Ancient of Days, hath revealed unto His omnipotent Word—He Who hath been raised up from the midst of the Burning Bush. This is the Mystery which hath been hidden from all that are in heaven and on earth, and in this wondrous Revelation it hath, in very truth, been set forth in the Mother Book by the hand of God, the Exalted” (Báb 1978, p. 41). The Báb references Islamic imagery of the Burning Bush, Hidden Mystery, and the Mother Book, which are associated with divine revelation and God’s knowledge. The Burning Bush, which is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) as the medium through which God addressed Moses, is
shorthand for revelation in the Báb’s writings. In his Tafsîr kull al-ta’am, the Báb states that whereas Moses encountered the Burning Bush several times, the presence of the Burning Bush was a constant and eternal experience for him (Saïedi 2008, p. 77). As with the Burning Bush, the symbol of fire is commonly used by the Báb as “the ultimate symbol of the Primal Will”, which is pure light, and is the opposite of hell-fire, which is manifest darkness (Saïedi 2008, pp. 75–78). The Quran (3:7, 13:39, 43:4, 85:22) explains that with God is the Source of Revelation, which is referred to as the “Preserved Tablet”, the “Mother of All Books”, and the “Hidden Book” (Rahman 1988, p. 29). The Mother Book or Preserved Tablet, therefore, is the source of all holy books and revealed verses. The Quran, Torah, Gospel, and other prophetic books are reflections of this archetypal revelation. Therefore, the Qayyîm al-asma’ can be understood to suggest that it comes from the Mother Book or that it is the Mother Book from which the Quran and other books were derived.

An additional statement in the Qayyîm al-asma’ (chp. 79) related to divine revelation is as follows: “God, of a truth, revealed unto Me in the sacred house of the Ka’bah, ‘Verily, I am God, no God is there but Me’” (Báb 1978, p. 73). The Báb, therefore, situates the location of his revelation in the most sacred place in the Islamic world, known as the House of God, the sanctuary built by Abraham and Ishmael, the center of pilgrimage (hajj), and the place to which Muslims around the world direct their prayers (qiblah). The final part of the Báb’s statement, quoted from Quran 20:14, is also a reference to the Islamic profession of faith (shahâdah), which many Muslims consider to be one of the five pillars of faith (in addition to pilgrimage). In the shahâdah, Muslims declare “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God”. The above-mentioned verse in the Qayyîm al-asma’ states that there is “no god but Me”. The singleness of God (tawhîd) is a fundamental belief in Islam, and the Báb does not challenge this doctrine of God’s oneness. Monotheism is likewise foundational in the Bábî religion. Instead, in the verse above, God is speaking to him in the first person. In other words, God says “there is no god but Me” to the Báb in the Ka’bah. Therefore, employing the word “me” instead of “God” (as the Quran does originally) is an indication that the Qayyîm al-asma’ is a revelation from God.

This mode of divine verses is characterized by direct revelation from God, which allows God to address his creation in his own voice. This type of verse is also common in the Quran. The mirror opposite of this mode is found in prayers in which the recipient of the revelation or the prophet addresses God, normally in the second person. Whereas a divine verse would say “I am God”, a prayer would say “Thou art God”. Third person statements (“He is God”) are characterized as the mode of commentaries, which generally affirm the words of God (Saïedi 2008, pp. 41–43). The Báb summarizes these modes of revelation in the Persian Bayán (Báb n.d.a, 3:17) as follows: “However, this name referreth in its primary reality to the divine verses, and in its secondary reality to prayers, third to commentaries, fourth to educational forms (or scientific treatises), and fifth to the Persian words” (Saïedi 2008, p. 45; Browne 1889, p. 893). The Báb outlines these five modes in more detail in his Panj shâ’în (Báb n.d.c). These modes can also be thought of as the multiple voices that are present in the Báb’s writings.

