

The Tablet of All Food: The Hierarchy of the Spiritual Worlds and the Metaphoric Nature of Physical Reality

Jean-Marc Lepain *translated by Peter Terry*

Abstract

This paper analyses some of the terminology that Baha'u'llah uses in one of his earliest tablets, the Tablet of All Food (Lawḥ-i Kull ut-Ṭa'ām), which is addressed to a Babi, Ḥājī Mirzā Kamālu'd-Dīn Narāqī, who visited Baha'u'llah in Baghdad. In particular the hierarchy of the spiritual worlds is examined under the headings of the four terms that Baha'u'llah uses to describe this hierarchy: Hāhūt, Lāhūt, Jabarūt and Malakūt.

Baha'u'llah revealed the Tablet of All Food (Lawḥ-i Kull ut-Ṭa'ām) in April 1854, shortly before his departure to the mountains of Kurdistan, at a moment when he was experiencing severe hardship due to the dissension and disunity that beset the Babi community.¹ From the time of his arrival in Baghdad, Baha'u'llah had made considerable efforts to gather around himself the Babis, who after the martyrdom of the Bab, became disoriented. At the request of Baha'u'llah himself, his ambitious younger half-brother Mirza Yahya had been designated as the nominal leader of the community but soon revealed himself to be particularly incompetent and lacking in wisdom. Due to his conceit and cowardice, his relations with his older brother and the rest of the Babi community had deteriorated. Meanwhile, Baha'u'llah began to appear more and more as the true leader, involved in reanimating the spiritual life of his co-religionists. His efficacious leadership and his wise counsel rapidly bore fruit. Numerous Babis turned to him to receive spiritual advice and guidance. This situation invoked the jealousy of a number of other Babis, including Mirza Yahya who had fallen under the influence of a deceitful and ambitious person, Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani, who sowed the seeds of dissension in the community.

Shoghi Effendi writes:

A clandestine opposition, whose aim was to nullify every effort exerted, and frustrate every design conceived, by Baha'u'llah for the rehabilitation of a distracted community, could now be clearly discerned. Insinuations, whose purpose was to sow the seeds of doubt and suspicion and to represent Him as a usurper, as the subverter of the laws instituted by the Bāb, and the wrecker of His Cause, were being incessantly circulated. His Epistles, interpretations,

Keywords

Baha'u'llah
Tablet of All Food
Lawh-i Kullu
ut-Ṭa'ām
Baghdad
Hāhūt
Lāhūt
Jabarūt
Malakūt
Nāsūt

1. This paper is based on the first chapter of the book *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu: Ontologie des mondes divins dans les écrits de Baha'u'llah* (Paris: La Librairie Baha'ie, 1990).

2. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (rev. edn., Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1974) 117.
3. *ibid* 118.
4. *ibid* 118.
5. Qur'an 3:92.

invocations and commentaries were being covertly and indirectly criticized, challenged and misrepresented. An attempt to injure His person was even set afoot but failed to materialize.²

Baha'u'llah saw that the very efforts he was making to revive the Babi community were becoming the cause of disunity. He soon decided to leave Baghdad, retiring completely from the world to lead the life of a wandering dervish in the mountains of Kurdistan. The purpose of this retreat was to allow time for the antagonism of his enemies to subside while simultaneously delivering a salutary shock to the Babi community. At the time that Baha'u'llah wrote the Tablet of All Food, he certainly had meditated upon this retreat for he declares:

Give ear, O Kamāl! ... to the voice of this lowly, this forsaken ant, that hath hid itself in its hole, and whose desire is to depart from your midst, and vanish from your sight, by reason of that which the hands of men have wrought.³

This for Baha'u'llah was a period of intense moral and spiritual suffering, for nothing could afflict him more than to see the disunity of the Babi community and the believers debasing themselves and defiling their Faith by committing vile acts. The Tablet of All Food reflects this suffering, which appears as an echo in the text: 'Oceans of sadness have surged over Me, a drop of which no soul could bear to drink', and 'Such is my grief that My soul hath well nigh departed from My body,' and finally:

Woe is Me, woe is Me! ... All that I have seen from the day on which I first drank the pure milk from the breast of My mother until this moment hath been effaced from My memory, in consequence of that which the hands of the people have committed.⁴

The tablet is addressed to a Babi named Ḥājī Mīrzā Kamālu'd-Dīn from the small town of Narāq in Iran. Kamalu'd-Din had become a Babi some years earlier and, after the death of the Bab, he had remained firm in his faith notwithstanding the persecutions of the Babis and the dissensions he witnessed among them. The state in which the Babi movement found itself preoccupied him greatly and became one of the reasons that impelled him to travel to Baghdad. His avowed aim was to encounter Mirza Yahya, who was then considered to be the nominal representative of the Bab, and ask him for clarifications on a number of points of exegesis and mysticism. Having arrived in Baghdad, Kamalu'd-Din found it impossible to find Mirza Yahya who lived in hiding for fear of being identified as a Babi leader and who refused to enter into contact with the Babi community. He then wrote to Baha'u'llah asking him to solicit from Mirza Yahya a commentary upon a verse of the Qur'an taken from the Sūra of 'Imrān which says: 'All food was lawful to the children of Israel except what Israel forbade to itself before the Torah was sent down.'⁵

According to tradition, this verse was revealed by the Prophet Muhammad in reply to the attacks of the Jews of Medina who used to pride themselves on their scrupulous observance of the Law and were concerned

that the alimentary prohibitions of Islam were different and less numerous than those of the Torah.

Baha'u'llah transmitted Kamalu'd-Din's letter to Mirza Yahya who wrote back an answer so superficial that his interlocutor lost all faith in his spiritual eminence. Kamalu'd-Din then turned to Baha'u'llah whose eminence and knowledge he had begun to catch a glimpse of. It is under these circumstances that Baha'u'llah revealed for him the tablet known today as the Tablet of All Food.⁶

The reading of this tablet completely transformed Kamalu'd-Din. He was convinced that the person who had written it could not be any other than 'Him Whom God shall make manifest', the Promised One announced by the Bab. Baha'u'llah enjoined him to avoid prematurely divulging this mystery, and sent him to Iran, encouraging him to share the tablet with the Babis.⁷

The fundamental question that is raised here, as a point of exegesis, is the divinely ordained capacity of prophets to change social aspects of the divine law (*sharī'a*) after it has been revealed. Baha'u'llah will address this question again in the Book of Certitude (*Kitāb-i Ṭqān*) in a more detailed and didactic manner. The explanation that he gives in the Tablet of All Food deals more with the mystical aspects of the question.

