

## Article

# The Bāb and ‘Alī Muḥammad, Islamic and Post-Islamic: Multiple Meanings in the Writings of Sayyid ‘Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819–1850)

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

**Keywords:** the Bāb; *Qayyūm al-asmā’*; Islam; Shi’ism; Bābī; Bahā’ī; Mahdī; Hidden Imām



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## 1. Introduction

The writings of Sayyid ‘Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819–1850), commonly known as the Bāb, are central to the Bābī 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 Bāb’s writings. The Bāb’s texts are the defining feature of the Bābī movement, and they remain central to the Bahā’ī faith. These writings attracted followers to the Bāb’s cause and were instrumental in giving their lives meaning. In fact, Bābīs referred to themselves as the people of the *Bayān* (*ahl al-bayān*), after the Bāb’s principal book (Browne 1889, p. 907). Since the Bāb refers to his writings collectively as *bayān*, the Bāb’s followers can also be understood as “the people of the Bāb’s writings”. In the *Persian Bayān* (The Bāb n.d.a, 2:1), the Bāb 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” (The Bāb 1978, p. 88). The Bābī religion, therefore, is a movement rooted in the Bāb’s texts. Iran’s Qajar government and many Shi’ī clerics used the Bāb’s writings as evidence for apostasy, which led to his execution and the persecution of his Bābī 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 Bābī movement and attracted to the Bāb’s “gentle spirit”, states that “the style of the Bāb’s writings is too remarkable to be easily mistaken” (Browne 1889, pp. 897, 993). Browne also refers to one of the Bāb’s works as a “mystical and often unintelligible rhapsody”, which indicates that he did not always find meaning in the Bāb’s writings (Browne 1892a, p. 261). Indeed, Bābīs, Shi’ī clerics, Qajar government officials, and Western scholars have derived different meaning from the Bāb’s words, and they have disagreed about the station or identity of the Bāb. In addition to the

complexity of his writings, the Bāb claimed a station, or multiple stations, which are also complex and have led to confusion about his identity and his authorial voice(s).

The Bāb'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 Bāb advises seekers of knowledge to understand complex realities in the following manner: "Beseech thou God to open, through His grace, the gate (*bāb*) 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 Bāb, therefore, the heart is capable of understanding dynamic realities through the grace of God. Stephen Lambden has astutely explained that the Bāb's writings are both crystal clear (*bayān, mubīn*) and bewilderingly abstruse (*ṣa' b, mustaṣa' b*), and that they often contain syzygies or seek to unify opposites (Lambden 2020, p. 157). Todd Lawson suggests that the Bāb's early writings are metaleptic and apocalyptic in their relation to Islam (Lawson 2012b, pp. 4–5). He further explains that the motif of "coincidence of opposites" is evident in the Bāb's *Qayyūm al-asmā'* in a distinctly Shī'ī form as the Bāb invokes opposing elements (such as fire and water) to refer to himself as the Imām (Lawson 2001, pp. 1, 8). Vahid Behmardi maintains that the eloquence of the Bāb's writings is in their uniqueness, which is not measured by the standards of the past, and although the Bāb's writings are comprehensible to everyone, the uninitiated may find them difficult because they are unfamiliar with the style, context, and terminology of the Bāb's texts (Behmardi and McCants 2007, pp. 118, 135). While the Bāb'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 Bāb's] writings is the intense creativity and symbolic nature of the Bāb's thought" (Saiedi 2008, p. 27). A critical aspect of the Bāb's creativity is his symbolic use of Islamic terminology to point in multiple directions simultaneously.

Decoding symbolisms in the Bāb'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 Bāb's many works. Through the creative use of rich symbolism, it appears that the Bāb's very intention was to inspire readers to unravel the many layers, meanings, riddles, paradoxes, and mysteries of his words. The Bāb states in his *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (chp. 57) that "the Mystery of this Gate (Bāb) 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 (The Bāb 1978, p. 57)". The Bāb'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 Bāb, 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 (The Bāb 1978, p. 203). The Bāb clearly indicates that his *Persian Bayān* (The Bāb n.d.a, 2:1) and other writings are revelations from God, which are the first to appear since the Quran. According to the Bābī tradition, then, the Bāb's writings are a new chapter in the book of divine revelation. This idea permeates the Bābī understanding of religion, which is progressive, dialectical, and rooted in history. The Bāb refers to himself in an epistle to Muḥammad Shāh (r. 1834–1848) as a "sustaining pillar" of the "word of God" (The Bāb 1978, p. 9). Therefore, the Bāb and his words are reflections of God in this world.

