



EXEGESIS VII. IN BAHAIISM

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vii. In Bahaiism

The importance of Koranic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and interpretation (*ta'wīl*)—a somewhat arbitrary distinction—for the Bābī and Bahai religions (considered here together) may be gathered from the fact that the inception of the former is dated to the commencement of a work of scriptural interpretation, namely the Bāb's (q.v.; Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Šīrāzī) *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsof*, and that, in many ways, the most important work in the Bahai canon is the *Ketāb-e īqān* by Bahā'-Allāh (q.v.). The former is a highly unusual example of the genre and may rightly be thought to go beyond the traditional parameters, both with regard to style and content, although by its title it claims to either remain within the tradition or extend its possibilities. The second work, though certainly not a *tafsīr* work, is almost completely concerned with the interpretation of various Koranic verses and Islamic, particularly Shi'ite traditions, usually of an eschatological nature. The former work is in Arabic, and the latter is in Persian. Both the Bāb and Bahā'-Allāh composed several other works of scriptural interpretation, and, indeed, a large part of the task of the two religions was to convince a Twelver Shi'ite audience that the long period of waiting for the return of the twelfth Imam had ended. The Shi'ite community support their beliefs on the basis of a distinctive interpretation of the Qur'ān, commonly referred to as *ta'wīl*, and the distinctly Shi'ite corpus of traditions. It is therefore not surprising that claimants to spiritual authority (*welāya*) within the Shi'ite community would support such claims by reference



to and new interpretation of this same corpus of religious literature. Much of the actual interpretation is figurative, typological, and allegorical. It will be noted that the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* was completed in the year 1260/1844, or one thousand years after the disappearance of the Hidden Imam in 260/873-74.

Other works of exegesis include the whole range of works by the Bāb entitled *Tafsīr* or *Šarḥ* on various suras or verses of the Qurʾān or on partial or whole Hadith ascribed to the Prophet or other personalities sacred to Shiʿism. The most important of these are: *Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara*, written before the author put forth any special claim to authority during the last months of 1259/1843; *Tafsīr sūrat al-kawṭar*; and *Tafsīr sūra waʾl-ʿaṣr*. All of the Bāb's exegetical works, except for a very few brief excerpts, remain in manuscript (see MacEoin). Bahāʾ-Allāh also wrote other works of exegesis: *Tafsīr-e āyat-e koll-e ṭaʾm* and *Tafsīr sūra waʾl-šams*. Other important works of scriptural interpretation in the Bahāʾī case are: *Šarḥ-e konto kanzan maḵfīan* by ʿAbd-al-Bahāʾ (q.v.), son of Bahāʾ-Allāh and appointed by him to lead the Bahai faith after his death, and the numerous apologetic works written by Bahai ʿolamāʾ, such as Mīrzā Abuʾl-Faẓl Golpāyagānī. Some of these works of interpretation have been the subject of recent scholarship that has attempted to elucidate the way in which heresy so-called is capable of generating an eventual orthodoxy (e.g. Smith; Buck). The Qurʾān remains, of course, a sacred book for Bahais. It is likely, therefore, that future Bahai scholars will continue to write on the meaning of that book.

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