

A STUDY OF THE MEANING OF THE WORD “AL-AMR” IN THE QUR’ÁN AND IN THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

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Summary: The word “amr” in Persian or “al-amr” in Arabic has a range of meaning that covers several words in English. In two instances the precise meaning has become a source of controversy and it is therefore necessary to examine this matter more carefully. In this paper, I will look in detail at the use of the word in the Qur’án in order to delineate the semantic range for this word in the Qur’án. This is in order to examine the assertion by Bahá’í apologists that the term “al-amr” in Qur’án 32:5 (“He establishes His Decree—al-amr—from heaven to earth and it will return to Him in a Day, the length of which is one thousand years in your reckoning”) refers to the appearance of a new religion one thousand years after the Prophet Muḥammad. I will also examine the semantic range of the occurrence of this word in the early writings of Bahá’u’lláh in order to assess the assertion of Prof. E.G. Browne that the phrase “maṣdar-i-amr” which appears in the Kitáb-i-Íqán is an acknowledgement by Bahá’u’lláh of the leadership of Azal at the time of the revelation of the Íqán in about 1861–62.

The purpose of this paper is to study the semantic range of the word al-Amr in two contexts: the Qur’án and the early writings of Bahá’u’lláh during the Baghdad period. The reason for this study is because this word has become controversial with respect to two particular passages, one occurring in the Qur’án and one in Bahá’u’lláh’s Kitáb-i-Íqán.

The first passage which we shall consider in this paper involves the fifth verse of the Suráh al-Sajdah in the Qur’án. In order not to prejudge the issue of the exact meaning of the word al-amr in this setting, I will here give Yusuf Ali’s translation but inserting the transliteration of al-amr:

He establishes al-amr from heaven to earth and it will return to Him in a Day, the length of which is one thousand years in your reckoning (32:5)

This verse is involved in a controversy in relation to the polemics between Islam and the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’ís consider that the verse refers to the appearance of a new revelation from God one thousand years after the coming of Muḥammad. Because of the Muslim understanding of the concept of Muḥammad being the ‘Seal of the Prophets,’ Muslims interpret this verse without any implication of the coming of a further revelation from God.

The second passage which has involved controversy over the meaning of the word al-amr, is a statement made by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, again merely transliterating al-amr at the point where it occurs in Shoghi Effendi’s translation:

By the righteousness of God! Our withdrawal contemplated no return, and Our separation hoped for no reunion. The one object of Our retirement was to avoid becoming a subject of discord among the faithful, a source of disturbance unto Our companions, the means of injury to any soul, or the cause of sorrow to any heart. Beyond these, We cherished no other intention, and apart from them, We had no end in view. And yet, each person schemed after his own desire, and pursued his own idle fancy, until the hour when, from the Source of al-amr, there came the summons bidding Us return whence We came. Surrendering Our will to His, We submitted to His injunction. (Bahá’u’lláh: *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 251)

This passage, in which Bahá’u’lláh relates the circumstances surrounding his return to Baghdad after his sojourn in Sulaymáníyyih, is involved in a controversy in relation to the polemics between Bahá’ís and the

supporters of Mírzá Yaḥyá Azal. Supporters of Azal's position, such as E.G. Browne, have translated this passage as referring to a summons by Mírzá Yaḥyá instructing Bahá'u'lláh to return to Baghdad.

His reason for altering this resolution was that 'the order to return emanated from the source of command', which clearly shows us that at this date (A.D. 1861-62) Behá still recognized Ezel as his chief, and submitted to his authority, at least nominally.¹

Browne thus used this passage as evidence that at the time of the composition of the Íqán in 1861-2, Bahá'u'lláh still acknowledged the leadership of Azal. Bahá'ís maintain that the 'source of command' (maṣḍar-i amr) which Browne considers to be Azal, in fact refers to God. In other words that it was on God's instructions that Bahá'u'lláh returned to Baghdad. Shoghi Effendi translates 'maṣḍar-i amr' as 'Mystic Source,'

A. Al-Amr in the Qur'án

Returning now to the first instance that we are examining in this paper, we must try to establish the meaning of the word al-amr in this verse of the Qur'án. We have various approaches to this question that we can utilize.

1. Dictionary definitions. In the first place it is useful to examine what is stated in the standard dictionaries. In Edward Lane's *Lexicon of the Arabic Language*, there are two series of meaning given for amr:

A. 'a command; an order; a bidding; an injunction; a decree; an ordinance; a prescript' with the plural of awámir and the antonym of nahy (prohibition).

B. 'a thing; an affair; a business; a matter; a concern; a state, of a person or thing, or of persons or things or affairs or circumstances; a condition; a case; an accident; an event' with synonyms of shan, ḥál, halah, ḥáḍithah, or fi'l and a plural of umúr.

In examining this Qur'anic verse in the light of Lane's definition of amr, there are two considerations. The first is: which meaning goes best with the preceding word "yudabbiru"? And the second is: which meaning goes best with the following phrase which refers to al-amr descending from heaven to earth and then ascending again. With regard to the first question, yudabbiru, which is the third person of the present/future tense of the II form verb of the root d-b-r, can be translated by a wide range of English words: to make arrangements, prepare plans, plan, organize, devise, arrange, bring about, contrive, direct, conduct, manage, run, regulate. It would appear that meanings in either range A or B above would fit with yudabbiru, although range B would be somewhat better. With regard to the second question, however, it is clear that meanings in range A fit much better: the picture of God sending down commands, orders, injunctions, decrees or ordinances from heaven to earth is one that is common to all of the religions of the Abrahamic line.

