

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Commentary on the Qur’anic Verses Concerning the Overthrow of the Byzantines: The Stages of the Soul

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Abstract

This paper is a translation and commentary upon a work of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which he give a mystical commentary upon the first few words of the thirtieth Súrah of the Qur’án, the Súrah of Rúm. These words refer to the overthrow of the Byzantines. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives the standard Muslim commentary upon these verses. Despite the fact that these verses have an obvious outward meaning, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes on to give nine esoteric or mystical interpretations of the word “al-Rúm” and of the phrase “The Byzantines have been overthrown.” In the last of these interpretations, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá delineates the different types of soul: mineral, vegetable, animal, human and the Soul of Láhút, the realm of the Primal Manifestation. With regard to the human soul, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also lists the nine stages in its ascent. These consist of the commanding soul, the blaming soul, the inspired soul, the assured soul, the accepting soul, the accepted soul, the perfect soul, the soul of the Kingdom of God (Malakút) and the soul of the Realm of Divine Command (Jabarút). This last is the ultimate goal in the world of creation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes these stages in the ascent of the human soul and how progress may be made from one to the other. This work of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá thus performs two functions. It establishes the principle that the Word of God has many meanings some of which are external and obvious while others are hidden and mystical. It is also a manual or guide to Bahá’í mysticism in that lays out the pathway or stages for the ascent of the soul from its lowest state of abasement and preoccupation with the things of the world to its highest state where the human qualities are effaced and only the divine attributes are manifest in the individual, the state where it becomes aware of the secrets of hidden and invisible realities.

Commentary

The work that is the subject of this paper is a lengthy tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which he gives an extensive commentary on the opening words of the thirtieth Súrah of the Qur’án, the Súrah of Rúm. Indeed most of the tablet is taken up with various interpretations of a single word in this Súrah, the word that also forms the title of the Súrah: ar-Rúm. While the word is obviously derived from the word Rome, in the context of the Arabia of the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, “Rome” meant the new Rome established by the Emperor Constantine on the Bosphorus, the city that he made his capital and which at this time was prospering even as the old Rome on the Tiber was struggling for survival under wave after wave of the barbarian tribes that had brought the Dark Ages to Europe. Thus the word “ar-Rúm” is best translated as “Byzantium” or “the Byzantines.”

The opening two verses and one phrase upon which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá comments in this tablet begin immediately after the disconnected letters “Alif Lam Mim”:

2. The Byzantines have been overthrown

Ghulibat ar-Rúm

3. In a land close by; but they (even) after (this) defeat of theirs will be victorious

Fí adná al-‘árd. Wa-hum min bádi ghalabihim sa-yaghlibún

4. Within a few years...

Fi biḍ‘ sinín

These verses refer to certain historical events that occurred during the ministry of Muhammad. In about the year 614, the Persian King Khusraw (Chosroes) Parviz attacked the Byzantines in Syria and took Damascus. By 616, he had occupied Egypt and most of Asia Minor. He even besieged Constantinople for a time. News of these events reached Mecca where Muḥammad was under great pressure from his adversaries, the idolators of Mecca. What then occurred is recounted in Islamic Traditions thus:

The Muslims were wanting the Byzantines, because they were people of the Book, to defeat the Persians and the unbelievers were wanting the Persians, because they were idol-worshippers, to defeat the Byzantines.¹

It is related that, after the revelation of this verse, Abu Bakr even laid a bet with the unbelievers that the Persians would in turn be defeated, but he said that it would be in five years. When this did not occur, he questioned the Prophet about this and Muhammad replied that the word “*biḍ‘*” means between three and ten. A few years later in 622 the victory of the Byzantines occurred.

Similarly, a Shi‘i account gives the same story:

The Persians overthrew the Byzantines and were victorious over them in the time of the Messenger of God (PBUH). The unbelievers of Mecca were happy at this in that the Persians were not people of the Book; and the Muslims were unhappy about this. Jerusalem was for the Byzantines like Mecca is for Muslims and the Persians had driven them back from it.²

The tablet can be dated to the period before the passing of Bahá’u’lláh, since Bahá’u’lláh mentions it in a tablet dating from the ‘Akká period, and addressed to a certain ‘Abd al-Ghaní. Bahá’u’lláh states that a question about these verses had been asked and that although a commentary on these verses had already been revealed by the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh commanded ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to answer the questioner.³

It is not however certain from reading the tablet that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s correspondent was a Bahá’í. He may well have been from among Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wide circle of Muslim acquaintances. There are no overt references to the Bahá’í Faith or the Bahá’í teachings in the tablet. Although there are a few references to the greatness of “this day,” these are vague enough that they could well have been written to a Muslim correspondent without occasioning comment. If this speculation is correct, then it is also possible to say that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s correspondent was probably a Sunni, rather than a Shi‘i, and therefore also probably non-Iranian. This is clear from the lack of the usual Shi‘i references and honorifics that would otherwise have been within the text if it had been written to a Shi‘i. Thus, in summary, it is possible that this tablet belongs along with *A Traveller’s Narrative* and *The Secret of Divine Civilization* among those tablets written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during Bahá’u’lláh’s lifetime and intended primarily for a non-Bahá’í audience, and in this case, a Sunni audience.

In this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives some ten meanings in all for the word “al-Rúm” and for the phrase “Ghulibat ar-Rúm” (the Byzantines have been overthrown), while in a few of these ten meanings, he extends the commentary to the remaining words: “in a land close by; but they (even) after (this) defeat of theirs will be victorious within a few years.”

As most people are aware, the Qur’án itself lays down the parameters for the writing of commentaries upon it. It states that the text of the Qur’án is divided into two parts, those verses that are clear in meaning and those about which there is doubt.

He it is that hath sent down unto thee the Book. In it are verses with firm meaning (*muḥkamát*)—they are the foundation of the Book (literally the Mother of the Book, umm l-kitáb)—and other verses that are of uncertain meaning (*mutashábihát*). Those in whose hearts there is a crookedness follow that part which is uncertain seeking to cause dissension and trying to explain it. But none knows its explanation except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. (Qur’án 3:7)

Of course the identity of “those who are firmly grounded in knowledge” has been a matter of debate. For Shi’is, it is the Imams who fill this role,⁴ while for Sufis it is usually their shaykh who is regarded in this light.

It is of some considerable interest that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has chosen to write a highly mystical commentary on a text which refers to a clear historical event. In other words, it is not a verse that would ordinarily be regarded as one of the verses that are of uncertain meaning (*mutashábihát*), but rather as one of the verses with firm meaning (*muḥkamát*). Although some doubt has been expressed about the voice of the verb in 30:2 (see below), this is expressed as a minority view and there is, in any case no doubt that the verse refers to a specific historical event.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then gives ten interpretations of these verses, the first being the outward historical circumstances as described above. The next nine are esoteric or mystical interpretations. Esoteric interpretations of this text are not unknown. The following, for example, is from the Tafsír of ‘Abd al-Razzáq al-Káshání (which is often attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabi):

The Primal Essence with the attributes of knowledge and primacy, just as He hath said. It requires that the “Rúm” of spiritual power be overthrown in the nearest of places to the earth of the soul (*nafs*), which is the breast (*ṣadr*), for the outpourings (*fayḍ*) of the Primal Source necessitates the appearance of the creation, and through this conceals the Absolute Reality. And all that is closest to the Absolute is overthrown by that which is closest to the creation. And this is the effect of the name of the Originator in the manifestation of the origins [of creation] and the effulgences of the All-High upon it, and also of His name the Manifest (*ẓáhir*) and of His name the Creator, and, in summary, of whatever names are in His Primal Presence. And “they will afterwards”—after their being overthrown, “they will overthrow” the Persians of the human, veiled, foreign powers by returning to God and manifesting victory.⁵

Although there are such examples of mystical commentary on this passage, the present author is not aware of any mystical commentary of the length and depth of this work of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has nine mystical or esoteric interpretation of these verses. The following is a summary of these:

1. “Rúm” signifies the existent realities and those veils which issue forth as a result of the specifications of existence. “Overthrown” refers to the overcoming and vanishing of these with the coming of the Manifestation of God.

2. “Rúm” signifies the forces of self and passion and the peoples of ignorance and blindness which, however, assist the Manifestation of God when he appears and, in doing this are “overthrown” and overwhelmed, which then becomes the source of their spiritual growth.

3. “Rúm” signifies those souls who turn their faces seeking enlightenment when the Manifestation of God appears. They purify the mirrors of their hearts and draw near to the rays of that noble light. They look to their Lord with radiant snow-white rejoicing countenances (for the Byzantines were considered by the Arabs to have white complexions and reddish hair). “Overthrown” refers to the fact that God send them trials and difficulties at the hands of the enemies of God. They in turn will overcome these tests and difficulties.

4. “Rúm” signifies the Divine ordinances, laws and decrees. In the days of the interval between Messengers of God, the people tend to cast the laws of God aside and establish a rule of ignorance. Thus are the holy and divine laws “overthrown” among the people. But after a time, a new Manifestation of God appears and the law of God is re-established.

