

Introduction to the *Musíbat-Ḥurúf-i-ʿAlín*, the Suffering of the Exalted Letters

By Joshua Hall

Bahá'u'lláh revealed the *Musíbat-Ḥurúf-i-ʿAlín*, or the Suffering of the Exalted Letters, during the Baghdad period following the death of His cousin, Muḥammad Vazír. He addressed it to His cousins Maryam and Havvá, the former being the sister of Muḥammad Vazír and the latter his wife, to the end that it might be a consolation to them and others in facing the ineluctable passing of family and loved ones. The Tablet takes the form of an extended supplication to God composed in eight parts, in which Bahá'u'lláh illustrates the creation of man, the journey to maturity and perfection, and then the process of death and the pain of desolation.

The term 'letter' in the Bábí signification was indicative of a believer, and parts one and two could thus be seen as describing the hardships and persecutions which the Letters of the Living sustained in the Bábí Dispensation, in addition to the woes that had befallen the entire body of the Cause. The second part employs the allegory of lamps shedding divine light, whom God preserved from "the winds of antipathy" but who eventually succumbed and were extinguished, perhaps narrating the careers of the stalwart defenders of the Báb's nascent Faith.

Part three describes the beginning of man, how the seed passes through the generations of the forefathers and attains unto the womb of one of God's handmaidens; how the embryo is formed by the loving providence of God and the fetus endowed with a noble and beautiful form. The man is born, grows to maturity under the guidance and shelter of God, attains belief in Him and steadfastness in His Cause—thereby coming to perfection as a creature of God—and then finally succumbing to the assailing tides of entropy and finding his final abode in the womb of the earth, paralleling his beginning in the womb of his mother. Bahá'u'lláh assures us that this is all in the design of God and is the realization of what He has ordained in His wisdom.

Bahá'u'lláh portrays a similar process with a heavenly Tree and a divine House, depicting the most sumptuous images of beauty, perfection, and wealth, along with the ultimate decline of the very same. The symbolic weight of these allegories should not be overlooked, and it is to be noted that the full depth and significance of this Work cannot be encompassed by a short outline.

To this point the Tablet has assumed the tone of a plaint and lamentation, while expressing resignation to God's decree and immutable judgement; it begins to transition in part seven, however, with Bahá'u'lláh's beseeching God's forgiveness for all that he had written in lamentation, affirming that God never deals unjustly with His servants, but rather ordains for them that which is the best for them in accordance with His divine wisdom; for if man never underwent the death of the body, he

could not obtain true life in the spirit. Bahá'u'lláh exclaims that it is as though He can behold Muḥammad Vazír traversing the heavenly realms of God and attaining unto the Beatific Vision, but that this reality which is known to Him is veiled from humanity, and so death is a cause of hardship and grief.

In the eighth part, we see another transition in Bahá'u'lláh's narrative, for He then makes mention of Havvá, who, her name meaning 'Eve', is described as being the namesake of the mother of all creation. He then makes mention of Maryam as she whom God singled out from amongst all women, insofar as she is named after Mary, the mother of Christ. He recounts, in heart-rending language, their suffering which followed the death of Muḥammad Vazír and their lonesomeness in that they were bereft of a mother to grieve for them, companions to console them, handmaidens to care for them and to comb their locks which had been disarrayed in grief. Bahá'u'lláh prays for these two women, beseeching God to solace and succour them, and closes the Tablet with a final supplication in the memory of Muḥammad Vazír.

This Tablet can well be considered as one among the most moving works of the Baghdad period, though previously inaccessible to the West on account of its not being translated into English. Bahá'u'lláh Himself translated it from the original Arabic into Persian at the request of some believers. This rendering He said was not literal, as that would not "be in accord with sweetness"; it could thus be regarded as being revealed anew in the Persian mode. The differences between the two versions are often very slight, although there is occasionally new material in the Persian translation, such as an address to the people of the Bayán, possibly reflecting the change in audience. The following provisional translation is based on the original Arabic text as found in *Ad'iyyih-i-Ḥaḍrat-i-Maḥbúb*.

To this day, the Suffering of the Exalted Letters is often recited at funerals by Bahá'ís of Eastern extraction, by virtue of its themes of birth, death, and the very purpose of human life and existence. It offers us a narrative illustration of the grieving process, beginning with shock and bereavement, sorrow and lamentation, moving to resignation and acquiescence, and finally ending in an understanding of death and human purpose as ordained by God. This Tablet is in its essence a meditation authored by one of no less a station than a Manifestation of God on the human journey and our ultimate goal.

The Tablet itself, as expressed earlier in this introduction, resists a brief encapsulation, and its richness, depth, and inner significance can perhaps only be opened by the contemplative and prayerful heart. It is my hope that the following provisional translation of this sublime example of God's Revelation will lead its readers to a greater appreciation of the Baghdad period in Bahá'u'lláh's ministry, and be a consolation to all those that have suffered the pain of bereavement.

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to Adib Masumian for his proofreading of the translation against the Arabic text, sometimes including consultation with Bahá'u'lláh's Persian rendering, as well as for his invaluable suggestions which improved the quality of this translation.