2. Qur'anic Commentary. It is also usual in trying to ascertain the meaning of a passage in the Qur'án to consult the various standard commentaries on the Qur'án. Most of the commentaries do not appear to give a direct opinion on the meaning of the word 'amr'. One exception is al-Kashshaf of az-Zamakhsharí (d.1144) which comments thus on this verse:

'Al-amr'—He causes the acts of obedience and pious deeds which are ordained (al-ma'múr bihi min at-tá'át wa'l-ámál as-ṣálihah) to be sent down in an organized manner (mudabbiran) 'from the heavens to the earth.' Then they are not acted upon and there does not arise to Him those things that are ordained in a pure form as He desires and wishes except in a very lengthy period of time on account of the fewness of numbers of the workers of God and of the paucity of pious souls among His servants. And the fewness of deeds that ascend is because only righteous deeds are described as ascending and the evidence for this is His words concerning its effect: 'little thanks do ye give' (23:78) or He establishes the amr of all of the world from heaven to earth for every day of the days of God; and this is one thousand years, just as He has said: 'Verily a day with your Lord is as one thousand years as you reckon.

'Then it will return to Him'—that is to say whatever is raised up of this amr and enters into being will go to Him and will be confirmed with Him and will be written down in the scrolls

of His angels every moment of this period of time until this period reaches its end. Then He will arrange also the last Day and so on until the [Last] Hour arises. And it is said that the revelation (al-wahy) is sent down with Gabriel (upon him be peace) from the heaven to the earth and then whatever acceptance or rejection of the revelation there was returns to Him with Gabriel. This occurs in a time that is in reality one thousand years because the distance of travel is one thousand years in descent and ascent inasmuch as the distance between heaven and earth is a journey of five hundred years and it becomes a day of your days on account of the speed of Gabriel, for he cuts through a journey of one thousand years in one day. And it is said: He establishes the amr of the world from the heaven to the earth until the [Last] Hour arises, then all of this amr will return to Him, that is to say it will go to Him in order that He may judge it.

‘In a day, the length [miqdar, amount] of which is one thousand years’—and this is the Day of Resurrection (yawm al-qiyámah)²

From this lengthy extract from az-Zamakhsharí, the following interpretations may be derived. Zamakhsharí evidently interprets al-amr as the decree of God to human beings concerning what are correct and righteous actions that should be performed in obedience to God (at-ṭá‘át wa’l-ámál as-ṣálihah). These are carried down by Gabriel and it appears from this passage that az-Zamakhsharí identifies what is sent down with al-wahy, the revelation that is sent down to the Messengers of God. This would be logical since the revelation of God’s decrees concerning correct and righteous actions was the very purpose of the coming of the Messengers of God, such as the Prophet Muḥammad. And of course the revelation to Muḥammad was carried by the angel Gabriel. Lastly, az-Zamakhsharí describes this process as continuing until the Last Hour and he identifies the ‘day’ mentioned in this verse with the Day of Resurrection.

Al-Bayḍáwí (d. 1291) repeats much of az-Zamakhsharí, almost word for word in places. He does not give a specific interpretation of the word amr, but rather explains the first part of this verse as meaning: ‘He organizes the amr of the world with heavenly instruments such as the angels and others, their effects going down to the earth.’³ Later in explaining the second half of the verse, al-Bayḍáwí repeats az-Zamakhsharí’s phrase ‘the acts of obedience which are ordained (al-ma’múr bihi min at-ṭá‘át)’ thus implicitly agreeing with the latter’s gloss on al-amr. Al-Bayḍáwí repeats the identification of what is sent down as being revelation (al-wahy) and also the assertion that this process will go on until the Last Hour and will end when it returns to Him on the Day of Resurrection. Thus al-Bayḍáwí concurs in all of the main points that we have identified above in az-Zamakhsharí’s commentary.

Other authors of commentaries on the Qur’án are not so helpful. Many of them seem to give most of their attention in commenting on this verse to statements about how long angels take in descending from heaven to earth. Thus for example Ibn Kathír (d. 1372):

‘He establishes His Decree (al-amr) from heaven to earth and it will return to Him’ that is to say, his amr comes down from the highest part of heaven to the furthest districts of the seventh earth, as He (exalted be He) has said: ‘Allah is He Who created seven Firmaments and of the earth a similar number. Through the midst of them (all) descends His Command, (65:12)’ And deeds rise up to their account books (i.e. each person’s actions rise to heaven where they are entered into one’s heavenly account), which is above the sky of the world, the distance between them and the earth being a journey of five hundred years and the thickness of heaven is five hundred years...⁴

In general, however, it is not useful to turn to the later commentators for interpretations of this verse in the context of our investigation. This is because once the doctrine of Muḥammad being the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ became a firm doctrine in Islam at about the beginning of the fourth Islamic century (late tenth century AD),⁵ all interpretations of verses such as this one were constrained by this doctrine and it became increasingly difficult to offer any interpretations that that could be seen as casting doubt on this doctrine. Since the Bahá’í interpretation of this verse does, as we shall see later, cast doubt on the traditional Muslim interpretation of the concept of the ‘Seal of the Prophets,’ we cannot expect to find support for it in the commentaries, except perhaps in the very earliest ones. Unfortunately, commentary

as a literary form in Islam arrived relatively late and so there is little commentary material available from the earliest period, before the concept of the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ became a firm doctrine in Islam.

3. Interpreting the Qur’án by means of the Qur’án. While the information that the dictionaries and commentaries give is useful, for our purposes, it is probably better to adopt the classical Islamic approach of ‘tafsír al-Qur’án bi’l-Qur’án’—interpreting the Qur’án by means of the Qur’án. This is not only because of the constraints imposed upon interpretation by later doctrine as mentioned above, but also because the Qur’án itself is almost the only document that we can reliably state stems from this period. And so if we want to know what a word meant at the time of the revelation of the Qur’án then really it is only the Qur’án that can act as documentary evidence.⁶

The word al-amr is extensively used in the Qur’án and has a range of meanings. There are 153 occurrences of the word al-amr alone and in combination with various pronouns and 13 occurrences of the plural, al-umúr, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Occurrences of the Noun “al-Amr” in the Qur’án

Amr/al-amr	72
amran	17
amrukum	3
amruná	16
amruhu	22
amruhá	3
amruhum	12
amrí	8
TOTAL	153
al-umúr	13

Source: This table shows all occurrences of the noun al-amr in its various cases as well as with various pronominal suffixes according to: Muḥammad Fu’ád ‘Abd al-Báqí, Mu’ajam al-Mufaris li-Alfáz al-Qurán al-Karím, Cairo, 1364. Although the words are given above in nominative form, they include occurrences of other cases.

