

# Tablet on the Right of the People (Lawh-i haqq al-nas)

## Introduction by Alison Marshall<sup>1</sup>

Tablet on the Right of the People (Lawh-i haqq al-nas) is an usual tablet in that it is entirely devoted to an examination of one philosophical issue. That issue is hinted at by the term ‘haqq al-nas’ (right of the people) in the name the tablet is commonly known by. This term has a wide meaning. In its plural form, ‘huquq al-nas’ (rights of the people), it can refer to the private rights of individuals under Islamic law.<sup>2</sup> In the tablet, Baha’u’llah discusses three situations that relate to a person’s private rights - two relating to theft and one involving a small debt. But, beyond the legal context, the term ‘right of the people’ also refers to the spiritual rights a person has as a result of their righteous deeds. In this context, the rights are founded in God’s promise to reward a person for their good deeds and punish those who do wrong. An example of this promise is found in the following verses of the Qur’an:

“As for those who disbelieve I shall chastise them with a heavy chastisement in the world and the hereafter; and they will have no helpers. And as for those who believe and do good works, He will pay them their wages in full. Allah loveth not wrongdoers.” (3:56-57)<sup>3</sup>

This principle is restated by Baha’u’llah. In “Words of Paradise”, for example, he tells us that, on the fifth leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise, the Pen has let it be known that:

“at the beginning of the foundation of the world [Wisdom] ascended the stair of inner meaning and when enthroned upon the pulpit of utterance ... proclaimed two words. The first heralded the promise of reward, while the second voiced the ominous warning of punishment. ... Thus the basis of world order hath been firmly established upon these twin principles.”<sup>4</sup>

This passage tells us that, at the beginning of the world, the embodiment of Wisdom announced from the pulpit of meaning the twin principles of reward for good deeds and punishment for bad deeds. As such, these two principles are at the foundation of world order. The wording of the passage, with its focus on an announcement made in pre-eternity, underscores the idea that the principles of reward and punishment are woven into the very

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<sup>1</sup> Note that another translation and introduction of Tablet on the Right of the People can be found on the Baha’i Library Online: [http://bahai-library.com/ghasempour\\_lawh\\_haqqu\\_nas](http://bahai-library.com/ghasempour_lawh_haqqu_nas)

<sup>2</sup> In this case, the term is the partner to the corresponding term, ‘huquq allah’ or ‘rights of God’, which refers to the rights that relate to the public interest. Anver M. Emon: “Huquq allah and Huquq al-’ibad: A Legal Heuristic for a Natural Rights Regime”, 13 *Islamic Law and Society*, 2006, p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> Pickthall translation

<sup>4</sup> *Tablets of Baha’u’llah*, <http://www.bahai.org/r/219831559>

functioning and purpose of reality.<sup>5</sup> They do not just occur at a social level in the physical world, where societies use justice systems to maintain law and order. Rather, they are satisfied through the processes of reality. Baha'u'llah's philosophical examination of the issue of the right of the people describes the metaphysical processes involved and explains how, through them, compensation for a right is made good in the physical world and the spiritual worlds.

The context for the tablet is a question put to Baha'u'llah by a correspondent who wanted to know how a person's rights, breached in the physical world, are redressed in the spiritual worlds. The question is framed in the following way, although not in these terms. What is the mechanism by which someone's personal rights are repaid in the next world? How is this process to be understood and how does it occur in the Day of Resurrection, which is also known to be the Day of Judgement? The physical and social structures that underpin the creation and recognition of personal rights in the physical world do not exist in the spiritual worlds. And even if a person's rights, as conceived of in the physical world, did exist in the next world, they would not be of any use to the right-holder in that world. Therefore, how can these rights be compensated for in the next world? The questioner understands that there must be some mechanism by which restitution takes place because, as is commonly believed, God sometimes waives a debt owed to Him but never allows a debt owed to a person to be set aside.

To answer this question, Baha'u'llah begins by setting out two metaphysical principles, which are closely connected. Commentaries on these two principles will no doubt run into volumes in centuries to come.