The Bāb'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 Bāb seeks to unify diverse realities through his self and his writings. Reality in the Bāb's writings, therefore, is multidimensional and complex, yet singular and simple. This requires readers of the Bāb'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 Bāb's message and theology (Saiedi 2008, p. 19). Unity and diversity are also central to the Islamic tradition. In addition to the Bāb's writings and his multiple stations, this principle of unity and diversity also applies to the Bāb'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 Bāb's writings engage and reflect this tradition of finding meaning in metaphor, paradox, and ambiguity through revelation.

To say whether or not the Bābī movement is Islamic would require us to first define Islam and the Bābī 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 Bāb's writings and his personage are Islamic or not, I conclude that the Bāb 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 Bāb, 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 Bābī movement, especially because much of what might be considered Islamic remains part of the Bābī religion. In other words, the Bāb separated his religion from many practices, beliefs, ideas, laws that might be considered Islamic, while he continued other Islamic markers, including language, revelation, and monotheism. Although the Bāb's writings criticize or disagree with interpretations of Islam, the Quran, and Muḥammad, he does not criticize Islam, the Quran, or Muḥammad. Instead, the Bāb's writings hold Islam, the Quran, Muḥammad, (and the Imāms) in the highest regard.

The remainder of this paper is composed of three sections, each of which analyzes the Bāb's writings in Islamic contexts. The aim here is that this method of reading the Bāb's writings metaphorically, symbolically, and from multiple perspectives, will add to a clearer understanding of the relationship between the Bābī religion and Islam. The first section is an analysis of the Bāb's writings as post-Islamic *and* purely Islamic. The second section focuses on the Bāb's *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, which is an inexhaustible source for understanding the Bāb'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 Bāb identifies himself as the Gate, the Imām, Muḥammad, *and* a manifestation of God. To illustrate how the Bāb identifies himself with these figures, the third section analyzes the titles of the Bāb found in his writings ("the Gate" (*Bāb*), "the Remembrance" (*Dhikr*), "the Point" (*Nuṭṭah*), "Alī", and "Muḥammad") by placing these titles in Islamic contexts, especially with reference to Quranic verses. Although perceptions of the Bāb evolved as his claims became more explicit over time, these multiple meanings and stations are present in his *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, which represents the beginning of the Bāb's manifestation (*ẓuhur*) in 1844. This book, also entitled *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* (*Commentary on the Surah of Joseph*), is the most influential of the Bāb's early writings. Bahā'u'llāh, who was an early follower of the Bāb and his successor, refers to the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* as "the first, the greatest and mightiest of all books" (Bahā'u'llāh 1983, p. 231).<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahā'ī faith, writes that "the Bābīs universally regarded" this book "during almost the entire ministry of the Bāb, as the Quran of the People of the Bayān" (Shoghi Effendi 1995, p. 23). In the *Persian Bayān* (*The Bāb n.d.a*, 4:18), the Bāb notes that the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* "had, in the first year of this Revelation, been widely distributed" (*The Bāb* 1978, p. 90). For most of his early followers

and antagonists, this book was in fact their introduction to the Bāb and his cause. It is the trumpet blast through which the Bāb 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 Bāb's additional writings, including the *Persian Bayān (Exposition)*, which is the most influential of the Bāb's later writings and is characterized by its explicit discussion of laws and norms.

## 2. Purely Islamic and Post-Islamic

There has been a scholarly emphasis on the Bābī movement's incongruence with Islam, no doubt resulting from historical tensions between Bābīs and Muslims in Iran. Abbas Amanat states that Bābīs 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 Bāb 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 Bāb 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 *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (1:37), we find the following statement, which indicates the Bāb's claim on laws: "Be obedient to that which God hath revealed unto us from the laws of the Bāb in this Book, submissive (*muslim*) to God and to His cause in truth, content".<sup>2</sup> The Bāb's later writings, especially the *Persian Bayān*, 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 Bāb's change of laws associated with Islam created a distinction between Bābīs and Muslims. According to Meir Litvak, the Bābī movement "posed the most serious ideological and social threat to the Shī'ī 'ulamā' 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 Uṣūlī Shī'ī 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 Imāms.<sup>3</sup>