An analysis of these 153 references to the word amr shows that they may be divided into the two different meanings given by Lane and also according to whether the word amr relates in some way to God or not. Such an analysis gives the following result (excluding for the time being verse 32:5):

**Table 2: Analysing al-amr in the Qur’án
in Relation to its Meaning and Context**

	Related to God	Not related to God
Meaning A: command, decree, order	66	10
Meaning B: affair, state, event, matter	17	43
Could mean either A or B		16
Verse 32:5 itself		1
Total		153

J.M.S. Baljon has written a paper analyzing the appearance of the word *amr* in the Qur’án.⁷ Baljon’s main intention in this paper is to discredit the earlier notion that the word *amr* was equivalent to the Christian *logos* concept (a Divine hypostasis). Nevertheless, Baljon makes a few points that are of interest to our discussion. He discerns the word *amr* in the Qur’án as meaning several stages in the process whereby God interacts with the world. In the first place, it relates to God’s preparation or organization of the His decrees (*yudabbiru ‘l-amr*); then He determines (*yaqđiya*, 19:35, 39) the *amr*; then He sends it down to earth (*yatanazzalu*, 65:12). But the descent of *al-amr* can be either a positive or a negative factor. For those who have disobeyed God, such as the people of Lot, it is a fearful punishment (15:66); while for those who are God-fearing, *al-amr* is an easy matter (65:4).⁸ It should be noted that the stage of God’s preparation of His decree has been inserted by Baljon in order to account for the very verse that we are considering here (Qur’án 32:5). Evidently, the statement that *al-amr* returns to God from earth puzzled Baljon and so in order to account for it, he postulated an initial stage when the decree is sent to earth as an “inquiry of the state of affairs in the world”; it then returns to God who determines the decree and it is then sent down a second time as a decree to be executed. It can be seen that in the interpretation of this verse given below, there is no need to postulate this initial stage of preparation because all references to the descent of *al-amr* refer to the same phenomenon and the returning of it is the completion of the cycle which is, in turn, the starting point for the next cycle. This would eliminate the need to postulate that God’s knowledge is in some way deficient and so an initial enquiry into the state of the world is necessary. In those contexts where *amr* is attributed to or effected by humans, Baljon finds the following meanings: command (20:65, 92, 94), intentions (10:72), deeds or conduct (59:15, 65:9), and religion or rites (23:55, 22:66).⁹

In trying to understand the meaning of the verse in question (Qur’án 32:5), we can try to find verses in the Qur’án that most closely parallel this verse in structure and content. Thus we can see from the verse and its context that the whole passage is referring to Divine actions. We can therefore eliminate from our enquiry all of those 53 verses in Table 2 where the occurrence of the word *amr* is not related to God. Examining the remaining 99 verses, we can find several where there are structural and content similarities to this verse.

a. ‘He establishes His Decree.’ The verse that we are examining (Qur’án 33:5) begins with the phrase *yudabbiru ‘l-amr*. This phrase occurs in several other places in the Qur’án.

10:3. Verily your Lord is Allah Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days and is firmly established on the Throne (of authority) regulating and governing all things (*yudabbiru ‘l-amr*). No intercessor (can plead with Him) except after His leave (hath been obtained). This is Allah your Lord; Him....

10:31. Say: “Who is it that sustains you (in life) from the sky and from the earth? Or who is it that has power over hearing and sight? And who is it that brings out the living from the dead and the dead from the living? And who is it that rules and regulates all affairs (*yudabbiru ‘l-amr*)?” They will soon say “Allah.” Say “Will ye not then show piety (to Him)?”

13:2. Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; is firmly established on the throne (of authority); He has subjected the sun and the moon (to His law)! each one runs (its course) for a term appointed. He doth regulate affairs (*yudabbiru ‘l-amr*) explaining the Signs in detail that ye may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord.

Here the evident meaning is God regulating and ordering the affairs of heaven and earth. Since, however, God does this regulating through the decrees that He issues, it is difficult to decide whether *al-amr* here should be considered in its A or B range of meanings.

b. ‘His Decree from heaven to earth.’ Looking at the next part of Qur’án 32:5, it speaks of *al-amr* as being something that comes down from God. If we look in the Qur’án for other occasions in which we find *al-amr* coming down from God, we find:

16:2. He doth send down His angels with inspiration of His Command to (*yunazzila al-malá’ikah bi’r-rúh min amr-hi ‘alá*) such of His servants as He pleaseth (saying): “Warn (Man) that there is no god but I: so do your duty unto Me.”

44:3-5: We sent it down (*anzalná*) during a blessed night: for We (ever) wish to warn (against

Evil). In that (night) is made distinct every affair of wisdom (amrin hakímin). By a command (amran) from Our presence. For We (ever) send (revelations, mursilín).

65:12. Allah is He Who created seven Firmaments and of the earth a similar number. Through the midst of them (all) descends His Command (yatanazzalu 'l-amr bayna -hunna): that ye may know that Allah has power over all things and that Allah comprehends all things in (His) Knowledge.