5. “Rúm” signifies the realities of things and their essences (*máhiyyát*) and the capacity of created things and their potentialities. And the meaning of “overthrown” is that the Divine outpourings and effulgences pervaded these realities, filled them, and surrounded them from all directions, both inwardly and outwardly, on the Day when the Manifestation of God appears. For on that day, God does not look at the capacity of souls and their preparedness. Rather, He pours forth upon them His Grace and Beneficence even if they have no capacity.

6. "Rúm" signifies speculative opinion and logical proofs, which in the days prior to the appearance of the Manifestation of God are the only proofs available to people for the existence of God. When, however, the Manifestation of God appears, the veils of such speculative thought and reasoning are rent asunder and the banners of proofs and intimations are unfurled. "Al-Rúm was defeated": that is to say the drops of the waters of speculative opinion and reasoning vanished in the face of the billowing oceans of the revelations and testimonies of the Manifestation of God himself.

7. "Rúm" signifies the bodily stages and realities of this earthly realm, together with their accidents and specifications. And: "Al-Rúm was overthrown" means that the bodily stages pass away with the manifestation of Word of God. Thus are the bodily things overthrown and dominion belongs to the things of the spirit.

8. "Rúm" signifies the idle fancies and vain imaginings in the hearts of ordinary people for these have supreme sovereignty among the people during the days of the absence of the Manifestation of God. When the Manifestation comes, however, he cause the darkness of idle fancies and vain imaginings to disappear.

9. "Rúm" signifies the stages of the soul and the states thereof, its degrees, its elevation and diminution, its ascent and its fall.

These stages are described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as consisting of the following:

- I. Mineral soul—which is static in nature and does not develop.
- II. Vegetative Soul—the features of which are that it grows and develops.
- III. Animal Soul—which senses its environment.
- IV. Human Soul—the rational soul within which arise the powers of the human being, the outer and inner senses, knowledge, sciences, arts, and wisdom. It is also the place where dark passions and earthly failings appear. The human soul has the following stages:
 - a. the commanding soul—the soul that commands to evil—is preoccupied with the trivialities of this world, and is infatuated with evil and ephemeral desires.
 - b. the blaming soul—which becomes aware of the depths of its degradation and of its remoteness from its true goal. It awakes to a perception of its state, is filled with regret and blames itself for the depths of perversity and error to which it has sunk.
 - c. the inspired soul—as it rises from its lowly condition, the soul comes to understand those things that kept it abased and those thing which will lead to its elevation. It becomes averse to those things that perish and to incline towards those things that endure. It is termed the inspired soul for it is inspired as to that which on the one hand leads to depravation and on the other to righteousness.
 - d. the assured soul—this is the stage at which the soul is in remembrance of its Lord and sees the signs of God in the creation. As a result it is assured in its faith, its turmoil and unrest is calmed, it has quenched its thirst, soothed its torment; it has changed its darkness to light and unloaded its burdens.
 - e. the accepting soul—reaches a station of submission and contentment, leaving behind its searching and neediness. It entrusts its affairs to God and is content with whatever God may decree for it. This is a happiness that is not followed by sadness. There remains no will, no rest, no motion, no destiny nor any fate except in God.
 - f. the accepted soul—in this state all-encompassing blessings and mercy reach it. Insofar as it has risen and left behind its passions and accepted the decree of its Lord, it becomes accepted in the sight of God, and in its state of nothingness, it is approved by its Creator.

g. the perfect soul—here it is characterized by divine perfections and comprised of godly attributes. It thus becomes the focal point of inspiration and the dawning-place for the Divine effulgences.

h. the soul of the Kingdom of God (Malakút)—here the soul confirms in its reality the profession of Divine Unity and establishes in its essence the sign of detachment. It attains to everlasting life and eternal living. It takes pleasure from delights the like of which no eye has seen nor any ear heard.

i. the soul of the Realm of Divine Command (Jabarút)—this is a station far above the understanding of the minds of men, for this station is created out of the elements of power, authority, sovereignty, omnipotence, and freedom and nothing that has limitations or pluralities has any resemblance to it. Here the soul becomes aware of the secrets of hidden and invisible realities. This is the ultimate goal in the world of creation.

V. Divine Soul—the soul of the realm of Primal Manifestation (Láhut)—it is the Universal Reality which brings together all of the revealed Divine realities, the Primal Point from which appear all things and to which they revert. From it there appears plurality through manifestation and illumination, and it becomes divided, dispersed and manifold, and radiates. This station and this soul are completely and forever beyond the reach of human beings.

In relation to his commentary on the overthrow of “Rúm,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that it means, in this context, that as the human soul ascends stage by stage, it overthrows the conditions of the lower stage in order to attain the higher stage.

It can thus be seen that not only has ‘Abdu’l-Bahá given nine spiritual or esoteric interpretations of this sentence of the Qur’án but he has done so in relation to only one event in spiritual reality—the coming of the Manifestation of God. Presumably ‘Abdu’l-Bahá could have given further interpretations of this verse relating to other aspects of spiritual reality.

With regard to the stages of the human soul, the first three or four (the commanding soul, the blaming soul, the inspired soul and the assured soul) are fairly commonly repeated among Sufi authors and those in the tradition of mystical philosophy in Islam.⁶ The remaining ones are rarely found although not unknown.⁷

At the end of this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to an alternative reading of this Quranic passage that would put the first verb into the active voice and the second verb into the passive. The passage would then read:

The Byzantines have been victorious (have overthrown [the Persians]), but they, after this victory (overthrow) of theirs, will be defeated within a few years.

The commentaries give this as an alternative reading and state that the circumstances in which this reading would have occurred refer to the time of the Battle of Badr when referring to the victory that had by then occurred of the Romans over Persians, the Qur’án predicts that the Romans too will be defeated by the Muslim armies within a few years.

The text of the tablet that has been used for this translation is to be found in *Makátíb ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 62-102.

Provisional Translation

He is the All-Glorious!

Praise be to Thee, O Lord! O my God! Out of Thy Bounty and Mercy, Thou hast caused the waters of existence to descend from the heaven of Thy Oneness and Thou hast caused the showers of Thine Eternal Bounties to rain down from the clouds of the heaven of Thy Mighty Oneness until, through this most mighty Beneficence, the rivers of Thy most wondrous Grace flowed forth upon the soil of all possible

existent realities in Thine act of Creation. All lands and regions were watered by these streaming, heavenly rivers. Every hill and city was inundated by these torrential celestial floods. And then there shone forth [63] upon them the sun of Thy Mercy from the horizon of Thy holy Might. And the grains, O my God, of Thine Exalted Word and Thy Most Mighty Verses were sown in the earth of human capacity by Thy great Grace and Favour.

These existent realities, however, became differentiated and diverged through the effulgences of the Sun of Thy most great Name. Some of them, O my God, just as Thou hast reckoned according to Thy secret knowledge, are pure and refined hearts upon which that Sun imprinted its signs and from which there appeared traces of its effulgence. It hath stirred up and fertilised their soil and there hath grown forth from them the myrtles of love and knowledge of Thee. They have been adorned by the sacred blossoms of yearning for and attraction towards Thee as like a blessed and fertile land. Some, however, O my God, were soiled hearts obscured by the rust of their vain imaginings, veiled from their Lord by the veils of darkness. No trace appears among them of the effulgences of that sun nor of the signs of the One Who hath created and ordained it. Upon their soil, the grain of the mention of their Lord is as upon desolate and barren land. Thou art not, however, O my God, neglectful in Thine effulgences upon the creation and the appearance of Thy signs among existent realities, as Thou hast said, and Thy word is the truth: "No fault canst thou see in the creation of the All-Merciful (67:3)" and "Your creation and your resurrection is but as a single soul (31:28).

At this time, I ask of Thee by Thy Name, which were it to be cast upon the mountains, they would crumble into dust and flow away [64], were it to be scattered upon the seas, they would overflow, were it to be thrown upon shrivelled branches, they would turn green and flower, and upon the blind, they would see, and upon the dumb, they would speak, and upon the deaf, they would hear, and upon the dead, they would arise, that Thou mayest lift the veils which intervene between Thee and Thy creatures and which prevent them from entering into the wellspring of Thy Mercy, from setting out on the pathway of Thy mighty Oneness, from hearkening to the melodies of the birds of Thy throne, and from drinking from the chalice of Thy love and knowledge of Thee. Verily, they are the lowly at Thy gate and the needy before the manifestation of Thy wealth. For themselves they seek to acquire neither benefit nor harm, neither life nor resurrection. Raise then, O my God, these pure souls to Thee and cause them to ascend with the wings of Divine Unity into the clouds of the highest heaven (*'amá'*) of the glory (*bahá*) of Thy Singleness. Shine forth upon them at every instant with what Thou wishest to bestow upon these compounded realities and these sacred hearts, for there is neither beginning nor end to signs of Thee, nor a first or last to Tokens of Thee. Wert Thou to shed Thy splendour upon the sincere ones among Thy creatures at every instant in all of Thy manifold ways, no reduction would there be in Thine Ancient Riches, nor any diminution in Thy Hidden Treasures.