In several additional statements in the Qayyîm al-asma’, the Báb refers to himself as the infallible bearer of God’s revelation. He states (chp. 9) “I have been made the Bearer of irrefutable proofs from the presence of Him Who is the long-expected Remnant of God” (Báb 1978, p. 47). The Báb further clarifies (chp. 17) “O peoples of the earth! Bear ye allegiance unto this resplendent light wherewith God hath graciously invested Me through the power of infallible Truth” (Báb 1978, p. 48). In the Shi’î tradition, infallibility is closely associated with the Fourteen Infallibles (Muhammad, Fâtima, and the twelve Imâms), and the infallible knowledge of the Imâms is a defining feature of Shi’ism. In the Shi’î tradition, the infallibility of these holy souls is the result of God’s grace, which ensures divine order. According to the Shi’î scholar al-Shaykh al-Îmrî (d. 1067), it is human fallibility that necessitates the infallible Imâm (Arjomand 1996).
4. Gate, Imām, Muḥammad, and Manifestation of God

In his writings, the Bāb refers to himself with a wide range of images and titles associated with the Imāmate, Muḥammad, and divine manifestation. Nader Saiedi explains that the Bāb relates his claims to different parts of human reality associated with his body, soul, spirit, and heart. The Bāb’s “body represents the station of the Gate to the Imām, His soul represents the station of the Imām, His spirit reflects the station of the Prophet (servitude), and His heart represents the station of the unity (divinity) of the Prophet, that is, the station of the Point” (Saiedi 2008, p. 102). Therefore, instead of a disjointed reality, the Bāb claims an ontology that is at once singular and multiple, like the unity and diversity of a human being with sense perception, thoughts, feelings, and spiritual qualities. Among the Bāb’s most prominent titles or names are “the Gate” (Bāb), “the Remembrance” (Dhikr) of God, “the Point” (Nuqtah), “Ali”, and “Muḥammad”, which will be the focus here to illustrate how these titles relate to the Bāb’s identity and his relationship to Islam. These titles represent important concepts that are rooted in the Quran and hadith, and are directly related to conceptions of Islamic authority and knowledge.

In the Qayyūm al-asmā’, the Bāb makes a whole host of claims through explicit and immediately recognizable Quranic language, and his later works continue to be explicit about his identity.12 The Bāb, therefore, announced his station at the inception of his manifestation (zuhūr) in 1844. As Lawson has already established, the Bāb’s “assumption of the titles of Bāb and dhikr did, in fact, put forth his real claims right from the beginning” (Lawson 1988, p. 42). Saiedi argues that the Bāb’s message is “coherent from beginning to end” and that it is gradually disclosed. He further states that “In the Bāb’s early writings, the exalted nature of the station He claimed is unmistakably evident, but . . . His writings appear to convey the impression that He is only the Gate of the Hidden Imām”, which “He is defining in an unprecedented way” (Saiedi 2008, p. 19). At the same time, the Bāb’s more exalted claims can be directly understood from the Qayyūm al-asmā’.

In public, the Bāb announced his claims gradually, first as an intermediary to the Hidden Imam, second as the Mahdī, and finally as a divine manifestation (mazāhar ilahi). Scholars have especially focused on the timing of these claims, and several have suggested that the Bāb’s status evolved over time. According to Browne, “The Bāb’s original claim was...that he was the “Gate” whereby men could communicate with the Ka’im [sic], Imām-Mahdī, or Twelfth Imām. At a later period of his mission, however, he declared himself to be none other than the Imām himself” (Browne 1891, p. 290). Like Browne, Denis MacEoin suggests that the Bāb’s career included different charismatic frameworks: 1. Agent of the Hidden Imam; 2. Imām; 3. Manifestation (MacEoin 2009, p. 200). Hamid Dabashi suggests that the Bāb declared himself the Gate “between the Hidden Imām and the world”, then he declared himself the Hidden Imām himself in 1844. Later in Mākū, “he completely abandoned the notion of being the Hidden Shi‘i Imām and proclaimed himself a whole new prophet, whose book Bayān superseded the Quran, just as the Quran had superseded the Bible” (Dabashi 2011, p. 182). From a Bābī perspective, this idea that the Bāb changed his claims is not accurate. According to the Bāb, the public perceived his identity during the first four years after his declaration (1844–1848) as the Gate (Bāb) of the Hidden Imām. At his trial in Tabrīz in 1848, he publicly announced that he was the Qā’im and a manifestation of God (Saiedi 2008, p. 170). Therefore, according to the Bāb, it was public perception that changed, not necessarily his status as the Gate or manifestation. He explains his wisdom of gradually revealing his identity in public and affirms the validity of the Quran in the Qayyūm al-asmā’ “in order to prevent people from being agitated by the coming of the new book” (Amanat 2005, pp. 199–200).

