

A Study of the Pen Motif in the Bahá'í Writings

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Abstract

This article is an introductory survey of the frequently encountered pen motif in Bahá'í writings. The theological usage of the "pen" is explored along with the Islamic theological and theosophical background of the term. The pen is a metaphor for the preexistent and creative force presented by the Manifestation of God. The pen-tablet relationship is then examined with the pen as a creative metaphor. The pen-tablet (active-recipient) motif is then used to explore the possible correlation between two theosophical topics—the "five divine presences" and the seven stages of "coming into being." The creative forces of the pen, undergoing emanation, create five distinct realms of existence. These five realms are generated as the pen creates in descending emanation. The pen undergoes the natural order of generation, the seven stages of "coming into being," as each of the divine presences are created.

Résumé

L'article présente une revue préliminaire des motifs de « plume » fréquemment retrouvés dans les écrits bahá'ís. L'auteur explore ensuite l'utilisation théologique de la « plume », de même que le fondement dans la théosophie et la théologie islamique du terme. Ainsi, la « plume » est une métaphore pour la préexistence et la force créative présentée par la Manifestation de Dieu. L'auteur examine alors la relation entre la « plume » et la « tablette » avec la « plume » jouant le rôle de métaphore créative. Le motif « plume-tablette » (active-récepteur) est utilisé pour explorer la corrélation possible entre deux sujets théosophiques, soit les cinq présences divines et les sept stades qui mènent à la naissance en tant qu'être. Ainsi, les forces créatives de la « plume » qui subit l'émanation créent cinq domaines d'existence distincts. Il s'agit de cinq domaines générés quand la plume est en train de créer en émanation descendante. La « plume » suit donc l'ordre naturel de génération, les sept stades de la naissance en tant qu'être, pendant que sont créées chacune des présences divines.

Resumen

Este artículo sirve de reconocimiento preliminar de la palabra "Pluma" como motivo frecuentemente hallado en los escritos bahá'ís. Se explora el uso teológico de la "Pluma" acompañado de los antecedentes teológicos y teosóficos islámicos del vocablo. La "Pluma" es metáfora que señala la fuerza creadora y preexistente expuesta por la Manifestación de Dios. De seguido se examina la relación pluma-tabla valiéndose de la "Pluma" como metáfora creadora. El motivo la pluma-tabla (el activo-recipiente) se usa entonces para explorar la posible correlación entre dos temas teosóficos, o sea, las "cinco presencias divinas" y las siete etapas de "llegar a ser." Las fuerzas creadoras experimentando emanación crean cinco reinos de existencia de notable diferencia. Estos cinco reinos son engendrados a la vez que la "Pluma" crea en emanación descendente. La "Pluma" experimenta el orden natural de engendramiento, es decir, las siete etapas de "llegar a ser," a medida de que cada una de las presencias divinas es creada.

The term “pen” (*qalam*) is frequently encountered in the Bahá’í writings. This term most commonly occurs in combinations such as the “Supreme Pen” or the “Pen of the Most High” as an appellation for Bahá’u’lláh. Such usage has significant theological implications. This article examines the pen motif in the Bahá’í writings primarily through a survey of selected topics gleaned from one of Bahá’u’lláh’s less-studied tablets, the *Súrat ul-Qalam* (the Chapter of the Pen), where this motif is heavily used. The *Súrat ul-Qalam* is an important document, as it introduces Bahá’í theology and the claims of Bahá’u’lláh as well as establishes a dialogue between the Bahá’í Revelation and the theosophical and mystical traditions within Islam. The pen is a metaphor for the creative forces of the Manifestation of God. This article will focus on the creative aspects of the pen in considerable detail. It emerges that the pen, undergoing emanation, generates all that exists. Particular attention will be given to the generation of the “five divine presences.”¹ It will also be suggested that the pen undergoes the natural cycle of generation of all things, known as the seven stages of “coming into being,” as it generates the five presences. Despite the importance of the pen motif in the creative schema, there has been no systematic study of this subject to date.

The *Súrat ul-Qalam*

Throughout this article, the authors will refer to the *Súrat ul-Qalam*.² The dating of the *Súrat ul-Qalam* is important for the purposes of this article. Although there is little internal evidence in the published text of this tablet to allow for an accurate dating, there is a general consensus that Bahá’u’lláh revealed the *Súrat ul-Qalam* in commemoration of the declaration in the Garden of Ridván. This consensus is supported by the reference to the *‘ayd ul-akbar* (the Great Festival) in the text of the tablet (*Súrat ul-Qalam* 128). This is consistent with the fact that the term “pen” is most heavily used in the Adrianople and Akka periods of Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry. The *Ganj-i-Shaygán* (The Abundant Thesaurus), the standard Persian reference text on the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, places the *Súrat ul-Qalam* in the ‘Akká period (Ishráq Khávarí, *Ganj-i-Shaygán* 192). Most authorities, however, have suggested Adrianople as the place of revelation.³ As such, the dating of this tablet remains uncertain. On this issue, the Research Department at the Bahá’í World Centre has kindly provided the following guidance, which is the most authoritative to date:

The exact place and date of the revelation of this Tablet has not yet been found in the records of the Faith. However, the tone and content of the Súrih itself show that it is quite possibly one of Bahá’u’lláh’s works revealed in Adrianople, as is suggested by Adib Taherzadeh in “The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh” (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), vol. 2, p. 397.⁴

¹ The five presences cover the entire spectrum of all ontological levels of being, ranging from corporeal existence to the inner, hidden, and unknowable essence of God.