And so, O my God, be merciful to Thy needy servants. Cause them to be seated beneath the tree of [p. 65] Thy Mercy and feed them from the table that Thou hast sent down from the heaven of Thy glorious Oneness. For verily Thou art the True Giver and Thou art the Forgiving, the Merciful.

Thou knowest, O my God, that this servant is the neediest of all the servants in Thy realm and is the lowliest of Thy creatures in Thy lands. How then, with such absolute poverty, is it possible for me to explain the incorporated and hidden meanings within the realities of Thy words and the secrets which Thou hast hidden from the eyes of the mystic knowers behind the tabernacle of Thy word. Since, however, Thou hast commanded me, I take up my pen trusting in Thee and relying upon Thy Bounty and Mercy. For Thou hast willed, O my God, that there flow forth from this ephemeral pen the seas of Thy Knowledge and the oceans of Thy secrets. Thou dost not wish that the tongue of the Supreme Pen be silent amidst the concourse of Thy creatures nor that the outflowing bounties of the Ancient Beauty be cut off from the peoples. The command is Thine. Thou doest as Thou desirest and Thou ordaineth what Thou pleaseth and the limit Thou hast set is: No God is there but Thee, the Powerful, the Mighty, the All-Bountiful.

O distinguished and excellent questioner! Know thou that from within every one of the Words of God, there surge forth oceans of hidden meanings, without number, and that from within every letter of the verses of thy Lord, there shine forth the suns of secrets, heavenly signs and truths, that none can

number except God, thy Lord and the Lord of thy fathers before you. [p. 66] That being the case how is it possible for ink to flow forth with these hidden meanings, even were there to be oceans of it, and how would sheets of paper suffice, even were they to be as extensive as the horizon? There is no end to this most great gift and no beginning to this most great mercy for it to be exhausted. Just as [God] says, and His word is the truth: “Were the ocean to be ink for the words of my Lord, verily that ink would be exhausted ere the words of my Lord were exhausted, even were a similar amount of ink added to it” (Qur’án 18:109). However, even if all of it cannot be mentioned, all of it need not be left out either. Therefore I can mention some of the hidden and secret meanings streaming from the torrents of the words of your Lord, the Exalted, the Mighty.

Know thou that these holy verses and heavenly sounds having meanings that are outer (*ẓáhir*) and inner (*báṭin*) and also the inner of the inner (*báṭin al-báṭin*) and so forth endlessly. For the words of God are mirrors encompassing (*muhítah*) the forms (*suwar*) of all things. Thus is it that [God] says: “There is nothing dry nor wet but that it is [inscribed] in a perspicuous Book.” (Qur’án 6:59)

1] And as for the outer meaning, God hath announced [in this surah] the destruction of the might of the Persians and the victory and triumph of Byzantium [Rome], after the Byzantines had been defeated and brought to naught at the hands of the Persians—their unity had been sundered and their alliances dispersed. The explanation of this is that in the days when the sun of Divine Oneness was shining from the Muḥammadan point and the banners of guidance were raised over the notables of Yathrib (Medina) and Baṭḥa (Mecca), the dove was warbling upon the twigs of the Sadrat al-Muntaha [p. 67] and the peacock singing in the heavenly sanctuary, the idolaters said that Khusraw (Chroeses) the king of the Persians, who were not people of the book, had defeated and was victorious over the Emperor of Byzantium, who was of the people of the book. Similarly, they said, we will destroy the might (*kalima*) of Muḥammad the Messenger of God on account of his being of the people of the book as is the emperor of Byzantium and we are not people of the book as is the king of the Persians. And so God caused these heavenly (*láhútiyya*) verses to descend and announced that Byzantium would defeat its enemy the Persians within a few (*biḍ’*) years. And a few (*biḍ’*) means between three and nine. And after seven of those years, God caused to appear that which had been announced by His most mighty Companion (Muḥammad). The Byzantines were victorious over the Persians and their ascendancy was established. Thus was it confirmed to the sincere ones that the knowledge of God precedes all things and embraces all that is in existence, whether of the seen or unseen.

This is that which the hearts of those who write the commentaries hath sung in the gardens of the mighty Qur’án. But other than this they have not penetrated to the secrets deposited therein nor to the stored and hidden mysteries flowing within the streams of the words of Thy Lord the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. And with this they cannot satisfy those who are sore athirst for the living waters (Kawthar) of the spirit from the hands of Grace and Beneficence. And this is nothing for those whom God has endowed with a penetrating vision and has taught them the meaning of His word [p. 68] and has informed them of the true interpretation of His verses. It is therefore necessary that I mention some of the things that God has intended by these hidden verses, these heavenly songs.

2] I say that Rome signifies that station which refers to and relates to the existent realities, to pure being (*ṣarf an-ániyyah*) and to the concealing veils and the woes which issue forth from the specifications of existence. And these are overcome and vanish with the rise of the rays shining forth from the Sun of Truth. And so when the cycle of the spirit has come to an end and the lamps of guidance have been extinguished, and the breezes of righteousness have been stilled, and the winds of faithfulness have died down, and the voices of the nightingales of Oneness in the gardens of faithfulness have become fatigued, and the heaven of wealth and the garden of victories has been transformed into a barren wasteland and the owl hoots balefully from the Tree of Zaqqum (Qur’án 37:62, 44:43, 56:52), then does the breeze of the spring-time of the All-Merciful waft from the Valley of Ayman⁸ the blessed spot, and the Sun of Divine Oneness rise from the dawning-place of the Will of Thy Lord the All-Merciful, the Compassionate, and the clouds of Divine Bounty arise and pour out upon the hearts, souls and the inner realities, causing the soils of capacity and receptivity to become verdant and the earth of knowledge to sprout forth. Then does the blessed tree become verdant from which can be heard the call: [p. 69] “O

Moses! Thou art in the holy vale of Tuwa” (Qur’án 20:11-12) and the fire of reality appears in that “olive tree which is neither of the east nor of the west. And its oil almost catches fire even though no fire has touched it. It is light upon light. God guides to His light whomsoever He wills” (Qur’án 24:35). Then doth the nightingale of inner meaning (*ma’áni*) sing upon the branches with the most lofty melodies.

And it says “The Romans have been defeated in the nearest of lands.” What land is nearer than the realities of things and their specifications? Then the tongue of the Ancient of Days announces, and it is indeed a mighty word, that the King of the Living the Eternal has decreed that every affair should have a prescribed and fixed term. And so at the end of this cycle, there will come days when this shining sun will set and be followed by billowing clouds, and this spiritual spring-time will be ended by darksome autumn, and this lofty garden will be transformed and its trees uprooted, and its leaves scattered, and its breezes will be stilled, and its rivers interrupted and their limpidity (clarity) destroyed. “This is the way of God and thou wilt not find any change or alteration in His way” (cf. Qur’án 48:23 and 17:77)

And so O questioner! See thou with an insight which God created after your outer vision. Is any just person able to say that all of the meanings of the words of God exist with those who cannot distinguish their left hands from their right? No! By the one whom the dove doth mention when it doth speak forth between [p. 70] heaven and earth. On the contrary, it is certain that the meanings will inspire those hearts that are pure and turned towards the Kingdom. Were God to desire it, He would cause one of His lovers to arise and stand upon the center of guidance amidst the concourse of creation and to commenate, with His assistance and power, upon the realities within His verses, giving such meanings as are known only to God and to those who are firmly established in His knowledge (cf. Qur’án 3:7). Approach thou then Thy Lord with radiant face and seeing eye and say:

O Lord! Make firm my steps in Thy Cause and teach me Thy hidden knowledge and Thy treasured secrets and raise me up to Thy lofty Kingdom and Thy most glorious Companion (*rafíqika'l-abhá*). Cause me to understand the meanings of Thy verses so that I may shine forth upon the horizon of Thy Will with Thy knowledge, like unto the morning star, and may show unto the people Thine eternal path and Thy straight way, which whosoever doth tread upon it will reach the Orient of Thy signs and the Dawning-place of Lights. For this is that which will favour me as I contemplate Thy most great verses and gaze upon the signs of Thine exalted effulgences. O Lord! Favour me with this most great gift and this most mighty mercy. For this what I hope from Thee and it is my goal and my desire. O my king and my desire at every stage, and the joy of my heart and the solace of my soul in the daytime and in the night season. Thou art the Giver, the Generous, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

3] And in the station of [p. 71] Souls, thou seest that these Divine verses have holy and heavenly meanings. Among these are that God has intended by the word “Byzantium” the forces of self and passion and the peoples of ignorance and blindness in that it (Byzantium = forces of self, etc.) assisted, at the appearance of His Friend (Muḥammad), the forces of reason and intelligence, with great power until it saw the signs of its Mighty Lord and heard the most sweet Call from the lofty horizon and drank the sealed wine from the hand of the faithful cup-bearer. The sweetness of the wine of the mention of its Lord the All-High captivated it to the extent that it became drowned in the oceans of the Love of God. At this time the reality of self and passion passed away with its conditions and powers at the appearance of the signs of the Absolute Divine Reality and it was defeated and vanished before the authority of the verses of its Creator. However, its state of defeat was the very source of its power, its ability, its loftiness and its might. For it grew and found reassurance in the remembrance of its Lord and through this it was enabled to overcome everything and to encompass, through the power of its Creator and Origin, the realities of the Kingdom in accordance with its capacity and to understand the secrets of its Creator and Fashioner. And what conquest could be greater than this, were people able to see with the eye of God? Indeed were they able to able to soar with the wings of the spirit in the heavens of knowledge they would bear witness that this is the conquering power and the overwhelming might and the triumphant sovereignty. However, [p. 72] when they are concealed behind the veils of neglectfulness and have forgotten what they used to bring to mind, God doth smite their eyes with a veil and their ears with heaviness.

