

The Tablet of Maqsúd (Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd)

Guidance on human nature and leadership

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Introduction

The Tablet of Maqsúd is a monumentally significant missive in the corpus of Bahá'u'lláh's revelatory texts.¹ It is addressed to a certain Mírzá Maqsúd, a Persian Bahá'í residing in Syria. In this Tablet, transcribed² by Mírzá Áqá Ján circa late-1881³ at Bahjí, Bahá'u'lláh amalgamates advice and admonition drawn from earlier tablets with some uniquely instructive pronouncements on a host of noteworthy topics including human potential and its efflorescence through the knowledge of God, the achievement of peace by means of disarmament, the demand that leadership and political statesmanship be based on wisdom, equity and justice, and other related topics. As with most post-Aqdas era works, its tone is majestic and its themes are of universal significance and interest. Shoghi Effendi Rabbani numbered this Tablet as amongst those Bahá'u'lláh revealed to further explain the core precepts and principles of His teachings, to reiterate previously proclaimed truths and to augment some of the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.⁴ In this paper, I intend to elaborate on some of Bahá'u'lláh's counsels and to examine their relevance vis-à-vis contemporary global circumstances. Following a synopsis of the Tablet, I will attempt to explore two of its overarching and inextricably-coupled concepts:

1. The innate nobility of human nature and the means for the full realization of its potential, and
2. The essential attributes of leadership, their relevance to the pursuit of justice and peace, and the duties devolved to a leader.

While these are not the only topics, nor do they comprise the sole arguments, of far-reaching interest advanced by Bahá'u'lláh in this weighty Tablet, yet they succinctly and comprehensively encapsulate its core message. Bahá'u'lláh touches on many intriguing topics which, owing to space constraints, will be omitted from this brief review to maintain focus on the selected themes.

Synopsis

The following is an abridged, sequential outline of the Tablet:

Prophets are necessary intermediaries between God and creation. Mankind stands in need of guidance from his creator, but God is invulnerable and self-sufficient. Without divine messengers humanity remains oblivious to the trust bestowed upon him. Mankind is recognized as the 'supreme Talisman' (*Tilism-i-a'zam*), but he needs divine education for his true worth to be uncovered and for his character to be polished and refined.

Bahá'u'lláh acknowledges the receipt of Maqsúd's letter after showering prolific praise upon Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, and upon His kindred and companions.

Concerned about the dismal state of human affairs, Bahá'u'lláh regrets and is mystified by the irony of a heedless world turning a deaf ear to His healing message, while stigmatizing Him with mischief for its own misfortunes.

The graciousness and the unified action of world leaders are preconditions for justice. On a related note, reward and punishment form the twin pillars upon which world order is established and which usher in just and equitable conditions for all who dwell on earth.

Reaffirming the notion of collective security and the promotion of peace and tranquility, Bahá'u'lláh calls for a conclave of the world's rulers and statesmen, led by the 'Great Powers,' to put up a united front against nefarious and aggressive elements in society. Armaments are hence reduced and only maintained for defensive purposes. It is worth mentioning that He acknowledges the need for a deterrent force as a counter-balance to would-be rogue regimes.

Reflecting on the necessity for a universal language and script, instituted through a consultative process led by a representative group of scholars and leaders of thought, He makes its promulgation and promotion incumbent upon all 'men of insight.'

The exercise of justice, balanced by wisdom and common sense, is requisite to successful statesmanship.

Bahá'u'lláh underscores the plea for unity and the abandonment of discord, estrangement and the pursuit of selfish and self-preserving schemes.

Wisdom and common sense are the outcomes of consultation and compassion.

The pursuit of useful sciences, and not those that 'begin with words and end in words,' yield optimum benefits to the civilized world. In effect, Bahá'u'lláh puts a damper on ventures in mindless minutia such as those practiced by some Muslim ecclesiastics.

To avert injustice, moderation is mandatory upon all. This is especially applicable to those in positions of power and influence.