² For the purposes of this article, the text as printed in Ishráq Khávarí, *Tasbîh va Tahlîl* (124–39) was examined. The text has also been printed in Bahá’u’lláh, *Athár-i-Qalam-i-A’lá* 4:258–67. When quoting from this tablet, the page numbers in *Tasbîh va Tahlîl* will be used.

³ Cf. Fâqîl-i-Mázandarání, *Asrâr ul-Áthár* 3:508 for an early dating. Adib Taherzadeh places the revelation of this tablet in Adrianople (*The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh* 2:397).

⁴ Personal correspondence elated October 11, 1996, transmitted via electronic mail.

The Supreme Pen (*Al-Qalam ul-A'lá*)

The term “pen” occurs frequently in the Bahá’í scripture. Occasionally, the term merely signifies a device of writing. The following may be considered an example of such use:

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: “Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle* 21)⁵

Another instance in which “pen” is used to refer to an instrument of writing occurs in the *Kitáb-i-Badí’* in which a particular pen bemoans its plight in the hands of one of Bahá’u’lláh’s enemies (239–50). Most often, however, the pen is a direct reference to Bahá’u’lláh.⁶ An example occurs in the Fire Tablet. In the initial portions of the tablet, the sufferings and wrongs to which Bahá’u’lláh was subjected in the path of God are recounted. Then a shift in tone occurs, and Bahá’u’lláh (the Manifestation of God) is addressed from a higher realm:

O Supreme Pen, We have heard Thy most sweet call in the eternal realm: Give Thou ear unto what the Tongue of Grandeur uttereth, O Wronged One of the worlds! (*Bahá’í Prayers* 218–19)

The classical pen is a hollow entity and a mere instrument in the hand of its operator. It also serves a creative function, as writing is impossible without it. Bahá’í theology maintains both hollowness and creativity with regard to the Manifestations. For example, Bahá’u’lláh speaks of the hollowness of the pen, indicating that it is the Might of God which has endowed the pen (i.e., Bahá’u’lláh) with pearls of mysteries (*La’ áli ul-Hikmat* 2:206).⁷ The *Súrat ul-Qalam* also maintains that the pen is reinforced by the strength and might of God (124–25).

A survey of the spectrum of the available writings of Bahá’u’lláh indicates that the *qalam* (pen) motif is primarily used in the Adrianople and ‘Akká periods of Revelation in comparison to the writings preceding the declaration in Baghdad. Islamic theology accords the pen a very significant function. Considering the background and theological implications of the term, this increased usage may be said to represent an escalation in the gradual unfolding of the claim advanced by Bahá’u’lláh.⁸ There are, however, occasional references to the pen in the writings of the Baghdad period, such as the *Jawáhiru’l-Asrár* (the Essences of Mysteries). These references hint at this unfolding of the Bahá’í kerygma and foreshadow the future employment of the pen motif.⁹

⁵ For other examples, see *Gleanings* 35 and *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 8:111.

⁶ There are a small number of cases where the appellation “Supreme Pen” is used with reference to others. A notable example occurs in the Tablet of Visitation for Husayn ibn-i-‘Alí (*Ziyárat Námiy-i-Haḍrat-i-Sayyed ush-Shuhadá*). In this tablet, the third Shíah Imám is also referred to as the “Most Great Tablet” (*Majmú’iy-i-Alwáh Mubárakiy-i-Haḍrat-i-Bahá’u’lláh* 209). This work is henceforth referred to as *Majmú’ih*.

⁷ The translations provided from the Islamic traditions and the Islamic mystical writings are by the authors.

⁸ There is a definite progression in the messianic and eschatological claims of Bahá’u’lláh throughout His ministry. This is confirmed in *Gleanings* 76-77. The Báb also advanced claims gradually and in conformity with the capacity of those who encountered the Revelation, as indicated by the very intriguing passage in the Epistle of the Seven Proofs (cf. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 119). In *Symbol and Secret* 276–78 Christopher Buck provides a concise treatment of this subject.

⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Athár-i-Qalam-i-A’lá* 3:25, 28, and 31.

Bahá'u'lláh uses this motif in various ways. An alternative usage of the pen occurs in the Tablet to Násiri'd-Dín Sháh (*Lawh-i-Sultán*), where a novel and challenging interpretation of Qur'án 96:4 is advanced:

Nay, by Him Who taught the Pen the eternal mysteries, save him whom the grace of the Almighty, the All-Powerful, hath strengthened. The Pen of the Most High addresseth Me saying: Fear not. (*Proclamation 57–58*)

Here Bahá'u'lláh produces a phrase very close to the well-known quranic verse.¹⁰ The implication is that Bahá'u'lláh is the recipient of communication from the pen. As will be demonstrated shortly, such an interpretation of Qur'án 96:4 is a novelty, at least in the context of classical orthodox commentaries. Later in the same tablet, Bahá'u'lláh hints that the “shrill of the Pen of Glory” (58) intends the author of the tablet. A question may be raised at this point: How is it that Bahá'u'lláh is intended by “the pen” at one time and at another is addressed by the pen? The quandary is simplified when it is understood that the pen is manifested in successive descending stages. The pen generates the tablet (recipient), and the tablet itself manifests generative forces and acts as a pen on another tablet (recipient). The cycle thus continues. As such, Bahá'u'lláh may be referred to as both the pen and the one addressed by the pen, without contradiction.