The above verses which are the closest to Qur'án 32:5 in form and content give a clear indication of the probable meaning al-amr of 32:5. The use of verbs from the root n-z-l indicates that the process of revelation is involved, since this is also the verbal form that is used in connection with the coming down of verses of the Qur'án (2:23, 97, 176; 3:3, 93; 4:136, 140, etc). This is made clearest in the first of the above verses (16:2), where it is indicated that al-amr comes down to one of God's servants with the instruction to warn humanity (andhiru). This function of being a warner is one that is tied in the Qur'án to that of being a Messenger of God (see 5:19, 7:184, 188, 27:92, 29:50, 33:45, 34:44, 35:24, etc.). In the second example above (44:3-5), al-amr is clearly tied to the revelation of the Qur'án. Thus the coming down of al-amr in 33:5 appears from these parallel verses to be intimately connected with the coming down of revelation upon a Messenger of God. It was presumably such considerations that caused az-Zamakhsharí, in the passage quoted above, to connect al-amr with 'the revelation (al-wahy)' that 'is sent down with Gabriel (upon him be peace) from the heaven to the earth'. Further evidence for this is the following verses, the first of which connects al-amr to the process of revelation (al-wahy, here in the verbal form awḥayná) and second, more specifically links al-amr with the revelation to Moses on the west side of Mount Sinai:

42:52. And thus have We by Our command sent inspiration to thee (awḥay-ná ilay-ka ruḥan min amri-ná): thou knowest not (before) what was Revelation and what was Faith; but We have made the (Qur'án) a Light where with We guide such of Our servants as We will; and verily thou dost guide (men) to the Straight Way

28:44. Thou wast not on the Western Side when We decreed the commission to Moses (qaḍayná ilá Músá al-amr) nor wast thou a witness (of those events).

Al-amr may thus be likened to the commission which a king or government gives to a governor or an army officer; it is this commission which gives that person his authority and makes his authority the equivalent of the giver of the commission. Similar, the giving by God of al-amr to the Messenger of God gives him the authority of God.

There is an exact parallel to verse 16:2, analyzed above, in the following verse from the Qur'án in which al-amr is described as coming from God and where the context clearly denotes a descent. Here again this process of the descent of al-amr is linked to the function of warning (yundhiru), which as indicated above is part of the function of the Messenger of God:

40:15. Raised high above ranks (or degrees) (He is) the Lord of the Throne (of authority): by his command doth He send the spirit (of inspiration) to (yulqí ar-rúḥ min amri-hi 'alá) any of His servants He pleases that it may warn (men, yundhiru) of the Day of Mutual Meeting (yawm at-taláq)

Finally, we can look at a large number of other occasions in the Qur'án where al-amr is stated to have come from God to humanity. In many of these instances, the context is that of God having sent a Messenger of God as a warner to humanity. Humankind ignores the warning and al-amr issues from God in the form of a severe penalty. Here, al-amr can be translated as the 'decree' or 'command' of God. The whole of the Súrah of Húd in the Qur'án consists of instance after instance of this usage. In almost every case the word al-amr is used in conjunction with the verb já'a.- al-amr came or issued forth. The first instance cited is that of Noah who is described as being sent as a warner (nadhírun) to his people. They refused to believe in Noah and his message, nor did they help him with his Ark, until:

11:40. At length behold! there came Our Command (já'a amru-ná) and the fountains of the earth gushed forth!

11:43. The son replied: “I will be take myself to some mountain: it will save me from the water.” Noah said: “This day nothing can save from the Command of Allah (amri Alláh) any but those on whom He hath mercy!” and the waves came between them and the son was among those overwhelmed in the Flood.

The destruction continued until the waters abated and al-amr was ended:

11:44. When the word went forth: “O earth! swallow up thy water and O sky! withhold (thy rain!)” and the water abated and the matter (al-amr) was ended. The Ark rested on Mount Judi and the word went forth: “Away with those who do wrong!”

Similarly, Húd was sent to the people of ‘Ád and ‘sálih was sent to the people of Thamúd to warn them, but they ignored them and then:

11:58. So when Our decree issued (já‘ amru-ná) We saved Húd and those who believed with him by (special) Grace from Ourselves: We saved them from a severe Penalty.

11:66. When Our Decree (já‘ amru-ná) issued We saved Saleh and those who believed with him by (special) Grace from Ourselves and from the Ignominy of that Day. For thy Lord He is the Strong One and Able to enforce His Will.

Next mention is made of Abraham. Abraham pleads with God against the penalty that was to be imposed upon the people of Lot:

11:76. O Abraham! seek not this. The decree of thy Lord hath gone forth (já‘ amru Rabbi-ka): for them there cometh a Penalty that cannot be turned back!

11:82. When Our decree issued (já‘ amru-ná) We turned (the cities) upside down and rained down on them brimstones hard as baked clay spread layer on layer...

The Súrah of Húd then reviews the fate of the people of Madyán, to whom Shu‘ayb was sent:

11:94. When Our decree issued (já‘ amru-ná) We saved Shuaib and those who believed with him by (special) Mercy from Ourselves: but the (mighty) Blast did seize the wrongdoers and they lay prostrate in their homes by the morning...

In reviewing all of these cases, the text of the Súrah of Húd states:

11:101. It was not We that wronged them: they wronged their own souls: the deities other than Allah whom they invoked profited them no whit when there issued the decree of thy Lord (já‘ amra Rabbi-ka): nor did they add aught (to their lot) but perdition!

Other examples of this usage of al-amr are:

16:33. Do the (ungodly) wait until the angels come to them or there comes the Command of thy Lord (for their doom, aw ya’tiya amra rabbi-ka)? So did those who went before them. But Allah wronged them not: nay they wronged their own souls.

57:14. (Those without) will call out “were we not with you?” (The others) will reply “True! but ye led yourselves into temptation; ye looked for ward (to our ruin); ye doubted (Allah’s promise); and (your false) desires deceived you; until there issued the Command of Allah (ḥattá já‘ amr alláh). And the Deceiver deceived you in respect of Allah.