Tolerance and righteousness are required for a true understanding of divine mysteries.

Learning and wisdom are as eyes giving sight to the body of mankind.

Speech must be influential and penetrating. Words should accompany deeds and be moderated for best effect. Speech is endowed with a spirit and its misuse can be detrimental.

After responding to Maqṣúd's personal questions, Bahá'u'lláh ends the Tablet by urging and encouraging the adoption of a virtuous life.

Let us now inquire into the two aforementioned themes: the nobility of human nature, and the essential attributes and demands of leadership.

On human nature

Bahá'u'lláh hails mankind as the supreme talisman and reaffirms the divine conferral of a latent gift to every soul. The realization of human aptitude and potential—that is, the discovery of the latent gift—is contingent upon proper education. This education, by implication of a spiritual nature,⁵ is comprised of exhortations, guidance, instructions and teachings brought forth through the agency of the divine messengers, acting as intermediaries between the creator and the world of creation. The reason Bahá'u'lláh cites for the necessity of such an education is mankind's incapacity to fully comprehend (*idrák*) by himself that which is revealed in the heavenly books. Spiritual education is a fundamental and constant human need and does not vary with the appearance of successive messengers. Indeed, it is humanity's inability and impotence (*ghásir, ájiz*) to understand and comprehend the heavenly books sans the assistance

of God's prophets that gives rise to the need for his spiritual education. Man, whom Bahá'u'lláh has elsewhere termed 'the most noble of all creation' (*ashraf-i-makhlúqát*), is endued and entrusted with mysterious and latent gifts. The discovery of the possession and the full realization of that with which he is charged is not possible save through spiritual training and education. Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on spiritual education through revealed religion is further augmented in the Tablet of Splendours, in particular the first Ishraq, where He says: "Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine."⁶

There is a delicate balance in Bahá'u'lláh's depiction of human nature: while man is termed the supreme talisman—the implication being that he trumps other forms of earthly life—yet in matters of the spirit he falls short in perception and understanding of the mystical realms by himself, and is in acute need of the assistance of divine messengers to fathom their inner meanings. Even in simple earthly matters, lacking such training, man is not immune from descending to base and bestly behavior. Commenting on this point, Abdul-Bahá brings to light that ". . . education is of three kinds: material, human and spiritual."⁷ The pinnacle of human achievement is the attainment of spiritual education, for it is through this alone that humanity can distinguish and differentiate itself from other forms of life. The role of the Educator is to impart divine knowledge so as to "educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the attributes and the names of God shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man."⁸

What is the latent gift bestowed to mankind and what does the phrase supreme talisman signify? For the first answer, let us examine Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words.⁹ As a representative sample (and not an exhaustive survey), we find that in the Arabic Hidden Words, number 12, He states: "O Son of Being! With the hands of power I made thee and with the fingers of strength I created thee; and within thee have I placed the essence of My light." Again, in the Arabic Hidden Words, number 22 He says: "O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee . . ." and in number 69, He says: "O Ye Sons of Spirit! Ye are My treasury, for in you I have treasured the pearls of My mysteries and the gems of My knowledge." In the Persian Hidden Words, number 29, He states: "O Son of Bounty! Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things." In His Will and Testament, Bahá'u'lláh declares: "Great and blessed is this Day—the Day in which all that lay latent in man hath been and will be made manifest. Lofty is the station of man were he to hold fast to righteousness and truth and to remain firm and steadfast to the Cause."¹⁰ In the yet-to-be-translated Tablet to Manikji, Bahá'u'lláh states (my provisional rendering): "The soul is the treasury of My Mystery; do not surrender it to avarice . . ." (*ján ganjiniy-i ráz-i man ast ú rá bidast-i áz maspárid*).¹¹ Finally, in this and in other tablets of the same era, Bahá'u'lláh advises us to "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value."¹²