The Pen: The First Created Thing

Early in the *Súrat ul-Qalam* (125), Bahá'u'lláh establishes the precedence of the pen over letters and words (*hurúf' va 'l-kalimát*) and contingent beings (*mumkinát*). The creation of the pen is also stated to precede the foundation of the kingdom of names and attributes (*Malakút ul Asmá va 's-Sifát*) and the revelation of the preserved and glorious tablets (*Alwáh-u-'izz'in mahfuz'in*). The precedence of the pen over the letters and words may seem problematic. One notes, however, that in writing, the pen precedes the point, the point precedes the letter, and the letter precedes the word, and words make up that which is written. The pen is the intermediary between the source and that which is penned. It is also the first entity outside the body in the chain that leads to action. Such a chain can be envisioned as mind-hand-pen-tablet or mind-hand-pen-point-letter-word-book. The word *pen* assumes a prominent role in other traditions. The New Testament, for instance, maintains the preexistence of the Word (logos): “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1).¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh has established the precedence of the pen over words and letters in the *Súrat ul-Qalam*. In the Tablet of Wisdom, however, the word of God is said to precede and bring about all creation, including the active-recipient (pen-tablet) interactions.¹² The problem posed by these seemingly contradictory statements has been addressed by Momen through his suggestion that the pen and logos are synonymous (Momen, “Relativism” 191). He therefore distinguishes between the word as used in the *Súrat ul-Qalam* and the word of God (*Kalimát'u'lláh*). Alternatively, the authors

¹⁰ Qur'án 96:4 refers to God as “Him Who taught by the Pen.”

¹¹ The following utterance ascribed to Jesus has similar implications regarding preexistence: “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58).

¹² The Word of God is assigned a prominent function in Bahá'í theology (cf. *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 140–41). The “Word or God” is said to have created entities that communicate “the generating influence and . . . receive its impact.” The reference in that passage is to the four elements of fire, water, air, and earth as examined by Brown (“Origin of Matter” 15–44) and not all pen-tablet interactions.

maintain that the pen (*qalam*) itself precedes the word (*logos*) and begets the word. The *Súrat ul-Qalam* provides the textual justification for this thesis.¹³

The Islamic Background of the Pen

The chronologically earliest of quranic verses contain the source for the subject of this study.¹⁴ Islamic history records that Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, would regularly retire to the mountains near Mecca and spend long periods in prayer and meditation. One day, the Angel Gabriel approached the Prophet there with a sheet in his hand. The angel said to Muḥammad, “Recite.” Muḥammad responded in surprise, “But I cannot read.” The angel repeated the command three times, and his third command became the first revealed verses in the Qur’án:¹⁵

Recite thou, in the name of thy Lord who created;
Created man from clots of blood;—
Recite thou! For thy Lord is the most Beneficent,
Who Hath taught by the Pen;
Hath taught man what he knoweth not. (Qur’án 96:1–5)

The Qur’án mentions the pen on yet another occasion, namely in the quranic *Súrat ul-Qalam* (the Chapter of the Pen), also known as the *Súrat un-Nún* (the Chapter of the Letter N). The súrih begins as follows: “*Nún*. By the Pen and that which they inscribe” (Qur’án 68:1). Murata points out that “these short and rather enigmatic verses provided a great deal of food for meditation, especially since the Prophet himself added a certain amount of interesting clarification” (12).

The quranic commentators transmit most of the interesting clarifications in the form of traditions (*ḥadīth*) regarding *al-qalam*. Most commentators examine the pen as an instrument of writing, especially when commenting on Qur’án 96:1–5. However, all commentators favor more esoteric interpretations when elaborating on Qur’án 68:1. In the *Jámi’ ul-Bayán*, at-Tabarí (d. 310 A.H.) presents the following tradition while discussing Qur’án 68:1: Verily the first thing that God created was the pen (29:14). The contemporary Shiah commentator Tabatabai, elaborating on the same quranic verse, writes:

By *al-Qalam* (the Pen), *al-Qalam ul-A’lá* (the Supreme Pen) is intended, which is found in the *ḥadīth*: Verily, it is the first thing that God created.¹⁶

Virtually all quranic commentators have acknowledged variants of this Tradition. Ibn-Kathír (d. 774 A.H.) writes:

¹³ *Logos*, or the word of God, is identified within the realm of *láhút* (Momen, “Relativism” 191).

The *Súrat ul-Qalam* maintains that the Pen itself has begotten *láhút* (120). The realm of *láhút* is one of the five strata of being within which God may be found or is manifested.

¹⁴ For a linguistic analysis of the quranic background of *al-Qalam*, see Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* 160–61.

¹⁵ Ibn-Hishám, *Sírat un-Nabawiyya* 1:236.

¹⁶ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Tabatabai, *Al-Mizan fī Tafsír al-Kor’an* 20:324.

The Pen is that which God hath ordained predestination (*qadar*) by, when He revealed the measures of creatures, fifty-thousand years prior to the creation of heaven and earth. (*Tafsír* 7:79)¹⁷

This represents an attempt to explain the precedence of the pen. Here, Ibn-Kathír argues for a temporal priority and places the creation of the pen 50,000 years prior to the creation of “heaven and earth.” Most commentators, however, argue for an essential priority, along the lines suggested by the *Súrat ul-Qalam*.