As will be discussed in further detail below, the Bāb also associated himself with the authority of the Imāms, which meant that the Bāb and Uṣūlī Shī'ī clerics had competing visions for representing the authority of the Imām. Browne has noted that the Bāb's *Ziyārat-nāmah (Visitation Tablet)* is particularly striking because of "the utter humility" and "diffidence with which he addresses himself to the Imāms" (Browne 1889, p. 900). In his analysis of the Bāb's *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqarah (Commentary on the Surah of the Cow)*, Todd Lawson concludes that the Bāb "makes his love of the Imāms 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 Bābism "can only appear as the negation of" Shi'ism (particularly the Shaykhī school) because "Whoever proclaims himself publicly to be the bāb of the Imām, has automatically put himself outside Shī'ī Islam" (Corbin 1972, p. 283; Lawson 2012b, p. 80; 2005). More precisely, Shī'ī Muslims who recognized the Bāb as the Mahdī saw him as the negation of the Imām's hiddenness. The implication, then, is that the negation of the Imām's hiddenness results in the negation of Shi'ism. For Bābīs who believed that the Bāb fulfilled prophecies associated with the Mahdī, the era of waiting was over and they had arrived at the era of fulfillment. Belief or disbelief in the Bāb as a manifestation of the Imām, therefore, is the point of divergence between Shī'īs and Bābīs. Because the Bāb aligned his authority with the Imāms, Browne explains that the Bābī movement was "wholly Muḥammadan in outward origin, and ultra-Shī'ite in their earlier stages of development" (Browne 1919, p. 100). Like Browne, Hamid Algar suggests that Bābism took "its starting point within Islam and then swiftly [went] beyond its bounds" (Algar 1973, p. 59). This idea that the Bābī movement evolved from Islam to post-Islam is a prevalent perspective which is partially based on the Bāb's statements in



his later writings that point to distinctions between Bābīs and Muslims. However, these distinctions are already evident in the Bāb's earliest writings, and Islam is never absent from the Bāb's writings.

Therefore, the absence *and* presence of Islam in the Bāb's writings are constant *and* simultaneous. Despite the very real division that emerged between Bābīs and Muslims along the lines of norms and practices, Islamic language, metaphors, and symbols are constants in the Bāb's oeuvre. In fact, without knowledge of Islam, the Bāb's writings could prove exceedingly difficult to comprehend or find meaningful. After all, many of the Bāb's followers were Muslim scholars who found the Bāb's writings profoundly meaningful precisely because they had been trained in Islamic studies.<sup>4</sup> Todd Lawson, who has particularly focused his attention on the continuity of Islam in the Bāb's writings, points out that the Bāb'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 Bāb (Lawson 2018, p. 5). Abbas Amanat argues that the most vivid part of the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* is the Bāb's "attempt to initiate a new prophetic system modeled on Islamic religion but deliberately independent from it" (Amanat 2005, p. 205). The Bāb's earliest writings, therefore, are both Islamic in terminology and post-Islamic (or purely Islamic) as revelations associated with the personage of the Bāb.

From a Bābī perspective, the Bāb's Quran commentaries express a deep love and respect for the Quran. In the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (chaps. 81, 48), the Bāb 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 Muḥammad [Islam]" (The Bāb 1978, pp. 67, 71). Because of the centrality of the Quran and Muḥammad to Islam, these statements suggest that the Bāb's writings are Islamic, or at least that the Bāb viewed his writings as directly associated or aligned with Islam. However, the Bāb's later writings are explicitly critical of Muslims (but not Islam, the Quran, Muḥammad, or the Imāms). For example, the *Persian Bayān* (The Bāb n.d.a, 2:7) states that not "one of the followers of Shī'ī Islam hath understood the meaning of the Day of Resurrection" (The Bāb 1978, p. 106). Additionally, in his *Kitāb al-asmā'* (*Book of Divine Names*, 17:2, The Bāb n.d.c), written a year or so before he was executed, the Bāb 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" (The Bāb 1978, p. 140). Such statements might be interpreted to indicate that the Bāb's views are not aligned with Islam. However, these assessments assume that the Bāb and his writings are either Islamic or not Islamic, which is a binary that is not useful in assessing the Bāb's relationship with Islam.