In the above passages, Bahá'u'lláh confirms the greatness of mankind and the nobility of his creation, yet He makes man's eminence conditional upon resolute faith in Him—in other words, spiritual training revealed through God's intermediaries. This notion is rooted in the Báb's Writings. In the Persian Bayán, commenting on man's inherent potentialities, He says: "Man's highest station, however, is attained through faith in God in every Dispensation and by acceptance of what hath been revealed by Him . . ." ¹³ As for man being the supreme talisman, the reference has less to do with physical objects such as amulets (*hayákil*) and charms (*ahráz*), or to the science of gematria. Rather, it sustains the assertion that to everyone is given the potential to rise to the rank of the Perfect Man.¹⁴ Bábís and early Bahá'ís wore or carried with them

loquets, rings and other objects engraved with signs and symbols or containing fragments of holy writings, prayers and invocations expressly revealed for special occasions. These were deemed to have talismanic powers in repelling malevolent, evil spirits and in bringing protection and blessings to their bearer. In this Tablet, it is likely that Bahá’u’lláh uses talisman as a literary device to elevate the station of man to that of a higher form of life vested with mysterious elements—an enthralled being! The potential to rise above the baser self is only realized through spiritual education. In the Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh confirms that He has come to educate mankind “for naught but the protection of your own selves and the elevation of your stations.”¹⁵ He goes on to state that the mission of all the Prophets has been “to nurture the trees of human existence with the living waters of uprightness and understanding, that there may appear from them that which God hath deposited within their inmost selves . . . The purpose of these educators, in all they said and taught, was to preserve man’s exalted station.”¹⁶

We can deduce, therefore, that the latent gift bestowed to mankind is the ‘essence’ of divine Light, the ‘pearls’ of divine Mysteries and the ‘gems’ of divine Knowledge. In expounding on the purpose of creation, Bahá’u’lláh attests that it is for the attainment of the true understanding of God (*maqṣúd az áfarínish irfán-i ḥaq búdíh*).¹⁷

On leadership

Bahá’u’lláh’s poignant reflection on the state of human affairs, its forlorn leadership and its collective failure to settle conflicts peacefully and with due attention to justice, forms the other theme being examined in this brief review. There is an unambiguous connection between the demands of leadership with the disposition of those being led. Bahá’u’lláh’s sanguine vision for a peaceful, unified world is predicated on the graceful acquiescence of humanity to leadership that is itself informed by wisdom and humility, and driven with a keen sense of equity and justice.

The decades leading to the revelation of this Tablet were witness to violent clashes and conflicts around the world.¹⁸ The Great Powers of the time—Britain and Russia—were occupied with imposing their might and control far beyond their recognized borders. This rampant march of colonialism and the ensuing assertion of ethnic and nationalistic pride by those bearing the brunt of imperial exploitations was a major cause of regional unease.¹⁹ The self-serving, colonial games in which Britain, Russia, France and other major powers of the time indulged themselves heralded a rapid deterioration in the plight of the subjugated masses. Economically, conditions were slowly but surely improving for a greater share of the people in the West. As industrial expansion picked up steam and the decline of feudalism and dynastic rule gave way to more liberal and democratic governance, a renewed sense of optimism pervaded some Western nations and with it the hopeful signs of equitable and egalitarian prospects for a greater share of their denizens. The same, sadly, did not hold true for the rest of the world. In this Tablet, Bahá’u’lláh expresses disappointment that the din and noise of wars and revolutions have drowned out His healing message. He calls for the establishment of a global conclave of world leaders to collectively engage in reforms, to cohesively put out rogue and unjust aggression, to consistently trim offensive armaments, retaining only minimal amounts necessary for defensive purposes, and to coherently promote universal peace (the ‘Great Peace’) through dialog and consultation. Bahá’u’lláh’s call is all-embracing and not hemmed in by the bounds of geographic or ethnic divides.