Depending on one’s reading of the Bāb’s early works, the Bāb’s identity may be perceived differently. While some perceived the Bāb in 1844 as the Gate of the Imām, others perceived him as a revealer of divine verses. Moojan Momen rightly argues that “there were at least two levels of understanding of the Bāb’s claim at this early period”: 1. Bābīs thought the Bāb was an intermediary to the Hidden Imām; 2. Muslim scholars who read the Bāb’s writings were aware of his claims to divine revelation (Momen 1982, p. 142). Therefore,
we can conclude that there was a multidimensional understanding of the Báb’s assumed identity during his lifetime, and that some of his early followers were aware of the extent of his claims from the beginning. As indicated already, it was the Báb’s early writings that initially made people aware of his elevated claims, which may not have been as apparent to those who did not read them. Additionally, Muslim scholars may have interpreted his writings differently from lay people. An analysis of the multiple meanings of the Báb’s titles may help us understand how his claims could have been read or interpreted.

The Gate (al-Báb) is one of the many titles by which the Báb referred to himself. In Islamic contexts, the term báb has different meanings that were employed by the Báb in a variety of ways, which may, in part, explain why he associated himself with this title. The elasticity of the word báb can be stretched between the different stations that the Báb claimed to represent or supersede, including being the representative of the Imam, the Imam, and the Prophet. The Qayyûm al-asmâ’ (chp. 23) refers to the Báb’s title on multiple occasions, including the following: “We have, verily, dilated Thine heart in this Revelation, which stands truly unique from all created things, and have exalted Thy name through the manifestation of the Báb, so that men may become aware of Our transcendent power, and recognize that God is immeasurably sanctified above the praise of all men” (Báb 1978, p. 49). This verse is particularly important because it is spoken in a Godly tone. It also refers to the Báb’s revelation, which is meant to make people aware of God’s transcendence and sanctity. In other words, the title of Báb is directly associated with divine revelation that has the power to transform and reaffirm humankind’s (re)cognition of God.

Another verse in the Qayyûm al-asmâ’ (chp. 24) that refers to the Báb is as follows: “Verily I am the ‘Gate of God’ and I give you to drink, by the leave of God, the sovereign Truth, of the crystal-pure waters of His Revelation which are gushing out from the incorruptible Fountain situate upon the Holy Mount. And those who earnestly strive after the One True God, let them then strive to attain this Gate” (Báb 1978, p. 50). Here, the Báb establishes his station not simply as an intermediary between the Hidden Imam and the world, but as an intermediary or gate between God and the world. In this way, he expands the meaning of the word báb to include divine authority. Holy Mount in this verse is shorthand for revelation. In the Quran, Mount often refers to Mount Sinai (2:83–4, 7:142–5), where God revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses. Muhammad received his first revelation on Mount Hirâ’. In the passage above, revelation is also analogous to crystal-pure waters that are gushing out of the Holy Mount. The Quran references heavenly water several times, and in one verse there is a connection between the concepts of heavenly water and gate. In the Moon Surah, which references the Resurrection, the Quran (54:11) states “So we opened the gates of the sky with pouring water”. An additional verse (8:11) states “he caused rain to descend on you from heaven, to clean you therewith, to remove from you the stain of Satan, to strengthen your hearts, and to plant your feet firmly therewith”. The verb “to descend” (nazala) here is also understood in the Quran as revelation. For Quran scholars, the Day on which “the sky is opened as if it were gates” (78:19) is often interpreted as a sign of the Day of Judgment (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 2580). This verse is preceded by the following statement in the Quran (78:17–18): “the Day of Division is a Moment Appointed, a day when the trumpet is blown”. Heavenly rain, therefore, is associated with the Day of Judgment in the Quran, and the Báb uses this imagery as a synonym for divine revelation.