A more nuanced reading of the Bāb's writings suggests that the Bāb 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 Bāb's use of the Quranic phrase "pure religion" (*al-dīn al-khālīṣ*) is a good example of the way in which he engages with Islam and pure religion simultaneously. In the first chapter of the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, the phrase "*al-dīn al-khālīṣ*" is used four times to announce that the book makes significant claims on religion. The Bāb states (1:12) "The Pure Religion (*al-dīn al-khālīṣ*) of this Remembrance (*Dhikr*) is well preserved (*sālim*). 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-khālīṣ*), which God in truth hath praised".<sup>5</sup> Utilizing a whole repertoire of Quranic vocabulary in this verse, the Bāb 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 Bāb 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 Bāb uses to refer to himself (Lawson 1988, p. 11). Second, the Bāb uses the phrase

“his Cause”, which is both the same as *and* different from Islam.<sup>6</sup> For the Bāb, 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 *islām* (literally submission to God) is universalized to refer to the religion of Muḥammad and past religions; *muslim* refers to those who submit to God, including Muḥammad and previous prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc.). Therefore, the Bāb’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 Bāb’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 Bābī religion and previous religions is a prominent theme in the writings of the Bāb 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, Muḥammad, himself, and the future manifestation, the Bāb in his *Dalā’il al-sab’ah* (*The Seven Proofs*, [The Bāb n.d.b](#)) 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.<sup>7</sup> The Bāb 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 Bāb 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 Bābism are pure religions of God, yet they differ in time, place, laws, norms, and culture. Therefore, the Bāb views his religion as the “essence” of Islam because it is the same sun associated with Muḥammad. Similarly, the Bāb 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 Bāb appeals to a broader audience beyond Muslims to encompass all of humanity. The Bāb’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’a”, “O concourse of divines”, and “O people of Persia”. The Bāb directly refers (chp. 27) to the founders of the Shaykhī school, with which many of his followers were associated, by addressing Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kazim, whom only the “pure in heart” have followed ([The Bāb 1978](#), p. 51). The Bāb 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.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although Muslims (especially Shaykhīs) are the Bāb’s immediate audience, his message is ultimately universal.

The *Qayyūm al-asmā’* was largely responsible for convincing the Bāb’s early followers (many of whom were Muslim clerics) of his identity and developing the terminology associated with this station ([Zarandī 1996](#), p. 61; [Browne 1892b](#), p. 499). This book also prompted Muslim clerics to condemn the Bāb 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 Bāb 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 not to recognize the divine messenger “at the time of His manifestation”, and God will transform their light into fire ([The Bāb 1978](#), p. 147). In the *Persian Bayān* ([The Bāb n.d.a](#), 2:1), the Bāb 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" (*The Bāb* 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" (*The Bāb* 1978, p. 89). For the Bāb, 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-asmā'* (and the rest of the Bāb's writings) created a division between those who recognized the Bāb's manifestation and those who did not. The Bāb's revelation also caused a division between the previous and current stages of history. The Bāb's followers would be led to God's knowledge by the light of his revelation, and those who rejected the Bāb 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 Bāb 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 Muḥammad's call to idolaters to believe in God, and it describes the stories of prophets prior to Muḥammad (Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot, Abraham, and Moses) who called their people to follow God's will.

As with Islam, belief and disbelief are central to Bābī theology. In the *Persian Bayān* (*The Bāb* n.d.a, 2:7), the Bāb fixes the date of his manifestation (*mazhar*) on 22 May 1844—when Mullā Ḥusayn Bushrū'ī (1813–1849) recognized the Bāb's station (*The Bāb* 1978, p. 107). The Bāb, therefore, gave Mullā Ḥusayn the title "Bāb al-Bāb" (Gate of the Gate). Prior to this moment of belief, the Bāb shared the first chapter of his *Qayyūm al-asmā'* with Mullā Ḥusayn. About this occasion, Mullā Ḥusayn is reported to have stated the following: "Not for one moment did He [the Bāb] interrupt the flow of the verses that streamed from His pen". Mullā Ḥusayn was "enraptured by the magic" of the Bāb'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" (Zarandī 1996, p. 61–65; Amanat 2005, p. 172). Mullā Ḥusayn was eventually killed in a battle between Bābīs and Qajar government forces. Like Mullā Ḥusayn's experience, the Bāb's writings convinced many Shī'ī clerics and laypeople that the Bāb was the promised one, and many of these Bābīs also engaged in revolutionary activities.