The hierarchy of the spiritual worlds

The Tablet of All Food is written in Arabic and begins with a long prologue of great poetical character woven in a chain of metaphors. An impression of grandeur and of majesty is emitted throughout the whole treatise, captivating the reader through luminous expressions which Baha'u'llah puts into motion as oceans of light and of fire upon which the billowing waves break over one another before our eyes.⁸ He describes the inundation of an enflamed gushing ocean from the 'Temple of saintliness', a temple which constitutes in all likelihood an allusion to his own person.⁹ Then, changing register, he announces that the 'Dove of light', symbol of divine inspiration, has newly begun singing the eternal melodies, that a 'Light' shines upon Mount Sinai, and that the 'Bird of light' has come out from behind the veils which concealed it from the view of men.¹⁰

After this long preamble, Baha'u'llah begins his commentary by explaining that the word 'food' has numerous meanings and these meanings can only be understood through the hierarchy of the four spiritual worlds. These four worlds are the worlds of *Hāhūt*, *Lāhūt*, *Jabarūt* and *Malakūt*.¹¹ In other writings the name of *Nāsūt* appears as part of the hierarchy. It is the world of human beings (*nās*). It is not the physical world, but rather a psychological world in which we must fight our spiritual battles.

This terminology has a long history. Most of these words have an Aramaic origin. The concept of *Malakūt* emerges in the Aramean tradition between the 2nd century BCE and the 6th century CE as a term depicting God's sovereignty and is often associated with *Gebrūt* as an attribute of divine power. *Malkūt* is probably the word that Jesus used to name 'the Kingdom of God'. In a later tradition, *Malkūt* will become one of the ten *sefirot* of the Kabala. The word *Malakūt* appears three times in the Qur'an, but not the other names, which have been borrowed from the Jewish and Christian tradition through other sources. Originally the word was not associated with any angelic reference

6. *Mā'idih-yi Āsimānī* (9 vols., Tehran: Mu'assisih Milli Matbū'āt Amrī, 121–9 BE/1964–72, hereinafter *Ma'idih*) 4:265–76.
7. See Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh*, vol. 1 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1974) 55–60.
8. *Ma'idih* 4:265–6.
9. *ibid* 4:265.
10. *ibid* 4:266.
11. *ibid* 4:269.

12. The complete story of the formation of that vocabulary can be found in chapter 4 of *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu*.
13. Bahā'u'llāh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1952, hereinafter *GWB*) section 78, p. 150.
14. *ibid* 150.
15. *Ma'idih* 4:269. This and all further passages from Persian and Arabic works are provisional translations by the author.

(*malak*) but referred to the concept of sovereignty (*mamlaka*). *Lāhūt* probably comes from the Hebrew or Aramaic *Elāhūt*, which means 'divinity' and passed into Syriac in the form *alōhū* or *elōhūt*. *Hāhūt* is simply a word coined by Muslim mystics on the model of *Lāhūt*, which comes from the Arabic 'huwa' or 'huw' meaning 'He', and was used to refer to God's essence. Finally, *Nāsūt* also has an Aramaic and Syriac origin. Among the first Syriac-speaking Christians, *elāhūtō* and *nāshūtō* were two words used to refer to the double nature of Christ: divine and human. Among the first Muslim mystics, such as Hallāj (858–922), *lahūtiyya* and *nāsūtiyya* were also used to describe the opposition between the spiritual and material nature of the human soul. It was not until the 9th century that this terminology started to coalesce into a cosmology. For Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, c.980–1037), *Jabarut* becomes the world of celestial spirits and *Malakut* becomes the world of the agent intellects. Then comes Al-Makkī (d. 998), Ghazālī (1058–1111), Suhrawardī (1155–91), and Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240) who all bring their personal touch to the system. Finally, a synthesis appeared in the 14th century by 'Abdu'l-Razzāq Kashānī (d. c.1335). Shaykh Ahmad Ahsā'ī (1753–1826) and Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī (1793–1843) made abundant use of that vocabulary and passed it on to the Bab and Baha'u'llah. For several centuries this cosmology has fluctuated between four and five different worlds. This explains why there are some small variations in the use of this vocabulary by Baha'u'llah, depending on which system he was referring to, often on the basis of the philosophical affiliation of the tablet's recipient.¹²

The world of *Hāhūt*

The world of *Hāhūt* represents a station in which the essence of God remains unmanifested and totally veiled. On that ontological level, no other being exists but God. His singleness is total, and there is no creature to know Him. It is to this station of *Hahut* that the following words of the prophets apply: "In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him" and "The Lord was alone; with no one to adore Him".¹³ The world of *Hahut* is a world outside of time and before any causation. In that world there is no first cause or cause of causes in contrast with the world of time where God has always been a creator and where there was always a creature to know Him. This is why he indicates that these words signify 'that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of any one besides Him'.¹⁴

Baha'u'llah describes this world as the world of 'He is' (*Huwa*), and 'the Paradise of the Absolute Unicity' (*Aḥadiyya*).¹⁵ It is the *Absconditum* where no intelligence has ever penetrated. One refers to this world as to that of the 'Hidden Mystery' or the 'Primal Point', for the primal point (*al-nuqṭa al-awwaliyya*) is the first singularity from which all has proceeded and that encompasses in itself all the potentialities of existence. It is the One who contains nothing but himself and from whom all the numbers have been engendered. God, in that world, is an unmanifested essence, for the essence manifests itself by attributes, but they are not yet distinct from the essence. The ancient philosophers made reference to this world as the world of the 'One'.

This passage of the tablet can be related to a commentary that 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote in 1861, seven years later when he was only 17 years old, on

the famous saying (*ḥadīth*) of the Prophet Muhammad ‘I was a Hidden Treasure, I desired to be known and for this purpose I brought creation into being’. The first part of this commentary is consecrated to the station of the Hidden Treasure which Baha’u’llah has clearly identified with the world of *Hahut*. ‘Abdu’l-Baha explains that the station of the Hidden Treasure represents the invisible level of the divine essence in its most absolute unicity. To speak of this station philosophers and theologians of the past have used multiple terms each more obscure than the other, such as ‘the hidden identity’ (*ghayb al-huwiyya*), ‘the pure Unicity’ (*ṣarf al-aḥadiyya*), ‘the Occultation of occultations’ (*ghayb al-ghuyyūb*), ‘the unknown Absolute’, ‘the inaccessible to all qualification’ (*mahjūl al-na’āt*), or ‘the inaccessible to consciousness’ (*munqaṭ‘a al-wujdānī*) and others besides.¹⁶ As ‘Abdu’l-Baha remarks, the diversity of these expressions is in itself an indication of the perplexity of the human mind when dealing with such questions. The only thing that can be affirmed with certitude about this station is that the divine essence is inaccessible to human intelligence and is above all comparisons and all metaphors generally used to describe it. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, however, takes on one of the images employed in this literature to make his point. He writes that the only way to represent the divine essence consists in imagining a point and considering how in the point are hidden all the letters and all the words (in the writing of Arabic the point is an essential element which gives value to the letter), without being able to find in the point any trace of their ipseity (*huwiyyat*), and also without being able to establish the least distinction between them.¹⁷