These Islamic traditions establish the pen as the first creation. A particularly interesting set of Shiah traditions on this topic are summarized by Khomeini, quoting one of his masters. This quotation summarizes a number of traditions, from Shiah books of *ḥadīth* including *al-Káfi*, narrated on the authority of the Imams. The following summary is provided:

The realm of the letters of alphabet is a realm reflective of all the Worlds. Organized according to the letters of alphabet. Thus, *alif* (A) represents the Necessary Being, and *bá* (B) represents the First Creation that is the First Intellect, the First Light that is the Light of our Prophet (Peace be upon Him and His descendants) and therefore it is interpreted to be Bahá'u'lláh (the Glory of God).¹⁸

The passage does not mention the pen directly; however, the first intellect and the Muhammadan light are mentioned. The equality of the pen with the first intellect and the light of Muḥammad is clearly established in Islamic thought.¹⁹ For example, the great commentator Imám Fakhr ur-Rázi, in his *Tafsír ul-Kabír*, concludes the equality of *al-'aql* (intellect) and *al-qalam* (pen). He states that the two must be one and the same thing, otherwise a contradiction will result (30:78).

In the above *ḥadīth* summary, the imagery of Arabic letters of the alphabet identifies the first emanation of Goel with the light of Muḥammad (*núr-i-Muḥammadi*). The symbolism is remarkable, in that the letter *alif* (A) is paralleled with the necessary being (God), since it is dependent on none else (the reference is the shape of *alif*, that of a vertical straight line). Proceeding from the *alif* (A) is the letter *bá* (B), which represents *'aql* (intellect), *núr* (light), and *qalam* (pen). The above passage provides a study of the relation between the necessary being and the pen as exemplified in Islamic thought. The student of the Bahá'í Faith may also take note of the reference to “Bahá'u'lláh” in the text of the passage and of the implied relationship with the pen.

¹⁷ Predestination (*qadar*) is one of the seven stages of coming into being as detailed in Bábí-Bahá'í scripture. The relationship of these stages to the pen will be examined later.

¹⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini, *Tafsír Du'á Sahar* 31 (Commentary on the Dawn-Prayer for the Month of Ramadan). This is the earliest known work by the Ayatollah. It is a commentary on the prayer from which the names of the nineteen Bahá'í months are derived.

¹⁹ Both light and intellect occur in a variety of traditions that follow the same general format. For example, “The first thing that God created was My Light (*Núri*)” and the “first thing that God created was the intellect (*'aql*).” Cf. Amin. *Afkár-i-Falsafiy-i-Mullá Šadrá* (109, 182). This nomenclature is maintained in many schools. See, for example, Mullá Šadrá, *Al-Mabdá' wa'l-ma'ád* (The Origin and the Return) 124–26. Also, see Rafati (“The Development of *Šaykhí* Thought in Shí'í Islam” 147–48) for an example from the writings of *Šaykh* Aḥmad Aḥsá'í (d. 1825), the founder of Shaykhism.

The Pen as an Agent in Creation

The glossary in the highly acclaimed volumes entitled *Islamic Spirituality* defines *al-qalam* as the “symbol of the Divine Intellect and the instrument of God’s creative act” (Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* 422). This definition is supported in Bahá’í writings. In the *Súrat ul-Qalam*, the Pen is identified as the creator of all that exists. Bahá’u’lláh states that all contingent beings were created through a word manifested by the pen (*Súrat ul-Qalam* 126). The pen also proclaims that all were created by God’s command and that all observe God’s bidding (124).

As indicated by the above, a prominent role is accorded the pen in the process of creation. This creative function is also expressed in terms of a familiar Islamic motif in Bahá’í writings, that of the divine command: BE (*kun*).²⁰ The divine imperative is rooted in the Qur’án itself, “His command when He willeth aught, is but to say to it, ‘BE’, and IT IS” (Qur’án 36:82). The divine imperative BE is a theme frequently encountered in the Bahá’í writings. In the *Súrat ul-Qalam*, Bahá’u’lláh states that the divine command “BE” is uttered by the Pen (*Súrat ul-Qalam* 135).

Islamic traditions also acknowledge the role of the pen in the process of creation. There is a large body of traditions on this topic. The following is given by at-Tabari through a chain of transmitters leading to Ibn-‘Abbás:

The first thing created by God was the Pen. Then He made it to stream forth to that which would exist. Then He made steam to ascend from the waters, by which He created the heavens. Then He created ‘*nún*’, and expanded the earth on the back of the ‘*nún*’. Then He moved the earth and caused it to grow. (Tabarí, *Jámi’ ul-Bayán* 29:14)

The above tradition incorporates *al-qalam* and *nún* from Qur’án 68:1. In this context, the *nún* (the letter *N*) represents the second letter in the divine imperative of creation, that is, *kun* (composed of the letters *káf* and *nún*). Islamic traditions place the creation of *nún* after the creation of *al-qalam*. The following tradition cited by Ibn-Kathír (*Tafsír* 7:77), on the authority of Abí-Hurayrah, is representative:

Verily the first thing that God created is the Pen, then He created the *nún*, which is the ink-pot (*dawát*).