The Bāb's words had the opposite effect on the Bāb's detractors who rejected his book and his claims, which led to the persecution of the Bāb and his followers.<sup>9</sup> The first major example of Bābī suppression is illustrated by another Shī'ī scholar who became a Bābī, namely Mullā 'Alī Baṣṭāmī (d. 1846), whom the Bāb gave the title "the second who believed". Sunni and Shī'ī clerics in Baghdad issued a rare, jointly authored fatwa against the Bāb after Baṣṭāmī's trial (Momen 1982, p. 113; Amanat 2005, pp. 211–38).<sup>10</sup> Baṣṭāmī had traveled to the Shī'ī shrine cities of Najaf and Karbalā' in southern Iraq to deliver the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* to Shī'ī scholars living in these centers of Shī'ī learning, which he did at public gatherings. The assembly of clerics in Najaf included Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī (d. 1850), one of the most prominent Shī'ī scholars of the nineteenth century. According to the Iraqi historian 'Alī al-Wardī, Baṣṭāmī stated the following at this meeting: the Bāb 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-asmā'*. 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 Bāb's writings, and many Bābīs were killed as a result. However, it appears that Baṣṭāmī was sentenced to hard labor by Ottoman officials. The inter-sectarian fatwa signed by Shī'ī and Sunni clerics on this occasion condemns the Bāb on account of his elevated claims in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*. The fatwa concludes that the Bāb was "making a mockery of religion", which is the point of contention between the Bāb's followers and his critics, as his followers concluded that the Bāb was (re)establishing or (re)affirming true religion. Additionally, the fatwa denounces the Bāb for referring to himself as the Gate

(Bāb) and the Remembrance (*al-Dhikr*), for composing the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* in the same style as the Quran, and for claiming to receive divine revelation (Momen 1982, p. 119). Indeed, these points accurately represent the Bāb's claims, which were embraced by his adherents. It is to these questions that we now turn.

### 3. *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* as Commentary, Quran, and Revelation

Through the Bāb's unique style, the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* 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 (*al-asmāʾ*) of God as found in the Quran. The *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* is simultaneously written as a commentary on the twelfth chapter of the Quran, the original Quran, and a newly disclosed divine revelation. Therefore, the Bāb presents us with what may appear as a paradox. These different interpretations of the book are also equivalent to the Bāb's claims of being the Imām (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-asmāʾ* 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 Bāb states that the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* is "the commentary (*tafsīr*) of everything (*kull al-shayʾ*)" (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-asmāʾ* is a commentary on the Quran that is radically different from the Islamic tradition of Quran commentaries.

At the same time, the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* is written in a style and structure that resembles the Quran, and it consistently interprets the Quran to unveil the Bāb as the mystery of God now made manifest in this new (and old) revelation. As noted already, the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* (chp. 71) states that it is "verily the same Quran which was sent down in the past" (The Bāb 1978, p. 67). It is the original "uncorrupted Quran", which had been safeguarded by the Hidden Imām (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 Imām until now and its appearance also entails the appearance of the hidden Imām" (Lawson 2018, p. 1). In his *Dalā'il al-sab'ah* (The Bāb n.d.b), the Bāb states that some of his Quran commentaries are written in the mode of divine verses, of which the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* stands out as the prime example (Behmardi and McCants 2007, p. 123). Browne, therefore, concludes that in the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* "a distinct claim to a divine mission is put forward" (Browne 1889, p. 906). Stephen Lambden states that the Bāb's writings "initiated a new eschatological age of inner (*ta'wīl*, *irfān*), deep-level (*batīnī*) 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-asmāʾ* 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 Bāb'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-asmāʾ*. 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" (The Bāb 1978, p. 41). The Bāb 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 Bāb's writings. In his *Tafsīr kull al-ṭa'ām*, the Bāb states that whereas Moses encountered the Burning Bush several times, the presence of the Burning Bush was a constant and eternal experience for him (Saiedi 2008, p. 77). As with the Burning Bush, the symbol of fire is commonly used by the Bāb as "the ultimate symbol of the Primal Will", which is pure light, and is the opposite of hell-fire, which is manifest darkness (Saiedi 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 *Qayyūm al-asmā'* 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 *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (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'" (The Bāb 1978, p. 73). The Bāb, 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 Bāb's statement, quoted from Quran 20:14, is also a reference to the Islamic profession of faith (*shahādah*), which many Muslims consider to be one of the five pillars of faith (in addition to pilgrimage). In the *shahādah*, Muslims declare "There is no god but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God". The above-mentioned verse in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* states that there is "no god but Me". The singleness of God (*tawḥīd*) is a fundamental belief in Islam, and the Bāb does not challenge this doctrine of God's oneness. Monotheism is likewise foundational in the Bābī 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 Bāb in the Ka'bah. Therefore, employing the word "me" instead of "God" (as the Quran does originally) is an indication that the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* is a revelation from God.