Hence, when we consider the divine essence on the ontological level of *Hahut*, we can see that the names, the attributes and the essential potentialities (*shu’ūnāt-i dhātīyyih*)¹⁸ are in a state of non-existence. It is for this very reason that we refer to that essence as a ‘Hidden Treasure’. For even though, on this ontological level, nothing is manifested, nevertheless it is from the non-manifested potentialities of this essence that the existence of all things is derived. ‘Abdu’l-Baha then uses another image that is also a common feature of this metaphysic of Being, the image of the number One (*Aḥad*), which contains in itself all the numbers. Without the concept of the number One, other numbers could not exist. Therefore it is possible to consider that the number One is responsible for engendering all the other numbers and that all the numbers are contained in the One without, of course, finding in the One the least trace of these numbers.¹⁹ In this manner, the character of absolute transcendence of the divine essence is preserved. Baha’u’llah says, speaking of this station: ‘The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be, closed in the face of men.’²⁰

Finally, the Hidden Treasure retains its mystery, for, contrary to what the majority of the thinkers and philosophers of the past have said, Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha do not identify the Primal Point or the One with the divine essence. For them, such expressions should be considered at best as images (*tamthīl*) or mental representations (*taṣawwūrāt*) used only to facilitate our comprehension. In one of his tablets, Baha’u’llah affirms that it is false to speak of God as One for that introduces already a sign of quantity, and God is above all numbers and all quantity.²¹ It is a clear repudiation of the past doctrines of such philosophers as Plotinus and Neoplatonists who

16. *Makātīb-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahā* (vols. 1–3, Cairo, 1910–22) 2:7.
17. *ibid* 8.
18. The expression ‘*shu’ūnāt-i dhātīyyih*’ is an Arabic and Persian expression conveying the concept of ‘seminal reasons’ borrowed from Greek Stoicism.
19. *Makātīb* 2:9.
20. *GWB*, section 21, p. 49.
21. Bahā’u’llāh, *Prayers and Meditations* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1987), sect. 75, p. 123.

22. Bahā'u'llāh, *Book of Certitude (Kitāb-i Īqān)* quoted in *GWB*, sect. 22, p. 50.
23. *Ma'idih* 4:269.

said that God is the One or that the One is God, or Muslim Platonists or 'Ismā'ilī philosophers such as Nāṣiru'd-Dīn Tāsī, Nāṣir-i Khusraw or the School of the Brothers of Purity (*Ikhwān al-ṣafā*), who were to influence all subsequent philosophy in Persia and for whom either God created the One as the first emanation of Himself and as the agent of the creation of all things or the One is the first hypostasis which emanates from God and which engenders in its turn the hypostases of intelligence ('*aql*) and of the soul (*nafs*). In the Baha'i writings, all references to the Point or to the One are but a convenience of language.

The world of *Lāhūt*

In the world of *Lāhūt*, the attributes of God begin their unfoldment. The potentialities contained in the divine essence manifest themselves, but only within the boundaries of the divine essence. A distinction between the essence and the attributes can finally be made. Baha'u'llah describes this level of existence of the divine Manifestations as 'the station of pure abstraction and essential unity'.²² At this level of existence, it is impossible to make any distinction between God and the divine Manifestations. The Manifestations exist only in total union with the essence of God. They have no individuality, no separate identity. They do not possess any other self but the divine self; this is the reason this world is called the kingdom of 'He is He Who is and there is no other but Him' (*Huwa huwa wa lā ilā huwa*).²³ This world is the world of the first divine emanation (*tajallī*), that is to say the Holy Spirit or the divine Word. The Word is the spiritual force God uses to create the world. The philosophers have named this spiritual force 'Logos' or 'Nous'.

Baha'u'llah, in many passages of his writings, refers to the world of the divine Word as the invisible force that animates his manifestation and the inspiration that moves his pen. Sometimes he speaks of it as a totally divine world, external to himself, where the essence of God manifests itself as 'the Lord of Lords'. Sometimes he describes the Word as manifesting itself through his own person and incarnating in him. This indicates two points of view, both of which are relative and neither of which is exclusive. In his writings Baha'u'llah frequently distinguishes these two ontological viewpoints. The western reader would be mistaken in believing that they are pure artifices of poetry. When, for example, Baha'u'llah refers to himself as 'the Tongue of Grandeur', or 'the Most Exalted Pen', he does not use simple poetic metaphors. Rather, such expressions introduce different ontological and metaphysical distinctions between him as a person and the Word for which he is the mouthpiece. Once he spoke from *Lahut* and at another time he spoke from the *Jabarut*. These ontological stations change the perspective he gives on reality and these expressions become precious indications that allow the spiritual and metaphysical meaning of such passages to unfold.

As already stated, there is no possibility of making any distinction between God and His Manifestation in the world of *Lahut*. The Manifestation appears in the absolute nakedness of his own essence and in union with the divine essence. There is no trace of his individual self, and any other vestige of his personal identity has vanished. For this very reason, this station is called 'the Universal Manifestation' (*Mazhar-i kullī*).

It is to this station that Baha'u'llah refers when he identifies himself with 'the burning bush or the light burning on Mount Sinai'. It is this Universal Manifestation whom the Prophet Muhammad encountered during his ascension to heaven (*mi'rāj*), taking the form of the 'Tree of the boundary' or 'Divine Lote Tree' (*Sadrat al-muntahā*),²⁴ the image that designates the point beyond which there is no passage for any human spirit. Jesus was speaking of this ontological level when he said: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega'; as was Muhammad when he said 'I am the first and the last of the messengers of God'. For on this level of existence each divine messenger is the return of all those who have preceded him and is the incarnation of all those who will follow him for they form but one spirit in total union with the divine Being.

The world of *Lahut* contains in potentiality all the other levels of existence and all the creatures of these worlds. It is through the activity of the Word of God that the creation passes from a virtual existence to an existence in act. This is the reason that Baha'u'llah refers to this level of existence as a world in which the two letters K and N (which form in Arabic the word *Kun!* or *Be!*) were 'joined and knit together',²⁵ for, according to the Qur'an,²⁶ it is by this word that God created the world.

Only the divine Manifestation has access to the world of *Lahut*. The divine dove and the mystical nightingale are other personifications of the world of *Lahut*. It is from this world that divine inspiration descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove on the day of his baptism and the angel Gabriel who appeared to Muhammad is another personification of that world. In the writings of Baha'u'llah, the prophetic inspiration is sometimes symbolized by a dove or a nightingale, sometimes by a virginal and angelic creature which is called a *Hūrī*. Like the dove on the day of Jesus' baptism, this celestial *Huri* appeared to Baha'u'llah in the Siyāh-Chāl at the moment in which he received the first intimation of his prophetic mission. It is important to note that the *Huri* does not represent an actual vision. Rather it should be taken as an image depicting in symbolic terms the mystical experience of the prophetic inspiration that results from total union with God.