Thus these examples and the whole of the Súrah of Húd bears witness to this meaning of al-amr—that it represents the decree of God imposing a severe penalty on those who fail to obey the Messenger of God when he comes.

c. ‘and it will return to Him.’ Continuing with our analysis of verse 33:5, we go on to the next phrase which refers to al-amr returning to God (thumma yáruju ilay-hi). The verse that come closest in paralleling this is also of great interest because it is the last verse of the Súrah of Húd, which, as demonstrated above, is full of references to al-amr as the decree coming from God and penalising those who oppose the Messengers of God. Here, at the end of this Súrah, we see that al-amr returns to God.

11:123. To Allah do belong the unseen (secrets) of the heavens and the earth and to Him goeth back every affair (wa ilay-hi yurjáu al-amr kull-hu): then worship Him and put thy trust in Him: and thy Lord is not unmindful of aught that ye do.

There are several other verses in the Qur’án that have some similarities but in each case what is recorded as going back to God is al-umúr, the plural of al-amr.¹⁰

d. ‘in a Day.’ Verse 40:15, quoted above and also the contents of the Súrah of Húd, described above, have important implications also when we come to consider the next two words of Qur’án 33:5—‘in a Day,’ (fí yawmin). We have seen how in the Súrah of Húd, whenever the people turned away from the Messenger of God, a severe penalty was visited upon them. In two verses of this súrah, it is implied that this fate that befell them was their Day of Judgement. In both of these verses, however, Yusuf Ali and other translators have changed things somewhat to make it appear that the reference to a Day of Judgement is to a future event. In reference to ‘Ád’s rejection of their Messenger of God, Húd, Yusuf Ali translates:

11:60. And they were pursued by a Curse in this Life and on the Day of Judgment. Ah! behold! for the ‘Ad rejected their Lord and Cherisher! Ah! behold! removed (from sight) were ‘Ad the people of Húd!

And similarly in relation to the rejection of Moses by Pharaoh and his people, Yusuf Ali translates:

11:99. And they are followed by a curse in this (life) and on the Day of Judgment: and woeful is the gift which shall be given (unto them)!

The literal word for word translation of the opening words of both of these verses is, however (the only difference between the two is that the word ad-dunyá appears in 11:60 and not in 11:99):

Wa utbi‘ú fí hádhihi [ad-dunyá] lánah wa yawm al-qiyámah

And they were followed in this [world] by a curse and the Day of Judgement (actually probably more accurately translated as Day of Resurrection)

Thus the Arabic text places ‘curse’ and ‘Day of Judgement’ side-by-side as that by which the people were pursued—the tense being the past tense. In other words, it regards what happened to the people of ‘Ád and the people of Pharaoh as being the Day of Judgement for them. This would support az-Zamakhsharí in his assertion that the Day that is referred to in 33:5 is the Day of Judgement (see above). This then takes us back to Qur’án 40:15, which links the coming of al-amr from God to earth with the coming of a revelation to a Messenger of God and to the Day of Mutual Meeting. Az-Zamakhsharí, in his commentary on verse 40:15, states that the Day of Mutual Meeting is the same as the Day of Judgement and other commentaries agree.¹¹

40:15. Raised high above ranks (or degrees) (He is) the Lord of the Throne (of authority): by his command doth He send the spirit (of inspiration) to (yulqí ar-rúh min amri-hi ‘alá) any of His servants He pleases that it may warn (men, yundhiru) of the Day of Mutual Meeting (yawm at-taláq)

e. ‘the length of which is one thousand years in your reckoning’. The next phrase in 33:5—the length of which is one thousand years in your reckoning—has one close parallel in the Qur’án. Interestingly, this parallel passage can be considered as a summary of the Súrah of Húd that we have already discussed at length:

22:42-7: If they treat thy (mission) as false so did the Peoples before them (with their prophets) the People of Noah and ‘Ad and Thamud; Those of Abraham and Lut; And the Companions of the Madyan people: and Moses was rejected (in the same way). But I granted respite to the Unbelievers and (only) after that did I punish them: but how (terrible) was My rejection (of them)! How many populations have We destroyed which were given to wrong-doing! They tumbled down on their roofs. And how many wells are lying idle and neglected and castles lofty and well-built! Do they not travel through the land so that their hearts (and mind) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind but

their hearts which are in their breasts. Yet they ask thee to hasten on the Punishment! But Allah will not fail in His promise. Verily a day in the sight of thy Lord is like a thousand years of your reckoning.

Here the period of one thousand years is closely linked to a future day of punishment. In other words the same overall scheme as is suggested in az-Zamakhsharí’s commentary is confirmed—that the Day that is mentioned is the Day of Judgement and this is linked to a one thousand year period.

4. The Collections of Traditions. While it is true, as stated above, that there are few other sources that we can consult that reliably contain usage of Arabic words contemporaneous to the Qur’án, it is useful to look also at the collections of Prophetic Traditions. Although these were not written down until 150 years or more after the time of the Qur’án and doubts have been raised about whether they can reliably be traced back to the Prophet Muḥammad, it is nevertheless true that they do represent an early stratum of the usage of Arabic words. In looking at those collections of Islamic Traditions that are considered among the earliest and most reliable, we can find a number of these Traditions where the word al-amr is used in a way that sheds light on its use in Qur’án 33:5.

In the collection by al-Bukhárí, which is one of two collections that have been given the name as-ṣaḥíḥ (the correct) by Muslims on account of their reputation for authenticity, the following two Traditions occur which generally support the above interpretations of al-amr:

God brings about whatever he wishes of His amr.¹²

God says: The son of Adam hurts me when he curses Time (ad-Dahr), for I am Time; in my hands is al-amr and I cause the revolution of night and day.¹³

By far the most interesting of these is a Tradition that occurs in slightly varying forms in almost all of the major collections of Traditions, including al-Bukhárí, Muslim, Ibn Májah, and at-Tirmidhí. The following is the form in which it is recorded by Ibn Ḥanbal:

The Messenger of God (PBUH) said: A group of my followers will continue victorious upon the path of truth and they will not be harmed by those who desert them until the amr of God shall come.¹⁴

This Tradition seems to be the natural corollary of Qur’án 33:5, stating that in future, after al-amr returns to God, it will come once again to earth.