- **Principle 1:** Everything in the physical world - no matter what its name and description, and its form and attributes - appears in every one of the worlds of God in a manner that is appropriate to that world. And it appears in that other world with another name and description, and another form and other attributes.
- **Principle 2:** If a thing dies in this physical world, this death applies only to the body or form of the thing. The reality (*h.aqiqa*) and essence (*dhāt*) of the thing has not gone out of existence. This quintessential aspect of the thing continues to exist and to appear in the worlds of God in accordance with Principle 1.<sup>6</sup>

If Principles 1 and 2 are put together, they constitute a very important statement about the functioning of reality. Principle 1 tells us that every thing in the physical world, no matter

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<sup>5</sup> Baha'u'llah makes the same point in other places too, such as in the Tablet of Maqṣud: "The Great Being saith: The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment." *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*: <http://www.bahai.org/r/260206487>

<sup>6</sup> It is my assumption that the "reality" (*h.aqiqa*) and "essence" (*dhāt*) of a thing refers to its 'existence' and 'essence', which correspond to the active force (*al-fā'il*) and its recipient (*al-munfa'il*). Baha'u'llah: Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i Hikmat), <http://www.bahai.org/r/893372526>

what its name and description, and form and attributes, appears in different forms, with different attributes, in each of the worlds of God. Principle 2 tells us that every thing has a reality and essence that survives the ‘death’ - that is, a change or extinction - of its forms. This means that the manifested forms of a thing can go through a process of radical change, while the essential reality of the thing is unaffected. From these two Principles, we have the general principle that every thing is, at core, a reality and essence, and that this reality and essence manifests itself in different forms in all the worlds of God.

Probably, the primary example of this general principle is the Manifestation of God. The reality and essence of the Manifestation is the Primal Will, or Word, of God. The Primal Will manifests itself in infinite forms in all the worlds of God. We witness this phenomenon in the physical world through the principle of the unity of the Manifestations. In accordance with this principle, the Primal Will has appeared in the persons of, for example, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab and Baha’u’llah. Each one of them came with different names and descriptions, and different forms and characteristics. But their reality and essence was the same, and this did not go out of existence when one of these Manifestations died a physical death.

Baha’u’llah continues his argument by applying Principles 1 and 2 to deeds.<sup>7</sup> Each human being has an essence and reality - that is, the soul - and our deeds are its attributes, which have various names, descriptions and forms in all the worlds of God. The physical body is also one of its attributes. When the body dies, our deeds continue to be manifested in all the worlds of God as attributes of the soul. As a result, a person is necessarily confronted with the manifestations of their own deeds, even if those manifestations do not appear in the same form as they did when the deed was committed. Justice is carried out in whatever way God determines, in any world of God, through this process of unfolding manifestations.

“It is evident, then, that deeds will be preserved and every [acquired] attribute will continue to exist, so that through the attribute or deed itself requital can be given. Every [acquired] attribute a person possesses and every deed he commits, therefore, will reveal itself and take on a particular form in each world ‘so that He may requite each soul for what it has done.’”

The second half of the tablet is given to Baha’u’llah providing analogies, in a variety of contexts, showing how a reality and essence, can have, simultaneously, different names and descriptions, and forms and attributes in multiple worlds. The primary analogy he uses to

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<sup>7</sup> He also applies them to words, as Baha’u’llah makes clear later on: “Were I to remove the veil from the manifestations of the deeds, act, and words that appear in limitless and manifold forms in the worlds of God...” The following hidden word suggests the principles also apply to thoughts: “O heedless ones! Think not the secrets of hearts are hidden, nay, know ye of a certainty that in clear characters they are engraved and are openly manifest in the holy Presence.” Persian Hidden Word 59

show how this phenomenon works is the dream, which he says is like the afterlife and said to be its “brother”. In a dream, a person has an experience in the world of vision. Subsequently, the person formulates a meaning of the dream by interpreting aspects of the vision experience in terms of corresponding experiences in the person’s life in the physical world. Baha’u’llah cites as an example Joseph’s dream from Qur’an 12:4, where it is recounted that Joseph dreamed that the sun and the moon and eleven stars prostrated before him. Later, this experience is revealed in the physical world when Joseph is seated on the throne of Egypt, and his father, Jacob, and eleven brothers prostrate before him. Baha’u’llah explains that this sequence of events, involving the dream event and its subsequent physical manifestation, is an example of the principle that things have different manifestations in the worlds of God. Here, the reality and essence of Jacob appears in the physical world as a man with a certain bodily form, but in the dream world as a sun. Similarly, the brothers appear in the physical world in their respective physical bodies, but in the dream world as stars. Therefore, the essential realities of Jacob and the brothers appear in the physical world in forms that are different to those in the dream world.