The world of *Jabarūt*

Below the world of *Lahut* comes the world of *Jabarūt*, a world in which nothing exists but the divine will (*Jabr*). In this world one finds only God and His Manifestations. At this level of existence divine Manifestations leave the level of the fused union of essences, which is particular to *Lahut*, and acquire individual existences. Baha'u'llah describes this level of existence of the divine Manifestations as 'the station of distinction' which pertains 'to the world of creation and limitation thereof' and which is characterized by 'differentiation, temporal limitation, characteristics and standards'.²⁷ In this world, the Manifestations become the channels of the divine will. They are the archangels of which the Mosaic tradition speaks. To them is applied the formula 'Thou (the Manifestation) art He (God) and He (God) is thee (the Manifestation)'.²⁸

Baha'u'llah refers to this world using various expressions such as 'the Kingdom of unity' (*Wāḥidiyya*), 'the most exalted Paradise', 'the Paradise of Justice', 'the Tabernacle of Glory' or 'the world of divine decrees', for

24. See for example *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1975) Persian no. 77; *GWB*, sect. 42, p. 91.
25. See the Long Obligatory Prayer (trans. Shoghi Effendi) in *Bahā'ī Prayers* (Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1983) 13.
26. Qur'an 36:82.
27. Bahā'u'llāh, *Book of Certitude* (*Kitāb-i Īqān*) quoted in *GWB*, sect. 22, pp. 50–51.
28. *Ma'idih* 4:270.

29. Henri Corbin translated this expression as '*le monde de l'imperatif*' (the world of the [divine] imperative).
30. Regarding the Mother Book, in the Sūra of the Thunder (*Sūrat ar-ra'd*) we read: 'God effaces that which He wishes and establishes that which He wishes for He holds the Mother-Book' (Qur'an 13:39), and in the Sūra of the Family of 'Imrān: 'He is caused to descend upon you the Book in which are found the well-established verses of the Mother-Book' (Qur'an 3:7).
31. The expression 'Preserved Tablet' only appears once in the Qur'an in the Sura of the Signs of the Zodiac (*Sūrat al-burūj*) which ends with these words: 'In truth this is the glorious Qur'an in the form of a preserved Tablet.' The word *alwāḥ*, in the plural form, appears in several other places in the Qur'an. In the Sura of al-A'raf, the term designates the Tables of Laws (*alwāḥ*) which Moses brought back from Mount Sinai (Qur'an 7:145, 150, 154).
32. Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, 1938) 253–4.
33. The word appears in Jewish apocryphal literature. In the Book of Jubilees (2:10), it is said that the laws concerning the rites of purification of the bedridden are written upon a tablet in the heaven. We find the same affirmation concerning the law of the Tabernacles (Leviticus 22; Jubilees 22:5) and

in this world there exists only the decree (*qaḍā*) of God, and it is by this decree that the divine Manifestation speaks and acts. Through the power of *Jabarut* the divine decree rules over the world, for the Word of God always prevails in the end. The divine decrees are the spiritual laws that will never be changed. They constitute the fundamental order hidden behind the reality of all things, the source of all knowledge, human or divine. Whoever has attained complete understanding of these laws has entered paradise and has grasped the ultimate reality of unity, for true unity is the unity of will between the creature and the Creator. Baha'u'llah also speaks of this world as the 'World of Command' (*'ālam al-amr*),²⁹ for it is by this command (*amr*) that all the creatures (*khalq*) have come into existence. The 'World of Command' is distinguished from the 'World of Creation', or 'Created World' (*'ālam al-khalq*), by the fact that the World of Command is the world of divine justice, while the World of Creation is the world of mercy; for without the divine mercy, the creatures, because of their imperfection, could not subsist.

Jabarut is also the world of the Mother Book (*umm al-kitāb*) and of the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ al-mahfūz*). Both expressions have Qur'anic origins³⁰ but Baha'u'llah uses them with completely new meanings. We must remember that, for most Muslims, the Qur'an is an uncreated book. They believe that from all eternity a celestial prototype of the divine Qur'an has existed engraved on a tablet made of an inalterable substance and it is that celestial prototype that is called the Mother Book. The angel Gabriel did nothing more than dictate the book to the Prophet Muhammad who transmitted it to human beings. The Preserved Tablet is an extension of the same concept.³¹ The expression is mentioned only once and it is the only place that the rather mysterious word 'tablet' (*lawḥ*) appears in the singular, apparently with a technical meaning associated with holy writings probably borrowed from Hebrew³² or Aramean.³³ Baha'u'llah, having chosen this word to designate his short writings as opposed to the 'books' (*kitāb*), indicates that they have the same inspirational and authoritative status and should be considered as part of the divine revelation. According to Muslim commentators, the Preserved Tablet represents the plaque upon which all divine decrees have been inscribed, making God's decision irrevocable. Whatever is inscribed on the Preserved Tablet cannot be changed and this is supposed to apply to the part of the *sharī'a* (legal system) that is directly mentioned in the Qur'an.

Baha'u'llah gives a different interpretation to these expressions. The Mother Book and the Preserved Tablet represent the quintessence of revelation (*wahy*), the spiritual laws that are eternal. The Mother Book represents the divine knowledge that the Manifestations share with God in the world of *Jabarut*. When in the Tablet of Ahmad Baha'u'llah says of the Bayān that 'It is the Mother Book', he does not mean that the Bayan is uncreated or contains laws that cannot be changed, rather he means to confirm the inspirational status of the book as part of the divine revelation. The Bayan is part of the same truth that is revealed again and again. In *Jabarut* the revelation exists independently of all human knowledge; it has no need of the garment of words and is not submitted to the contingency that characterizes the created world. When the divine Manifestation transmits the divine revelation to men, he gives it a contingent form that

is the form of human language. In the Baha'i Faith the concept of revelation goes far beyond the revealed words of the holy books. The distinction made by Baha'u'llah between his revelation and his writings appears clearly in this passage:

Say: The First and Foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He has established the words He hath revealed as proof of his reality and truth.³⁴

The concept of revelation not only includes the words revealed by the prophets but his deeds and his lasting influence on the world. Revelation is a power at work in God's creation. It is the source of the progress of humankind and the cause of transformation of society. It can influence people even when they have never read Baha'u'llah's writings or heard of his message. Thus the Mother Book does not represent the prototype of any particular book, but the matrix from which all the revealed books have been issued forth, the knowledge that God shares with His Manifestations and which is common to all dispensations.