This mode of divine verses (*āyāt*) 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 (Saiedi 2008, pp. 41–43). The Bāb summarizes these modes of revelation in the *Persian Bayān* (The Bāb n.d.a, 3:17) as follows: "However, this name referreth in its primary reality to the divine verses (*āyāt*), and in its secondary reality to prayers (*munājāt*), third to commentaries (*tafāsīr*), fourth to educational forms (or scientific treatises) (*sh'ūn-i 'ilmiyyah*), and fifth to the Persian words (*kalimāt-i fārsiyyah*)" (Saiedi 2008, p. 45; Browne 1889, p. 893). The Bāb outlines these five modes in more detail in his *Panj sha'n* (*Five Modes of Revelation*, The Bāb n.d.d).<sup>11</sup> These modes can also be thought of as the multiple voices that are present in the Bāb's writings.

In several additional statements in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, the Bāb 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" (The Bāb 1978, p. 47). The Bāb 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" (The Bāb 1978, p. 48). In the Shī'ī tradition, infallibility is closely associated with the Fourteen Infallibles (Muḥammad, Fāṭima, and the twelve Imāms), and the infallible knowledge of the Imāms is a defining feature of Shī'ism. In the Shī'ī tradition, the infallibility of these holy souls is the result of God's grace, which

ensures divine order. According to the Shī'ī scholar al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067), it is human fallibility that necessitates the infallible Imām (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" (*Nuqṭah*), "Alī", 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 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 Imām, second as the Mahdī, and finally as a divine manifestation (*mazḥar ilahī*). 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 Imām; 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 Shī'ī 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). 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 Bāb's assumed identity during his lifetime. As indicated already, it was the Bāb'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 Bāb's titles may help us understand how his claims could have been read or interpreted.

The Gate (*al-Bāb*) is one of the many titles by which the Bāb referred to himself. In Islamic contexts, the term *bāb* has different meanings that were employed by the Bāb in a variety of ways, which may, in part, explain why he associated himself with this title. The elasticity of the word *bāb* can be stretched between the different stations that the Bāb claimed to represent or supersede, including being the representative of the Imām, the Imām, and the Prophet. The *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (chp. 23) refers to the Bāb'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 Bāb, so that men may become aware of Our transcendent power, and recognize that God is immeasurably sanctified above the praise of all men" (The Bāb 1978, p. 49). This verse is particularly important because it is spoken in a Godly tone. It also refers to the Bāb's revelation, which is meant to make people aware of God's transcendence and sanctity. In other words, the title of Bāb is directly associated with divine revelation that has the power to transform and reaffirm humankind's (re)cognition of God.

An additional verse in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (chp. 24) that refers to the Bāb 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" (The Bāb 1978, p. 50). Here, the Bāb establishes his station not simply as an intermediary between the Hidden Imām and the world, but as an intermediary or gate between God and the world. In this way, he expands the meaning of the word *bāb* 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. Muḥammad also received his first revelation on a mount, Mount Ḥirā'. 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 Bāb uses this imagery as a synonym for divine revelation.

An additional title found in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* to refer to the Bāb 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 Bāb 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 Bāb's multidimensional being (Saiedi 2008, p. 144). For the Bāb, 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 Bāb suggests that Islam (which literally means submission to God) is synonymous with submission to the Bāb's revelation. The *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (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 Bāb'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-asmā'* asserts that the Bāb 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 Muḥammad, "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 a central concept in Shi'ism and Sufism. Shī'ī scholars associate *dhikr* with Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad, 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 Bāb'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 (*ghaybah*) and presence (*ḥudūr*). 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 (*wurūd*) in which the performer reaches the apex of Sufism—the annihilation of the self (*fanā'*) and the subsistence in God (*baqā'*) (Stern 2012).

An additional title of the Bāb is "the Point" (*Nuqṭah*), which also has a variety of meanings. Saiedi suggests that *nuqṭah* in the Bāb'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” (Saiedi 2020, p. 45). In the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* (chp. 24), the Bāb states 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” (The Bāb 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 Bayān* (The Bāb n.d.a, 4:1), the Bāb 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). *Nuqṭah*, therefore, is a reference to the speech of God and his manifestation. Lawson has made the additional point that the Bāb employs the term *nuqṭah* (as well as the terms “pole” (*qutb*) and “center” (*markaz*)) to indicate that he also occupies the position of the Imām 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 Imām is the source of divine names (Lawson 2001, p. 16).

