

# Tablet of Tribulations

(Lawḥ-i Baláyá)

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## Introduction

Baha'u'llah rarely compares his sufferings to those of Muhammad, preferring instead to parallel his mistreatment to that of Muhammad's martyred grandson Husayn. But the comparison with Muhammad is apt if for no other reason than both men lived long lives as self-proclaimed prophets and died peacefully in their beds.

One of the few places Baha'u'llah makes the comparison is in the "Tablet of Tribulations," written between 1863 and Baha'u'llah's death in 1892. In it, he draws a stark contrast between his tribulations and those of Muhammad. Given his allusion to the calumnies directed against him by two unnamed individuals, Baha'u'llah probably wrote the tablet during his exile in Istanbul and Edirne between 1863 and 1868 when the Iranian ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani conspired against him.

The tablet is not only unique for its subject matter but also for its historical references. Baha'u'llah quotes or paraphrases many early Islamic histories of Muhammad's life and exegeses of the Qur'an, which is unusual in his tablets. Some of the episodes, especially the massacre and enslavement of a Jewish tribe, are rarely treated elsewhere in Baha'u'llah's voluminous works. I have included footnotes to provide some background from the Islamic sources.

To my knowledge, no one has written about the tablet in any language other than a brief note by Fadil Mazandirani (Asrar al-Athar, 5:256) identifying its recipient as Sayyid Mahdi Dahaji. Sayyid Mahdi's nephew, Ali Akbar Dahaji, had received the Fire Tablet. (Baha'u'llah also mentions Ali Akbar in the "Tablet of Tribulations.")

The text of the tablet is in *Iqtidarát va chand lawh-i digar*, a collection of Baha'u'llah's writings in the hand of Mishkin Qalam published in 1892-3. (The bracketed numbers in the translation are the page numbers in *Iqtidarát*.) Because the tablet has no name, I have taken its name from the "tribulations" (*baláyá*) mentioned throughout.

[116]

In His Name, the Merciful, the Gracious

Hearken, O Mahdi, unto the call of Him Who is drowning in a sea of tribulation. When the waves recede, He will assuredly rear His head and look to the East, saying, "The Beloved hath come, welcome Him!" Then the waves shall take and drown Him. When the waves calm, He will lift His head and gaze to the West, proclaiming in upraised voice, "This is the Beloved of the worlds who hath come to quicken you and exalt your station! Ye have abandoned Him to this ordeal the like of which mortal eyes have never seen." He, verily, is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

[117]

O Mahdi! By My life! If the veils were burnt away and thou wert to see Me in the darkness in which I abide, thou wouldst rush out and raise a cry amongst the entire creation, forgetting thyself and the sorrows that have overwhelmed thee. Nevertheless, We have concealed it as a bounty from thy Lord, the Almighty, the Generous.

Despite these trials, I have shone resplendent above the horizon of beauty and arisen from the dawning-place of power and majesty in such wise that if someone saw Me, he would find in the lines of my forehead the joy of God and in my cheeks the light of God, the Powerful, the Almighty, the Great. Though a man fleeth tribulation, Baha' shall accompany him in the path of God, the King of Names. Thus have we confided in thee so that thou mayest leave thy cares behind and follow the Manifestation of the Merciful among all created things. Verily, this is true victory.

Leave aside thy disappointment and acknowledge what the Exalted Pen hath testified unto thee in several tablets. Verily, He hath recognized thy love of thy Lord and hath revealed to thee that which hath caused the fragrance of the Beloved to waft throughout the world. Is it more befitting to bear witness to what [118] hath been revealed to thee or rather to doubt it? Nay, by thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Bountiful. Leave aside the latter and be content with the bounty of thy Lord. Thus doth the Wronged One commandeth thee. Verily, He is to be obeyed in that which He desireth.

In the Persian tongue: "Hearken unto that which hath been revealed. Acknowledge its truth and persevere in asking the True One of that which concerns thee." Even if the testimony of God is not sufficient for thee, He hath borne witness to thy faith and thy turning unto Him, to the prayers thou hast uttered, and to the aid thou hast rendered.

By my life! If thou knewest what the Reality of Knowledge hath sent down upon thee, thou wouldst soar on wings of longing. Take heed lest the fragrance of hopelessness waft from thee; nay rather, be thou hopeful. Send forth at every moment that which will diffuse the scent of joy at having stood before the Face of thy Lord, the Powerful, the Praised. This is what We have admonished thee previously and in this luminous tablet.