The Preserved Tablet, which Baha'u'llah sometimes calls the Tablet of Chrysolite,³⁵ has an even greater meaning. It is upon this tablet that the divine decrees (*qaḍā*) are inscribed and consequently it becomes the source of the knowledge of the past and of the future. It is the symbol of the omniscience of the divine Manifestations and of the omnipotence of God. Omniscience and omnipotence should be considered as two aspects of the same reality of the *Jabarut* and it is from that source that the Manifestations derive their knowledge and power. The 'divine Pen' (*qalam-i ilāhī*) becomes then the expression of this omnipotence for this is the pen that registers the divine decrees; at the same time the pen is a symbol of omniscience for it is the channel of revelation. There is a clear association between the idea of 'pen' and the idea of 'tablet', which are both personifications of the *Jabarut*. Shoghi Effendi wrote: 'The Preserved Tablet is a spiritual expression and has no actual existence. It sometimes refers to the Manifestation Himself, Whose knowledge encompasses the knowledge of the former and the latter generations.'³⁶

The world of *Malakūt*

The world of *Malakūt*, which is situated below *Jabarut*, is the angelic kingdom of those souls to whom God has revealed Himself in the splendour of His 'greatest manifestation' (*al-maẓhar al-akbar*).³⁷ In the Tablet to Varqā Baha'u'llah has given us a striking description of this world. He explains that the term *Malakūt* covers two significances. The first concerns the Manifestation and the second 'the world of images' (*ālam al-mithāl*) which is an intermediary world between *Jabarut* and the human world of mortality (*Nasūt*), between 'the heavens' and 'the earth'. In the Muslim tradition, *Malakūt* is the angelical world, the world of angels (*malak*). It is also through that world that holy men receive visions. However in the Baha'i writings, the word *Malakūt* has a completely different function. *Malakūt* is a dimension of the contingent universe (*ālam al-mumkināt*). It is in *Malakūt* that the soul resides, for the soul is an essence (*jawhar*)

the law of the tenth (Leviticus 27), from whence Judaism developed the idea that all the laws are transcribed from a 'Tablet' which is found close to God. In the pseudo-epigraphical literature, the celestial tablets are considered as the original text of the revelation. It is due to the knowledge of these tablets that the prophet Hanoch (Enoch) had precognition of the future.

34. GWB sect. 52, p. 105.
35. *Persian Hidden Words* no. 64 and GWB, 104:209. 'Abdu'l-Baha writes: 'Thou hast asked about the "Tablet of Chrysolite" and the "Preserved Tablet". By the "Chrysolite Tablet" is meant the Book of Bahā'u'llāh's Covenant which is the Preserved Tablet. It was hidden and preserved, now it is made manifest and resplendent. The Chrysolite Tablet is recorded and enshrined in the inmost recesses of the Book of the Covenant.' ('Abdu'l-Bahā, from a Tablet translated from the Persian by the Research Department, and included in an unpublished compilation, found at <http://bahai-library.org/unpubl.compilations/hw.compilation.html>).
36. In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi on the margin of an incoming letter dated 8 July 1929, instructing his secretary – translated from the Persian by the Research Department, and included in an unpublished compilation, found at <http://bahai-library.org/>

37. *Ma'idih* 1:19, 4:226
(Tablet of Examination
or *Lawḥ-i Istintāq*).
38. *Ma'idih* 1:18.
39. See for example
Persian Hidden Words
no. 77 and *GWB*,
sect. 42, p. 91.

and essences never leave the world of essences. The soul cannot incarnate itself in matter; it can only reflect itself in matter just as the light reflects in a mirror. Therefore it can be said that all human beings have a Malakutian dimension. We are all part of the physical world (*Nasut*) as well as of the spiritual world (*Malakut*). It is the soul that communicates with the divine worlds, and consequently everything that comes from those worlds, such as the grace of God and His inspiration, must pass through *Malakut* to reach humanity. This explains the intermediate character of the world of *Malakut*. Baha'u'llah explains that when the Word of God descends from the world of *Lahut* towards humanity, it passes into the world of *Jabarut* where it is made manifest, this constituting the first step of 'substantiation'³⁸ (*taqyīd*). When the Word descends to the level of *Malakut*, it confers upon those who dwell therein the blessings of the power coming from the superior levels.

The world of *Malakut* has great importance for humans because it is the only spiritual world of which we can form a feeble mental representation. The physical world itself, the world of *Nasut*, is but an emanation of *Malakut* which encompasses it totally. As such, *Malakut* has sometimes been termed the 'world of images' in a way that is not without resemblance to the platonic world of ideas, although Baha'i metaphysics is certainly not Platonist. Baha'u'llah tells us that the world of humanity (*Nasut*) is but a metaphorical image of *Malakut*. *Malakut* is the destiny, the finality of human beings. It is the spiritual world par excellence, 'the Kingdom of Abhā', the world of souls, where, beyond physical death, human beings pursue their spiritual development in their infinite voyage towards God.

Baha'u'llah tells us that the world of *Malakut* is itself hierarchized according to the degree of spiritual development of the souls therein. At the summit of *Malakut* is found 'the celestial Arc', 'the Crimson Ark' upon which sail the souls of the prophets, the martyrs and the saints who form 'the Supreme Concourse' (*Malā-yi A'lā*),³⁹ 'the angelic troops', 'the Celestial Assembly', ready at every moment to come to the rescue of those who arise to uphold the Cause of God. After leaving their physical bodies the souls of the departed continue their existence in the *Malakut* according to the station they have reached by their spiritual development during their earthly life. Souls are conscious of the plight of other souls that have not reached the same degree of development but they are unable to understand adequately the bliss of the souls who live in higher stations.

The metaphorical character of *Malakūt*

When human beings pursue their spiritual development in the world of *Nasut*, they do so by means of actions such as helping and serving their fellow human beings, sacrificing their comfort in order to accomplish noble and altruistic tasks, contributing from their means to the support of religion, augmenting their love for others through philanthropic acts, developing their spiritual comprehension by associating with pure and detached persons, daily recitation and reading of the revealed Word, and promoting and promulgating the teachings of their faith. These actions, Baha'u'llah tells us, contribute to the spiritual development of human beings because

they are the symbolic representations, one could say the 'images', of the functions of the soul in *Malakut*.

Our life in this world, the world of *Nasut*, is then a metaphorical image of what our life will be like in the other world, the world of *Malakut*. In this world, human beings exercise and develop their spiritual functions, which in the next world will become the equivalent of the physical senses in this world, permitting them to live a new existence conforming to the spiritual nature of the disembodied soul. If the soul fails to develop its spiritual qualities in this world, it will not grow and it will enter the Kingdom in a state of spiritual atrophy that will render its existence in *Malakut* similar to that of the blind and the deaf upon this earth. As for those who will have developed their spiritual qualities, these will become new senses for them by which they will breathe 'the celestial breezes', will hear the 'divine melodies', and will contemplate meta-physical landscapes that will cheer them in their deepest selves. The quality of the world of humanity (*Nasut*) as a metaphorical reflection or image of *Malakut* is illustrated by an anecdote told by 'Abdu'l-Baha in his book *Memorials of the Faithful (Tadhkirat al-Wafā)*. In this book, he tells us of the life and death of 74 of the close companions of Baha'u'llah. In the chapter consecrated to Mullā 'Alī-Akbar, who was named by Baha'u'llah a 'Hand of the Cause of God', and who played a very significant role in the propagation of the Baha'i teachings, 'Abdu'l-Baha describes a dream that he had some years after the death of this individual:

One night, not long ago, I saw him in the world of dreams. Although his frame had always been massive, in the dream world he appeared larger and more corpulent than ever. It seemed as if he had returned from a journey. I said to him, 'Jināb, you have grown good and stout.' 'Yes,' he answered, 'praise be to God! I have been in places where the air was fresh and sweet, and the water crystal pure; the landscapes were beautiful to look upon, the foods delectable. It all agreed with me, of course, so I am stronger than ever now, and I have recovered the zest of my early youth. The breaths of the All-Merciful blew over me and all my time was spent in telling of God. I have been setting forth His proofs, and teaching His Faith.⁴⁰

'Abdu'l-Baha added this particularly significant commentary: 'The meaning of teaching the Faith in the next world is spreading the sweet savours of holiness; that action is the same as teaching.'⁴¹

This short text teaches us two things. The first is that the most important actions of our terrestrial life such as loving one's fellows, propagating the divine teachings, giving and receiving unselfishly, all have a counterpart in *Malakut* and should be regarded as the symbolic expressions of the life of the soul in the divine Kingdom. The second is that as long as human beings inhabit this physical world, they can neither comprehend nor directly express the realities of the spiritual world. As long as they are prisoners of this world, their intelligence cannot understand these realities and no human language can describe them. All it can do, at the very best, is to have a vague intuition of their reality. Poetic language is the only way to mediate this communicational impossibility, and recourse to metaphors based upon this sensible world is therefore inevitable.

40. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Memorials of the Faithful* (trans. Marzieh Gail, Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1971) 12.

41. *ibid* 12.

42. *Ma'idih* 4:19-20.

43. 'Abdu'l Bahā,
*Selections from the
Writings of 'Abdu'l-
Bahā* (Haifa: Bahā'ī
World Centre, 1978)
no. 163, p. 195.

However, these metaphors are not simple poetic artifices. They contain a portion of the spiritual truth that goes beyond the limitation of words. Thus, in this story of 'Abdu'l-Baha we must understand that the pleasures of our physical senses, such as smelling a perfume, contemplating a landscape, savouring a delicious meal, are the terrestrial images of the life of the soul in *Malakut*. To go beyond that in the comprehension of this mystery seems to be impossible. Nevertheless, for those who possess spiritual comprehension, meditation upon this natural world allows some degree of intuitive understanding of the spiritual world.

The unity of the divine worlds

The relationship that exists between this world, the world of *Nasut*, and the spiritual worlds is a very rich theme. All the great mystics have intuited this connection. For example, in the writings attributed to Hermes we read: 'The world below is the image of the world above.' Baha'u'llah explains to us that the world below (*Nasut*) and the *Malakut* are not two worlds totally separated from one another but are rather two parts of one greater world, which he calls 'the world of creation' (*'ālam-i khalq*) or 'the contingent world' (*'ālam-i mumkināt*), and both are governed by the same laws. In a tablet addressed to a believer named Yūsuf Isfahani,⁴² Baha'u'llah explains that all the divine worlds revolve around this world. He says that for this reason, the soul, which in this world has always behaved according to the Will of God and according to His commands, after its departure for the other world, will demonstrate qualities that in this world existed only as potentialities. He adds that in each world there exists for every soul a state that was previously assigned to it. 'Abdu'l-Baha writes in one of his tablets:

Those souls who are pure and unsullied, upon the dissolution of their elemental frames, hasten away to the world of God, and that world is within this world. The people of this world, however, are unaware of that world, and are even as the mineral and the vegetable that knows nothing of the world of the animal and the world of man.⁴³

It is this differentiation and interdependence between the two worlds that explains that the spiritual laws governing the whole of creation take different forms adapted to the requirements of each of the different worlds. Since the most remote antiquity, it has been understood that a fundamental similitude exists between 'the world above' and 'the world below'. But each religion, each tradition, has given its own interpretation of this similitude often based on philosophy and metaphysical speculation. The Baha'i writings suggest that meditating upon the physical realities of this world can be a means of understanding the spiritual realities of the other world, providing that in doing so we do not lose sight of what has been outwardly conveyed to us through divine Revelation, and that we allow ourselves to be guided by this divine Revelation. If the world of creation reflects spiritual laws, it is not merely due to the unity of the physical world and the spiritual world, for inasmuch as these worlds are a divine emanation, the least atom of the physical world reflects the divine

attributes according to its capacity. In the Words of Paradise (Kalimāt-i-Firdawsīyih) Baha' u'llah writes:

Every created being however revealeth His signs which are but emanations from Him and not His Own Self. All these signs are reflected and can be seen in the book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a most great book.⁴⁴

44. *Ishraqāt va Chand Lawh-i Dīgar* (Bombay, n.d.) 116 and Bahā' u'llāh, *Tablets of Bahā' u'llāh revealed after the Kitāb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1988) 60.

Because the spiritual worlds are beyond the power of words, only the use of metaphors can allow us to approach them, and when we start reading Baha'i writings we soon find that there are a number of recurrent themes.

One of these recurrent themes is the similitude that exists between the embryo in the womb of its mother and this terrestrial life. We will look in detail at this theme because it is a good demonstration of how the Baha'i writings base their description of the physical world on inferences developed from metaphors. This approach is based on two principles: the physical world is a metaphorical image of the spiritual world (and not the reverse) and nature is an expression of the Will of God, therefore continuity exists between physical and spiritual laws. The law of progress is universal. Spiritual evolution is simply the continuation of biological evolution.

This theme begins with the recognition that the embryo in the womb of the mother has no knowledge of an external world. It is not even conscious of its mother's existence and has no understanding of its environment. In the same way, human beings in this world, if they rely solely on their physical senses, might be led to believe that the physical world is the only world that exists, although, 'Abdu'l-Baha says, the distance that separates this world from the spiritual world is even thinner than the uterine membrane. The spiritual world completely surrounds the physical world. In the same way the matrix is narrow and dark, this physical world will appear narrow and dark to those who leave it.

Another idea that comes from this metaphor is that the uterine world and the external world are governed by the same laws, even though these laws manifest in different ways. Likewise, the material world and the spiritual world are also governed by the same laws, even if they appear different, for these two worlds form only one reality. The physical world is only a small region of a larger world that is the 'World of Creation' (*'ālam al-khalq*), just as the uterus is part of the physical world.

The comparison that can be made between the uterine world and the physical world does not end here, as the development of the soul can be compared to the development of the embryo. From the moment the ovum is fertilized, we know that gestation will not exceed nine months. Uterine life has a term just as physical life has a term. At the end of the nine months, the embryo reaches maturity, which means that in order to continue its development it must leave the mother's womb and pass into the extra-uterine world. Staying indefinitely in this physical world would not lead to more spiritual progress. When the fruit is ripe it must fall from the tree and release its seed, otherwise it will wither on the branch and completely fail to fulfil its purpose. When the infant is born before term, she might pass through a critical phase during which her life is in the balance and she needs special care. However, she is likely to recuperate and later continue

45. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1978), sect. 158, pp. 187–8; *Muntakhabātī az Makātīb-i Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā*, vol. 1 (Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1979), sect. 158, p. 183.
46. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* (trans. Laura Dreyfus Barney, Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1981) ch. 66, pp. 238–40 *passim*.
47. *ibid* 339.
48. See for example 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Selections*, sect. 156, pp. 183–5.
49. *Makātīb* 1:337–42.
50. *ibid* 1:339.
51. *ibid* 1:338.