An additional title found in the Qayyûm al-asmâ’ to refer to the Báb is “the Remembrance (Dhikr) of God”, which is found in the following verse (chp. 3): “Praise be to God, Who hath revealed this Utterance (Dhikr), in truth, unto the Remembrance (Dhikr), that the people may be mentioned in the Mother Book by virtue of the Most Great Remembrance (Dhikr)” (Saiedi 2008, p. 140). Simultaneously, the Báb claims to be the recipient of the revelation as well as the revelation itself. As Nader Saiedi rightly puts it, “the interpreter, the object of interpretation, and the interpretation are all one and the same”, each associated with the Báb’s multidimensional being (Saiedi 2008, p. 144). For the Báb, therefore, Dhikr refers to “the Word and the Will through which God calls reality into being” (Saiedi 2008,
p. 95). In another reference to Dhikr, the Báb suggests that Islam (which literally means submission to God) is synonymous with submission to the Báb’s revelation. The Qayyūm al-‘asrā’ (chp. 3) states “Verily, the essence of religion is none other than submission unto This Remembrance (Dhikr). Thus, whoso seeketh Islam (submission to God), let him submit unto this Remembrance (Dhikr)” (Saiedi 2008, p. 142). It follows then that Muslims and everyone else seeking submission to God (islam) must submit themselves to the remembrance of God in accordance with the Báb’s writings.

Dhikr is a central concept in the Quran which appears in a variety of forms in more than two hundred verses. Quranic words with the same root as dhikr have a variety of meanings which have been variously translated into English as the following terms: remember, invocation, admonition, heed, mention, and exhort. “Dhikr” is also one of the titles of the Quran itself. Toward the end of the Surah of Joseph (12:104), which has been interpreted by some Muslims as an account of the separation and return of the divine, the Quran refers to itself as “a reminder (dhikr) for the worlds” (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 1071). As a commentary on this surah, the Qayyūm al-‘asrā’ asserts that the Báb and his writings are also a “reminder”. Quran 16:45 describes dhikr in the following terms: “We sent Our Messengers with clear Signs and Scriptures. And We have sent down to thee the Reminder (al-dhikr) that thou mayest explain to mankind that which has been sent down to them, and that they may reflect”. In this verse, dhikr is associated with divine revelation and its messengers, and the Quran again is referred to as “the Reminder” (dhikr). As the Quran was revealed in parts over time, each new revelation was known as a reminder (dhikr) (26:5). Another Quranic verse (20:124) makes a connection between remembrance and the Day of Resurrection in the following way: “But whosoever turns away from the remembrance of Me, truly his shall be a miserable life, and We shall raise him blind on the Day of Resurrection”. Blindness here is often interpreted as spiritual blindness or the inability to see spiritual realities. The importance of dhikr is summed up in the following Quranic verse (29:45): “the remembrance of God is surely greater” than anything else. Several hadiths reiterate this concept as well. According to a hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, “All that is on the earth is accursed save the remembrance of God” (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 866). An additional hadith states that the remembrance of God is more virtuous than spending money in the service of God, participating in jihad, and martyrdom (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 1135).

Dhikr is also an important concept in Shi`ism and Sufism. Shi`i scholars associate dhikr with Muhammad and the Imāms, and dhikr is related to the authority of the silent book (Quran) and the speaking book (Muḥammad and Imāms) (Lawson 2012b, pp. 54–55). “Dhikr” is one of the titles of the Prophet Muhammad, who referred to the invocation or remembrance (dhikr) of God as “the polish of the heart” (Lings 1975, p. 59; Nasr et al. 2015, pp. 1067, 1135). In Sufism, dhikr is associated with the devotional tradition in which Sufis rhythmically invoke the names of God in prayer and music. According to Martin Lings, “the invocation of the Supreme Name Allāh takes precedence over all the other practices in Sufism” (Lings 1975, p. 60). In this tradition, dhikr is partially defined by its focus on the active participation in remembrance, which may involve repetitive singing, dancing, and respiration (During 2010). Alluding to this type of dhikr practice, Lambden points out that the poetic rhyming style of the Báb’s writings often have a “hypnotic depth of rhythmic, dhikr-like intensity” (Lambden 2020, p. 167). A goal of Sufi devotional dhikr is to have an ecstatic experience which results from concentrating on the remembrance of God. This mystical experience has been described in the multidimensional terms of absence and presence. Absence refers to the absence of self, and presence is the presence of God or self-consciousness. This experience can result in a mystical revelation in which the performer reaches the apex of Sufism—the annihilation of the self and the subsistence in God (Stern 2012).