The primary reference here is to a literal definition of *nún*, which is an inkpot.²¹ A subtle reference here may also be to shape of the letter *nún*, which resembles an ink-pot. The pen must be dipped in the ink, as the ink allows for the writing potential of a pen to become actualized. The joining of the letters *B* (*kaf*) and *E* (*nun*) follows a similar pattern, as the interaction between *Qalam* and *dawat* is a necessary causal prerequisite, before anything can be written on the tablet (*lawh*).

It is the pen that inscribes upon the tablet.²² The creative interaction between the active force (the pen) and its recipient (the tablet) is reminiscent of the following passage from the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*:

²⁰ There are many references to this theme in Bahá’í writings. For an example involving the Pen, see the first paragraph of the Tablet of Visitation of Bahá’u’lláh (*Bahá’í Prayers* 230).

²¹ See Ghadimi, *An Arabic-Persian Dictionary of Selected Words* 1013.

²² See, for example: “Praise be to God Who hath made being to come forth from nothingness; graven upon the tablet of man the secrets of preexistence” (Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys* 1).

That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form thou seest today. The world of existence came into being through the beat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 140)²³

Bahá'í theology understands creation as occurring through emanation ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 203). In such an emanative scheme, the pen, which is the first creation, becomes the cause preceding contingent existence.²⁴ Therefore, one may say that the Pen contains the essence of all created things in itself, this in the form of primordial and undifferentiated matter.²⁵ Imám Fakhr ur-Rázi states that the pen is “the principal substance of all creation.” He also refers to the pen as “the essence (*jawhar*) which is the principal substance of all created things” (*Tafsír ul-Kabír* 30:78). This understanding of the pen is consistent with Bahá'í theology.

The Pen and the Godhead

The *Súrat ul-Qalam* presents a definite problem for the reader unfamiliar with Bahá'í theology. In the very opening of the *Súrat ul-Qalam*, the pen is commanded to testify that there is no God but I (124). The structure of this phrase closely parallels the Islamic kerygma, “There is no God, but Alláh” (*Lá illáha illal-láh*). The problem is that in light of the above material, why is the pen identified with the Godhead?

The relation between the pen and the Godhead will be further examined under the heading “Five Divine Presences.” The Bahá'í response, however, must begin with a survey of Bahá'í theology. Bahá'u'lláh has repeatedly made the dual claim of divinity on the one hand, and servitude and utter nothingness on the other. The following is illustrative:

When I contemplate, O my God, the relationship that bindeth me to Thee, I am moved to proclaim to all created things ‘verily I am God!’; and when I consider my own self, lo, I find it coarser than clay! (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 113)

This understanding is consistent within the Bahá'í theological framework, which maintains that God is infinitely transcendent:

To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. “No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile,

²³ The active force and its recipient will be examined later in the study of the Pen-Tablet relationship. Murata presents a study of the Pen-Tablet motifs in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabí in *The Tao Islam* 153–55. As will be illustrated shortly, her argument closely follows the implications of the above passage from the Tablet of Wisdom.

²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh places the Pen in the emanative scheme (*La'álí ul-Hikmat* 1:79). The implication is the equality of the Pen and the primal will. The scriptural evidence supporting this supposition will be examined later.

²⁵ For a detailed study on this topic, see Brown, “Origin of Matter.”

the All-Perceiving.” [Qur’án 6:103] No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 98)

Humankind’s direct access, by any means, to God is therefore absolutely closed, according to Bahá’u’lláh. The question then arises, how can a person, as a spiritual being, know of God? Bahá’í theology responds, as in the following passage, that God is revealed through the Manifestation:

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace, according to His saying: “His grace hath transcended all things; My grace hath encompassed them all” hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99)

Bahá’í theology maintains that God is transcendent over all attributes. In the *Lawh-i-Kanz*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms this transcendence while elaborating on a tradition by Imám ‘Alí (Ishráq Khávarí, *Rahiq-i-Makhtúm* 1:51). Therefore, all attributes fall short of the majesty and grandeur of God, as Bahá’ís profess during their daily obligatory prayer (*ṣalat*):

Too high art Thou for the praise of those who are nigh unto Thee to ascend unto the heaven of Thy nearness, or for the birds of the hearts of them who are devoted to Thee to attain to the door of Thy gate. I testify that Thou hast been sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names. No God is there but Thee, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious. (*Bahá’í Prayers* 12)

The Seven Stages of “Coming into Being” and the Pen²⁶

The writings of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh contain references to the seven stages of “coming into being” (*marátib-i-sab’ih-i-takwín*), involved in the formation of all things.²⁷ Every created thing has gone through these stages.²⁸ In a tablet (*Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 8:191–92) Bahá’u’lláh points out that nothing whatsoever may exist, whether in heaven or on earth, other than by going through the seven stages of will (*mashīyyat*), purpose (*irádih*), predestination (*qadar*), fate (*qadá*), permission (*imdá*), fixed-time (*ajal*), and book (*kitáb*).²⁹ The *marátib-i-sab’ih-i-takwín* (seven stages of “coming into being”) are part of the Shiah heritage of the Bahá’í Faith.³⁰

²⁶ The authors wish to acknowledge Keven Brown for his recommendations in translation of the seven stages of “coming into being.”

²⁷ Fádíl-i-Mázandarání, *Amr va Khalq* 1:99–104 and *Asrár ul-Athár* 3:120–22.

²⁸ The Báb uses a similar but different system when elaborating on stages or belief (*imán*) in a commentary on the second chapter of the Qur’án (*Tafsír-i-Súriy-i-Baqarah* 22).