her development in the normal way. In the same way, when someone dies before having completed his spiritual development, he might go through a critical phase and become completely dependent on the grace of God. Others complete their spiritual development rapidly and leave this world early. An example of that can be found in the life of Thomas Breakwell, the first British Baha'i, who died prematurely at the age of 29, shortly after embracing the Baha'i Faith and having demonstrated extraordinary steadfastness in his faith despite intense suffering. In a tablet of visitation that he wrote after Breakwell's death, 'Abdu'l-Baha says that he left the world of *Nasut* to rise to the world of *Malakut*, then having received the confirmation of the grace of the world of *Lahut*, he arrived at the threshold of the Lord of *Jabarut*.⁴⁵ Others leave this world prematurely because the world, rather than being a means and an instrument for their spiritual development, has instead become an obstacle.⁴⁶

In the uterine world, the embryo develops lungs, arms, legs and so forth, which apparently are of no use to him. If the embryo could understand his plight, he might wonder why he needs legs, arms, lungs and eyes. The infant in the uterine world cannot imagine what seeing, smelling or speaking signifies, for these are functions that belong to the physical world. Likewise, as long as humans are in this world, they cannot imagine what the awakening of their spiritual senses will represent in the other world.⁴⁷ 'Abdu'l-Baha teaches that in this physical world, human beings are in exactly the same situation as the embryo. The purpose of physical life is to develop spiritual qualities. Humans might wonder why they need spiritual qualities since some people seem to live a comfortable and happy life without aiming for high spiritual attainments. But the Baha'i writings teach that spiritual qualities are, in the next world, like legs, arms and eyes in this world. Humans enjoy life because they have an adapted physical body and senses to perceive the world. Living without the capacity of walking or seeing is a serious handicap. Similarly, failing to develop their spiritual qualities in this world will result in us entering the next world with spiritual handicaps because spiritual qualities are the means by which we will interact with the spiritual world. 'Abdu'l-Baha developed this theme in many of his tablets and talks.⁴⁸ In one tablet in Persian⁴⁹ he explains that as long as the embryo is in the womb of its mother its physical defects and imperfections are hidden, for defects and imperfections do not become manifest until after birth. So also, to a large degree, human spiritual defects and imperfections are not apparent in this world, but when humans enter the next world then these in their turn become evident and manifest.⁵⁰

Infinite variations on such a theme are possible. However, one should not believe that this is a simple metaphor. Such metaphors are powerful because they express a deep reality: the lower world is an image of the higher world. Metaphors are necessary because reality is structured in a metaphoric *manner*. They express the deep relationship that exists between things throughout all of God's creation.

In the same tablet cited above, 'Abdu'l-Baha declares that human life can be compared to a tree and that the metaphorical heaven and hell of the tree are contained in the fruit.⁵¹ The tree is responsible for the fruit it produces. Paradise and hell are in us. They are spiritual states.

'Abdu'l-Baha adds that those who negate the existence of the spiritual worlds are in the same position as the mineral that negates the existence

of the vegetable world or the vegetable that negates the existence of the animal world. The internal organization of the mineral and vegetable worlds provides no information to them about higher worlds.⁵² Likewise, for those whose spiritual senses have not begun to awaken, the internal organization of their human nature does not disclose the existence of higher spiritual worlds. However, in essence, the world of existence, physical and spiritual, is but one world.⁵³

Another theme that can be encountered in the Baha'i writings is the similarity between the laws that govern the growth of a tree and those that govern the spiritual development of humanity.⁵⁴ The image of the tree shows us the interdependency that exists between the divine worlds. The tree belongs to the vegetable world, while it derives all of its substance from the mineral world, that is to say, from an inferior world. In a similar fashion, God did not wish for human beings to be pure spirit, for otherwise He would have created them spiritually perfect. This would have been a violation of the fundamental law of the world of being that says that everything in the creation of God must be submitted to the law of evolution and progress. Instead, God has created the physical world to be the instrument of human spiritual development. The material world is the world in which humans root their future growth, even as the tree plunges its roots into the earth. Humans have need of the material world to nourish their spiritual growth; for without the embodiment of the soul and its passage in this transient physical reality, spiritual evolution would be impossible or completely dependent on the grace of God. Even as the vegetable world is built upon the mineral world and the animal world upon the vegetable world, so also the spiritual world is built upon the human world (*'alam-i insānī* or *Nasut*). Each of the superior worlds encompasses the inferior worlds and all are interdependent just as reflected in the different kingdoms of nature.

While the nature of the tree is to plunge its roots in the soil to take from the earth its sustenance, if a tree chose to bury its branches in the soil, it would condemn itself to wither away and to rot. Its very nature pushes it to lift up its branches towards the sky in the opposite direction to the earth to receive the direct light of the sun. For humans, the equivalent of this reaching up of branches is the law of detachment. Even though the material world is there to take care of the needs of their spiritual development, nevertheless, they cannot attain this development without detaching themselves from the things of this world. For that reason, without detachment there is no spiritual development possible. The essential nature of human beings is spiritual and it attracts them to the spiritual world even as the branches of the tree are attracted to the sky.

If the tree directs its branches to the sky, it is because it is attracted by the light of the sun. So too, human beings are naturally attracted by the 'Sun' of the divine Manifestation and it is this spiritual light that conditions their spiritual development. The light of the sun permits the tree to produce leaves, then flowers and fruits. Likewise, the light of the 'Sun' of the Manifestation allows human beings to develop their spiritual qualities and perform good deeds. In a forest, we will find trees of varied heights. Some are immense and tower to the canopy of the forest. These trees are in direct contact with the rays of the sun. Then there are trees that live in their shadow. In the final analysis however, all the trees derive their life through

52. *ibid* 1:340-1.

53. *ibid* 341. The Persian text says: "ālam-i-vujūd 'ālam-i vāhid-ast (the world of existence is only one world)'.

54. Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahā'u'llāh*, vol. 1 (rev. edn., Oxford: George Ronald, 1975) 310.

the light of the sun, even those that do not directly receive this light. There even exist parasitic plants like tropical creepers, ivy or mistletoe, which notwithstanding their own feebleness make use of other trees to attain this light. Human life is formed in a similar fashion. There are individuals who live directly in the light of the Manifestation and those who never see that light. But in these two cases it is always the light of the Manifestation that is the cause of their existence and of their spiritual development. This is why the path of spiritual development is never totally blocked, even to those who do not recognize God and His Manifestation.

Because all God's creatures are dependent on the light of 'the Sun of Reality', the world of existence can only be one. The differences that we see between *Hahut*, *Lahut*, *Jabarut*, *Malakut* and *Nasut* are purely conceptual. However, the same divine light is infused through all these worlds. Everything created exists only by the breath of the Holy Spirit. Nothing would exist without this light, which is the cause of the existence of all things.

One could elaborate infinitely upon this theme of the similarities between the laws of the physical world and those of the spiritual world. There are many examples of this theme found in the writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha; for example, 'Abdu'l-Baha says that universal gravity is an example of the law of love which is the fundamental law governing all of creation and indeed all the divine worlds?

These few reflections allow us to see that the metaphorical character of the physical world in relation to the spiritual world is not like a simple play of mirrors. This metaphorical relation is the expression of something much more profound which derives from the unity of the creation of God; unity which encompasses as much the physical world as the spiritual, the sensible as the intelligible.

The infinite continuum of the divine worlds

All that we have said about the different divine worlds obviously implies that, when Baha'u'llah refers to these worlds, his explanation is necessarily limited by human language and by our comprehension. It is but a faint glimmer and without doubt very distant from reality. The divine worlds form an infinite continuum. Any attempt to establish distinctions between them is but a creation of the human mind based upon arbitrary criteria.

Nevertheless, the definitions that Baha'u'llah gives of the divine worlds provides a precious key that unlocks and therefore allows us to comprehend his writings. It often happens that when reading his writings one may ask, who is this person speaking? Is it God? Is it a personification of the Holy Spirit? Is it the universal Manifestation or is it Baha'u'llah? In the same text Baha'u'llah often use several levels of language, sometimes creating dialogues between these levels. Once he speaks as a mere man, and once as Divinity personified. Sometimes he introduces distinct entities such as the nightingale, the dove, the celestial pen and so forth. At other times, his writings represent a dialogue between various voices, as in the Fire Tablet. These different levels of language represent the different aspects of the divine Manifestation as viewed from the perspective of the worlds of *Lahut*, *Jabarut*, *Malakut* and *Nasut*.

This hierarchy of the spiritual worlds does not derive its meaning from a creationist theology as can be found in Muslim philosophy or among

certain Christian Neoplatonist authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Baha'u'llah's intention has never been to develop a cosmology but to explain the relationship of God and His Manifestation, and consequently between His Manifestation and His creature. To understand fully that idea we must give up the old mental schemes of Muslim philosophy or of Christian scholasticism and reject completely the temptation of a Neoplatonic reading of those texts. If part of Baha'u'llah's terminology can be traced back to Muslim Neoplatonist philosophers, it is because it was the terminology current at his time among learned Persians and perhaps also because all spiritual philosophy based upon a revealed message necessarily had a Neoplatonic outlook. It does not mean, however, that he is validating a Neoplatonist view of the world.

The Kingdom as a structure of intelligibility

This paper is intended to demonstrate that what appears at first sight as a purely metaphysical question is better addressed from a hermeneutical angle. This is precisely what Baha'u'llah suggests in the Tablet of All Food. Undertaking the spiritual hermeneutic of the word 'food' in the Qur'an, he assures us that this word has significance in each of the worlds of God. We have therefore on the one hand a text that can be read in a purely hermeneutic manner as an exercise of pure exegesis with an inventory of all spiritual meanings of the word 'food' and, on the other hand, we have a question that initially appears to be purely ontological, which is the question of the existence of divine worlds. However, this analysis is mistaken and is the source of all the errors that have been made in the study of the 'metaphysics' of Baha'u'llah. I put the word 'metaphysics' between quotation marks because just as Baha'u'llah did not want to create a cosmology, he never intended to produce a metaphysical system. Baha'u'llah has warned us to avoid sciences that 'begin with words and end with words'.⁵⁵ There is no doubt that he had in mind the scholastic system of his time, deeply rooted in metaphysics. It does not mean that metaphysical questions should be avoided. Metaphysical questions are inescapable. However, metaphysical questions, as such, cannot be solved by metaphysics. This is one of the major lessons that 'Abdu'l-Baha gives in *Some Answered Questions*. Traditionally, metaphysical systems try to identify the ultimate principle, such as 'the One', 'the First Cause', 'Being' or 'Existence', from which all other principles derived. 'Abdu'l-Baha points to the futility of that approach. Instead he proposes a bottom-up approach that starts from the observation of the natural world to identify principles that can be extended to other realms of human knowledge. We have seen several examples of that approach in this paper.

The hierarchy of divine worlds, even if its purpose is mainly hermeneutical, unavoidably raises some ontological questions. However, we should take these ontological questions as the basis of possible Baha'i metaphysics. The roots of metaphysics are certainly not in any ontology but rather in anthropology and in epistemology. Baha'i anthropology teaches us that the nature of the human being is spiritual and that the purpose of biological evolution is the emergence of a consciousness with the ability to know its creator. This new humanism places the question of human nature at the very core of Baha'i philosophy. The role of ontology, in relation to

metaphysics, is thus totally displaced. Hence, Baha'i ontology splits into two branches. The first is an onto-hermeneutic, which we find exemplified in the Tablet of All Food and which defines a 'world' as a level of understanding dependent upon the spiritual *situs* of the seeker. The second is an onto-cosmology which defines a 'world' as a mode of being, which is itself a modality of the spirit upon which depends a structure of intelligibility. It is this structure of intelligibility that establishes the unity of ontology and which assures interaction between the onto-hermeneutic and the onto-cosmology. The plurality of worlds described in Baha'u'llah's writings exists only in the human mind and is created by our cognitive limitations. Ontological categories are, in fact, epistemological or cognitive categories. To be in the world of *Nasut* means to be cognitively limited by the ontological *situs* specific to the human species.

Like every philosophical explanation, this one may appear complicated. A superficial reading of Baha'u'llah's writings might tend to avoid such questions that are fundamentally alien to western culture. It is not in our cultural habit to have philosophical ideas conveyed by poetical means, often without the recourse of philosophical jargon. The effectiveness of this poetical language is based on the resonance that images and metaphors can create in our inner being, often shortcutting our discursive mode of thinking. However, if such resonances exist it is because these images reverberate in the symbolic universe of our collective and personal unconscious and can be apprehended directly by our intuitive faculties.

We hope that this paper will have convinced the reader that the various images that we find in the writings of Baha'u'llah such as the 'the Sun of Reality', 'the Tongue of Grandeur', 'the Supreme Pen', 'the Mystical Nightingale' are not innocent poeticisms resulting from the excess of an oriental flowery language. Western readers often have a tendency to discard such images as obstacles to reach the core meaning of the text. On the contrary, these images should be taken as precious guides through the intricacies of subtle questions.

Suggested citation

Lepain, J.-M. (2010), 'The Tablet of All Food: The Hierarchy of the Spiritual Worlds and the Metaphoric Nature of Physical Reality', *Baha'i Studies Review* 16, pp. 43–60. doi: 10.1386/bsr.16.43/1

Contributor details

Jean-Marc Lepain is a graduate of the French Institut des Langues Orientales and of the Institut d'Études Politique de Paris. After several stays in Iran in the 1970s, he spent a full year at Tehran University (1977–8) and two years at L'École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne) to study Islamic philosophy under Professor Henri Corbin. He holds also a master's degree in History and several postgraduate degrees in Economics. He now works as Consultant in Public Finance and is serving as Intergovernmental Fiscal Advisor in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. His main interest in Baha'i studies is in philosophy and his work focuses on rationality, individualism, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind and evolutionary psychology.

E-mail: jlepain@yahoo.fr