An additional title of the Báb is “the Point” (Nuqṭah), which also has a variety of meanings. Saiiedi suggests that nuqṭah in the Báb’s writings refers to the Primal Will of God, which is “manifested in this world by the Prophet or divine Messenger, Who is the nexus between the Divinity and the created world” (Saiiedi 2020, p. 45). In the Qayyūm al-‘asrā’
The Báb sates that “The angels and the spirits, arrayed rank upon rank, descend, by the leave of God, upon this Gate and circle round this Focal Point in a far-stretching line” (Báb 1978, p. 50). This verse references the following Quranic statement (78:38): “That Day the Spirit and the angels stand in rows, none speaking, save one whom the Compassionate permits and who speaks aright”. In the Persian Bayán (Báb n.d.a, 4:1), the Báb explains the connection in this verse between the Point and speaking: “Verily the Point possesseth two stations. One is the station that speaketh from God. The other is the station that speaketh from that which is other than God, a station whereby He expresseth His servitude for the former station” (Saiedi 2020, p. 46). Nuqtah, therefore, is a reference to the speech of God and his manifestation. Lawson has made the additional point that the Báb employs the term nuqtah (as well as the terms “pole” (qutb) and “center” (markaz)) to indicate that he also occupies the position of the Imam from whom “acts of being acquire reality” and choice becomes evident as a result of their proximity to the point or center in which the Imam is the source of divine names (Lawson 2001, p. 16).

Nuqtah in Islam refers to the point or dot beneath the letter B (ب), which is the first letter of basmalah (“in the name of God”), the opening phrase of each chapter of the Quran except one. Muslims often recite the basmalah (bismallah) as a prayer before undertaking an activity, including giving a speech, and it appears at the beginning of books, letters, and other writings. The sixth Shi’i Imam, Ja far al-Šādiq (d. 765), explains the first three letters of the basmalah in the following way: “[The bá ’ (“b”) is the glory of God (buhá’ Alláh), the sín (“s”) is the splendor of God (saná’ Alláh), and the mím (“m”) is the dominion of God (mulk Alláh)].” Imam Ali associated the point with himself by saying, “I am the point under the bá’” of basmalah. According to a hadith attributed to Imam Ali, all the holy books are contained in the Quran, and the Quran is contained in the opening surah (al-fatihah), which is contained in the opening phrase of basmalah, which is contained in the letter bá’, which is contained in the dot (nuqtah) under the bá’. Basmalah is thought to contain all knowledge of the Quran and previous scriptures, and it is associated with the Greatest Name (al-ism al-a’am) (Lawson 2012b, pp. 101–2). The nuqtah, then, signifies the beginning of all knowledge and is shorthand for knowledge itself, which begins with the point or dot that is required to formulate the letters, words, and ideas of divine revelation.

The final two titles to be discussed here relate to the Báb’s given name, ‘Ali Muḥammad, which is significant to the Báb as he simultaneously claims to be God’s vicegerent (‘Ali) and a revealer of verses (Muhammad). The name “Ali Muhammad” also signifies his status of unifying the stations of divinity and servitude. Like Muhammad and other prophets, he is a mirrored reflection of God. The Báb refers to ‘Ali and Muḥammad as his “Twin Names” as well as the Sun and the Moon. The Sun represents Muhammad and prophethood, and the Moon represents ‘Ali and vicegerency (Saiedi 2020, pp. 107–8). The Báb interprets the Quranic statement which says that on the Day of Resurrection “the sun and moon are joined together (75:9)” to mean that he is both ‘Ali (the Moon and vicegerent) and Muḥammad (the Sun and prophet). Therefore, the Báb interprets his given name as the trumpet call for the Day of Resurrection. In his analysis of the disconnected letters in chapters 108 and 109 of the Qayyûm al-asma’ which spell the names “‘Ali” and “Muhammad”, Lawson argues that these letters assert the Báb’s authorship of the text, provide references to Imam ‘Ali and the Prophet Muḥammad, and “complicate and challenge a traditional understanding of divine revelation” (Lawson 2015, pp. 114–15).