²⁹ To illustrate the seven stages of “coming into being,” one may consider the construction of a building. This example is certainly an oversimplification of a complex theological subject and is only meant as an introduction to the subject. At first, one desires to build a building. Then steps are taken to facilitate the initiation of the work. These steps lead to a design. Eventually, the primary materials for the construction come together, and a building is actualized.

³⁰ In the *Uṣūl-Káfi*, one finds a number of *ḥadīth* variants (Kulayni, *Al-Káfi* 1:204–8), including the following:

The Bahá'í writings have systematically used these terms with precision and accuracy.³¹ Responding to a written query regarding *qaḍá* (fate), *qadar* (predestination) and *irádih* (purpose), 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a systematic and technical response:

Thou hadst asked about fate, predestination and will [*irádih*]. Fate and predestination consist in the necessary and indispensable relationships which exist in the realities of things. These relationships have been placed in the realities of existent beings through the power of creation and every incident is a consequence of the necessary relationship. For example, God hath created a relation between the sun and the terrestrial globe that the rays of the sun should shine and the soil should yield. These relationships constitute predestination, and the manifestation thereof in the plane of existence is fate. Will is that active force which controlleth these relationships and these incidents. (*Selections* 198)

The *Súrat ul-Qalam* links the pen with the seven stages of “coming into being,” as the purpose (*irádih*) of the supreme pen is stated to be involved in the process of creation (*Súrat ul-Qalam* 126).³² An interesting relationship exists between the pen and the seven stages of “coming into being.” In the progression from will (*mashīyyat*) to book (*kitáb*), there is a decrease in the pen (active) attributes and an increase in the tablet (recipient) attributes.³³ Will (*mashīyyat*) is all active (*fá'il*), while the book (*kitáb*) is all recipient (*munfa'al*). This progression is also suggested by the reference to *mashīyyat* as the Father of the World (*Abul'álam*) and the reference to *irádih* as the Mother of the Children of Adam (*Ummu baní Adam*) by Bahá'u'lláh (*La'álí ul-Hikmat* 2:275).

Ontologically, the primal will is equivalent to the pen.³⁴ *Irádih*, identified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as an “active force” in the above passage, is a pen with respect to descending stages. Predestination (*qadar*) itself exercises active control with respect to fate (*qaḍá*), as indicated in the above tablet

Nothing whatsoever may exist, whether on earth or in heaven, except with seven attributes: will, volition, predestination, fate, appearance, book and the end (*ajal*). Verily, he who thinks that he may contradict one (i.e., one of the seven) is an unbeliever. (Kulayni, *Al-Káfi* 1:206)

³¹ There have been very few studies devoted to this esoteric subject. Of interest are the series of recent articles in Persian by Mehran Jazbani in *Payám-i-Bahá'í*, vols. 202 and 203.

³² The “purpose” of the Supreme Pen is frequently associated with the creative function. Cf. *Ad'iyih-i-Haḍrat-i-Mahbúb* 14.

³³ The distinction between the active (*fá'il*) and recipient (*munfa'al*) entities is suggested by the *Lawḥ-i-Hikmat*. Murata, in her study of gender relationships in Islam, *The Tao of Islam*, argues for the following dynamics between the Pen and the Tablet:

The Pen writes out these divine words on the Tablet, thus manifesting the spiritual essences of all Things. . . . The Pen has two faces. With one face it looks at God, and with the other it looks at the Tablet and everything below it. In the same way, the Tablet has two faces. With one face it looks at the Pen, and with the other it looks at the worlds that lie below it. In relation to the Pen, the Tablet is receptive and thereby manifests differentiation. But in relation to the cosmos, the Tablet is active and manifests governing control. It becomes a yang reality (13).

Her discourse on the Pen-Tablet interaction has important implications that will be examined later. Also important is the “differentiation” that the receptive (tablet) reality demonstrates. Bahá'u'lláh also emphasizes *taqyid* (differentiation or substantiation) in the Tablet to Varqá (*Lawḥ-i-Varqá*), where *Jabarút* is said to be the first descending realm in which differentiation occurs.

³⁴ It was demonstrated earlier that the Pen is the first created thing. Elsewhere, the Primal Will (*mashīyyat ul-Awalliyyah*) is considered to be the first created thing (Bahá'u'lláh, *Majmú'ih* 144). Both are noted to give rise to all that exists. One can therefore conclude their equality. Momen also accepts the equality of the Pen and the Primal Will (“Relativism” 191). See also Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 98.

by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and therefore is a pen.³⁵ Predestination (*qadar*) is also determined by the pen and therefore functions as a recipient as well. An example occurs in the Fire Tablet: “Where is the compelling power of Thine ordaining pen (*Qalam-i-taqdir-i-ka*), O Conqueror of the worlds?” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 214). Islamic and Bahá’í sources are in agreement, as a great number of Islamic sources confirm this relationship between predestination and the Pen. The following tradition by at-Tabarí is representative:

The first thing which God created is the Pen. Then He said (to the Pen), “Write!” The Pen said, “what shall I write?” He said, “inscribe predestination (*qadar*).” (*Jámi’ ul-Bayán* 29:15)

Based on the above evidence, one can conclude that, ontologically, the progression from will to book represents successive pen-tablet (active-recipient) interactions. The implications of such interactions in the creative schema is clear—that God is manifested in the world through successive pen-tablet interactions. Restated, the pen-tablet motif occurs in successive stages. As the pen undergoes successive pen-tablet interactions, the creative schema progresses from will to book, generating all created things.