*Nuqṭah* in Islam refers to the point or dot beneath the letter B (*bāʾ*, ب), which is the first letter of *bismallah* (“in the name of God”), the opening phrase of each chapter of the Quran except one. Muslims often recite the basmala (*bismallah*) as a prayer before undertaking an activity, including giving a speech, and it appears at the beginning of books, letters, and other writings.<sup>13</sup> The sixth Shīʿī Imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765), explains the first three letters of the basmala in the following way: “The *bāʾ* is the glory of God (*bahāʾ Allāh*), the *sīn* (“s”) is the splendor of God (*sanāʾ Allāh*), and the *mīm* (“m”) is the dominion of God (*mulk Allāh*)”. Imām ʿAlī associated the point with himself by saying, “I am the point under the *bāʾ*” of basmala. According to a hadith attributed to Imām ʿAlī, all the holy books are contained in the Quran, and the Quran is contained in the opening surah (*al-fātiḥa*), which is contained in the opening phrase of basmala, which is contained in the letter *bāʾ*, which is contained in the dot (*nuqṭah*) under the *bāʾ*. Basmala is thought to contain all knowledge of the Quran and previous scriptures, and it is associated with the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-aʿzam*) (Lawson 2012b, pp. 101–2). The *nuqṭah*, 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 Bāb’s given name, ʿAlī Muḥammad, which is significant to the Bāb as he simultaneously claims to be God’s vicegerent (ʿAlī) and a revealer of verses (Muḥammad). The name “ʿAlī Muḥammad” also signifies his status of unifying the stations of divinity and servitude. Like Muḥammad and other prophets, he is a mirrored reflection of God. The Bāb refers to ʿAlī and Muḥammad as his “Twin Names” as well as the Sun and the Moon. The Sun represents Muḥammad and prophethood, and the Moon represents ʿAlī and vicegerency (Saiedi 2020, pp. 107–8). The Bāb 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 ʿAlī (the Moon and vicegerent) and Muḥammad (the Sun and prophet). Therefore, the Bāb 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 *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* which spell the names “ʿAlī” and “Muḥammad”, Lawson has demonstrated that these letters assert the Bāb’s authorship of the text, provide clear references to Imām ʿAlī 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 “ʿAlī” refer to Imām ʿAlī and “the Exalted”, which is one of the ninety-nine names of God in the Quran. In the *Qayyūm al-asmāʾ* (chp. 3), we find the following reference to the Bāb as ʿAlī: “Verily, this is the straight Path ascribed to ʿAlī before Thy Lord, as laid out in the Mother Book. And He is that ʿAlī (Exalted One), Who is praised before Us as the Wise (Ḥakīm) 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 Bāb multiplies the meaning

of a single word to make a larger point. He uses the word ‘Alī to connect himself to the Imāmate 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 Bāb indicates here that he is a reflection of God by joining together the stations of divinity and servitude.

Muḥammad is the second part of the Bāb’s given name. The Bāb associates himself with the Prophet Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad” (The Bāb 1978, p. 71). Additionally (chp. 66), “the conclusive Proof of God in favour of His Remembrance is similar to the one wherewith Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets, was invested, and verily great is the Cause as ordained in the Mother Book” (The Bāb 1978, p. 71). The point here is that the Bāb, already in 1844, clearly states that his religion and his conclusive proof (the revealed word) are similar to that of Muḥammad. He also associates his life with that of Muḥammad, as the Bāb was an orphan, merchant, and an unlettered revealer of verses.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Bāb and Muḥammad were both orphans and merchants is apparent. In terms of Muḥammad’s lack of education, The Quran (7:156–8) refers to Muḥammad 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.<sup>15</sup> Referring to himself as “devoid of sciences” and “untutored”, the Bāb appeals to this same logic to prove his status as the recipient of revelation from God (Browne 1889, p. 917). Comparing himself to Muḥammad, who was on the receiving end of “outrageous insults” after he revealed the Quran, the Bāb states in the *Persian Bayān* (The Bāb 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” (The Bāb 1978, pp. 82, 96–97). The Bāb 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 (*āyāt*) are the most evident of God’s signs (*āyāt*) to man and that the Bāb has revealed numerous of these verses. The Bāb, therefore, establishes a relationship between himself and Muḥammad which is similar to the relationship between Muḥammad and Abraham in the Quran.<sup>16</sup>