The letters that make up the name “‘Ali” refer to Imam ‘Ali and “the Exalted”, which is one of the ninety-nine names of God in the Quran. In the Qayyûm al-asma’ (chp. 3), we find the following reference to the Báb as ‘Ali: “Verily, this is the straight Path ascribed to ‘Ali before Thy Lord, as laid out in the Mother Book. And He is that ‘Ali (Exalted One), Who is praised before Us as the Wise (Hakim) in the Mother Book. Verily, He is the Truth from God, registered in the Mother Book as endowed with the uncorrupted Religion in the midst of Sinai” (Saiedi 2008, p. 101). In his signature form, the Báb multiplies the meaning of a single word to make a larger point. He uses the word ‘Ali to connect himself to the Imamate and as an attribute of or a name for God, while also associating himself with...
imagery of revelation (Mother Book and Mount Sinai). Again, the Báb indicates here that he is a reflection of God by joining together the stations of divinity and servitude.

Muhammad is the second part of the Báb’s given name. The Báb associates himself with the Prophet Muhammad many times in the Qayyūm al-asmā’ and elsewhere. The Qayyūm (chp. 48) states “This Religion is indeed, in the sight of God, the essence of the Faith of Muhammad” (Báb 1978, p. 71). Additionally (chp. 66), “the conclusive Proof of God in favour of His Remembrance is similar to the one wherewith Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, was invested, and verily great is the Cause as ordained in the Mother Book” (Báb 1978, p. 71). The point here is that the Báb, already in 1844, clearly states that his religion and his conclusive proof (the revealed word) are similar to that of Muhammad. He also associates his life with that of Muhammad, as the Báb was an orphan, merchant, and an unlettered revealer of verses. The fact that the Báb and Muhammad were both orphans and merchants is apparent. In terms of Muhammad’s lack of education, The Quran (7:156–8) refers to Muhammad as the “illiterate prophet” (al-nabī al-ummī) with the implication that the Quran is the divine word of God, not the man-made words of a poet, scholar, or even a literate person.

Referring to himself as “devoid of sciences” and “untutored”, the Báb appeals to this same logic to prove his status as the recipient of revelation from God (Browne 1889, p. 917). Comparing himself to Muhammad, who was on the receiving end of “outrageous insults” after he revealed the Quran, the Báb states in the Persian Bayān (Báb n.d.a, 6:11, 2:1) that after he had “revealed no less than five hundred thousand verses on different subjects, behold what calumnies are uttered, so unseemly that the pen is stricken with shame at the mention of them” (Báb 1978, pp. 82, 96–97). The Báb then cites the following Quranic verse (29:51) as proof of the previous statement: “Is it not enough for them that We have sent down unto Thee the Book to be recited to them?”. The point here is that divine verses (¯ayāt) are the most evident of God’s signs (¯ayāt) to man and that the Báb has revealed numerous of these verses. The Báb, therefore, establishes a relationship between himself and Muhammad which is similar to the relationship between Muhammad and Abraham in the Quran.

The Báb further emphasizes his similarity to Muhammad by challenging the idea that divine revelation ended with the Quran. In a letter to a Muslim cleric, the Báb claims that he received revelation from God, like Muhammad did, in the following terms: “Thy vision is obscured by the belief that divine revelation ended with the coming of Muhammad, and unto this We have borne witness in Our first epistle. Indeed, He Who hath revealed verses unto Muhammad, the Apostle of God, hath likewise revealed verses unto ´Alī Muhammad [the Báb]” (Báb 1978, p. 31). Here, the Báb references the Quranic verse (33:40) which states “Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and seal of the prophets (khatām al-nabīyīn)”. Muslim scholars commonly interpret this verse to mean that Muhammad is the last prophet and therefore revelation ended with him, which the Báb clearly challenges. For many Muslims, therefore, the Báb’s claim to revelation is perhaps the most problematic of his claims. Interestingly, the Báb does not refer to himself with reference to the title of “nabī” (prophet), one of the most prevalent titles associated with Muhammad. In the Persian Bayān (Báb n.d.a, 9:10), the Báb states that God’s “revelations of glory never end”, which is related to the Báb’s concept of progressive revelation discussed above (Báb 1978, p. 99). In addition to claiming that revelation continues in his own writings after Muhammad, the Báb emphatically states numerous times that revelation will continue after him. Although post-Bābi revelation is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be pointed out here that this theme is central to the Báb’s writings. The Báb foretells of a figure that he calls “Him Whom God shall make manifest”, who will appear after him. Bahá’u’lláh, who founded the Bahá’í faith, declared in 1863 that he was “Him Whom God shall make manifest”. Therefore, the Báb positioned himself as the gateway connecting Muhammad (and past prophets) with Him Whom God shall make manifest (Bahá’u’lláh). Bahá’ís, then, understand the Báb to be the Gate connecting Islam and the Bahá’í faith.
5. Conclusions