The Pen and the Five Divine Presences

One of the central features of Islamic mysticism and theosophy, especially of the Ibn al-‘Arabí³⁶ school, is the doctrine of *ḥaḍarát ill áhhiyya khams* (the five divine presences). These would be the “five domains in which God is to be ‘found’, or God’s presence is to be perceived” (Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* 5). Ibn al-‘Arabí describes the “self-manifesting activity of the Absolute” in the form of four categories of “emanation” (*tajallí*)³⁷ resulting in the five planes of being. The commentators and expounders of Ibn al-‘Arabí have developed somewhat different formulations of these presences.³⁸ The classification by al-Makkí (d. 386) is considered to be the most systematic. He describes *háhút*, *láhút*, *jabarút*, *malakút*, and *násút* in a descending order (Glasse, *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* 128). This classification is the one followed most closely in the Bahá’í writings.³⁹

³⁵ The progression from “will” to “book” may be better explained by means of an example from Islamic history. One day Muḥammad passed under a wall which was about to fall down. A bystander gave Muḥammad a warning about the wall and then asked, “Do you flee from the fate (*qaḍá*) of God?” The Prophet responded by saying, “I flee from the fate (*qaḍá*) to predestination (*qadar*)” (Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* 176–77). Muḥammad escapes from the falling down of the wall as decreed by fate (*qaḍá*) by escaping to the less actualized (substantialized) predestination (*qadar*). As one moves from “will” to “book,” events become more actual and less potential.

³⁶ For a concise and informative study of the life and doctrine of Ibn al-‘Arabí, see Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*. For a brief yet remarkable examination of the teachings of this prolific and highly influential mystic in light of the Bahá’í Faith, see the study by Vahid Rafatí in the *Mahbúb-i-‘Alam* (The Beloved of the Worlds). Ibn al-‘Arabí is known as *ash-Shaykh* ul-Akbar (the Great Master) in Sufi literature.

³⁷ *Tajallí* literally indicates “disclosing something hidden behind a veil” (Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* 20). The implication is that the Absolute is hidden within its “Absoluteness” and can only be known through its self-manifesting activity. The self-manifesting activity of the Absolute generates all planes of existence.

³⁸ A brief summary of these Presences may be found in Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 270. The definitive treatment of the various developments in the school of Ibn al-‘Arabí is Chittick, “The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qunawí to al-Qaysarí” 106–28.

³⁹ The five presences or planes of being have parallels in other mystical and philosophical systems. Lao-Tsu, for example, divides the multistratified structure of reality into five strata: Mystery of Mysteries, Non-being (Namelessness), Being, and the Ten Thousand Things (Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* 481).

The object of this study is linked to this doctrine. In the *Súrat ul-Qalam*, the pen is said to be the light that created the Heavenly Court (*láhút*) and the temples of the dwellers of the All-Highest Dominion (*jabarút*), and their essences (*Súrat ul-Qalam* 129).

Numerous references to these realms may be found in Bahá'í writings. The most widely available systematic explication occurs in the Tablet of All Food (*Lawḥ-i-Kullu 'l-Ta 'ám*). This article does not allow for a detailed survey of these realms. There have been a number of surveys regarding these realms.⁴⁰

The next portion of this study aims to examine this relationship. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh describes a gradation of colors while elaborating on these divine presences, which will be explored later in light of the Bábí-Bahá'í concept of the seven stages of “coming into being.”

A. *Násút* (The Corporeal World)

Násút is the physical realm. *Násút* itself may be further subdivided into the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms;⁴¹ included also is the corporeal aspect of human life. The pen is involved in both the general and specific theophanies. God is manifested in *násút* through a universal revelation (*tajalliy-i- 'ám*) or general theophany (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 139–40). The following passage reiterates the same concept:

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a min-or of His own Self. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 65)

According to this passage, every created thing may be considered to be a manifestation of God, as all things come to exist through this general theophany. In this context, Bahá'u'lláh states that if one listened to objects with innate hearing (*bi sam 'il-fitrah*), one could hear from every atom that which the ears of the Interlocutor (Moses) heard (*La 'alí ul-Hikmat* 1:46).⁴²

God is revealed to humankind in a secondary revelation (*tajalliy-i-thání*) as well, through God's Manifestations (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 141–42). This specific theophany in the Bahá'í Revelation also occurs through the Supreme Pen (*al-Qalam ul-A 'lá*), which interacts with the five divine presences. In *násút*, this Manifestation is known as “the Perfect Man” (Nasr, *Islamic Mysticism: Manifestations* 79).⁴³ The corporeal body of the Supreme Pen exists within *násút* as well. This may be gleaned from Bahá'í writings, including the following passage where various realms address *násút* as follows:

This is the Day whereon the unseen world [*láhút*] crieth out: “Great is thy blessedness, O earth [*násút*], for thou hast been made the foot-stool of thy God, and been chosen as the seat of His mighty throne.” The realm of glory [*jabarút*] exclaimeth: “Would that

⁴⁰ Cf. Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 1:58–59; Momen, “Relativism” 189–96.

⁴¹ This is suggested by Momen in “Relativism” 192.