O My name! From the beginning of the world until Mine own time, no one hath been afflicted by such trials. Consider the Messenger of God. Despite manifest power in the Battle of the Trench, some of His

Holiness's Companions, outwardly evincing utter servitude and sacrifice, said in secret, [119] "Muhammad promised we would devour the treasure of Khosrau and Caesar but none of us even feel safe going to the bathroom."<sup>1</sup> This happened in the few years when there was neither outward victory nor clear dominion for the Ancient Beauty over rival claimants to power. It is well known what happened as a result.

Tu`ma, one of His Holiness's Companions, stole armor at night.<sup>2</sup> In the morning, the Jews gathered and followed the signs and traces of the theft. When the Jews learned His Holiness had become aware of what happened, they insisted He do something. His Holiness resisted, not wanting this sin to accrue to Islam such that it damaged the cause of God among the believers. Suddenly, Gabriel descended and recited this verse: "Verily, We have sent down to thee the Book with the truth, so that thou mayest judge between the people by what God hath shown thee. So be not an advocate for the traitors" (Q 4:105). Afterwards, Muhammad repudiated Tu`ma but calumnies were uttered against His Holiness amongst the people that the pen does not like to describe. After a complete recantation of his faith, Tu`ma returned to Mecca [120] and lived among the polytheists.

Likewise, recall the dispute between Zubayr and Hatib regarding water and land that was referred to His Holiness. They argued until they sought His Holiness' judgment. His Holiness decreed, "O Zubayr! Go and water thy land." At that moment, Hatib said something that suggested His Holiness had turned away from what is right. This blessed verse then descended: "But no, by thy Lord! They will not believe till they make thee the judge regarding the disagreement between them, then they shall find in themselves

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<sup>1</sup> A paraphrase of an account in Ibn Hisham's *Sira*.

<sup>2</sup> From al-Wahidi's *Asbab al-Nuzul*, commenting on verses 4:105-4:116 (modified Guezzou translation):

All these verses were revealed regarding one incident. One man from the Ansar by the name of Tu'mah ibn Ubayriq, from Banu Zafar ibn al-Harith, stole an armour from his neighbour who was called Qatadah ibn al-Nu'man. The armour was in a sack of ground wheat. When he took the armour, the ground wheat was strewn about from a hole in the sack. Traces of ground wheat were left in his house. Tu'mah then took the armour and hid it with a Jew by the name of Zayd ibn al-Samin. When people looked for the armour in the house of Tu'mah, they could not find it. He swore to them by Allah that he did not take the armour or have any knowledge about it. The owners of the armour said: "No indeed, by Allah he entered our house and took it. We followed him until he entered his house and, therein, we saw traces of wheat". When he swore by Allah that he did not steal it, they left him and followed the trail of ground wheat which led them to the house of the Jewish man. When they took him, he said that it was Tu'mah ibn Ubayriq who had left the armour with him, and some Jewish people testified that this was the case. Banu Zafar, the clan of Tu'mah, said: "Let us go to the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace". They spoke to the Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, and requested him to argue in favour of their man, saying: "If you do not do so, our man will be doomed and exposed and the Jew will come out of this as an innocent man". The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, was on the verge of doing as he was requested — for his heart was with them — and punish the Jew when Allah, exalted is He, revealed "Verily, We have sent down to thee the Book with the truth," up to the end of the verse. This is the view of a number of Qur'anic commentators."

no impediment touching thy verdict, but shall surrender in full submission” (Q 4:65).<sup>3</sup> After they went outside, Ammar Yasir and Ibn Mas`ud asked, “In whose favor did he rule?” Hatib, filled with mockery and sarcasm, sneeringly pointed at Zubayr. A Jew standing nearby said, “May God strike them dead. What kind of group is this that testifieth to the truth of the message of this man and then mocketh his ruling?” At that moment, Ammar Yasir swore by the God of Muhammad, “If Muhammad said ‘Kill thyself,’ I would kill myself.” Thabit b. Qays and Ibn Mas`ud also uttered such words. Thereupon, this verse descended, “But had We prescribed for them, saying, ‘Slay yourselves’ or ‘Leave [121] your habitations,’ they would not have done it, save a few of them; yet if they had done as they were admonished it would have been better for them, confirming them strongly” (Q 4:66).<sup>4</sup>

At another time, one of the Jews and a Companion quarreled. The Jew sought the judgment of His Holiness and the Muslim preferred the ruling of Ka`b b. Ashraf.<sup>5</sup> The Jew insisted on bringing the complaint before His Holiness, who ruled in the Jew’s favor. Afterwards, this verse descended, “Hast thou not regarded those who assert that they believe in what has been sent down to thee, and what was sent down before thee, desiring to take their disputes to idols, yet they have been commanded to disbelieve in them? But Satan desires to lead them astray into far error” (Q 4:60).<sup>6</sup> The meaning of “idol”