Rise then with power, O revered questioner, and mention Thy Lord among the concourse of the earth and say: “How long will you be satisfied with a brackish and malodorous drop from the All-Mighty, All-

Glorious Ocean which billows forth from His Essence to His Essence and from a sprinkling (*rashh*) of which God hath created all existence, living and enduring, just as He hath said, and His word is the Truth: ‘And We made from water every living thing’ (Qur’án 21:30)?

4] And on one level, God intended by the word “Rúm” those souls who turn their faces seeking enlightenment when the Sun of the Ancient of Days doth shine forth from the Dawning-Place of the Greatest Name. They purify the mirrors of their hearts and draw near to the rays of that noble light. For the noun “Rúm” according to linguistic usage is connected with fine white (complexions) and people of reddish (hair) and pure souls who look to their Lord with radiant snow-white rejoicing countenances. In this is the comparison and the relevance (of the metaphor).

And as for the meaning of His Words, magnified be He: “The Byzantines were overcome,” that is to say that those blameless souls who have effaced their designations and limitations at the appearance of their Revealer so that they have become designated by the attributes of the All-Merciful and they have appeared with heavenly signs—they are overcome in the physical world. God has sent them the winds of tests and difficulties and has thrown them into the clutches of those who have repudiated His Truth, [p. 73], those who have not inhaled the breezes of life, have renounced their intellect and clung to their passions. But when they [those blameless souls] have overcome with respect to the spirit, they will similarly physically overcome their enemies through the power of their Creator. For God has assigned all good for His loved ones in every one of His worlds, even the world of body and memory. Thou dost witness that mention of them dost fill the horizons and their name raises the standards of harmony and through them the world is set aflame and the potentialities of all things is illuminated by the light of existence emerging from nothingness. Through them the stones have been shattered, days have dawned and the oceans billowed; through them the holy laws have been established, the waters have become clear, the outspread tables have been sent down (cf. Qur’án 5:113), the diseases remedied, the dead brought to life, the earth has been made to shake, the heavens have been cleft asunder, the mountains split in two, paradise has been brought close, the trees have given forth fruit, the secret things have been made known, the veils rent asunder, the lights have shone forth, and the signs (*al-áthár*) have been made known.

Then, say: Praise be to God, the Creator of these burning meteors, these brilliant stars, these consummate words, these lofty souls, these singular minds, and these spirits enraptured by God their Lord.

And say: O Lord! Cause me to enter under the shade of the Tree of Thy Mercy. Immerse me in the deep ocean of the Might of Thy Oneness. Sanctify me from all else save Thee. Deliver me from [p. 74] the floods of self and passion so that I may arise just as Thou hast caused them to arise in service of Thee and may stand ready to obey Thy command by Thy Might and Power. Verily Thou art the Giver to whomsoever Thou willest by Thy gracious hand and Thou art powerful over all things.

5] And in another sense, God has intended by this word of the Qur’án, the Divine ordinances (*shará’i’*) and prescriptions (*sunan*) and the laws (*hudúd*) of God and His decrees (*hukm*). For the people, in the days of the interval [between Messengers of God] have cast the laws of God behind their backs. They have forgotten the decrees of God to such an extent that they replaced them and established a rule of ignorance (*siyásatan jahaliyyatan*) and made laws according to custom. They raised the banner of arbitrary and tyrannical decrees to such an extent that they forsook all [spiritual] knowledge and guidance and clung instead to the basest of fancies and passions. They fell from the heaven of reason and [divine] prohibitions and took up their residence in the abyss of error and blindness. They chose the highway of the corrupt and imagined it to be a straight path (*siráṭun mustaqímun*). They applied themselves to the idols of luxurious living and did not know the corrupt from the wholesome. Thus were the lamps of justice and fairness extinguished and the storms of error intensified. The sign of tyranny seized power and the traces of illumination were obliterated. The people were afflicted by disasters by night and by predators during the day to such an extent that they forsook the commands and prescriptions of God and abrogated the Divine decrees and laws. Thus were the holy and divine laws overthrown (*ghalabat*) [p. 75] among the people.

Through the power and might of God, however, at the time of the dawning of the Morn of Guidance from the horizon of eternity, the clouds of doubt and error were dispersed and the heaven of knowledge

and righteousness restored. The wondrous light shone forth and the gloomy darkness vanished. The Straight Path was manifested and the Scales set. The Sure Handle, which cannot be rent, was extended and the pollens of the spring of justice and wisdom wafted from the direction of the Bounty of the Preexistent Lord. The trees of the human form became clothed with the leaves of knowledge and Divine wisdom and the Goodly Tree, the roots of which are firmly in the earth and the branches of which are in heaven, was planted. Its fruit came in every season, its twigs and branches stretched forth as far as the horizons. The birds of faithfulness sought refuge and built their nests within the tree. The nightingales of awareness sang upon it the songs of the Friend and the doves of love cry out from its twigs with the psalms of the House of David to such an extent that spirits trembled, hearts were rent asunder, eyes were consoled, souls were rejoiced and this existence became the garden of paradise.

However, thou dost see that there appeared a wild and evil people and an ignorant and detestable group among the people; their ignorance was so great that they were unable to distinguish right from left and they wrote upon sheets of water. They performed every [p. 76] abomination and committed that which even the animals eschew, and so how can they be called human beings. But when there appeared among them the Most Great Friend (Muḥammad), the most magnificent Light, the sign of the Ancient of Days, the most joyful morn, they took refuge in the cave of His teaching for a certain number of days and years until this ignorant people ascended from the depths of ignorance to the summit of knowledge and wisdom and became proficient in the arts and sciences and outstripped the most noted scholars and learned men. They became famous among God's creatures for the specific qualities of humanity and for their divine attributes such that they became a mine of perfections and knowledge and the pivot of the circle of praiseworthy deeds and beneficence. Thus were they victorious as far as the horizons and gained sovereignty over every tribe and people in creation. And so people began to come from every direction to their lands in order to learn knowledge and wisdom. They became adorned with the vestments of excellence and perfections. And all this was only out of the Grace and Mercy of God who sent to be among them the best of creatures with a power which no creature possesses.

6] And in another sense, God intended by the word "al-Rúm" the existent realities, which are revealed by the Divine Names and Attributes, are warmed by the flame of Oneness, are kindled in the blessed spot within the delights of paradise, appear and are seen upon [p. 77] four ancient pillars,⁹ are established through the divine and heavenly scriptures, and arise out of the essence of Singleness.

O would that the All-Merciful would break open from the mouth of this servant the seals of caution and concealment so that I could explain to you, O friend, the stations of the Fire of Oneness and the Blessed Tree and its branches and leaves and the state of the place of Paradise which God has concealed from the eyes of all save those who soar with the wings of victory in the atmosphere which brings joy to the souls. And so inhale the fragrance of faithfulness from the shirt of Bahá which hath been smattered with bright-red blood on account of what the idolaters have done to His effulgent, illumined Beauty—and this after God hath established a Covenant with them in every holy book, scripture and psalm that at the time of each effulgence of one of His Lights and the Dawning of each Sun upon His horizons, they would recognize His Power and Sovereignty and prostrate themselves to Him on the Day when He comes to them in shadow of His clouds and that they should sacrifice themselves at the time of His appearance in order to attain His Presence. What a pity and what a cause of regret for them that they have neglected nearness to God. And so there will come to them an announcement of what they have neglected. Then will their skins shiver, their livers bleed, their hearts melt, their souls mourn and their innermost selves lament. And they will bite their finger-tips out of grief and remorse at what they have done and that they have barred themselves from the table [p. 78] of life sent down from the heaven of the Mercy of their Lord, the Mighty, the Forgiving.

We will now return to what we were mentioning in explanation of the word "Rúm." We said that its meaning was the realities of things and their essences (*máhiyyát*) and the capacity of created things and their potentialities. And the meaning of "were overcome" is that the outpourings of the All-Merciful and the eternal effulgences pervaded the potential realities pouring forth from the pre-existent light, filled them, overcame (*ghalabat*) them, and surrounded them from all directions, both inwardly and outwardly, on the Day when the Sun of the Ancient of Days shone forth from the horizon. For on such a blessed

and promised day, God does not look at the capacity of existent realities and their preparedness. No, He pours forth upon them from the oceans of His Grace and Beneficence even if they have not the capacity for a single drop of its rivers such that you will see the poor man clothed in the robe of His wealth and the destitute beggar wearing the garments of His Might and Loftiness. Just as He hath said, and His word is the truth: “We desire to show favour unto the weak upon the earth, and We make them leaders and inheritors” (Qur’án 28:5).