⁴² Hájí Mullá Hadi Sabziwari (d.1878) has a verse of poetry that is very similar to this teaching of Bahá'u'lláh. It must be noted that he was strongly rebuked by Bahá'u'lláh for his failure to recognize that same voice when it came from the human temple, i.e., from Bahá'u'lláh. Cf. Vahid Rafati, in vol. 2 of the collected works of Dr. A. M. Davudí, *Ulúhiyyat va Mazhariyat* 163–64.

⁴³ Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 174.

my life could be sacrificed for thee, for He Who is the Beloved of the All-Merciful hath established His sovereignty upon thee. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 30)

This realm is described as the “crimson land.” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that crimson is a reference to martyrdom (*shahádah*), which occurs in *násút* (*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 2:21, 48).

B. Malakút (The Kingdom)

The first in the ascending hierarchy of noncorporeal realms, *malakút* is frequently translated and referred to as the “angelic realm” or the “psychic realm” in Islamic mysticism. In the tablet to Varqa (*Lawḥ-i-Varqá*), Bahá'u'lláh provides two definitions for *malakút*.⁴⁴ The first definition is the “Most Great Beauty” (*Manẓar-i-Akbar*), a reference to Bahá'u'lláh. The second definition states that *malakút* contains the similitude (*mithál*) of all that is in heaven and on earth. *Malakút* is therefore located intermediate to the *jabarút* and *násút*. In the same tablet, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that the latent potentialities of *jabarút* are manifested within *malakút*. In the Tablet of All Food, Bahá'u'lláh uses a well-known quranic verse (24:37) to describe the dwellers in the *malakút*. He states that *malakút* is the realm in which reside souls whom neither trade nor transactions have kept from the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. This seems to be the farthest realm to which humankind has access in its spiritual quest. This realm has been divided into *a'lá* (higher) and *asfal* (lower) in some schools (*Sharḥ-i-Manẓúmih-i-Hikmat* 442). This distinction is not readily maintained in Bahá'í scripture. This realm is designated as the land of green (*arḍ ul-khadrá*) in the Tablet of All Food.

The pen exists within and interacts with the *malakút*. This interaction takes different forms. In an explication of the Fifth Tablet of Paradise, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá states that the Supreme Pen inscribes onto the preserved tablet (*lawḥ-i-mahfúz*) in the *malakút* (*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 2:56). As such, the pen is the source of guidance for *malakút*. Bahá'u'lláh is referred to as the preserved tablet (*lawḥ-i-mahfúz*) and the most great book (*kitáb ul-a'zam*) in Bahá'í writings.⁴⁵ One may ask how the pen and the tablet can coexist in the same realm. A possible solution to this problem, based on the principle of interaction between the active force and its recipient underlying creation, as established in the Tablet of Wisdom, was presented earlier. In short, the pen-tablet relation occurs in another tablet. The cycle is then repeated. Therefore, the Manifestation may claim to be the pen or the tablet (or book) in any descending realm. Similarly, Bahá'í theology can maintain that the Manifestation is both the pen *and* the one spoken to by the pen, without a contradiction.

Table 1 *Corresponding Relationship between the Stages of “Coming into Being” and the Five Divine Presences*

Stage of “Coming into Being”	Color	Divine Presence	Pen-Tablet Relationship
—	—	<i>Háhút</i>	Gives rise to the Pen
Will (<i>mashíyyat</i>)	White	<i>Lahút</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pen to <i>jabarút</i> • Tablet in relation to the Pen
Purpose (<i>irádih</i>)	Yellow	<i>Jabarút</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pen to <i>malakút</i> • Tablet in relation to <i>lahút</i>

⁴⁴ Cf. Ishráq Khávarí, *Rahíq-i-Makhtúm* 2:1083. An English translation of a portion of this tablet is provided by Momen, “Relativism” 192.

⁴⁵ For an example, see *La'dlf ul-Hikmat* 2:147.

Predestination (<i>qadar</i>)	Green	<i>Malakút</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pen to <i>násút</i> • Tablet in relation to <i>jabarút</i>
Fate (<i>qaḍá</i>)	Crimson	<i>Násút</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tablet in relation to <i>malakút</i> • Many Pen forces act within

Conclusion

Through an analysis of a lesser-known Bahá'í document, the Chapter of the Pen (*Súrat ul-Qalam*), this article examined some salient features of a significant theological motif frequently used by Bahá'u'lláh. The pen-tablet relation is a critical and key motif in the study of Bahá'í scripture. The deliberate use of the pen motif represented an escalation in the gradual unfolding of the claims of Bahá'u'lláh. An approximate dating for the revelation of the *Súrat ul-Qalam*, which supports the above progression, was provided. The Islamic background of the pen was extensively examined through a study of primary Islamic sources. An appreciation of this Islamic background is indispensable to a deeper understanding of the pen motif and Bahá'í scripture. The pen is a metaphor for the creative function of the Manifestation of God.

The pen was examined in the context of the little-studied seven stages of “coming into being” and the five divine presences. A correlation between the pen-tablet motif, the five divine presences, and the seven stages of “coming into being” was suggested, based on the active-recipient dynamics presented in the Tablet of Wisdom, and outlined in Table 1. It follows that the creation of the four descending divine presences occur through successive pen-tablet interactions as the pen undergoes the descending progression of the stages of “coming into being.” It was noted that the Tablet of All Food confirms an already established color correlation between the presences and the stages of “coming into being.” The significance of this finding has not been fully appreciated and further investigation is required.

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