The Bāb further emphasizes his similarity to Muḥammad by challenging the idea that divine revelation ended with the Quran. In a letter to a Muslim cleric, the Bāb claims that he received revelation from God, like Muḥammad did, in the following terms: “Thy vision is obscured by the belief that divine revelation ended with the coming of Muḥammad, and unto this We have borne witness in Our first epistle. Indeed, He Who hath revealed verses unto Muḥammad, the Apostle of God, hath likewise revealed verses unto ‘Alī Muḥammad [the Bāb]” (The Bāb 1978, p. 31). Here, the Bāb references the Quranic verse (33:40) which states “Muḥammad is not the father of any one of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and seal of the prophets (*khatam al-nabīyyīn*)”. Muslim scholars commonly interpret this verse to mean that Muḥammad is the last prophet and therefore revelation ended with him, which the Bāb clearly challenges. For many Muslims, therefore, the Bāb’s claim to revelation is perhaps the most problematic of his claims. Interestingly, the Bāb generally does not refer to himself with reference to the title of “*nabī*” (prophet), possibly to avoid common interpretations of this Quranic verse. In the *Persian Bayān* (The Bāb n.d.a, 9:10), the Bāb states that God’s “revelations of glory never end”, which is related to the Bāb’s concept of progressive revelation discussed above (The Bāb 1978, p. 99). In addition to claiming that revelation continues in his own writings after Muḥammad, the Bāb 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 Bāb’s writings. The Bāb foretells of a figure that he calls “Him Whom God shall make manifest”, who will appear after him. This is a title and status claimed by Bahā’u’llāh, who founded the Bahā’ī faith in 1863—nine years after the Bāb’s execution. Therefore, the Bāb positioned himself as the gateway connecting Muḥammad (and past prophets) with Him

Whom God shall make manifest (Bahā'u'llāh). Bahā'īs, then, understand the Bāb to be the Gate connecting Islam and the Bahā'ī faith.

## 5. Conclusions

The Bāb's identity and his writings are interconnected, mysterious, and multidimensional. In his *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, the Bāb 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 Bāb'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 and absent from his writings, the Bāb's words are both Islamic and post-Islamic. Therefore, instead of arguing that the Bāb'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 Bāb 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 Bāb, the Imām, 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 his words. Through the use of Quranic titles ("Bāb", "Dhikr", "Nuṣṣah", "Alī", and "Muḥammad"), the Bāb identifies himself as "the Gate", "Imām", "Muḥammad", and "manifestation of God" in the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*. As a reflection of the Bāb'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

- <sup>1</sup> Browne notes that the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* "was the first, and, for a long while, the chief sacred book of the Bābīs, and in it the earliest form of the Bābī doctrine must be sought" (Edward G. Browne 1892a, p. 268).
- <sup>2</sup> See also Stephen Lambden, "The Surah of the Dominion", <https://hurqalya.ucmerced.edu/node/105/> accessed on 3 March 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> On the development of Uṣūlī Shī'ism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see (Heern 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the social makeup of the early Bābī community, including Muslim clerics, see (Amanat 2005; Momen 1983).
- <sup>5</sup> See note 2.
- <sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the term cause (*amr*), see Omid Ghaemmaghamsi (2020, p. 26), who argues that "In hadiths about the Qā'im, *amr* [cause] has eschatological and apocalyptic connotations".
- <sup>7</sup> This imagery continues in the writings of Bahā'u'llāh. See, for example, (Bahā'u'llāh 1983, p. 21).
- <sup>8</sup> The Bāb specifically refers to himself as the secret of the Syrian Gospel, the Rabbinic Torah, and the Aḥmadi Furqān (Quran). See *Qayyūm al-asmā'*, (The Bāb n.d.e, chp. 109); See also, (Lawson 2012a, p. 128).
- <sup>9</sup> On the refutation of the Bāb's claims by a Kirmānī Shaykhī leader, see (McCants 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> Moojan Momen suggests that this is the first time that "Ottoman authorities officially recognized the Shī'ī sect" (Momen 1982).
- <sup>11</sup> On the modes of revelation, see also (Lambden 2020; Behmardi and McCants 2007).
- <sup>12</sup> The following verse gives a taste of the breadth of the Bāb'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'*, *The Bāb n.d.e*, chp. 109; [Lawson 2012a](#), p. 128).

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion on basmala, see ([Haider 2011](#), pp. 57–94).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion on the innate knowledge of the Bāb and a comparison of the childhoods of the Bāb and Jesus, see ([Lambden 1986](#)).

<sup>15</sup> For more on Muḥammad's illiteracy, see ([Günther 2002](#)).

<sup>16</sup> 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".

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