Over the past century we have witnessed the steady coalescence of the international community via the intercessions of the now-defunct League of Nations, the current United Nations (and its many affiliated agencies) as well as the various military and economic partnerships such

as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, and so on.²⁰ These sputtering efforts at cooperation and the bringing together of human civilization have yielded a few tangible results. Among the pertinent examples of the united endeavors of world leaders is the manner in which conflicts have been dimmed in Europe and Africa, and more recently in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans and other trouble spots. Although not with entirely reliable or uniformly positive outcomes, yet most statesmen have taken resolute steps to address endemic global problems such as the alarming buildup of armaments, racism and discrimination, ethnic and religious tensions, environmental pollution and degradation, drug abuse, the rapid spread of deadly diseases, hunger and malnutrition, etcetera. They have introduced and maintained deterrents to curb the arbitrary belligerence of strongmen and dictators and have countered the naked aggression of some of the more flagrantly seditious tyrants and fanatics with decisive undertakings. In the process, they have come to fulfill Bahá'u'lláh's call that "Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him" (*agar malikí bar malikí bar khízad jamí' mottafighan bar man' ghíyám namáyand*).²¹ Their work is far from done but the machinery of communal action is in gear and, one would hope, irreversible—albeit at times faltering and beset with bias. Filtering the clashes and catastrophes of the past century through the lens of Bahá'u'lláh's predictions, we can begin to grasp the relevance and the urgency of His plea for impartial, graceful, just and balanced leadership.

In 1875 Abdul-Bahá penned a treatise known as "The Secret of Divine Civilization" addressed to the people and government of Persia.²² Referring to rulers who are known for their sense of justice and who champion the cause of human rights, Abdul-Bahá states that their station in the sight of God is second only to that of His prophets.²³ Abdul-Bahá recalls the horrific events of the Franco-Prussian War and laments over the senseless destructions and the tragic loss of human life. He is puzzled over mankind's inability to learn from these mistakes and expresses alarm at the invention of even deadlier armaments and instruments of warfare.²⁴ Appealing to the greatness of the Persian nation by alluding to its pre-Islamic glory, He argues for the redirection of resources into rebuilding the nation's infrastructure, reforming its educational system, renewing its social welfare apparatus, and so on. In short, Abdul-Bahá echoes the essence of Bahá'u'lláh's message of enlightened and progressive leadership rooted in the principles of justice and equity.

Bahá'u'lláh underscores the necessity for the leader to exercise self-moderation, wisdom and common sense in advancing the common good. The leader is one who makes judicious use of rewards and punishments to arbitrate and mitigate conflicts. In the eight Ishraq—an integral part of the Aqdas—He reiterates: "O people of God! That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment"²⁵ Further, Bahá'u'lláh re-reveals many of the themes found in this Tablet, mainly the two discussed in this paper, in the Tablet of the World.²⁶

Conclusion

By reaffirming the necessity of spiritual education for the fulfillment of the intrinsic greatness of mankind, Bahá'u'lláh unfurls His vision for world peace by accentuating the attributes of enlightened leadership. In this Tablet, the former theme (nobility of creation) becomes the antecedent of and a prerequisite for the attainment of the latter (peace through progressive leadership). He unequivocally designates and commits to the leaders and statesmen the formidable task of training the nations under their charge and calls on them to cooperatively establish peace and security. Other themes such as the efficacy of moderated speech, the appeal for reforms, the need for long-term vision and planning, the abandonment of estrangement, the inexorableness of a common language and script and so on are, alas, omitted from considera-

tion due to the limited scope of this paper. Above all, His emphasis on the need for limits to liberty and civilization, the excess of which can exercise a “pernicious influence upon men,” requires meticulous attention and study. Further elaboration on this point appears in the ninth Leaf of the Words of Paradise.²⁷ It can be argued that in this and other tablets of the same era Bahá’u’lláh anticipates the fall of despotic, tyrannical rule and the rise of democratically elected governments and leaders. He awaits the “high endeavours” of political statesmen to lead humanity in beneficial pursuits. Correlating the concept of leadership as articulated here with some of His other writings, we find that in a final, remarkable gesture towards the rulers and kings (*mulúk*), Bahá’u’lláh calls on the trustees of God (i.e. the yet-to-be-formed Universal House of Justice) to pray for them and affirms that the rulership of the world is entrusted to their care, while the hearts of men are set aside for Himself.²⁸