O Thou who art soaring in the atmosphere of the love of God and travelling upon the sea of Bounty. Arise from the torpor of idle fancies and open your eyes to witness how the Ancient Beauty doth shine forth upon you and upon the whole of creation from the horizon of Bounty. [p. 79] His Countenance doth shine forth between earth and heaven. You will observe the comprehensiveness of the Bounty of Your Lord and the generality of His Beneficence towards those who draw nigh unto Him. You will see how the ocean of His Most Great Mercy billows forth out of the right hand of His Will and you will experience the fragrance of His Most Mighty Mercy wafting from the direction of His Providence so that you will know that, in this day, should a gnat desire to become an eagle or a drop to become an ocean in the shadow of this Beauty, then it would be able to, with the assistance of God and His Power. He hath said, and His word is the Truth: ‘Were an ant to desire to have full mastery over the Qur’án and its inner meaning and the inner meaning of the inner meaning (*fi hukmi sawád ‘ayni há*), it will undoubtedly be able to do so for the secrets of eternity vibrate within the realities of all created things.¹⁰ Therefore say: Blessed be He who causeth His Might, His Sovereignty, His Mercy and His Beneficence to appear in these days within all created things.

And as for His saying, exalted be He: “And they will afterwards overturn their defeat.” That is to say that there will come a day in which the Sun of Divine Oneness will set in the Occident of Eternity, the winds of the spirit blowing from the direction of Faithfulness will be stilled, the lamp of love in the breasts of those possessed of understanding will be put out, the fires of longing in the hearts of the wise will be extinguished, the table of Divine Knowledge that hath descended from heaven of certitude will be withdrawn, the clouds of holiness will be prevented from yielding rains and the seas of Divine Oneness from surrendering the pearls of mysteries. Thus doth this most abundant favour and most great bounty come to an end [p. 90] and this day of lights is turned into darksome night. And if you should find the creation in such a state, then be certain that the morn of certitude is nigh and the day-break of the All-Merciful from the Dawning-Place of Creation and the coming of Your Lord in the shadow of clouds approaches. Then raise your hands towards your Lord and say:

Unto Thee be praise and gratitude, O my most glorious Lord, in that Thou hast created me and sent me forth in this day when Thy Countenance doth shine forth, Thy Beauty hath appeared, Thy Visage shineth forth, Thy Mercy hath preceded all things, Thy Bounty is abundant, Thy Power doth encompass all, Thy signs appear (Thy verses are revealed), Thy Word is exalted and Thy proof is established. By Thy Might! Were I to praise Thee for as long as Thy sovereignty endures, I would not be able to produce a single word in praise of Thee. However, on account of what I have seen of the universality of Thy Bounty and greatness of Thy Generosity, a drop from among Thy servants would be enabled to approach the station of oceans and an atom would be equivalent to the station of suns. Therefore have I stepped before Thee offering my thanks, which are as the buzzing of mosquitoes in the valley or the crawling of an ant along a chain. Verily Thou art the Forgiving, the All-Merciful.

7] And among the meanings intended by God in this Qur’anic word is the station of opinion (speculative thought) and reasoning and the setting up of decisive evidences and logical proofs of the Oneness, the Singleness, the Might, the Power and the Sovereignty of God [p. 81] just as thou hast seen and observed in the days prior to the appearance of the Most Mighty Light from the Dawning-Place of His Name the Generous, to such an extent that no-one had any pathway or any guide to Him except the appearance of those signs and evidences which the intellect and opinion (speculative thought) indicated. And the people inferred from these His existence and steered clear of anything other than this. When, however, the sun of the horizons dawned from the Dawning-Place of the Ancient of Days in the most noble of forms and all existence was illumined by the rays radiating out over all creation, the veils of speculative thought and reasoning were rent asunder and the banners of proofs and intimations were

unfurled and the standards of revelations (*mukáshafát*) and testimonies were raised over the signs of hearts and perceptions. Then were the pure souls (*aḥrár*) able to enter into the presence of their Lord on the day when the earth shook and mountains were cleaved.

Then say: Blessed be God, the King, the Mighty, the Omnipotent who hath annihilated the darkness with light with a Mighty Sovereignty.

“Al-Rúm was defeated”: that is to say the drops of the waters of speculative opinion and reasoning vanished in the face of the billowing oceans of the revelations (*mukáshafát*) and testimonies of He who is a coolness on the brow of those who seek Him with ardor and is sweet water for their thirst and healing for their ill. He destroyed and brought to naught that which is nothing but idle fancies, vain thoughts, false inferences and empty speculations—for the likeness of these proofs before the face of Thy Lord is as the likeness of shadow before the dawning of the sun. For even were there to be logical proofs for It (the sun) [p. 82], they cannot be held to exist in the face of Its effulgences, nor can they be said to endure before Its radiating rays. Indeed, they are veiled from It even were they to be given proof of It. In the opinion of them who have drunk a draught of sealed wine from the hands of the Bounty of His Name the Eternal, the most mighty of the veils of His servants is that they rely on the ephemeral shadow for knowledge of the Sun of the Ancient of Days and depend upon mere traces and seek to give proofs in this way for that which is the origin of all lights. And despite this, they consider that they have reached the center of guidance and are proceeding upon the celestial spheres of the mind. On the contrary, they are plunged in the depths of idle fancies and are wandering lost in the wildernesses of vain imaginings.

Arise then with power from God and strength from His Sovereignty call out to the negligent: How long will you gallop in the deserts of ignorance? The flashes of inner meanings lighten the heaven of the spirit and ignite the horizons with the fire of God which hath appeared from the Sinaitic Tree upon the Mount of Eternity. Verily, O Concourse of Lovers, draw near to it so that you may be warmed by it, be guided by it, be ignited by a glowing brand from it and may hear its sighing.

Say: The eyes of all things have been consoled by entering into the Presence of their Lord while you do not perceive. All created things have been aroused while you remain negligent. All existence has arisen while you slumber upon the cushions of negligence. The tongues of all things are speaking forth in mention of the King of Heaven [p. 83] while you are silent.

If you do not turn towards this Beauty, then to which beauty will you look? If you are not aroused by this call, then by what call will you be aroused? If you are not stirred by this Spirit, by what spirit will you be stirred? Do you count yourselves as being alive? Nay, ye are among the companions of the graves. Do you maintain that you are among those that perceive and hear? Deaf are ye and blind, neither do ye understand. Has the Mercy [of God] not anticipated [all], the Bounty not abounded, the proof not been spoken, the evidences not made clear, the verses not descended or the word not been completed? Have the doves of paradise not sung and has heaven not been brought near? Has the blessed Tree not given fruit and the oceans of mystery billowed forth? Nay, the most mighty battle (*wáqīah*) has occurred and the most great calamity (*támah*) has appeared and all things have been gathered (resurrected, *ḥashara*) in the presence of God, the Protector, the Everlasting, even as the unbelievers are wandering astray in their drunkenness.

8] And among the things that God has intended by these consummate words are the bodily stages and physical (*násútiyyah*) realities, together with their accidents and specifications in their realm and domain. And the meaning of His words, may His station be exalted: “Al-Rúm was overcome” is that the bodily stages pass away with the manifestation of the spiritual verses and the rivers of reality inundate the earths of the pure hearts when the All-Merciful is mounted upon His Most Mighty Throne in the midst of all beings. For [p. 84] the armies of the spirit fall upon and attack the troops upon the Day of the Return with the power of the Lord of Lords. Thus are the bodily things overthrown and dominion belongs to the things of the spirit. And in this are signs for those who discern.

9] And among what God has intended by these firm and enduring words is concerning the idle fancies and vain imaginings in the hearts of ordinary people. For during the days when the Sun of Knowledge

and Wisdom has set, thou dost witness that idle fancies and vain imaginings have supreme sovereignty among the concourse of created things. Thou dost observe that all are depending upon idle fancies for knowledge and to solve problems, even for matters of the holy law and ordinances. They have no capacity to swim in the oceans of knowledge nor to plunge the depths of wisdom. When the Sun of Certitude doth shine forth from the clear horizon, however, the rays of the Divine Beauty doth cause the darkness of idle fancies and vain imaginings to disappear. Then doth the tongue of creation speak forth saying: the Truth hath come and Error hath disappeared. Verily Error was bound to vanish.

O Friend! speak forth with a wondrous tongue: Thine is the bounty, the grace, the mercy, and the beneficence upon this servant who is not worthy of anything in Thy Kingdom in that Thou hast saved me from the wilderness of idle fancies and hast caused me to seek shelter amidst the twigs of the tree of knowledge. O Lord! Cause me to be firm in Thy Love and to arise to assist Thy Cause and to establish Thy Rule. Make me [p. 85] one of Thy banners among Thy servants that I may be a focal point for Thine inspiration and may be assisted by Thy signs. Verily, Thou art powerful over all things by Thy Might and sovereignty, O Thou Beloved of the worlds.