5. Ancient Arabic poetry. It is customary for Islamicists in considering the meaning of words in the Qur’án to turn to ancient Arabic poetry for clues. Although the authenticity and exact relationship of this poetry to the Arabic of the Qur’án is a matter of some dispute, it cannot be denied that, whether genuinely pre-Islamic or written after the advent of Islam, it is some of the closest literature to the Qur’án in time that is available to us.

There are several instances where there are close parallels between the Qur’anic use of amr and that of ancient Arabic poetry. Umayya ibn Abí’ş-şalt, for example writes in one of his poems of the King of Heaven and His angels who are elected for His amr and descend to earth with it and ascend again.¹⁵

The idea that at some time in the future, al-amr of God will descend again and that this is the Day of Judgement finds strong contemporary support in the poetry of Ḥassán ibn Thábit, a Muslim poet who was a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad. He wrote:

That the amr of God may descend upon us hastily this very night or tomorrow

Then we shall stand in the [Last] Hour and participate in the pure good¹⁶

6. Summary. In summary then, we can say that on the basis of a survey of other parallel passages in the Qur’án and taking into account the early commentators such as az-Zamakhsharí and al-Bayḏáwí, the collections of Traditions, and ancient Arabic poetry, the meaning of verse 33:5 can be reconstructed thus:

He establishes (yudabbiru): establishes, organizes, orders,

His Decree (al-amr): command, decree of God

- that which God send down with the angel (especially the Angel Gabriel) as a revelation (al-wahy) to the Messenger of God

- the commission which God gives to the Messenger of God, charging him with a mission on earth

- the decree of God ordaining a severe punishment for people who have ignored or opposed the Messenger of God

from heaven to earth (min as-samá' ilá 'l-arḍ): this appears to function as an equivalent of a verb from the root nazala (coming down, descent, revelation) which is used in the Qur'án to describe the revelation of verses to the Messengers of God

and it will return to Him (thumma yáruju ilay-hi)—al-amr—the decree or commission delegated to the Messenger of God—returns to God

in a Day (fí yawmin)—this Day is the Day of Judgement—on which the previous amr returns to God and a new decree is issued—a new amr comes

the length of which is one thousand years in your reckoning (kána miqdár-hu alf sinah min má táuddún)—the duration of time in which the decree is in effect before its return to God is completed is a period of one thousand human years. Each of these is a Day of God—a Day of Judgement

7. The Bahá'í Interpretation. The discussion above has yielded a number of possible interpretations of the word al-amr in Qur'án 33:5. Two of these appear to be very different from one another: the revelation or commission that is given to a Messenger of God and the penalty imposed by God upon a people when they reject a Messenger of God. It is interesting to note that the Bahá'í interpretation of al-amr in Qur'án 33:5 has the ability to link these two meanings so as to refer to one event. The Bahá'í interpretation of this verse would be that it refers to the coming of a Messenger of God one thousand years after the Islamic revelation. In the Bahá'í interpretation, the coming of any Messenger of God is a Day of Judgement, for the followers of the previous religions. It is their Day of Judgement to see if they have been faithful to the teachings of the previous Messenger of God. If they fail this test and do not accept these teachings then God sends down upon them a severe penalty or chastisement. The day of judgement is also called the Day of Resurrection (because those who believe are spiritually revitalized) and the Day of God. Thus, in the Bahá'í interpretation, both of the interpretations of al-amr, whether as revelation/mission or as penalty/Day of Judgement, refer to the same phenomenon, the coming of the Messenger of God.

The Bahá'í interpretation of this verse is thus that God sent down from heaven the revelation to the Prophet Muḥammad. This was also the Day of God, the Day of Judgement, for the followers of previous religions such as Christianity and Judaism. As they failed to respond to Muḥammad's message, they suffered a severe penalty. The Islamic Day of Judgement lasted one thousand years. Since Bahá'ís accept the Shi'í account of the true nature of authority after the Prophet Muḥammad, this one thousand year period began in AH 260, with the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, at which time, authoritative, divinely-guided interpretation of the Islamic revelation was ended. After one thousand years, in AH 1260 (AD 1844), the period in which the Divine commission (al-amr) was entrusted to the Prophet Muḥammad ended and al-amr returned to God. In 1844, God once more sent Divine revelation to earth, once more, through the Báb.

B. Al-Amr in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán

The Kitáb-i-Íqán is one of Bahá'u'lláh's early works from the Baghdad period. It was written in response to a number of questions posed by one of the maternal uncles of the Báb regarding why the signs accompanying the coming of the Mahdí did not appear to have been fulfilled with the coming of the Báb.

At one point in the is work, Bahá'u'lláh refers to his two-year sojourn in the mountains around Sulaymáníyyih in Kurdistan. Dealing then with his return from that self-imposed exile, he states that, although he himself had no thought of return, the command for this issued from maṣdar-i-amr and so he returned. E.G. Browne has argued that this reference to maṣdar-i-amr in fact indicates that Bahá'u'lláh

at this date still deferred to Azal as leader of the Bábí movement. Shoghi Effendi has translated maşdar-i-amr as “the Mystic Source.”