The Báb’s identity and his writings are interconnected, mysterious, and multidimensional. In his *Qayyūm al-asmā‘*, the Báb continues the Islamic tradition of making meaning through metaphors, paradox, creative language, and symbolism. His writings invite readers to see multiple meanings at once, which, in practice, has resulted in multiple understandings of the Báb’s writings. Fully engaging with the Quran and Islamic terminology, his writings are unique and differ drastically from any school of Islamic thought. As Islam is simultaneously and consistently present in and absent from his writings, the Báb’s words are both Islamic and post-Islamic. Therefore, instead of arguing that the Báb’s writings are either Islamic or un-Islamic, it might be more informative to understand them as intentionally Islamic and post-Islamic. From the outset of his manifestation in 1844, the Báb articulated a vision of pure religion, which is the same sun as pure Islam, and he presented himself as the same sun as previous and future prophets and manifestations. Although in public he gradually disclosed his identity as the Báb, the Imám, and a manifestation of God, his complex identity is present in his *Qayyūm al-asmā‘*, which created a real division between his followers and detractors, many of whom were Muslim scholars. The *Qayyūm al-asmā‘* foreshadows this division as an apocalypse of revelation in which people either believed or disbelieved in his words. Through the use of titles found in the Quran and hadith (“Báb”, “Dhikr”, “Nuṭlāḥ”, “‘Alī”, and “Muḥammad”), the Báb identifies himself as “the Gate”, “‘Imám”, “Muḥammad”, and “manifestation of God” in the *Qayyūm al-asmā‘*. As a reflection of the Báb’s identity, this book identifies itself as a commentary on the Quran, the original Quran, and a unique divine revelation.

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**Notes**

1. Browne notes that the *Qayyūm al-asmā‘* “was the first, and, for a long while, the chief sacred book of the Bábís, and in it the earliest form of the Bábí doctrine must be sought” (Edward G. Browne 1892a, p. 268).
3. On the development of Usūlī Shi‘ism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see (Heern 2015).
4. For an analysis of the social makeup of the early Bábí community, including Muslim clerics, see (Amanat 2005; Momen 1983).
5. See note 2.
6. For a discussion of the term cause (amr), see Omid Ghaemmaghami (2020, p. 26), who argues that “In hadiths about the Qā‘im, amr [cause] has eschatological and apocalyptic connotations”.
7. This imagery continues in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. See, for example, (Bahá’u’lláh 1983, p. 21).
8. The Báb specifically refers to himself as the secret of the Syrian Gospel, the Rabbinic Torah, and the Ahmadi Fūrğān (Quran). See *Qayyūm al-asmā‘*, (Báb n.d.d, chp. 109); See also, (Lawson 2012a, p. 128).
9. On the refutation of the Báb’s claims by a Kirmānī Shaykhī leader, see (McCants 2003).
10. Moojan Momen suggests that this is the first time that “Ottoman authorities officially recognized the Shi‘i sect” (Momen 1982).
11. On the modes of revelation, see also (Lambden 2020; Behmardi and McCants 2007).
12. The following verse gives a taste of the breadth of the Báb’s titles: “This same youth who is called by the People of the Cloud the mystic secret and by the People of the veil, the Flashing Mysterious symbol and by the People of the pavilion, the Western Divine Attribute and by the People of the throne, the Divine Eastern Name and by the People of the Footstool, the Exalted / ‘Alīd Image and by the People of the Empyrean, an Arab truth and by the People of the gardens, a Fatimid spirit and by the People of the earth, a servant of the kingdom and by the People of the Water, the fish of Timelessness” (*Qayyūm al-asmā‘*, Báb n.d.d, chp. 109; Lawson 2012a, p. 128).
13. For further discussion on *basmalah*, see (Haider 2011, pp. 57–94).
See, for example, Quran 3:67, which states “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; he was a true Muslim, and he was not a polytheist”.

References


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