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<sup>3</sup> From al-Wahidi’s *Asbab al-nuzul*, commenting on verse 4:65 (modified Guezzou translation):

This was revealed about al-Zubayr bin al-`Awwam and his adversary Hatib ibn Abi Balta`ah,...(The son) of al-Zubayr said his father used to relate that he went to the Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, to settle a dispute he had with one of the Ansar who had participated in the Battle of Badr regarding a water conduit which they both used to water their land. The Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, said to al-Zubayr: “Water your land first and then let the water flow to your neighbor”. The Ansari man got angry and said: “O Messenger of Allah! You judged in this way because he is the son of your maternal aunt”. Upon hearing this, the face of the messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, flushed. He then said to al-Zubayr: “Water your land and then block the water until it goes back to its source”. In this way the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, gave al-Zubayr his full right. His first command to al-Zubayr was made because he wanted to make it easy on both al-Zubayr and the Ansari. But when the Ansari man protested against the judgment of the messenger of Allah, he gave al-Zubayr his full right as he deserved this judgment in the first place.

<sup>4</sup> See the *Tafsir* of Muqatil b. Sulayman.

<sup>5</sup> A Jewish poet hostile to Muhammad.

<sup>6</sup> From al-Wahidi’s *Asbab al-Nuzul*, commenting on Q 4:60 (Guezzou translation):

Al-Kalbi reported from Abu Salih that Ibn `Abbas reported that this verse was revealed about a hypocrite who had a dispute with a Jewish man. The Jew said to him: “Let us go to Muhammad [to settle our dispute]”. The hypocrite said: “Rather, let us go to Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf (whom Allah described as a false deity) to settle our dispute”. The Jew insisted that their dispute should be settled by the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace. When the hypocrite saw his insistence, he went with him to the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, and his judgment was in favour of the Jew. When they left, the hypocrite stuck to the Jew and said to him: “Let us go to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab”, and they went to him. The Jew said to him: “I and this man took our dispute to Muhammad and his judgment was

in this instance is Ka`b b. Ashraf. The Muslim rejected the ruling, saying, “We are going to Umar b. Khattab.”<sup>7</sup> After they mentioned details of the ruling, Umar said, ‘Wait here until I come back.’ He entered his house, took up his sword, and returned, whereupon he beheaded the man. He said, “This is the recompense of those who are not satisfied with what [122] the Messenger of God decrees.” When the Messenger arrived, he named Umar “The Distinguisher” (al-Faruq) and from that day he was known by that nickname.

From such remembrances it is evident that today the Most Exalted Pen is preoccupied with interpreting the Qur’an and explaining its revelation, though it be sadness upon sadness. By Him Who is the Truth! From time immemorial even unto this day the mention of the chosen ones of God and their writings hath been beloved. He hath yearned for what hath been ascribed to them and for what their tongues have uttered. He hath recalled what transpired in their days in sadness because in every age such trials have befallen the Manifestations of Truth. On days such as these he hath decreed a benefit to recounting remembrances such as these, flowing from the Chosen Pen, so that thou and the lovers of truth may, by reciting the words of the Revealer of verses and the Beloved of the heavens and the earth, fathom but a dewdrop out of the billowing ocean of tribulations afflicting Him.

Briefly, We return to the subject of Our discourse. After the conquest of Mecca, the Battle of Hunayn transpired before the Battle of Taif. Much wealth was gathered for His Holiness in the form of camels, [123] cattle, and so forth. His Holiness bestowed one hundred camels upon the notables amongst the people of Mecca like Abu Sufyan<sup>8</sup> and others. To the remainder he gave forty. A person objected, “I do not see thee being just.” The Messenger became angry and said, “If I am not just, then who is?”<sup>9</sup> In this instance the Ansar<sup>10</sup> became angry because they were poorer than others, and His Holiness had given them no spoils. When bitter thoughts and vain imaginings overcame them, the hand of the loving-kindness of thy Lord, the Lord of all men, seized them. The Messenger, may the spirit of all who are in the Kingdom be His sacrifice, said: “O my Ansar! Do ye not want them to return with the camels and cattle while ye return with the Messenger of God?”

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in my favour, but this man is not happy with his judgment and claimed that he wants you to judge between us. And since he did not let me go, I came with him”. 'Umar said to the hypocrite: “Is this the case?” “Yes!” replied the hypocrite. 'Umar said: “Wait for me a moment until I come back”. 'Umar then entered his house, got his sword went back to the hypocrite and killed him. He said: “This is how I judge for he who does not accept Allah's judgment and the judgement of His Messenger”. The Jew ran away. This verse was then revealed. Gabriel, peace be upon him, said: “'Umar has differentiated between the truth and falsehood”, and so he was named al-Faruq [the distinguisher].”

