

COMMENTARY ON
THE SURAH OF THE SUN

BY

BAHA'ULLAH

TRANSLATED BY

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*commentary on the
surah of the sun*

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE MERCIFUL, THE
COMPASSIONATE

PRAISE be to God, Who hath set the dove of eloquence, perched among the twigs of the tree of explanation, to weaving her divers melodies. Her lyrics tell of how there is no God but God, Who hath brought new beings into existence, and created the contingent world by means of His Primal Will, whereby He hath caused to exist all that was and yet shall be. May God be glorified, Who hath embellished the heavens of reality with the sun of metaphorical meanings and mystical insight, as inscribed by the Pen of the Most High. Sovereignty belongeth to God, the Omnipotent, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. He hath brought forth the Most Great Ocean, which uniteth in itself the waters flowing from the spring of the letter H, which flow into the Most Ancient Name (Baha), from

which the Primal Point was separated off, and whereby the unifying Word hath become manifest and both spiritual truth and religious law were revealed.² The upholders of the divine unity broke through its surface and soared up into the heavens of ecstasy and divine presence. The sincere ones thus attained the beatific vision of their Lord, the All- Glorious, the Devoted Friend.

Then peace and blessings be upon the Dawning-Place of the Most Beautiful Names and the Most Exalted Attributes, in every letter of Whose appellation the Divine Names are treasured up, and whereby existence itself, whether visible or invisible, hath been adorned. He was called Muhammad in the realm of names, and Ahmad in the Kingdom of eternity. And peace be upon His House and His Companions, from this day until that upon which the Tongue of Grandeur shall speak forth. Sovereignty belongs to God, the One, the All-Conquering.

Your letter reached Us, and We have perused it, with all its allusions. We beseech God to aid thee in doing that which He loves, that He might

bring thee nigh unto the shores of that sea from which rise up the waves of the Name of thy Lord, the Most High. Every drop thereof saith, "There is no God but God, the Creator of all Names and of the Heavens above."

O questioner, if thou seekest the Sacred Fold and the Sinai of divine proximity, then cleanse thy heart of all else but Him. Remove the sandals of thy suppositions and idle fancies, that thou mightest see with the eye of thine heart the effulgences of God, the Lord of the Throne and of the Earth. For this is the day of unveiling and witnessing. Separation hath passed away, and union hath arrived. This is from the bounty of thy Lord, the Cherished, the Beloved. Leave posing questions and seeking answers to the people of this earth, and ascend by the wings of abnegation into those skies wherein thou shalt draw nigh to the clemency of thy Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Say: O people, the Primal Point hath been revealed, the Universal Word hath been brought to fruition, and the kingdom of God, the Help in

Peril, the Self- Subsisting, hath been made manifest. Say: O people, ye disport yourselves in a puddle, oblivious to the sweet sea that billoweth before your faces. What aileth ye, that ye comprehend not? Do ye speak forth with the knowledge ye possess when He hath appeared, Who knew the Point of Knowledge that generated all things, and to which they all returned? From this Point did issue God's own words of wisdom, and sciences that yet remain concealed in the treasures of the purity of thy Lord, the Exalted, the Almighty. Leave allusions to those trapped in them, and set out toward that station wherein ye shall perceive the fragrances of knowledge from His heavens. Thus counseleth ye this Servant, every member, every artery, of whose body testifieth that there is no God save He. He ever subsisted in the zenith of His might and glory, and in the heights of His honor and radiance. The Ones He sent with truth and guidance are the Dawning-places of His revelation to all creation, and the Daysprings of His inspiration among His servants. Through them were the mysteries unveiled, and the divine Laws legislat-

ed, and by Them was realized the Cause of God, the All-Powerful, the Mighty, the Unconstrained. No God is there but He, the Omniscient, the All-Knowing.

O questioner, know thou that the people pride themselves upon knowledge, and praise it, whereas this Servant complaineth of it. For without it Baha would not have been imprisoned in Akka with extreme abasement, nor would He have drunk from the cup of woes proffered by His enemies. Eloquence hath banished Me, and the science of rhetoric brought Me low. My mention of conjunction [union with God] hath torn Me limb from limb. My succinctness hath provoked a long-winded affliction, grammar hath deprived Me of all comfort, and syntax hath disordered the pleasures of My heart. My knowledge of God's mysteries hath become a chain about my neck. Given all this, how can I respond to your question concerning the verses revealed from the heavens of majesty and grandeur, especially since the hearts of the discerning have failed to comprehend them, and the minds of the

sagacious never soared into the heavens of their meanings?

