

Yawm al-Alast (Day of the Covenant): A Semantic-Structural Interpretation

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Abstract

Qur'ān 7:172, widely known as the verse of *Alast*, is one of the most profound Qur'ānic passages concerning the relationship between God and the human being, primordial human nature (*fiṭrah*), knowledge, love, heedlessness, responsibility and spiritual return:

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قَالُوا بَلَى شَهِدْنَا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ

(Sūrah al-A'raf, 7:172)

This article interprets the verse of *Alast* not as an isolated theological statement, but within the semantic network of the whole of Sūrah al-A'raf, following Seyed Salman Safavi's theory of **semantic-structural hermeneutics**. According to this approach, the meaning of a Qur'ānic verse emerges through its relationships with neighbouring verses, recurring semantic fields, oppositional structures, lexical patterns and the overall movement of the sūrah.

From this perspective, the covenant of *Alast* constitutes a crucial link between **Divine Lordship, primordial human nature, witnessing, covenant, love, heedlessness, remembrance, guidance, reverence and salvation**. The article argues that, within an esoteric reading, *love* (*ishq*) may be understood as the existential dimension of the primordial human response of *balā*—the “yes” by which the human being acknowledges God as Lord. The earthly spiritual journey may consequently be understood as a movement from heedlessness towards remembrance of the primordial covenant, and from remembrance towards love, spiritual transformation and proximity to God.

Keywords: *Alast*, primordial covenant, Sūrah al-A'raf, semantic structure, Seyed Salman Safavi, *fiṭrah*, *ishq*, Divine Lordship, witnessing, heedlessness, remembrance, *taqwā*, spiritual return.

1. Introduction: From the Individual Verse to the Semantic Structure of the Sūrah

In many classical interpretations, Qur'ān 7:172 is principally discussed in connection with the question of the *‘ālam al-dharr*—the “Realm of the Covenant” or “World of Particles”—and the manner in which God took the primordial covenant from the descendants of Adam.

That question is important, but from the perspective of semantic-structural hermeneutics it is not sufficient.

In the semantic structure of the Qur'ān, a verse is not an isolated textual unit detached from its context. Its meaning is constituted within a network of relationships: its relationship with preceding and succeeding verses, recurring concepts, lexical fields, semantic oppositions and the overall movement of the sūrah.

The fundamental question concerning the verse of *Alast* is therefore not merely:

“When and how did the primordial covenant occur?”

A deeper hermeneutical question is:

“Why does the Qur'ān place this verse within Sūrah al-A‘rāf, and what function does it perform within the semantic architecture of the sūrah?”

This question opens a broader horizon.

Within the semantic structure of Sūrah al-A‘rāf, the verse of *Alast* may be understood as a point of connection between **the primordial truth of the human being and the historical responsibility of the human being**.

Humanity possesses, at the deepest level of its existence, a relationship with Divine Lordship. Earthly life becomes the arena in which this primordial relationship may either be obscured by heedlessness or reawakened through revelation, remembrance, faith, reverence and love.

2. The Etymology and Semantic Fields of the Principal Words

One important dimension of semantic analysis is the examination of the lexical fields and roots of the principal words of a verse. Etymology alone does not determine the final meaning of a Qur'ānic term; rather, it helps reveal the semantic potential contained within its root and its subsequent contextual development.

2.1. *Akhadh* — أَخَذَ: Taking, Receiving and Assuming

The verse begins with:

أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ

The verb **akhadha** derives from the triliteral root ' **-kh-dh** (أ - خ - د), whose basic semantic range includes taking, receiving, grasping and assuming something firmly.

Within the context of the covenant, *akhadha* is not merely a physical act of taking. Its semantic field moves towards the idea of **taking upon oneself, establishing and assuming an obligation**.

Thus:

akhadha → taking → receiving → commitment → covenant

This semantic progression is significant. The relationship between God and humanity described by the verse is not merely intellectual. It involves **responsibility and existential commitment**.