<sup>7</sup> Umar was a Companion of the Prophet and the second caliph after Muhammad’s death.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Sufyan was the chief of Muhammad’s tribe and one of his greatest persecutors. He later converted to Islam.

<sup>9</sup> A quotation found in Tabari’s *Tarikh* and other sources.

<sup>10</sup> The Muslim converts in Medina who helped Muhammad and his Meccan followers when they abandoned Mecca for Medina; hence their name “Ansar” or “Helpers.”

Consider, O servant: Should we wish to mention all of that which occasioned the text of the divine verses, words would wax long and we would stray from our purpose. The intent is that despite worldly dominion and the uniting of inner rule with outer form, all these tribulations befell Him. So manifest were the punishments He enforced [124] that He had seven hundred people beheaded on a single day. That was in the battle with the Banu Qurayza.<sup>11</sup> The details are that after the Battle of the Trench, Gabriel descended and said, "O Messenger of God! The One Who Possesses a great Cause commands Thee and Thy Companions to pray the afternoon prayer before the Banu Qurayza."<sup>12</sup> The Prophet commanded His Companions to do what He had been commanded, whereon He and the Companions went to the Banu Qurayza.

When they arrived, the army of God encircled the Banu Qurayza, whose hearts were seized with fear. Whereupon the Aws<sup>13</sup> asked the Messenger of God to expel the Banu Qurayza, just as He had expelled the Banu Qaynuqa,<sup>14</sup> the allies of the Khazraj.<sup>15</sup> In short, the Aws and the Kahzraj were two groups between whom there was a lot of fighting and war in those days until the Messenger arose and appeared with the truth, gathering them both to Islam. Therefore, in most cases those two groups were subject to the same rule, and the Banu Qurayza were the allies of the Aws. His Holiness had previously forgiven the Banu Qaynuqa, who were allies of the Khazraj, on account of the intervention of some hypocrites who outwardly professed Islam and were numbered amongst the Companions. Thus, the Aws sought the same treatment for the [125] Banu Qurayza.

The Messenger of God, may the spirit of everyone other than Him be His sacrifice, asked, "Do ye not desire that Sa`d b. Mu`adh judge them since he is the chief of the Aws?" They said, "Yes, but the Sa`d

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<sup>11</sup> A Jewish tribe in Medina. According to some Muslim sources, the Banu Qurayza had violated a truce with the Prophet and attempted to negotiate with Muhammad's enemies during their siege of Medina.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*:

"According to what al-Zuhri told me, at the time of the noon prayers Gabriel came to the apostle wearing an embroidered turban and riding on a mule with a saddle covered with a piece of brocade. He asked the apostle if he had abandoned fighting, and when he said that he had, (Gabriel) said that the angels had not yet laid aside their arms and that he had just come from pursuing the enemy. 'God commands you, Muhammad, to go to Banu Qurayza. I am about to go to them to shake their stronghold.' The prophet ordered it to be announced that none should perform the afternoon prayer until after he reached Banu Qurayza."

In the Shi'i *Tafsir* of al-Qummi, Gabriel himself gives the command to pray the afternoon prayer at the Banu Qurayza.

<sup>13</sup> An Arab tribe in Medina aligned with the Banu Qurayza.

<sup>14</sup> Another Jewish tribe. According to Muslim sources, Muhammad exiled them for violating their commitments to him.

<sup>15</sup> The other main Arab tribe in Medina.

thou hast mentioned, upon him be drops of light, cannot come because of a wound he received in the Battle of the Trench.” His Holiness sent for Sa`d and he came with great difficulty. When he arrived, they informed him of what the Messenger of God commanded him to do. Sa`d said, “I rule that their men be killed, their wealth divided, and their progeny and women enslaved.”<sup>16</sup> The Messenger said, “Thou hast ruled in accordance with what God hath ruled above the seven heavens.”<sup>17</sup> Afterwards, the Prophet returned to Medina and the army did as Sa`d had commanded. They beheaded the men of the Banu Qurayza, divided their wealth, and enslaved their women and children. In two days, they beheaded seven hundred individuals.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite obtaining outer and inner power and divine authority, some became apostates, some returned to idols, and some utterly denied.