My pinions have been clipped by the shears of envy and rancor. Should this broken bird find wings, He would fly into the sky of rhetoric and exposition and warble on the twigs of the tree of knowledge a song that would lift up the hearts of the sincere ones into the firmament of longing and attraction. They would then witness the effulgences of their Lord, the Mighty, the Bestower. At this time, however, I am forbidden to uncover what was hidden, release what was repressed or speak openly of what was concealed. We must withhold it rather than revealing it. Were We to speak of what God hath taught Us by His grace, the people would back away from Us and flee, save for those who have imbibed the elixir of life from the chalice of the words of their Lord, the All-Merciful.

For, every word sent down from the heavens of revelation upon the prophets and messengers hath been filled with the sacred waters of figura-

tive meaning, explanation, wisdom and exposition. Blessed are they who drink thereof. Since We have perceived in thee the fragrance of love, We shall reply to thee briefly and with concision. Thus mightest thou sever thyself from those who interpret all scripture metaphorically, who have opposed the truth and its mystery and cling instead to their own conjectures and vain imaginings, even though aforetime it was revealed that "Conjecture availeth nothing against the truth"³ and in another place "Some conjecture is a sin."⁴

Know that the sun mentioned in this blessed surah hath divers meanings. At the level of primacy and unity, and in the city of pre-existent divinity, it is one of God's mysteries, one of his sanctuaries, stored away in His treasure hold, concealed in His knowledge, and sealed by God's own seal. No one is informed thereof save the One, the Unique, the Omniscient. For in this station the sun signifieth the Primal Will and the illumination of divine oneness that by means of its Self sheddeth its effulgence upon the horizons.

Whoever approached it was illumined thereby just as, when the sun riseth, its rays encompass the world, all save those surfaces that remain veiled from it by some obstacle. Consider the land unencumbered by trellis or wall: it is irradiated by the sun, whereas walls cast a shadow that prevents the earth from receiving this effulgence. In the same way, behold the sun of reality. It sheddeth the light of meanings and explanation upon beings. Whoso turneth toward it is rendered luminous by its rays, and such a one's heart gloweth with its light. Whoso turneth away will never have any portion therein, for the veil of self and passion hath intervened, and such a one remaineth far from the emanations of the sun of reality that flashed forth from the horizons of the heaven of heavens.

Then, in another station, it refereth to the prophets and pure ones of God, for they are the suns of His names and attributes amid his creation. Were it not for them, no one would have been illumined by the mystical knowledge of God. As you see, every nation on earth hath been enlightened by one of these brightly shining suns.

Whoso denieth them remaineth deprived. For instance, those of God's servants who followed the Christ were irradiated by the sun of his knowledge, until the luminary of the horizons dawned over the Hijaz. Those who denied him [Muhammad] among the Christians and other communities were thereby deprived of that sun and its rays. Their very repudiation of him became a wall that locked out the light emanating from the horizon of the Cause of their Lord, the Omnipotent, the Succorer.

On yet another level of reality, it refereth to the friends and lovers of God, since they are the suns of authority among his creatures. Without them, gloom would have encompassed the entire earth, save those thy Lord willed to escape it. The word hath many other referents. Were ten scribes to come into Our presence and take down Our utterances for a year, or two years, they would in the end confess their inability to keep pace. Were it not for the denials of some ignoramuses, We would have discoursed at greater length, and the revered Pen of God would have gone beyond the mention of limitations.

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted.⁵ They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom. Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbors, and share with them their food and drink.

Oh, would that the world could believe Me! Were all the things that lie enshrined within the heart of Baha, and which the Lord, His God, the Lord of all names, hath taught Him, to be unveiled to mankind, every man on earth would be dumbfounded.

How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain! How vast

the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusion can be made! How manifold are the truths which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come! Even as it hath been said: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it."