2.2. *Rabb* — رَبّ: Lord, Sustainer and Nurturer

The word **Rabb** derives from the root **r-b-b** (ر - ب - ب).

Its semantic field encompasses ideas of nurturing, sustaining, governing, cultivating, ordering and bringing something towards its appropriate perfection.

The divine question is therefore not:

“Am I existent?”

Rather, it is:

أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ؟

“Am I not your Lord?”

The central issue of the primordial covenant is consequently not merely the recognition of God's existence but the recognition of **Divine Lordship**.

The semantic sequence may therefore be represented as:

Lordship → relationship → nurturing → guidance → perfection

This is crucial for an esoteric interpretation of the verse. God is not presented merely as an abstract metaphysical First Principle; He is *Rabb*, the Lord in a living and existential relationship with His creatures.

2.3. *Dhurriyyah* — ذُرِّيَّة: Progeny and the Continuity of Humanity

The term **dhurriyyah** refers to descendants, offspring and progeny.

The expression:

مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ

places the primordial covenant within the context of the continuity of human generations.

The covenant is therefore not presented as a private mystical experience belonging to a single individual. It concerns **Banū Ādam**, the children of Adam.

The semantic movement becomes:

Banū Ādam → humanity → universal human responsibility

The covenant therefore has an anthropological as well as a theological dimension.

2.4. *Ashhada* — أَشْهَدَ: From Knowledge to Witnessing

One of the most significant verbs in the verse is:

وَأَشْهَدُهُمْ

It derives from the root **sh-h-d** (ش - ه - د), whose semantic field includes witnessing, presence, observation and bearing testimony.

The Qur'ān does not simply say that God gave the human beings information about Himself. The verb is one of **witnessing**.

This distinction is fundamental.

Knowledge may be conceptual; witnessing implies presence.

Thus, in an esoteric reading:

Primordial knowledge of God is not merely conceptual knowledge; it is a mode of witnessing the truth of one's relationship with Divine Lordship.

The semantic structure is therefore:

knowledge → presence → witnessing → testimony

This becomes especially important when the human response is considered.

2.5. *Anfusihim* — أَنْفُسِهِمْ: The Self and the Inner Reality of the Human Being

The word **nafs** derives from the root **n-f-s** (ن - ف - س) and possesses a broad semantic range including self, person, soul and inner self.

The expression:

عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ

is especially significant.

The human beings are made witnesses **concerning themselves**.

From an esoteric perspective, this creates a profound relationship between **self-knowledge and knowledge of God**.

The semantic movement may be expressed as:

witnessing the self → witnessing one's existential relationship → witnessing Divine Lordship

This does not mean that the verse literally states the later mystical maxim concerning knowledge of the self and knowledge of God. Rather, the linguistic structure of the verse provides an important foundation for such an esoteric interpretation.

3. *Alast* — أَلَسْتُ: The Question at the Foundation of Existence

The word **alast** is formed from the interrogative particle **a-** (أ) and the first-person form of the negative verb **laysa** (ليس):

أ + لَسْتُ = أَلَسْتُ

Literally, it carries the sense of:

“Am I not...?”

The complete question is:

أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ؟

“Am I not your Lord?”

The structure of the question is theologically decisive.

God does not ask:

“Do you acknowledge that I exist?”

He asks about **relationship**:

I am your Lord. Do you recognise this Lordship?

The human response is:

بَلَىٰ

The semantic and rhetorical structure is therefore:

Alast → Balā

Divine question → human affirmation

The primordial covenant is thus represented through a dialogical structure between Divine address and human response.

4. *Shahidnā* — شَهِدْنَا: The Covenant as Witness

Following *balā*, the human response continues:

شَهِدْنَا

“We bear witness.”

The root is again **sh-h-d**.

The structure:

أَلَسْتُ → بَلَى → شَهِدْنَا

may be understood as:

Divine address → human affirmation → existential testimony

The primordial covenant is therefore not merely a contract. It is a **testimony concerning the deepest relationship of the human being with God**.