In the early days of Our arrival in this land, when We discerned the signs of impending events, We decided, ere they happened, to retire. We betook Ourselves to the wilderness, and there, separated and alone, led for two years a life of complete solitude.... Many a night We had no food for sustenance, and many a day Our body found no rest. By Him Who hath My being between His hands! notwithstanding these showers of afflictions and unceasing calamities, Our soul was wrapt in blissful joy, and Our whole being evinced an ineffable gladness.... Our withdrawal contemplated no return, and Our separation hoped for no reunion. The one object of Our retirement was to avoid becoming a subject of discord among the faithful, a source of disturbance unto Our companions, the means of injury to any soul, or the cause of sorrow to any heart. Beyond these, We cherished no other intention, and apart from them, We had no end in view. And yet, each person schemed after his own desire, and pursued his own idle fancy, until the hour when, from the Mystic Source, there came the summons bidding Us return whence We came. Surrendering Our will to His, We submitted to His injunction. (Bahá’u’lláh: The Kitáb-i-Íqán, pages 250–251)

In order to clear this matter up, it is clearly necessary to examine Bahá’u’lláh’s use of the word amr in detail particularly his use of the word in the Íqán itself since it is conceivable that Bahá’u’lláh’s usage of the word may have changed over the years. I have looked at 154 instances of the noun amr in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. The details of these instances are to be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Occurrences of the Noun Amr in the Kitáb-Iqán.

amr	105 (103 Persian, 2 Arabic)
amrí	25 (Persian)
amr-ash	5 (Persian)
amr-and	1 Persian
amrí-rá	1 (Persian)
amru-há/amr-há	2 (1 Arabic, 1 Persian)
amran	1 (Arabic but used in Persian context)
al-amr	9 (Arabic)
amru-hu	1 (Arabic)
amru-ná	2 (Arabic)
bi amri-hi	2 (Arabic)
Total	154

In looking at the meaning of the word amr in this context, it is necessary to add a meaning which is additional to those derived above from Lane’s Dictionary, but which has already been discovered in our consideration of the Qur’anic meaning of this word. Most frequently in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, al-amr means the mission given to the Messenger or Manifestation of God. Thus amr Alláh means the Cause of God, or the commission given by God to the Messenger of God. This meaning is closely linked to the decree, command, order range of meanings of amr, and may be considered as part of that group but it has been given separately in Table 4 for clarity.

Unfortunately the phrase maşdar-i amr does not appear elsewhere in the Kitáb-i-Íqán and so this cannot be used directly to derive the meaning. The word maşdar is the noun of place (nomina loci) derived from the verb şadara, which means to go out, issue forth, originate or emanate. Maşdar thus comes to mean: point of origin, source, or origin. It is clear that with the preceding word, maşdar, the word amr in this context is more likely to have either meaning A or C from Table 4, rather than meaning B. Table 4 indicates that the most likely meaning for amr in this context is that it means the “Divine commis-

sion or Cause.” The following are a few examples of its use in the Kitáb-i-Íqán that demonstrate this meaning of the “Divine commission or Cause.”

Moreover, the more closely you observe the denials of those who have opposed the Manifestations of the divine attributes, the firmer will be your faith in the Cause of God [dar dín-i khud va amr Alláh muḥkamtar va rasikhhtar shavíd]. (Íqán, p. 6)

When He was invested with the robe of Prophethood, and was moved by the Spirit of God to arise and proclaim His Cause [bar amr qiyám farmúd], whoever believed in Him and acknowledged His Faith, was endowed with the grace of a new life. (Íqán, p. 154)

Among the utterances that foreshadow a new Law and a new Revelation [shar‘-i jadíd va amr-i badí‘] are the passages in the “Prayer of Nudbih....” (Íqán, p. 240)

Table 4: Analysing Amr in the Kitáb-i-Íqán
in Relation to its Meaning and Context

	Related to God	Not related to God
Meaning A: command, decree, order	21	10
Meaning B: affair, state, event, matter	2	43
Meaning C: the Divine commission or Cause	77	
Reference to maṣḍar-i-amr itself	1	
Total	154	

Thus, maṣḍar-i amr is most likely to mean the “Source of the Divine commission or Cause.” Since the “the Divine commission or Cause” can only come from God through a Manifestation of God, the “Source” referred to can only be either God or the Manifestation of God. Indeed with the frequent recurrence (ten occasions in the Kitáb-i-Íqán) of the phrase amr Alláh, the Cause of God, it becomes clear that the Source of amr is most likely to be God. In the circumstances surrounding the writing of the Kitáb-i-Íqán in Baghdad, the meaning that E.G. Browne tries to give to this phrase thus becomes very unlikely. In speaking of the Source of Command, Bahá’u’lláh could only really be speaking about God or possibly about a Manifestation of God. The Báb had previously been martyred in 1850 and Azal was not at this time claiming to be a Manifestation of God. Indeed the claim to be a manifestation of God equated within the Bábí context to a claim to be Man Yuḏhiruhu’lláh—He whom God shall make manifest, which Azal did not claim during this Baghdad period. Later during the Edirne period, it seems that he briefly put forward such a claim in response to Bahá’u’lláh’s open proclamation of his claim,¹⁷ but it does not appear to have been accepted by any substantial group of people and seems to have later been withdrawn, as Browne does not report any such claim on the part of Azal during the period of his contacts with him. Thus in the context of the Baghdad period, this leaves only the interpretation of this phrase as a reference to God. Bahá’u’lláh is in effect saying that the cause of his return to Baghdad was a Divine summons.

One further approach to elucidating this issue which helps us to a certain extent is to look for other occasions where the term maṣḍar-i amr appears in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. I have only been able to trace a few other instances of the use of this term and none of these can be definitely stated to belong to the Baghdad period of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. In the first of these, the context makes it more likely that God is meant, in the second and third, the Manifestation of God appears to be intended.

