

Exalted Letters, The: Overview

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The Hurúfát-i-'Álín, 'the Exalted Letters', is a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh written in Baghdad and concerned with death and the development of the human soul. Variously known as 'Hurúf-i-'Álín' or "Áláyát' and 'Musíbat-i-Hurúf-i-'Álín' ('The suffering of the exalted letters), this Tablet was written in Arabic after the death of Mírzá Muhammad-i-Vazir and was addressed to his wife Havvá' and his sister Maryam. All three were first cousins of Bahá'u'lláh and had become Bábís soon after Bahá'u'lláh's own conversion. 'Letters' in the title is thus used in the Bábí meaning of 'believers'.

Bahá'u'lláh says that He originally wrote the Tablet for a particular person — His cousin — but later translated the entire text of the Tablet at the request of some of the Bahá'ís who had asked for an explanation of it in Persian. It is not a literal translation, He explains, because this is not in accordance with sound taste. He mentions this so as not to arouse the criticism of the unbelievers.' Because of its theme and its elevated language, it is often chanted at funerals and memorial meetings.

In its present published form the Tablet begins with a brief prologue in which Bahá'u'lláh explains how it came to be translated. The Tablet itself consists of eight sections, with the Persian translation following the original Arabic of each. The entire Tablet is an address to God and is thus a prayer.

Bahá'u'lláh begins by stating that His sorrow makes it difficult for Him to write. He then eloquently praises God's all-encompassing wisdom and providence. The heart of the Tablet is devoted to an exposition of the origin, life and destiny of the individual human soul. In the Qur'án, conception and birth were described as wonderful signs of God's power and providence. Bahá'u'lláh elaborates on this theme, describing in elevated language how the pearl-like fluid of the father's semen links generation to generation, finally descending into the shell of a maidservant. There God forms it and makes it to grow until He at last brings it forth as a child, nursing it and making it grow to maturity. But God also afflicts it, until at last it returns to its Maker, abandoning its body and leaving loved ones behind to grieve.

Bahá'u'lláh makes two other analogies for the human body. First, it is the holy tree that God causes to grow but then blasts, breaking its branches, searing its leaves and driving away the birds. The other is the house that God raises by His decree but then destroys, wrecking its foundations and causing its pillars to fall until it is as though it had never been.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself does not complain about the afflictions that have befallen Him, for He has seen God's wisdom and has beheld the state of the one who has ascended to God. However, He knows that God has concealed this vision from others so that the separation of death is difficult for them, Now the

afflictions of the world have been decreed for Havvá' and Maryam. They have no mother or women friends to share their sorrow. Bahá'u'lláh asks God to bless them and to give them relief and patience, for they are believers. Finally He asks God to make 'this weak one' — Mírzá Muhammad — ascend to His court. The Tablet ends with unconditional praise of God, for His decree is absolute and is His most perfect gift.

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