5. *Ghāfilūn* — غَافِلُونَ: Witnessing and Heedlessness

The final part of the verse introduces one of its most important semantic oppositions:

إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ

The word **ghāfil** derives from the root **gh-f-l** (غ - ف - ل) and denotes heedlessness, inattentiveness or failure to remain conscious of something.

The semantic opposition is therefore:

شهادة / **witnessing** ↔ غفلة / **heedlessness**

This opposition is not restricted to verse 172. It becomes part of the wider semantic structure of Sūrah al-A‘rāf.

The human being has the capacity for witnessing, yet may fall into heedlessness.

Humanity may possess an innate orientation towards truth, yet become obscured by worldly attachment, desire, illusion and forgetfulness.

Thus the central spiritual problem is not necessarily the absolute absence of knowledge, but **the loss of awareness of what lies most deeply within the human being**.

6. ‘*Ahd* — عَهْد: Covenant as an Enduring Relationship

The word ‘**ahd** derives from the root ‘**-h-d** (ع - ه - د) and encompasses meanings associated with covenant, promise, undertaking, instruction and maintaining an obligation.

In an esoteric context, ‘*ahd* is more than a legal contract.

It is the **preservation of a relationship**.

The primordial covenant may therefore be understood as:

The human commitment to preserve awareness of his or her existential relationship with Divine Lordship.

The problem is consequently not merely whether the covenant was once made, but whether it is **remembered and actualised**.

Here the concept of *dhikr*, remembrance, becomes essential.

7. Love (*ʿIshq*) as the Existential Dimension of the Covenant

The word *ʿishq* does not occur in the Qurʾānic text of verse 7:172. It is therefore important to distinguish between the **lexical meaning of the Qurʾānic verse** and an **esoteric interpretation of its existential implications**.

In Islamic mystical literature, however, *ʿishq* became one of the central terms for describing the intense attraction of the human being towards the Divine Beloved.

In this interpretative framework, the *balā* of the primordial covenant may be understood not merely as an intellectual affirmation but as the beginning of an existential relationship between the human being and God.

Thus:

Lordship → knowledge → love → longing → return

forms a coherent esoteric semantic chain.

Love is not here merely an emotional state. It signifies the **existential attraction of the human being towards his or her Divine Origin**.

From this perspective:

The “yes” of the primordial covenant may be interpreted, esoterically, as the verbal form of primordial knowledge and love of the Divine Lord.

This is an esoteric-philosophical interpretation rather than a claim that the word *ʿishq* itself occurs in the verse.

8. The Covenant of *Alast* within the Macro-Structure of Sūrah al-Aʿrāf

The semantic significance of verse 7:172 becomes clearer when it is situated within the architecture of the whole sūrah.

Sūrah al-A‘rāf begins with revelation, warning and guidance. It then presents the story of Adam and Iblīs, the testing of humanity, the history of prophets and peoples, the consequences of accepting or rejecting divine guidance, and repeated warnings against heedlessness.

Within this architecture, the verse of *Alast* functions as an **ontological hinge**.

The semantic structure can be represented as:

Revelation and guidance

↓

Adam and Iblīs

↓

Human testing

↓

Heedlessness and temptation

↓

Prophetic history

↓

Human responsibility

↓

Primordial covenant

↓

Remembrance of primordial truth

↓

Guidance, reverence and salvation

The verse consequently explains why human beings are responsible before divine guidance.

9. The Relationship between *Alast* and the Story of Adam

One of the most important structural relationships in Sūrah al-A‘rāf is the relationship between the story of Adam and the verse of *Alast*.

The story of Adam includes concepts such as:

Divine command → temptation → nakedness → loss → descent → repentance

The verse of *Alast* contains:

Lordship → witnessing → covenant → heedlessness

These two semantic fields can be brought together:

Covenant → testing → heedlessness/temptation → fall → repentance → guidance

From this perspective, the story of Adam may be understood as the **narrative representation of the human condition after the primordial covenant**.