Of these truths some can be disclosed only to the extent of the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge, and the recipients of Our hidden grace. We beseech God to strengthen thee with His power, and enable thee to recognize Him Who is the Source of all knowledge, that thou mayest detach thyself from all human learning, for "what would it profit any man to strive after learning when he hath already found and recognized Him Who is the object of all knowledge?" Cleave to the Root of knowledge, and to Him Who is the Fountain thereof, that thou mayest find thyself independent of all who claim

to be well versed in human learning, and whose claim no clear proof, nor the testimony of any enlightening book, can support.⁶

In another station, it refereth to the most beautiful names of God, insofar as every one of His names constituteth a sun shining above the horizon. Consider the name of God, “the knowing.” It is a sun that dawneth above the horizon of the will of thy Lord, the All-Merciful, its rays bathing the bodies of all things in the known universe. Thou wilt find every correct science among those persons of learning who have not given in to their passions and base desires, who have acknowledged the path of the divine decree and held fast to the firm handle of faith. Know that such a one is in the right, and that his knowledge is a ray that emanated from the light of this sun. We have, verily, interpreted the names and elucidated their mysteries, effulgences, and coruscations, their externality and internality, the secrets of their letters and the wisdom of their composition in an epistle that We penned for one of Our friends who had inquired concerning the names and what they contained.

Know that the Word of God, in the primal reality and the first station, compriseth those meanings that most of the people have failed to perceive. We bear witness that His words are complete, and in every one of these words lie concealed meanings apprehended by no one but Himself, and from Him is knowledge of the Book. No God is there but Him, the Almighty, the Omnipotent, the Bestower.

Those who wrote commentaries on the Qur'an fell into two sorts. The first neglected the literal sense in favor of an esoteric exegesis. The other interpreted literally and ignored its metaphorical dimension. Were We to review all their sayings and statements, thou wouldst be overtaken with fatigue and unable to read what We have written for thee. Therefore, We have declined to mention them here. Blessed are they that cling both to the literal and to the esoteric, for those are His servants that have believed in the universal Word.

Know that whoso clingeth to the outward sense of the words, leaving aside their esoteric significance, is simply ignorant. And whoso con-

centrateth on the metaphorical sense to the exclusion of the prosaic meaning is heedless. Only the one who intepreteth the verses esoterically while harmonizing this reading with the literal meaning can be said to be a complete scholar. This maxim hath dawned from the horizon of knowledge, so know thou its value and cherish its excellence. Verily, we mention Our object allusively in our words and intimations. Blessed is the one who graspeth Our intent and arriveth at the goal.

Say: O people, the nightingale warbleth upon the twigs, the royal cockerel crieth out with wisdom and utterance, and the peacock spreadeth its feathers in paradise. How long will ye sleep upon the couch of heedlessness and transgression? Rise from the bed of selfish passion and advance toward the dawning-place of the compassion of thy Lord, the Sovereign of Eternity, the Revealer of Names. Beware lest ye oppose Him, who calleth you to God and to His precepts. Fear ye God and be not of the negligent.

Then know that God swore to His prophet by the sun of divinity, sovereignty, will, volition, and names; by the lights of these suns, their effulgences, emanations, and effects, and by the sun shining and apparent above the horizon of this exalted firmament.⁷

“By the moon when it followeth it!”⁸ The moon signifieth the station of guardianship, which followeth the sun of prophethood, that is, it appeareth afterward, to vindicate the cause of the prophet among God’s servants. Were We to elaborate on the stations of the moon, thou wouldst be presented with a hefty tome indeed.

“By the day when it revealeth its glory!” The intent of the word “day” on the level of primal reality is every Day whereon a prophet or messenger of God appeared, to establish His mention among His servants and to implement His laws among His creatures. Thereon, the Manifestation of His Cause emanateth forth upon phenomenal beings. On that Day, the lights of the sun are

manifest, and He is the One who causeth their effulgence in the sense that in Him and by Him the sun of prophethood shineth and sheddeth its light.

“By the night when it enshroudeth it!” By the night is meant the veil of oneness behind which was hidden the Point of Reality. After this Point descended from its highest station, it settled into the realm of oneness, the plane of unity. From it the soft form of the letter alif became manifest, and beneath the veil of oneness there appeared the alif in motion, which is its upright form. It covereth the veil itself, and concealeth the Point of Reality that constituted the actuality of the sun of prophethood.⁹

“By Heaven and that which built it!” Heaven possesseth, for the people of truth, divers referents: the heaven of meanings, the heaven of mystical insight, the heaven of the religions, the heaven of learning, the heaven of wisdom, the heaven of grandeur, the heaven of exaltation, the heaven of glory. The phrase “that which built it”

signifieth the One Who created all the heavens just mentioned, and all that thou seest in the phenomenal world.

“By the earth and Him who spread it forth!” By the earth is intended the hearts. They are, indeed, vaster than the earth and heaven, for the heart is the most great throne upon which descendeth the effulgence of thy Lord, Creator of the nations and Reviver of mouldering bones. This is an earth in which God hath sown the seeds of His knowledge and love, that the sprouts of learning and certitude might shoot forth. Say, O people: Today is the day of sowing. Plant in your hearts with the hands of certitude that which hath been bestowed upon you by your Lord, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. “And Him who spread it forth” means the One who unfolded it with the hand of His might and the power of His Cause.

“By a soul and Him who fashioned it!” The soul or self hath numerous stations and subsists upon divers planes. Among them is the self of the

kingdom, the self of sovereignty, the self of Godhead, the self of divinity, the self of holiness, the self of serenity, the self of contentment, the self of satisfaction, the self of inspiration, the blameworthy self, and the self that is at the command of evil. The soul intended in this verse is the one that God hath rendered capable of all works, including acceptance and opposition, error and guidance, belief and unbelief. “And Him who fashioned it” means the One who created it and ordered it.

“And informed it of its wickedness and its piety.” This verse signifieth that God informed and instructed the soul concerning its wickedness, that is, the deeds that benefit it not and that take it far from its sovereign Creator. “Its piety” referreth to the inspiration that he giveth the soul concerning that which will sanctify it from what hath been forbidden it. That is, He created it and informed it of the path of guidance and error, truth and falsehood, light and darkness. The He commanded it to forsake what was prohibited to

it and to perform that which was enjoined upon it.

“Blessed now is he who hath kept it pure.” This verse constituteth an answer to His oath upon the soul. That is, whoso cleanseth the soul from shortcomings and passions, from all that hath been interdicted in the Book, hath attained the goal. Consider those who have purified their souls in these days. By My Life! They, verily, are blessed. They are persons undeterred by the world and all that is therein from setting out on the clear and straight path. Verily, they exemplify this blessed verse, clothing themselves in piety and clinging to the hem of the loving-kindness of their Lord in these days, wherein most have stumbled. We bear witness to whatever God hath attested, and confess the truth of that which He hath revealed. Verily, He is the Truth, and after the truth there is naught but falsehood.

“And undone is he who hath corrupted it!” That is, whoso causeth the soul to become lost

hath gone astray, and hath neglected to forbid it that which was prohibited or to enjoin upon it that which it was commanded to perform.

“The Thamud tribe in their impiety rejected their prophet.” Thamud, according to what is recorded in the books, was a community to whom God sent the Prophet Salih, but they rejected him after he enjoined them to good and forbade them from evil. They did not follow the commands and precepts of God. Finally, they hamstrung Salih camel.

“So their Lord destroyed them for their crime.” That is, God visited His wrath upon them and made of them an object lesson to all the peoples on earth. In reality, all those who oppose the truth belong to the tribe of Thamud, whatever their actual genealogy. They shall be tormented and destroyed, just as were their predecessors. Verily, God is Almighty and Omnipotent. Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds.

We have forborne to mention what the commentators have said in interpreting this blessed

chapter, for such commentaries are freely available among the people and whoso desireth may consult them. They have interpreted the sun as the outward sun, and likewise the moon, and so forth throughout the surah. They trod down the path of fundamentalism and satisfied themselves with what they possessed. We have, on the other hand, interpreted it in a way not mentioned in such books. We beseech God to render every letter of what was mentioned a chalice brimming with meanings and knowledge, and to give thee to drink therefrom what will enable thee to detach thyself from all that runneth contrary to His good-pleasure. May it bring thee nigh unto the station He hath preordained for His pure ones, for He is, verily, the Forgiving, the Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.

Praise be to thee, O Lord, My God! I beseech thee by Thy name, whereby all things glorify Thee, to open the eyes of thy creatures, that they may see the evidences of Thy splendid unity, and the effulgences of the sun of thy loving-kindness. O Lord, leave them not to themselves, for they are thy servants and creatures. Attract them by

the exalted Word unto the Dayspring of Thy most beautiful names and the treasury of Thy highest attributes. Thou art, verily, able to do whatsoever Thou desirest. No God is there but thee, the Almighty, the All- Wise.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Franklin Lewis of the University of Chicago for his meticulous comments on the earlier draft of this translation. I am grateful to Stephen Lambden for publishing the earlier draft of this provisional translation, the circulation of which in Baha'i Studies Bulletin made it possible for Mr. Lewis to comment on and improve it.

