

**Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam:
Qur'an, Exegesis, Messianism, and the
Literary Origins of the Babi Religion**

Todd Lawson

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In his *Gnostic Apocalypse and Islam*, Todd Lawson provides a rich and multifaceted exploration of an unconventional exegetical text by Ali Muhammad Shirazi (d. 1850), more prominently known as the Bab. The text in question is *Tafsīr Sūrah Yūsuf*, also known as *Qayyūm al-Asmā'* and *Aḥsan al-Qaṣaṣ*. Available only in manuscript form, the *Tafsīr* is an early and critically important text for understanding the rise of Babism, a messianic new religious movement that emerged out of Shi'ism. Lawson's study will not only be of

interest to scholars of Ithna' Ashari Shi'ism, Babism, and Baha'ism, but is also a valuable contribution to *tafsir* studies and the burgeoning field of Muslim apocalyptic literature.

The *Tafsir Sūrah Yūsuf*, however, is not a conventional scriptural commentary, for its relationship to the Qur'an is far more complex. Being deeply connected to the Bab's emerging identity as the "gate" of the hidden Imam, the *Tafsir* moves beyond the sphere of the explanatory into that of the revelatory. As a result, the text bears explicitly scriptural resonances. Among the examples provided is that the chapters of the *Tafsir* are called *sūrahs*, the text has prostration (*sajdah*) markers, each *sūrah* opens with the *basmalah*, and nearly all of them have disconnected letters at their beginning. In Lawson's own words, "...it is clear from the structure of the work that the author is introducing a new scripture or revelation by means of the Trojan horse of exegesis" (p. 22).

Lawson undertakes a deep analysis of this unique and complicated text over the course of a introduction rich in theory, four chapters, a brief conclusion, and two appendices. His introduction situates the study within a number of scholarly fields. In a comparative key, the author convincingly argues that the *Tafsir Sūrah Yūsuf* falls into the genre of apocalyptic writing and places it in conversation with similar texts from the Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as with the Qur'an itself. Particularly helpful for typological purposes is his treatment of several apocalyptic motifs found in the *Tafsir*, namely, the reading of ambiguity as an expression of multivocality, *coincidentia oppositorum*, cosmogony, the hidden Imam as a mediating "otherworldly being," and the issue of pseudonymity. Within the field of *tafsir* studies, Lawson offers a meditation on Shi'i exegesis as it culminates during the eschatologically inquisitive Safavid period and continues into the Bab's lifetime.

Another point raised is the experiential delivery of the text. Lawson points out that the *Tafsir* had an important aural component and reports that the work was "written while being chanted" and "chanted to audiences" (p. 14). It is significant that the *Tafsir* was delivered in Arabic, because at the end of the introduction Lawson reviews the historical criticisms, both from Shi'i scholars and western academics, that argue that the Arabic used is "ungrammatical or unidiomatic" (p. 17). A tantalizing thread that remains to be addressed, then, is how the Bab's primarily Persian-speaking audiences might have received and interpreted the irregularities of the recited Arabic and what role this might have played in shaping the new religion.

In chapter 1, the author further contextualizes the *Tafsir* and then offers a general description of the work. First, he surveys the preceding exegetical works that have examined *Sūrah Yūsuf* (Q. 12) and then of the various attempts at Qur'anic imitation. Next, Lawson turns to the *Tafsir* itself and dis-

cusses the dating of its composition and the available manuscripts. At this point, a helpful comparison is made to the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Baqarah*, the only text of the Bab's to chronologically precede this one. Finally, Lawson documents the text's structure and arrangement, all the while making insightful connections to the socio-historical realities facing the Bab and his nascent religious movement.

In chapters 2 and 3, the author investigates the usage and meaning behind three self-referential terms used by the Bab in the *Tafsīr*. These terms are important, as they reveal much about who is speaking and what is intended. Thus, chapter 2 begins by covering the preceding, but relatively scant, scholarly literature on the *Tafsīr* and its authorial voice. Lawson then delves into the first two designations of *dhikr* (remembrance) and *bāb* (gate). In both cases, he traces the relevant religious and literary genealogy of each word before turning to their appearance in the *Tafsīr* itself. Influences from Sufi thought are also interspersed throughout. Chapter 3 shifts tack slightly as the author explores the third designation of *al-nuqtah* (the point) in light of the apocalyptic literary feature of *coincidentia oppositorum*. A particularly insightful vehicle for this inquiry is Lawson's consideration of the obscure and contested *khuṭbat al-tuṭunjīyah* (the sermon between/on/of the two gulfs) of Imam Ali and its subsequent bearing on the thought of the Bab (p. 87).

The fourth and final chapter of the book provides the reader with a taste for the text as a whole by closely examining *sūrah* 93 of the *Tafsīr*: *Sūrat al-Nahl*. The main body of the chapter consists of a translation of *Sūrat al-Nahl* accompanied by Lawson's own line-by-line commentary, or his *tafsīr* of the *Tafsīr*, where valuable explanations, points of intertextuality, and allusions to the wider tradition are provided. Enriching this treatment of *Sūrat al-Nahl* further are the book's two appendices: a photoduplication of the *Sūrat al-Nahl* text from the earliest manuscript of the *Tafsīr*, followed by a transcription of it. The book concludes with a summative, although brief, conclusion.

In sum, Lawson's impressive feat of erudition opens the doors for future studies of the Bab and his *Tafsīr*. His book takes the imposing complex of religious ideas surrounding the *Tafsīr Sūrah Yūsuf* and carefully lays out for the reader the intricately intertwined threads of Shi'ī messianism, Sufi worldviews, and apocalyptic motifs. As a result, the book sheds a great deal of light on the energetic genesis of this new religious force in nineteenth-century Iran.

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