The verse of *Alast* expresses the primordial truth of human existence; the story of Adam demonstrates how that truth becomes tested within historical and earthly existence.

10. The “Raiment of Reverence” and the Actualisation of the Covenant

An especially significant passage in Sūrah al-A‘rāf concerns clothing:

يَا بَنِي آدَمَ قَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ لِبَاسًا يُؤَارِي سَوْآتِكُمْ وَرِيشًا وَلِبَاسُ التَّقْوَىٰ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذَّكَّرُونَ

(7:26)

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's translation renders the central expression as “**the raiment of reverence**” and concludes with the idea that human beings may thereby remember.

This verse is particularly important for the semantic relationship between *Alast* and the remainder of the sūrah.

If the primordial covenant represents the inner truth of the human relationship with God, then *taqwā*—here beautifully rendered by Nasr as “reverence”—represents its **practical and existential manifestation**.

Thus:

Primordial covenant = inner truth

Taqwā = lived realisation of that truth

The human being who recognises Divine Lordship must embody that recognition in conduct, ethics, worship and spiritual discipline.

11. Alast, Fiṭrah and Dhikr

The semantic relationship between the primordial covenant and *fiṭrah* is especially significant.

The Qur’ān states:

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۚ فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

(Sūrah al-Rūm, 30:30)

The *fiṭrah* is here explicitly associated with the manner in which God has created humanity.

The root **f-ṭ-r** (ف - ط - ر) carries meanings associated with originating, bringing into being and creating according to an intrinsic constitution. In the theological and philosophical vocabulary of Islam, *fiṭrah* therefore came to signify the primordial constitution or disposition of the human being.

Within the present semantic reading:

Alast → primordial covenant → fiṭrah → innate orientation towards Divine Truth

The *fiṭrah* may consequently be understood as the continuing existential imprint of the primordial covenant within human nature.

The problem of the human being is not necessarily the total absence of this truth, but **heedlessness of it**.

This brings us to *dhikr*.

The word **dhikr** derives from the root **dh-k-r** (ذ - ك - ر) and encompasses remembering, mentioning and bringing something to consciousness.

Thus:

heedlessness → remembrance → awakening

At the esoteric level:

forgetting the covenant → remembrance → reawakening the covenant

12. Love and Remembrance: Two Movements of the Spiritual Life

In an esoteric reading, *dhikr* is more than the repetition of words. It is the reorientation of consciousness towards the Divine Reality.

If *‘ishq* represents the **movement of the human being towards God**, then *dhikr* represents the **awakening of awareness of the Beloved**.

The semantic chain therefore becomes:

Covenant → love → longing → remembrance → spiritual wayfaring → proximity

The opposite movement is:

Heedlessness → attachment to the other-than-God → forgetfulness of the covenant → distance

Love and heedlessness therefore represent two opposing directions of the human spiritual condition:

Love = movement towards the Divine

Heedlessness = movement away from the Divine

Here again, *‘ishq* is employed as an esoteric category rather than as a lexical term occurring in verse 7:172.

13. The Primordial Covenant and Human Moral Responsibility

The concluding purpose of the verse is decisive:

أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ

The verse explicitly connects the primordial testimony with the Day of Resurrection.

The covenant therefore has an ethical consequence.

Its semantic sequence becomes:

Covenant → awareness → responsibility → action → judgement

The primordial covenant is consequently not merely a metaphysical teaching concerning the remote past. It establishes the basis for human responsibility in the present and the Hereafter.

14. Two Opposing Movements in Sūrah al-Aʿrāf

The semantic structure of Sūrah al-Aʿrāf can be interpreted as containing two opposing movements.