[126]

Tribulations have afflicted and continue to afflict this Wronged One in foreign lands where everyone well knows that all the kings and religions oppose Him. Thus, if it be said unto Me, “Do not drink wine, and do not say what God has not permitted,” they would immediately arise with such calumnies that have never been conceived on earth. Likewise, two souls denounce a wicked act after they themselves commit countless sins. I swear by the Day Star of Might and Holiness! They have manifested rebelliousness the like of which men have neither seen nor heard! In the eyes of the people of the land, they impute all of their blameworthy sins to Him Who is the Sovereign Truth. Such is their state. Consider now how much harm hath been done and to what extent the tribulations have reached. They do as they wish and judge as they please, save those who have believed in God and stood fast.

How very grievous is the state of the Cause in this land. Consider the Lawh-i Samsun<sup>19</sup> and those tablets that hath been revealed in recent years and the reports therein [127] of what befell the Soul of Truth. And

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<sup>16</sup> Accounts of the episode are found in Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira* and elsewhere.

<sup>17</sup> Almost exact quotation from Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the prophet. “Seven heavens” is a loose translation of “seven cobbles,” which a medieval Muslim authorities claim is another name for the seven heavens.

<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Baha’u’llah recounts his distress at reading the episode as a child in a book by the medieval Muslim scholar Majlisi:

When this wronged one was a child, he read about the subjugation of the Banu-Qurayza in a book attributed to Mulla Baqir Majlisi, and immediately became so grieved and saddened that the Pen is unable to recount it, even though what occurred was the command of God and had no purpose except to cut the roots of the oppressors. Despite this, with the ocean of forgiveness and boundless mercy before his eyes, in those days he beseeched the One True God, exalted be His glory, for whatever would be the cause of universal love, fellowship, and the unity of all the peoples of the earth – until before sunrise on the second day of the month of His birth, all his manners, speech and thought were thrown into confusion, a tumult that gave glad tidings of exaltation. This tumult was sent down and manifest repeatedly, without interruption, for twelve days, after which the waves of the sea of utterance became manifest and the rays of the sun of assurance dawned, until it culminated in the moment of Manifestation. (translation by Sen McGlinn)

<sup>19</sup> Written by Baha’u’llah in 1863 in the Ottoman port city of Samsun, on his way from Baghdad to Istanbul.

yet, He remained and still remaineth busy with that which he was bidden in utmost joy and happiness. Therefore, thou shouldst not be angered by some of these affairs. Walk thou in the footsteps of thy Lord. This is the law of God aforesaid and hereafter. Follow it and be of those who abide by My counsels. The more thou art oppressed, the more meritorious it hath been and shall be in the path of the wrongs suffered by thy Lord.

Convey greetings to thy nephew on behalf of this Wronged One, the Exile. Say: O Ali Akbar! A flame hath been lit by the fingers of thy Lord, which hath set the horizon ablaze. The people, however, are wrapped in a great veil. Draw nigh unto it with thine heart, wholly for the sake of God. By my life! By that fire the lamp of His love hath been kindled in thine heart in such wise that neither the winds nor the vast and numberless oceans can ever extinguish it. Render thanks unto thy Lord for having drawn nigh, entered, and attained. The glance of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, hath turned unto thee. Ponder the measure of this favor and sing His praise amidst all people.

Can anything sadden thee after meeting [128] thy Lord? It behooveth thee not to sorrow. Be thou content with My love and cling unto it. This is sufficient for thee didst thou but know. Even if thou art heedless, He is not heedless of thee. He doth remember thee inasmuch as He hath detected the scent of the garment wafting from thee. He giveth thee whatsoever He willeth. Verily, He is the Forgiving, the Compassionate. Go forth and persevere in His service. By my life! Nothing created on earth can ever compare, so be of those who remain steadfast.

Call to remembrance Anis! Say: Thou hast been exiled and thy Lord is the Exile. The difference is that no one harmeth thee, tortureth thee, or speaketh of thee unkindly. But this Exile hath fallen into the hands of the oppressors. They do with Him as they will, they say of Him whatsoever they wish, and they pronounce upon Him that which hath never been pronounced by the rebellious in bygone centuries. Render thanks unto thy Lord for this state of affairs even as thou renderest thanks for this affliction. Likewise, He commandeth thee to be kind to the servants who are with thee and to have mercy upon them. Verily, He is the Compassionate, the Forgiving, the Generous. Let nothing sadden thee and remain steadfast in the Cause. Say: Praise be to Thee, O Thou praised by the sincere ones! May my soul be a sacrifice for thine imprisonment and exile, O Wronged One in the hands of the [129] profligate.

If thou shouldst see the two who have attained the Face and from whom the scent of God hath wafted, convey my greetings to them and give them glad tidings of this transcendent Remembrance. The glory of God be upon thee and upon those who hath clung to truth and justice from the Almighty, the All-Powerful. Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds.