

An Introduction to the Lawh-i Haqqu'n-Nas¹

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Baha'u'llah devoted an entire tablet, which is sometimes called "*Lawh-i-Haqqu'n-Nas*"², to explain the metaphorical character of this world. Unfortunately we do not know the circumstances of the revelation of this Tablet. It was written in response to a correspondent whom Baha'u'llah calls "friend of my heart", and who apparently sent him a letter with a number of questions to be answered. The question with which the tablet starts is apparently a trivial one and a particularly obscure point of Muslim theology: How is it possible, as tradition [*hadith*] teaches, that we can acquit ourselves of our debts in the next world after we die? This is a principle known in Muslim theology as "*haqqu'n-nas*", literally the "right of people". It affirms that in the other world there is compensation for whatever is owed to us, including everything stolen or usurped. In the context of the Baha'i teachings, this question has no meaning, and this is what Baha'u'llah in a gentle way endeavoured to have his interrogator understand.

The question nevertheless reflects the Persian mentality of the time. The Shi'i theologians and jurists were partial to this kind of problem, engaging in long contradictory debates which in turn gave rise to multiple interpretations in which are systematically envisioned all of the germane cases, even the most absurd. Baha'u'llah himself cites a particularly absurd example of such casuistics which reminds us of the question asked to Jesus by the Sadducees, regarding the status, on the day of resurrection, of a widow who would have successively married the six brothers of her first husband after the passing away of each one.³

The problem is posed in the following terms: Let us imagine a Christian who lends another Christian a jar of wine and a piece of pork meat; two things which are permitted to Christians but forbidden to Muslims. After a certain time the debtor and the lender both become Muslims. How can the debtor acquit himself of his debt, for not only can Muslims not consume either wine or pork meat, but they are forbidden to engage in the commerce of either, and it is thus impossible to pay back the lender with money. If the debt cannot be repaid in this world, how will it be in the other world for the debtor? Persian society of the 19th century was passionately fond of this kind of problem.

¹ Translated from the French by Mr. Peter Terry, gratefully acknowledged by the Editors'.

² Mehran Ghasempour, "Bahá'u'lláh's Lawh-i Haqqu'n-Nas: Tablet of the Right of the People, Provisional Translation, *International Journal of Baha'i Studies*, 2007, 1, 405-409.

³ Luke 20:27-33

Jesus gave the following response to the Sadducees:

"Those who belong to this world take wife and husband. But those who have been judged worthy of having part in the world to come and in the resurrection of the dead take neither wife nor husband. It is that they cannot die, for they are the same as angels..."⁴

Baha'u'llah responds in a similar vein. He begins by indicating that in order to understand this problem, one must have a detached heart and an understanding purified from common superstitions, and only in this case can one reach a the true comprehension of what life is after death and resurrection. He proceeds by explaining that all that exists in the world of *Nasut*, which He also calls the "world of limitations" (*'alam-i-hudud*), whatever may be its name (*ism*), form (*rasm*), appearance (*surat*) or characteristics (*vasf*), exists in the divine worlds in an appearance (*shuhudi*) and a manifestation (*zuhuri*) which is appropriate to each of these worlds. The things which exist in the spiritual worlds thus exist in these worlds with totally different characteristics from those of the world below, in such manner that no category of our understanding such as place, extent, form or time can apply to them.

What Baha'u'llah says here is very different from what Muslim philosophy used to teach, and in particular the Ishraqi or Shaykhi philosophy of his time. Ishraqi philosophy says that to every thing existing in this world is attached an intelligible reality (*haqa'iq*) which exists in *Malakut* or in the World of Images or Imaginal World [*'alam-i-mithal*]. Thus, this world (*Nasut*) becomes the mirror of the other world, as in Plato's myth of the Cave. However, for Baha'u'llah it is not only the world of *Malakut* and the world of *Nasut* which are the image of each other, but a plurality of worlds which he calls divine (*ilahi*). In several places in this tablet he insists upon this plurality in speaking of innumerable worlds (Arabic *la-tuhsa*).

Death in this world is thus but the disappearance of forms and appearances. It never touches the "reality" (*haqiqat*) and the "essence" (*dhat*) of beings, for the spiritual reality (*haqa'iq*) of things exists in each world with a manifestation adapted to each of these worlds corresponding to degrees of different realities, which might be understood as different ontological levels.

This explains why everything that man does in this lower world affects his "essential reality" in the other worlds. Thus our acts and words live on from one world to the other, and every soul find his retribution (reward) in *Malakut*. It means that there is no avenging God who judges and condemns us, but it is rather the consequences of our actions that follow us into the next world represent our reward or punishment. God does not intervene

⁴ Luke 20:34-36

except to pardon the sinner and to assist him through his grace in surmounting the handicap which he has created for himself.

Baha'u'llah continues with this theme by explaining that if we wish to understand the way in which the reality of things is manifested in these infinite worlds, the only fashion in which we can approach this comprehension is to use metaphorical images. He explains that one of best illustrations that we can find is that of sleep, because sleep is just like death. It is so similar, that one can say that sleep and death are brothers. It happens sometimes that we see things in our dreams that are unintelligible and without relation to our lives. Yet, if we ask for the interpretation of these dreams from a specialist, he will explain that the things we have seen in our dream are symbolic representations of other things, and once we have understood the key to this interpretation and the correspondence between the symbol and the reality, we see that the things which we have seen in dream corresponded to real situations in our lives. The only difference, in this case, between the world of sleep and the world of waking is that these things appear in one form in the world of sleep and in another in the world of waking. The world after death, that is to say *Malakut* or the *Kingdom of Abha*, is like the world of sleep. The things which we see in the temporal world may also appear in the other world, but in another form which can be as far removed from the reality of this lower world as the metaphorical language of our dreams.

In another Tablet, Baha'u'llah explains that we cannot understand the metaphorical character of this lower world in relation to the spiritual worlds without understanding the nature of the soul. He says in speaking of the soul that "It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end."⁵ It is the absence of any spatial and temporal reference in the spiritual worlds which makes these so different from our world, and which ultimately eludes our comprehension. It is for this reason that a comparison can be made between the world of dreams and the spiritual world after death, because the dream is the only experience which man can have in this world which is exempt from space and time. Baha'u'llah says:

"Behold how the dream thou hast dreamed is, after the lapse of many years, re-enacted before thine eyes. Consider how strange is the mystery of the world that appeared to thee in thy dream."⁶

In the "*Tablet of Haqqu'n-Nas*", in order to illustrate his point, Baha'u'llah takes the example the dream of Joseph. Joseph dreamed that the sun, the moon and twelve stars prostrated themselves before him. This dream announced the imminent ascension of Joseph to the rank of the Pharaoh's

⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section LXXXII

⁶ *Ibid.*

prime minister and to the arrival of his family in Egypt, who would prostrate themselves before him without recognizing his real identity. Baha'u'llah points out that the world of dreams is strange inasmuch as in that world the father and mother appear in the form of the sun and the moon, and the brothers in the form of stars. This shows to what extent the forms and representations of this world are different from the forms and representations of the world of waking. The difference between the world below and the world of death, he says, is of the same order.

To explain the metaphorical link which ties the changing of forms from one world to another, Baha'u'llah brings another example. Let us imagine that in the springtime a powerful man robs a weak man of his provision of seeds and that he plants these seeds in his own garden. The seeds germinate and in summer produce plants, trees and ultimately fruits. Then, it befalls that a just king decides to redress the wrong that was done to the weak one. In what manner should this just king proceed? Should he require from the oppressor that he return the same quantity of seeds? At harvest-time the seeds are of no immediate utility. Or should he return to him the product of the seeds that were stolen from him? We understand immediately that justice requires that we return to the victim not the original seeds but that which they produced. The seeds changed in form, they were transformed into something else, the appearance and the qualities of which are only distantly related to their first appearance and qualities. The relationship between this world and the other world is of the same nature, and of the same nature also is the nature of justice that links the two. Here below things exist only in the state of seed. When they evolve in the divine worlds, they are completely transformed in form, appearance and qualities. Nevertheless, the qualities of the tree and of the fruit depend upon the qualities of the seed that produced them.

In this Tablet, Baha'u'llah proceeds with a digression of a moral rather than a metaphysical character. In this life, the material things that we might lose do not matter. In due course, these material things show their true colors, becoming tests and of calamities in our spiritual evolution, while tests and calamities prove to be the source of true riches. At the final count, the fact that we have lost material goods for spiritual reasons, whether we have offered them to God in a spirit of detachment, or lost them because of the oppression of men, makes no difference. The man who robs another man of his wealth removes from him a portion of the tests that weigh upon his victim's shoulders. In this subtle manner, Baha'u'llah explains that the principle of "*Haqqu'n-Nas*" cannot apply to material goods. One cannot pay these material debts in the next world. However he who has unjustly seized the goods of another in order to accumulate his own riches in fact has but accumulated obstacles to his own spiritual development. Without fail, the consequences of our actions follow us from one world to the next.