The movement of descent

Covenant → heedlessness → temptation → disobedience → corruption → punishment

The movement of return

Heedlessness → remembrance → repentance → faith → reverence → guidance → salvation

Prophecy and revelation belong fundamentally to the second movement.

Within this esoteric interpretation, revelation does not introduce a truth that is wholly alien to the human being. Rather, revelation **awakens and confirms the primordial orientation already embedded within human existence.**

Revelation becomes *dhikr*: remembrance.

And remembrance becomes the possibility of returning to the covenant.

15. Is the “Day of Alast” Historical Time or an Ontological State?

The expression **Yawm al-Alast**, “the Day of Alast”, is a later theological and mystical designation for the scene described by the divine question **alastu bi-rabbikum**. It is not itself the exact expression used in the Qur’ānic verse.

Classical and later interpretations differ concerning the precise ontological status of this event and its relation to the so-called *‘ālam al-dharr*.

A semantic-structural and esoteric reading does not necessarily require resolving the question exclusively in terms of chronological time.

Instead, the emphasis may be placed upon the **ontological and spiritual significance** of the covenant.

In this interpretation, *Alast* is not merely a “day in the past”. It signifies a primordial mode of human existence in which the relationship between humanity and Divine Lordship is disclosed.

Thus:

Alast is not merely a date in sacred history; it is an ontological truth concerning the human being.

Whenever the human being awakens from heedlessness, remembers God and turns towards Him, he or she symbolically returns to the truth of *Alast*.

16. The Final Semantic Network

On the basis of Safavi's semantic-structural approach, the principal semantic network of the verse and its relationship to the wider sūrah may be represented as follows:



Guidance (*hidāyah*)



Reverence (*taqwā*)



Proximity and Salvation

The opposite semantic chain is:

Heedlessness (*ghaflah*)



Temptation



Desire



Forgetting the Covenant



Denial



Corruption



Distance and Punishment

Within this network, **love constitutes the bridge between knowledge and spiritual wayfaring.**

Knowledge of God, if merely conceptual, may remain intellectual. Love transforms knowledge into existential movement.

Thus:

Witnessing → knowledge → love → movement → spiritual wayfaring → proximity

constitutes one of the deepest lines of the esoteric interpretation.

17. Conclusion

Qur'ān 7:172 cannot be adequately understood within the semantic architecture of Sūrah al-A'raf if it is treated merely as an isolated verse concerning a primordial metaphysical event.

Within the structural-semantic framework associated with Seyed Salman Safavi, the verse of *Alast* occupies a fundamental position in explaining the **origin of human responsibility, the primordial orientation of human nature and the possibility of spiritual return.**

Humanity hears the divine question:

أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ؟

and responds:

بَلَىٰ شَهِدْنَا

This *balā* is not merely a verbal affirmation. In an esoteric-philosophical interpretation, it represents the primordial acknowledgement of the existential relationship between the human being and Divine Lordship.

Fitrah may then be understood as the continuing imprint of this primordial orientation within human nature. Revelation awakens it; *dhikr* restores awareness of it; *taqwā* embodies it; and love gives it existential movement.

In this interpretation, *‘ishq* is the dynamic force of return.

The human being originates from God, enters the world of multiplicity, becomes vulnerable to heedlessness, and is repeatedly called back through revelation, remembrance, repentance, faith and love.

The spiritual life therefore becomes a journey:

**from heedlessness to remembrance,
from remembrance to knowledge,
from knowledge to love,
from love to spiritual wayfaring,
and from spiritual wayfaring to proximity to God.**

The primordial *balā* may consequently be understood as the beginning of the journey of love.

The human being begins with “**balā**” and returns towards **proximity**; the distance between these two poles is the field of earthly existence, spiritual trial, remembrance and love.

In its deepest esoteric significance, therefore:

The covenant of Alast is the primordial memory of the Divine; *fiṭrah* is its imprint within human existence; *dhikr* is its awakening; *‘ishq* is its movement; and spiritual wayfaring is its return to the Beloved.

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