With guidance to political leaders for the establishment of peace and tranquility through consultation and mutual respect, Bahá’u’lláh re-reveals and weaves together many of the themes He has enunciated in various other writings. This coherent collage of exhortations—for the spiritual education and advancement of humanity, for the reconciliation of nations and for unprejudiced leadership—stands out as the most distinguishing feature of this Tablet. What makes it all the more riveting is its bearing on global events in more recent times—its core message being as fresh and relevant now as it was over a century and half ago! More than a simple response to a private letter of a bewildered believer, the Tablet of Maqsúd surely ranks among the “choicest fruits” emanating from the Supreme Pen.

Notes

- 1) The original text is in *Majmú’ihí az Alváh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá kih ba’d as Kitáb-i Aqdas názil shudih* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’i-Verlag, 1980), pp. 95-111. The English translation is in *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1988), pp. 159-178.
- 2) A. H. Ishraq-Khavari, *Muhaḍirát* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’i-Verlag, 1994), pp. 448-454. See also the explanation of the translator preceding the text in *Tablets*.
- 3) A. Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, vol. 4 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1988), pp. 235-6. See also J. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 131 and *Call to Remembrance* (Wilmette: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1992), p. 283.
- 4) S. Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 216.
- 5) Unlike His emphasis on mandatory schooling (*tahsíl*) in numerous other writings, Bahá’u’lláh’s reference to education (*tarbíyat*) in this Tablet is, in my belief, informed by an undertone of spiritual training and is distinct from the traditional secular or the Islamic madrasah tuition.
- 6) See *Tablets*, p. 125.
- 7) Abdul-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1984), pp. 7-11. For the original see *Mufávaḍát* (New Delhi: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1983), pp. 5-9.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1994).
- 10) The translation of the Book of the Covenant appears in *Tablets*, pp. 217-223. The original is in *Ad’íyyih-i-Haḍrat-i-Mahbúb* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’i-Verlag, 1980), pp. 410-420.
- 11) Bahá’u’lláh, *Majmúiy-i-Alváh-i Mubáarak* (Cairo, 1920), p. 265.
- 12) See *Tablets*, p. 162.
- 13) The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (Haifa: Bahá’i World Centre, 1976), p. 89.
- 14) For a full description of these and related concepts, see D. MacEoin, *Rituals in Babism and Baha’ism* (London: British Academic Press, 1994).
- 15) Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá’i World Centre, 1992), p. 26.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 139. This passage appears in the Questions and Answers section.
- 17) Bahá’u’lláh, *Áyát-i-Iláhi*, vol. 2 (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’i-Verlag, 1996), p. 41.
- 18) Revolutions in Greece (1821-1829) and Portugal (1820-1851), the Anglo-Russian Crimean War (1854-1856),

Tablet of Maqsúd

the American Civil War (1861-1865), revolutionary wars in South America, the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the gradual waning of Catholicism's temporal powers, to mention but a few, attest to a period of sustained agitation, restlessness and general dissatisfaction with unjust, arbitrary and corrupt princely and priestly callousness.

- 19) British colonial interests stretched from Egypt to Iran to Afghanistan to India to Australia to China, and to many points in between. Similarly, the Belgians in Congo or the French in North Africa, Indo-China and Mexico, to name a few, were not to be deprived of their share of exploits.
- 20) The preamble to The Covenant of the League of Nations is noteworthy in that it states: "In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war, by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations, by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another . . ." Available on the Internet at www.tufts.edu/departments/fletcher/multi/www/league-covenant.html.
- 21) See *Tablets*, pp. 165.
- 22) Abdul-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990).
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 24) *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- 25) See *Tablets*, pp. 128-129.
- 26) *Ibid.*, pp. 81-97.
- 27) *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
- 28) See Kitáb-i-Ahd in *Tablets*.