2. This passage is abstruse, but it appears to refer to the two-stage Neoplatonic and mystical doctrine of the appearance of the world. First there is the level of the unknowable God, subsisting in and by Himself. This level is variously referred to as that of God's essential "identity" (huwiyah) or, in the Tablet of All Food, as hahut (probably formed on the Syriac pattern of words such as

nasut or humanity from the “h” of huwiyah). Huwiyah or identity derives from the third-person masculine pronoun in Arabic, huwa or he. Huwa (“He,” a typical Sufi way of referring to God), huwiyah or (divine) identity, and hahut or the level of unknowable divinity, all begin with the Arabic letter “ha” or the soft H. That the “waters” of this letter H (unknowable divinity) run into the Most Great Ocean would appear to refer to the process whereby the Universal Intellect is emanated from the primal One. The Universal Intellect is coded here as the Most Ancient name, or Baha, an Arabic word meaning “glory” that is made up of the letter H (referring to huwiyah or the unknowable divinity), the letter B, and the letter alif. Alif, a straight line, is often used by Muslim mystical thinkers to symbolize the Universal Intellect. The Arabic letter B in turn is made up of a horizontal line curved up at each end (and therefore replicating the alif), with a point underneath it. The letter B is therefore a symbol of the further emanation of the world from the Universal Intellect, since it is made up of a basic shape that is lent meaning

only by being differentiated. Unlike the divine, which is essentially One, the world, like the Arabic letter B, is essentially dual in character. By analogy, the “Primal Point” is the manifestation of God in this world that gives differentiation to human society. The word Baha therefore encodes the entire Neoplatonic process of emanation, containing the H of the primal huwiyah or divine identity, the alif of the Universal Intellect, the B of the emanated cosmos, and the Primal Point or manifestation in the world of the Universal Intellect, which gives it meaning or rationality (Arabic `aql, Gr. nous). For hahut in the Tablet of All Food, see “Lawh Kull at-Ta’am” in Ishraq-Khavari, Ma’idih-’i Asmani, IV, pp. 260-70 and Stephen Lambden, “A Tablet of Mirza Husayn `Ali Baha’u’llah of the Early Iraq Period: The Tablet of All Food,” Baha’i Studies Bulletin, vol. 3, no. 1 (June 1984):4-67. The transformation of the alif into the B (symbolizing the emanation of the superlunary spheres from the Universal Intellect) is made explicit by the Shi`ite mystic Rajab al- Bursi, Mashariq Anwar al-Yaqin fi Asrar Amir al-Mu’minin (Beirut: n.p.,

1979), pp. 20-21. On this figure see B.Todd Lawson, "The Dawning of the Lights of Certainty in the Divine Secrets Connected with the Commander of the Faithful by Rajab Bursi (d. 1411)," in Leonard Lewisohn, ed., *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism* (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1992), pp. 261-276. The procession from H to alif to B is not necessarily always stated in so straightforward a manner. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i appears to see the broken alif as an intermediate stage between the upright alif and the supine ba'. The intermediate level of Universal Spirit has, in turn, the shape of the lam, the Arabic "L." Ahmad al-Ahsa'i/Abu'l-Hasan al-Jilani, 1 Safar 1224/18 March 1809, in Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, *Jawami` al-kalim*, 2 vols. (Tabriz: Muhammad Taqi Nakhjavani, 1273-1276), I, i, 11:143-144.

3. Qur'an 53:28 (53:29, Flugel).

4. Qur'an 49:12.

5. This and the following three paragraphs were translated by Shoghi Effendi Rabbani in

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah (Wilmette, Il.: Baha' Publishing Trust, 2nd edn 1976), LXXXIX.

6. Here ends the section translated by Shoghi Effendi.

7. In Surah 91 of the Qur'an, entitled "The Sun," verse 1: "By the sun and its morning brightness!"

8. Qur'an, 91:2. Subsequent verses quoted are all from the same surah, and are quoted in order, so further identification of them would seem pedantic.

9. Again, this passage refers to the letter mysticism of Muslim Neoplatonism. The upright alif, equivalent to the English long A when not associated with the hamzah glottal stop, often symbolizes the Universal Intellect. Alif also has a "soft" or "broken" form, with the shape of the Arabic ya' or Y but without any pointing. This "soft" form of the alif was often seen by mystics to symbolize an intermediate stage of emanation, in the transformation from alif to ba' (the Arabic B consists of a horizontal, slightly curved line,

with one point beneath it). The sequence upright alif-broken alif-B thus symbolizes the emanation of Universal Spirit and Universal Nature from Universal Intellect. For further details, see note 1 above.