9] And among what God has intended by these comprehensive words are the stages of the soul and the states thereof, its degrees, its elevation and diminution, its ascent and its fall, out of the bounty of its Creator, the generosity of its Originator and the power of its Source. Know thou that the soul has various stages and innumerable degrees. But its totality in the stages of existence is confined and limited to: the static (non-developing) mineral soul, the growing vegetative soul, the sensing animal soul, the earthly (*násútiyyah*) human soul, the commanding soul, the blaming soul, the inspired soul, the contented soul, the accepting soul, the accepted soul,¹¹ the perfect soul, the angelic (*malakútiyyah*) soul [of the Kingdom of God], the soul of the realm of Command (*jabarútiyyah*) and the soul of the sanctified realm of the Primal Manifestation (*láhútiyyah*).

As for “the mineral soul” (*an-nafs al-má’daniyyah*), it consists of intrinsic matter in the form of minerals and this is its perfection, its purity and the effects that appear from it. And so observe the precious stones that are mined; how they are heated within the bowels of the earth until they reach their perfection and beauty through the appearance of this soul within them and the emergence of their essential qualities through this process.

And as for “the growing vegetable soul” (*an-nafs an-námiyyah an-nabátiyyah*) [p. 86], it consists of an essence within which arises the vegetative power through which seeds, leaves, branches and trees grow and develop in that it takes matter and elements and gives these to the trees and plants so that they grow and mature. They grow and extend their branches and give forth their fruits, their flowers and their leaves.

And as for “the animal soul” (*an-nafs al-ḥaywániyyah*), it consists of an essence within which arises the powers of sensing those physical things that can be sensed.

And as for “the human soul” (*an-nafs al-insániyyah*), it consists of the rational soul that is to say an essence within which arises the powers of the human being, the outer and inner senses, the divine perfections and knowledge, the heavenly sciences, the eternal arts, and the hidden wisdom. Likewise, it is the place where dark passions and earthly (*násútiyyah*) failings appear.

Praise be to God for this astonishing sign, this mighty matter, this comprehensive word on the scroll of existence. For thou dost observe that it has various stations, diverse stages of ascent and manifold degrees to which there is no end. It has the capacity to be the mirror for the manifestation of the realities of the realm of the Primal Will (*láhútiyyah*) and the place wherein the divine and perfect attributes are revealed and appear. It also capable of descending into existential darkness, where it is veiled with thick veils arising from [p. 87] its limitations and its specific qualities which prevent it from attaining to its origin and point of return and hide from it the signs of its Creator which have been deposited with in it through the grace of its Maker.

On account of its progression to the stages of nearness and reunion and its descent into the regions of perdition and error, it is clothed in each stage and station in clothes that are different from the pre-

vious. Therefore it is known in each stage by a particular term. For example, in its descent into the lowest stations of animal passions, its preoccupation with the trivialities of this vile world, its infatuation with evil and ephemeral desires, its congealment from the coldness of the contingent world, its extinguishing of the heat of the love of its Lord, the Mighty, the Generous, its fall and its descent into the turmoil of error and its excessive preoccupation with reprehensible and brutish actions, it is known as “the commanding soul” (*nafsín amáratín*, the soul that commands to evil) as He hath said, and His word is the truth: “Verily, the soul commands to evil unless My Lord hath mercy upon I” (Qur’án 12:53).¹²

Then it progresses from this dire state and this base level to a station wherein there comes to it from time to time an awareness of the depths of its embroilment in danger, of its descent into the abyss of heedlessness, its treading such pathways, its self-concealment from its Lord God, its neglect of its Creator, its bewilderment in the wilderness of error and passion, and its forgetfulness of the mention of God the King, the Mighty, the All-High. On occasions, there passes over it the breeze of the perception of its state [p. 88] and it is awoken to a slight extent. It then blames itself for the depths that it perceives of its immersion in the tribulations of heedlessness and transgression and reproaches itself when it sees itself bewildered in the deserts of perversity and error. It regrets its baseness and its vile state in the lowest degrees of error and ruinous passions and its concealment behind the accumulated veils which prevent it from ascending to lofty spiritual stations and distract it from the remembrance of God through the evil whisperings of Satan. And so on account of its regret and remorse concerning its station and its blaming itself it is called “the blaming soul” (*an-nafs al-lámi’ah*)—as He hath said, may His name be magnified: “No, I will swear by the blaming soul” (Qur’án 75:2).¹³

And when the soul progressed from this lowly, brutish and abased state and ascended to a more noble, more fortunate, nearer, concealed location, it was assisted by the confirmations of God and inspired by the contents of its own book—as it is said: “Read thou thy book, sufficient is it for thy soul as an account against thee on this day” (Qur’án 17:14). Then there came to it the signs of inspiration and the reality of day became apparent to it from that of night and it was summoned to the shore of the ocean of knowledge (*’irfán*), was sustained by holy foods from the gardens of paradise, harvested the fruits of the tree of beneficence, drank from the streams of bounty and grace, benefited from the eternal bounty, [p. 89] and tasted the sweetness of blessings. It came to understand the cause of its elevation and degradation, its ascent and descent, and its rising and setting as it ought to be. It reflected upon its state, its plight became clear to it, and this led it to become averse to those things that perish (*fániyyát*) and to incline towards those things that endure (*al-báqiyyát*). It closes its eyes to those things that exist and turns instead to the court of the Almighty, the All-Compelling. It anticipates the call of the Concourse on High and turns its attention to those things that will cause it to ascend until it reaches the throne of assurance and the seat of gratitude. It becomes the focal point of inspiration among humanity. It discovers as a result of its efforts and strivings those beneficial things which will lead it to its purpose and goal. Then it is termed the “the inspired soul” (*an-nafs al-mulhamah*) for it is inspired as to that which leads it to depravation or to righteousness—as He hath said, blessed and glorified be He: “By the soul and what is like unto it, He inspired it as to that which leads it to depravation or to righteousness” (Qur’án 91:7-8).

And in a station which awakens it to the mention of its Lord and arouses it to the call of its Creator from the slumber of vain imaginings and brings its attention to the remembrance of God, the Almighty the All-Knowing, to its arising and ascent to the stations of love and assurance, its immersion in the ocean of certitude, its recognition of the signs of God in the dawning-places of contingent being, the horizons of existence and the breaths of the All-Merciful, the appearance of the evidence of Divine Oneness from the dayspring of heaven, its entrance into and remaining in the heart of paradise, its simmering in [p. 90] the heat of the love of its Lord, the Almighty, the Beneficent, its pathway and passage to God the All-Powerful, the Ruler of Paradise, its setting on the throne of calmness and repose, and its drinking from the chalice of firmness and constancy at all times. Then it is termed “the assured soul” (*an-nafs al-muṭmá’innah*) because it is assured in its faith, its turmoil and unrest is calmed, it has quenched its thirst, soothed its torment, it has thinned and removed its veils, it has changed its darkness to light, it has ended its futility, its shortcomings have turned to perfection, it has pierced its veils, torn

its coverings, revealed its secrets, shaken its foundations and unloaded its burdens. It has reported the tidings that your Lord has revealed to it. Exalted is God, its guide and its saviour, the One Who illumines it and forms it, above all that the ignorant have said.¹⁴

And when it has reached this most mighty and perfect station, this most pleasant, most pure, most sweet destination, and has drunk from these clear spring waters of Sabá,¹⁵ it will attain to the station of submission and contentment, it will leave behind its searching and neediness and will entrust its affairs to God, the Mighty and Eternal King. It will rely upon Him and recline against the cushion of His bounty and beneficence. It will not see in this station anything that is inconsistent with its contentment (*riḍá*) and it does not prefer the greatest ease to the most mighty calamity. Indeed it is content with (accepts, *ráḍiyyah*) whatever God may decree for it [p. 91] and thou wilt observe it joyful and happy when troubles descend and grateful and thankful when the oceans of misfortunes and disaster billow forth. Even were the arrows of misfortune and grief to issue forth from the clouds of destiny and the rains of sorrow and adversity to descend upon it, thou wouldst observe it wetting its tongue with praise of its Lord, the Help-in-Peril, and eloquently expounding in mention of the Generous King.

This is a station which, wert thou to attain unto it, thou wouldst arrive at a happiness which would not be followed by sadness, a joy which is not succeeded by grief, an ease and comfort that does not end in distress and hardship, a prosperity that does not turn to destitution and misfortune, for the might of thy Lord has grasped firmly the reins of affairs. “The earth is His handful on the Day of Resurrection, while the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand. Praised be to Him and Exalted is He above everything that they ascribe as partner unto Him” (Qur’án 39:67). Thus is it that not a leaf stirs upon a tree nor does a fruit fall except by the will of Thy Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

For the seeker in this exalted station there remains no will, no rest, no motion, no destiny nor any fate except in God. Indeed, his essence, his attributes, his being, his very sense of self all fade away overwhelmed by the signs of Divine Oneness, just as the shadows disappear when the pre-existent sun shines forth.

And when his will has faded away and vanished in the Will of the True God, and his will has become identical to His Will, and his pleasure is the same as His pleasure, and the veils have been lifted, the coverings have disappeared, and idolatry (*shirk*) has vanished from the reality of his heart [p. 92], then does there appear in the soul the sign of acceptance. Then on account of its acceptance of the decree of its Creator and its submission to the command of its Maker, it is known as “an accepting soul” (*nafs in ráḍiyyatin*).

Insofar as all-encompassing blessings and mercy reach it [the soul], bounties and favours encompass it, a covering of grace and beneficence enclose it, and God clothes it in the robe of obedience and His favour, the Supreme Concourse addresses it, saying: “Well is it with thee in that thou hast traversed the path and covered the way until thou didst enter into the spring of faithfulness and didst obtain the clear waters of submission and contentment (*riḍá*). Thou hast left behind thy passions and accepted the decree of Thy Lord. Thou hast expended what is thine and sacrificed thy spirit, thy heart and thine inner self upon the path to thy Lord. This then is thy consolation—thus hast thou attained unto this most exalted station and this most glorious company. Thus hast thou become accepted (*marḍiyyah*) and approved in the sight of God, thy Lord, and hast sought the shelter of the bounty of thy Lord, trembling with joy and happiness at His Bounty and Beneficence. Verily, His Grace towards His sincere servants is mighty!”

And on account of its [the soul’s] rising by means of its acceptance (*riḍá*) into the heights of being accepted by God (*al-mir’áj al-marḍiyyah ‘ind alláh*), its Lord, and its being approved in its state of nothingness (*faná’*) by its Creator, it is known as “the accepted soul” (*an-nafs al-marḍiyyah*).

And when it (the soul) soared on the wings of holiness into the atmosphere of this paradise and tasted of the sweetness of the stations of reunion in the gardens of heaven, these illumined and lofty stations were collected within it (the soul) [p. 93] and it arose to this elevated and spiritual degree and there gushed forth from the lofty heights of its reality the springs of the wisdom of eternity (*samadániyyah*). It became the focal point of inspiration and the dawning-place for the radiance of the lights of this effulgence and became content with the remembrance of God the Gracious Sovereign. It has become accept-

ing (*ráđiyyatan*) of His decree and accepted (*marđiyyatan*) in nothingness (*faná’*) at His gate, therefore it is known as “the perfect soul” (*an-nafs al-kámilah*) on account of its being characterized by these spiritual and divine perfections and being comprised of these essential (*al-jawhariyyah*) and godly attributes.

Then is it (the soul) worthy and prepared for entry into the heaven of the Kingdom of God (*malakút*), which is the paradise of the righteous and the refuge of the free whose faces have been illumined by the glad-tidings of God. In it appears the beauty of the All-Merciful and the sign of the Beneficent One. To these stations do His words, may his Grandeur be magnified, refer: “O thou assured (*muṭma’innah*) soul, return to thy Lord, accepting (*ráđiyyatan*) and accepted (*marđiyyatan*). Enter among my servants! Enter my paradise!” (Qur’án 89:27-30). For the garden of refuge, the meads of splendour, the exalted heaven and the all-high paradise are the pastures of the Kingdom of God. In this Day, the doors [of this Kingdom] are open, its land stretches out, its lights shine forth, its fruits ripen, its blossoms open out, its streams flow, its oceans billow, its springs gush forth, its breezes are gentle, its surface is delicate, its doves sing out [p. 94], its mouths smile, its sorrows are made joyous, its lightnings flash, its dawns are filled with light, its birds warble, its palaces are adorned and its joys draw near. Therefore, rise and with the loudest voice proclaim: “Hasten, O ye lovers, to the dawning-place of this most ancient light that shines forth and glistens and head towards this lofty and sublime refuge.”

The soul, when it has entered this exalted heaven, this eternal paradise, has sought the dawn of this most luminous day, has entered this most pleasant, most pure place, has taken on perfections, acquired the illumination of the essence (*jawahir*) of names and attributes, has drunk from this “cup tempered at the camphor fountain (Qur’án 76:5),” has roamed throughout these lands, plunged the depths of these seas, and has been guided to this fire kindled and aflame on the Paran of love, confirms in its reality the profession of Divine Unity (*kalimat at-tawhíd*) and establishes in its essence the sign of detachment (*ayat at-tajríd*). It attains to everlasting life and eternal living. It takes pleasure from delights the like of which no eye has seen nor any ear heard. It drinks from the clear springs which flow from the right hand of the Throne of Reality and tastes of the fruit of the tree growing in the midst of Paradise, stirred by the breezes coming from the direction of the Beauteous One [p. 95], through which the hearts of those who believe in the Divine Unity have been revived and the leaves on the branches of the hearts of the sincere ones have been set in motion. It attains unto the seat (*markaz*) of eternal life (*baqá’*) in the shadow of the countenance of its Most Exalted Lord, such that not the slightest trace of the ephemeral (*faná’*) should be hidden within it nor the misfortune of evanescence or annihilation befall it—just as He hath said, and His word is the truth: “All that are thereon (upon the earth) shall perish (*fána*) and there remaineth but the countenance of thy Lord, full of Glory and Honour” (Qur’án 55:27-8).

And when the soul hath unfolded the wings of the spirit, been attracted by the Joy of God, hath soared to the most exalted horizon, hath sought the most glorious Companion (*rafíq al-abha*), it doth ascend to the divine station of Jabarút (the realm of Command) and is assisted by an overwhelming and all-conquering power and by the intricate and ancient secret and by the noble and mighty mystery. It becomes aware of the secrets of hidden and invisible realities which consumes in envy the hearts of the mystic knowers. It is imprinted by the rays shining forth from the Sun of Truth and by its effects and comes to resemble its appearance and its light in every state and condition. It ascends to a station that God hath made to be far above the understanding of the minds of men, for this station is created out of the elements of power, strength, might, authority, sovereignty, omnipotence, protection, and freedom and nothing that has limitations or pluralities has any resemblance to it. On the contrary it is the very essence (*jawhar*) of unity, the substance of singleness and abstraction, the light [p. 96] of lights, the mystery of mysteries, the furthest tree (*Sidrat al-Muntahá*), the exalted rank, the all-highest station, the Masjid al-Aqsá (the remotest mosque), and the ultimate goal in the world of creation even though perfections have no beginning nor end to them and are beyond all limitations. Well is it with the one who has entered this holy, noble and mighty station.

And as for “the Divine Soul” (*an-nafs al-iláhiyyah*), it consists of the Universal Reality which brings together all of the Divine realities of the realm of Primal Manifestation (*láhútiyyah*) and the eternal secrets, the outer aspect of which is the ancient light and the inner aspect is the most mighty and sub-

lime mystery, the Primal Point from which appear all things and to which they revert, from which they originate and to which they return. Thus is it the Primal Oneness (*al-aḥadiyyah*) in its essence and the derived Oneness (*al-wáḥidiyyah*) in its attributes. And from it there appears plurality through manifestation [is manifested plurality, *zuhúr*] and illumination, and it becomes divided, dispersed and manifold, and radiates. And so the horizons and souls become filled and illumined by it on the Day of the Covenant, and on account of it the tabernacles of unity tremble and are set in motion. From it there grow the branches of the tree of oneness and by it they are clothed in the primal garment and the most perfect light. And from a single sign (*ayah*) from it there appear all of the (Divine) names to which human realities can attain and from a mark (*simah*) from it there grow forth all of the true hidden (Divine) attributes. And so it is the center of the circle of existence through the manifestation (*zuhúr*) of “There is no god but God” and the axis of the sphere of eternity, around which circles [p. 97] the star of oneness and unity, such that all of the hidden realities circle around this point of oneness in the realm of Primal Manifestation (*an-nuqtah al-aḥadiyyah al-láhútiyyah*) and all of the subtle luminous essences (*kaynúnát*) derive from this flame which is kindled, ablaze and speaking forth in the tree of humanity saying: “There is no god but He, the Mighty, the Powerful, the Eternal.”

This Soul consists of the reality of the sanctified persons and true thrones—the horsemen of human intelligence can never gallop in this pasture nor can the birds of the minds of creatures travel in this land. Only the sincere ones among them receive the great bounty of the rays of this most luminous light in their haste and progress towards the state of nothingness (*faná’*) at the gate of the Mighty King. Wretched and condemned are the people who imagine that they have attained unto their highest station when they have not even circled around their inner sanctuary. How can the gnats of ephemeral being (*faná’*) vie with the phoenix of the dawning-place of eternity (*baqá’*). Why is it that for a putrid, salty, bitter drop, they reject the sweet, clear and billowing sea.

To whatever extent they who seek to rise to the highest stations of mystic knowledge may ascend or to whatever high station in the degrees of certitude they that hold fast to the Divine unity may climb, they are only reading the letters of the book of their souls (cf. Qur’án 17:14), only attaining the sign that is refulgent, deposited, incorporated, and concealed within the realities of their own inner being (*kaynúnátiḥim*) and only revolving around the centres of the circles of their own essential natures (*dhátiyyátiḥim*) [p. 98]. And as for the stages that are above their worlds and beyond their attainment, they are not able to seek information about them nor to understand them.

Observe with the eye of reality physical (*khárijíyyah*), created things. You will see that everything else is not able to understand what is above it even were it to progress in its station to the highest degree of [its] existence, even as thou dost witness that the mineral however much it may progress and ascend to the summit of perfection is unable to know or to understand the station of the vegetable. And similarly, however much the plant may increase in splendour and growth, it can never become aware of the reality of the animal. And in the same way, the animal however much it may improve its goodness, splendour and proportions, it will never possess knowledge of the essence (*huwiyyat*) of humanity nor of its realities, states and attributes.

Know thou therefore that, in the variety of their stages, degrees and stations, souls are bound by this condition—that none of them are able to transgress their limits or station. No bird is able to fly above the upper limit of its flight. And if matters are thus among these created, contingent, physical (*khárijíyyah*) beings which share pertinent and similar aspects, then how much more so between the stations of contingent reality and those of the realities of Primal Manifestation, which the human intellect fails to understand, souls become confused in trying to know [p. 99], tongues are powerless to explain and the wings of the birds of hearts and minds are too feeble to fly to the heights of elucidating it.

Let us now return to our theme of the stations of the soul and its degree and conditions, its elevation and decline and its exaltation. We have stated that this most great sign in one station confirms the soul and its degrees and is transformed from stage to stage and from station to station. For in each degree it leaves behind its limitations and its condition. It seizes possession through its efforts of the signs of the degree that is above it and it leaves behind [its former] condition through tests which purify it, refine it, cleanse it and make it detached from whatsoever it not worthy in it in the path of its Creator. And

when it is released and saved from all of the lower degrees and ascends with the help of its Originator and Fashioner to a high degree, it gains a victory over the power of the lower degrees and vanquishes the hosts of the realities of the base states.

Then understand what He, glorified be He, hath said: “The Byzantines were overthrown”—that is to say it [the soul] has overthrown and caused to diminish and fade away “the commanding soul” through the misfortune of the thunderbolts that fell upon it from the realms of the Kingdom and the flaming fire that entered upon it from the repositories of Might and Command (*Jabarút*). Then was it aided by the hosts of guidance and victory and assisted by the angels of spirit and righteousness. It was awakened from its slumber and its negligence and it ended [p. 100] its immersion, its decline and abasement and bore witness to its fall and its lowly condition. Then it called to mind its condition, refined its vision, purified its sight until it came to know its state and what it was that veiled it and hindered it and became a cause for its remoteness, denial, negligence and inebriation. Then it grasped hold of the hem of Grace and Mercy and supplicated God and took refuge in His Presence, until it ascended and was saved from that station and stage and entered the loftiest station. Thus was it transformed in its stations and degrees and was victorious over and over again until it went back to its origin and returned to its center and was clothed in the robe of its perfection and entered the shadow of its Lord, the Seat of Truth in the presence of the Mighty King.

O thou who art kindled and aglow with the fire of the love of God! Know thou that were this servant to wish to interpret this Divine (*láhútiyyah*) verse in all of the hidden stations and Divine realities and in the stations of *Jabarút* and *Malakút*, the existent realities, the seen and unseen worlds, the manifestations of Primal Oneness and the states of conditioned Oneness, the spiritual essences (*kaynúná*t), the foundations of the heart, the stations (*mashá'ir*) of reality and of the soul and that which pertains and is supplementary to this with the most complete exposition and the most perfect explanation, he would be able with the help of God, and His Power and Grace and confirmation. But souls are not able nor do they have the capacity [p. 101] to hear it and understand it. Therefore do we hold the pen back from exposition and movement and give to you these keys of elucidation. Therefore open by the power of your Lord all of the doors that have been shut in your face so that you may be aware of the hidden and concealed mysteries of God, may witness and reveal the preserved and guarded secret, may travel in that spacious and mighty Kingdom, plunge into that swelling and billowing sea and that mighty and rolling ocean, glean from the bright stars of light by the Grace of the King of Manifestation.

By the Lord of forgiveness and the well-known beauty of gratitude! Were one of the sincere ones to turn to God in this most great Day and see with the purest vision, he would understand all of the realities and meanings of every word of the verses of God, the Eternal Protector—nay indeed, every letter and every dot. For realities and meanings in their entirety flow forth within their inner aspects and streams burst forth from them and oceans billow within them. Well is it with those who attain thereunto!

These meanings which we have set forth appear and are made manifest from this blessed verse when we read “the Byzantines are overthrown”—that is to say in the passive form but if we read it in the active form, there appear from it other meanings which there is no opportunity today to explain and make clear and to uncover its mysteries and secrets. We leave that for another time.

We trust in God [p. 102] in all matters and we seek help from the cord of His Mercy and Grace. Verily He gives answers to the questioner and wealth to the needy.

Notes

- 1) Aṭ-Ṭabarí, Abu Jāfar Muḥammad, *Jāmi' al-Bayán fi Tafsír al-Qur'án*, 30 vols., *Matbāah al-Maymaniyyah*, Cairo, 1321/1903, vol. 21, p. 11. Cf. similar accounts in *ibid.*, pp. 10-14 and in Ibn Kathír, *Tafsír al-Qur'án al-'Azím*, 4 vols. *Dār at-Turáth al-'Arabí*, Cairo, 1385/1965, vol. 3, p. 422-7.
- 2) Faḍl ibn Ḥasan aṭ-Ṭabarsí, *Majma' al-Bayán* (Qumm: Manshúrat Maktabah Ayat Allah al-Uzmá al-Mar'ashí al-Najafí, 1403, 5 vols.), vol. 4, p. 295.
- 3) *Athár Qalam A'lá*, vol. 5, p. 47. I am grateful to Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir for this reference.
- 4) *Tafsír of al-Qummí* quoted in Majlisí, *Bihár al-Anwár* 23:191, No. 12, see Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, p. 151-2.

- 5) Tafsír al-Qur’án, *Dár al-Yaqaza*, Beirut, 1387/1968, vol. 2, p. 255–6.
- 6) See for example the definitions of three of these from ‘Abd ar-Razzáq al-Qáshání given in footnotes 12–14 below.
- 7) Massignon, for example, gives a similar list of seven stages, which he states is to be found in the Tafsír of al-Qáshání (presumably the *Táwílát al-Qur’án*). This list is the same except that it ends after *an-nafs al-mardiyya* with *an-nafs aš-šáfiyyah* (the pure soul). See Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Halláj*, (trans. Herbert Mason), vol. 2 (Bollingen series 98, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 277 and n.
- 8) The valley of the right-hand side, the place from which the Burning Bush called out to Moses, Qur’án 28:30
- 9) This may be a reference to the four pillars or supports upon which religion is based. The Shi’is believed in five pillars (see Momen, *Introduction to Shi’i Islam*, pp. 176–8) but the Shaykhis reduced this to four (ibid, p. 226). The Báb also refers to four pillars: *Tawhíd* (Divine Unity), *Nubuwwa* (Prophethood), *Walaya* (Guardianship), and the *Shi’a* (see the Báb’s *Risála as-Sulúk*—provisional translation by Todd Lawson).
- 10) Statement made by the Báb is quoted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in several places. See quotation in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 46 and *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 126–7.
- 11) Shoghi Effendi translates these last six terms in a passage from the writings of Bahá’u’lláh thus: “Much hath been written in the books of old concerning the various stages in the development of the soul, such as concupiscence, irascibility, inspiration, benevolence, contentment, Divine good-pleasure, and the like; the Pen of the Most High, however, is disinclined to dwell upon them.” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, no. 82, p. 159).
- 12) An example of the standard Sufi description of the commanding soul can be found in ‘Abd ar-Razzáq al-Qáshání, *Istilahat as-Sufiyyah* (trans. Nabil Safwat, London: Octagon Press), no. 245, p. 56: “The Self which inclines towards bodily nature, and commands one to sensual delights and lusts, pulling the Heart downwards. Thus it is the abode of evil, the fountainhead of reprehensible morals and wicked deeds.”
- 13) al-Qáshání’s description of this state of soul is (no. 246, p. 56): “The Self which has been illuminated by the light of the Heart, to the extent that it becomes aware of its habitual heedlessness. Thus it awakens and begins to improve its condition, vacillating between Godliness and its natural state; so that whenever a misdeed occurs through its natural propensity towards evil, it is corrected by the divine admonitory light, and it starts to blame itself and turn in repentance to the door of the Forgiving, the Merciful.”
- 14) Al-Qáshání describes this state of the self thus (no. 247, p. 56): “The Self whose enlightenment has been completed by the light of the Heart, so that it has divested itself of base qualities and has been moulded by laudable moral conduct and orientated toward the way of the Heart, generally following it closely and progressively rising to the sacred world- free from sin, assiduous in its devotions, rising step by step...”
- 15) *Aš-Šabá*, the East Wind. According to al-Qáshání (*Iztilahát as-Súfiyyah* no. 242): “It is the breezes of the All-Merciful coming from the direction of the East of Spirituality and summoning and rousing one to the good.”