Baha’u’llah makes an important enigmatic statement about the relationship between the manifestations of the essential realities of things in the dream world and their manifestations in the physical world. First of all, he has the reader consider *the nature of the dream world* from the perspective of the physical world. “Now consider. What kind of world is that wherein his father and mother are seen as the sun and the moon, and his brothers appear in the form of stars?” But then he reverses the perspective and has the reader consider *the nature of the physical world* from the perspective of the dream world. “And what is this world wherein the reverse is seen: the sun and the moon in the form of his father and mother, and the stars in the form of his brothers?” In asking these opposing, but parallel, questions, I think Baha’u’llah is calling into question the view that the physical world is real and the dream world is unreal, consisting only of transitory, ephemeral images. In asking the second question, Baha’u’llah forces the reader to view things in the physical world as symbols, where the physical bodies of the father and brothers are just corresponding metaphorical representations of the sun and stars of the dream world. From this perspective, the physical things in this world, despite their concrete appearance, are just manifestations of the realities and essences of things. Further on in the tablet, Baha’u’llah encourages the reader to see all the worlds of God, including the physical world, as metaphorical.

“God willing, to the extent you are cognizant of the divine worlds, you will recognize and understand the metaphorical nature of this world, and will be able to extend it to the limitless worlds.”

Baha’u’llah gives two further analogies illustrating how an essence and reality of a thing can appear in a variety of forms and characteristics. But this time, instead of focusing on the differences in form in the innumerable worlds of God, Baha’u’llah focuses on the physical

world alone and the way in which the manifestations of a thing change in form through time in this world. Baha'u'llah gives the scenario of a person stealing seeds from someone else in the season of spring. The thief plants the seeds and grows plants that bear fruit in summer. A just king then determines to restore to the victim what was taken. But how would he go about doing this? Would he return the seeds or give the victim the plants and their fruit?

Baha'u'llah concedes that a person could argue that the seeds no longer exist, and if they did exist would no longer be of use, and that the plants and fruit are not the same thing as the seeds. But Baha'u'llah rejects this position and argues that the seeds do still exist; they have changed in form and become plants and fruit. Giving these to the victim constitutes fair compensation for the loss of the seeds and, arguably, a more valuable return as a result of the changes in form. The scenario highlights the fact that a victim's right does not go out of existence even though events in the world lead to changes in the appearances of things. The reality and essence of the right is preserved and is restored to the right-holder in this world in another form.

In some cases, Baha'u'llah says, a victim is compensated in this world for a loss without that person being aware of it. The scenario he gives for this is where a person loses a great deal of wealth as a result of misfortune or wrongdoing. The compensation for such a loss is the lifting of the associated afflictions that come with possessing the wealth in the first place. If the wealth is stolen, these afflictions will settle on the thief. Baha'u'llah sees this outcome as a most efficient way to dispense justice.

Baha'u'llah ends the tablet with a second analogy related to changes in the manifested forms of things in the physical world. In this scenario, a Christian owes another some wine or pork. Subsequently, the two parties become Muslims, which means that the wine and pork are no longer of value. Baha'u'llah argues that a judge hearing the case would have to order that the debt be repaid in the equivalent of goods lawful under Islam or in cash. The example illustrates the same point, this time showing how the debt changes in form from wine or pork to something lawful in Islam. But the right is not extinguished by the fact that the two parties change their religion. It persists through these changes in circumstances. The scenario seems to underscore the fact that a person's rights are not annulled by a change in religious law due to the appearance of a new dispensation.