These words were sent down from the Source of the Revelation (maṣḍar-i-amr) of the All-Bounteous, and were addressed to Siyyid Javád, known as Karbilá’í. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 160-61)

I yield Thee thanks that Thou hast made known unto me Him Who is the Day-Spring of Thy mercy, and the Dawning-Place of Thy grace, and the Repository of Thy Cause (maşdar amri-ka). (*Prayers and Meditations*, no. 137, p. 225)

...in such wise that the changes and chances of the world will be powerless to hinder me from recognizing Him Who is the Manifestation of Thine own Self, and the Revealer of Thy signs, and the Day-Spring of Thy Revelation, and the Repository of Thy Cause (maşdar amri-ka). (*Prayers and Meditations*, no. 139, p. 228)

There are also two occurrences of similar terms that are worth noting here. The first has the word maşdar (maşádir) in the plural and clearly refers to the Manifestations of God:

They, verily, are the manifestations of the power of God, and the sources of His authority (masádir-i amr), and the repositories of His knowledge, and the daysprings of His commandments. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 90)

The second has the word amr in the plural. Since the form of the plural is awámir, this confirms that in this phrase, maşdar-i amr, the word amr is present in its meaning of decree, command, order (i.e. meanings A or C in Table 4 above; since it is the plural for this range of meanings that is awámir). This passage is from the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, the last major work of Bahá'u'lláh. Here, Bahá'u'lláh is challenging Shaykh Muḥammad-Taquí the recipient of this epistle, to go to Cyprus and meet Mírzá Yaḥyá and ascertain for himself the truth of the matter—that Mírzá Yaḥya is not “the source of the Divine laws” (maşdar-i awámir):

In this day, this Wronged One requesteth thee and the other divines who have drunk of the cup of the knowledge of God, and are illumined by the shining words of the Day-Star of Justice, to appoint some person, without informing any one, and despatch him to these regions, and enable him to remain a while in the island of Cyprus, and associate with Mirza Yahya, perchance he may become aware of the fundamentals of this Faith and of the source of the Divine laws (maşdar-i awámir) and commandments. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 120-21)

Perhaps more pertinent than these examples however, is the occurrence of a variant of maşdar-i-amr in the Kitáb-i-Íqán itself. This the phrase maşádir-i amriyyih, which appears in the following context:

Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God’s holy Cause (maşádir-i amriyyih), hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world. (Íqán p. 49)

Here again the word maşdar is in its plural form while instead of the genitive construct, the word amr appears in adjectival form as amriyyih. Here again, it seems clear from the context that the Manifestations of God are meant.

In summary, this analysis shows that the term maşdar-i-amr is always used with the meaning of amr relating the word to “Divine decree, command or commission.” The word maşdar means source or origin. Thus the phrase masdar-i-amr cannot have a meaning related to earthly leadership or even the leadership of a religious movement, such as Azal claimed. The “source of the Divine command or decree” can only be God or a Manifestation of God who has been given the authority (amr) to carry out the decree of God. Azal was not claiming any such station at this time and thus Browne’s understanding of this phrase in the Kitáb-i-Íqán is incorrect. It was in fact an assertion by Bahá'u'lláh that he returned from Sulaymáníyyih in response to a Divine summons.

Notes

- 1) “The Bábís of Persia-II”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 21, 1889, p. 946; reprinted in M. Momen (ed.), *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne on the Bábí and Bahá’í Faiths* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987), p. 252.
- 2) Az-Zamaksharí, Abu’l-Qásim Maḥmúd. *Al-Kashsháf*, 2nd printing, al-Maṭbá‘ah al-Kubrâ al-Amriyyah, 3 vols., Cairo, 1318, vol. 2, p. 418.
- 3) Al-Bayḍáwí, ‘Abd Alláh. *Anwár at-Tanzíl*. 8 vols. Dár al-Kutub al-‘Arabí al-Kubrâ, Cairo, 1330/1912, vol. 4, p. 155.

Lights of 'Irfán

- 4) Abu'l-Fidá Ibn Kathír, *Tafsír al-Qur'án al-'Azím*, Dar at-Turáth al-'Arabí, Cairo?, n.d., vol. 3, p. 457.
- 5) See Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*, University of California, Berkeley, 1989, pp. 50-58, 70-71.
- 6) Considerable doubt has been thrown on whether certain other items of Arabic poetry, such as the Mu'allaqát poetry really do represent pre-Qur'anic Arabic literature.
- 7) J.M.S. Baljon, "The 'Amr of God' in the Koran," *Acta Orientalia*, vol. 23 (Copenhagen, 1959) pp. 5-18.
- 8) Baljon, "Amr of God," pp. 9-11.
- 9) Baljon, "Amr of God," p. 8.
- 10) See Qur'án 2:210; 8: 44; 22:76; 35:4; 57:5.
- 11) 'The Day of Mutual Meeting—the Day of Judgement for on this Day spirits and bodies will meet and also the people of heaven and earth, and the worshipped and the worshippers, and deeds and the doers.' *Az-Zamakhshari, al-Kashsháf*, vol. 5, p. 36. See also Yusuf Ali's commentary in his translation.
- 12) Al-Bukhári, *ṣaḥíḥ*, Bk. 93—Tawḥíd, ch. 42, vol. 9, p. 460.
- 13) Al-Bukhári, *ṣaḥíḥ*, (Kazi Publications, Chicago, 1979), Bk. 93—Tawḥíd, ch. 35, no. 583, vol. 9, p. 433.
- 14) Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 5, p.279. See also Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 4, p. 101; vol. 5, p.278; al-Bukhári, *ṣaḥíḥ*, 93—Kitáb at-Tawḥíd, ch. 29, no. 551-2, vol. 9, pp. 414-5; Muslim, *ṣaḥíḥ*, Kitáb al-Imára, ch. 1306, Nos. 4715-6 and 4719, vol. 3, p. 1061-2; at-Tirmidhí, *Sunan*, Kitáb al-Fitan, ch. 51; Ibn Májah, *Sunan*, Kitáb al-Fitan, ch. 9; al-Ḥákím, *al-Mustadrak*, Kitáb al-Fitan wa al-Maláḥim, vol. 4, p. 550; al-Muttaqí al-Hindí, *Kanz al-'Ummál*, vol. 14, no. 38224, p. 158.
- 15) Umayya ibn Abiṣ-ṣalt 55: 10, 16-17 (ed. Schulthess), quoted in Baljon, "Amr of God," p. 13
- 16) Hasan ibn Thabit 133:7-8 (ed. Hirschfeld), quoted in Baljon, "Amr of God," p. 114
- 17) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 167.