Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-hikmat)

Source: Bahá'í Library Online (bahai-library.com), curated by Jonah Winters. Used by permission of the curator. Original citation: Juan Cole, Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-hikmat), bahai-library.com.
â”€â
”€â”

Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-hikmat)

Juan Cole

1995

The Tablet of Wisdom was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for the Bahá'í philosopher Aqa Muhammad "Nabil-i Akbar" Qa'ini when the latter came to visit him in `Akka sometime in 1873 or 1874 (1290 A.H.). Bahá'u'lláh recalls in the course of this Tablet their earlier meeting, around 1859, at the house of `Abdu'l-Majid Shirazi in Kazimayn, Iraq, at which time Bahá'u'lláh had expounded Greco-Islamic philosophy. It was upon listening to such discourses that Nabil-i Akbar (who had the best seminary training the Shi`ite world could offer at that time) had given his allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh, though he had earlier been devoted to Subh-i Azal. Bahá'u'lláh's willingness to engage philosophy in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, as it was elaborated in Muslim culture by Avicenna (d. 1037), Suhravardi (d. 1191) and Mulla Sadra (d. 1641) among others, marked a major departure for Babi religious culture. The Bab had earlier discouraged the study of metaphysics and other scholastic disciplines, but Bahá'u'lláh made a place for philosophy in the Bahá'í Faith.

The Tablet of Wisdom, which could also be translated as "The Tablet of Philosophy," begins with ethical exhortations directed at the people of the world. Ethics, politics and household management were considered in Aristotelian thought branches of "practical philosophy." That he begins with praise of down-to-earth virtues such as diligence, generosity and service to humankind suggests that he saw "practical philosophy" as having primacy over more theoretical branches of the discipline.

Next, he addresses a question posed to him by Nabil-i Akbar, about the beginning of creation. The ancient Greeks believed that the universe has always existed, a doctrine that seems to clash with the biblical and qur'anic idea of the world having been created by God at a particular point in time (perhaps as recently as 6,000 years ago if one takes the Bible literally). The great Muslim mystic and clergyman Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. A.D. 1111) had, in his Incoherence of the Philosophers, energetically attacked the idea of the pre-existence of the cosmos, while the master philosopher Averroes (d. 1198) had in his The Incoherence of the Incoherence replied with a spirited defense of Aristotle. The followers of Aristotle in Iran, mostly Avicennians known as peripatetics, continued to believe in the eternality of the world. Nabil-i Akbar was eager to have Bahá'u'lláh resolve this controversy.

Bahá'u'lláh in reply says the both the eternality of the world and the creation of the world are valid ways of talking, each in its own way, about the God-world relationship. He affirms the standard Avicennian position, that the universe has always existed. "Wert thou to assert that it hath ever existed and shall continue to exist, it would be true" (Lawh-i Hikmat, Eng. tr., p. 140). But he says that the world is nevertheless originated by the creative power of God. That is, the world is created, but it has always been being created and so has never been non-existent. Creation is not a unique divine act that occurs once, at a particular point of time, establishing a historical dividing-line between nonbeing and being. It is rather a continuous divine activity.

Yet he also affirms the validity of speaking as though the pre- existent God created the contingent world out of nothing. This way of talking, he says, is a metaphor. In Greco-Islamic philosophy, God's Being is Necessary and must by its nature exist, so that He is essentially pre-existent (qadim). The world need not have come into being, existing not because it must, but because of God's creative Will. It is therefore dependent or contingent (mumkin) and its essence is originated (muhdath) (Rahman, "The Eternity of the World," pp. 222- 237). When the scriptures or hadiths refer to God as having been alone "before" the creation, then, they are actually pointing to the difference in his metaphysical level from that of the originated world. His primacy is essential, not sequential. It is also valid, then, to speak of the contingent universe having always existed alongside the deity, since God's "Firstness" is not really a "firstness" of time but rather of essence (Lawh-i Hikmat, Eng. tr., p. 140).

To explain the dependence of complex matter on simpler building blocks, Bahá'u'lláh employs the formulation of Avicenna (Shifa', ed. Madkur, 7:147-59), which is in turn based on the schema put forward by Aristotle in his De generatione et corruptione.

Ancient Greek thought identified the basic qualities out of which the universe was formed as moistness, dryness, heat and cold. Avicenna considered the tangible qualities of heat and cold to be "agents (Ar. sing. fa'il)," or active forces. He believed moist and dry to be "patients" or passive (Ar. munfa'il). The mixture of an agent and a patient in turn produced each of the four basic elements. That is, moistness and cold combined to form water, whereas dryness and heat made fire. This is the meaning of the phrase, "The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient" (Lawh-i Hikmat, Eng., p. 140). In this way, from the combination of these attributes, the four elements of earth, air, fire and water came into being. Since the underlying qualities are indestructible, and they part and recombine, the processes of generation and disintegration are continuous and eternal. This Aristotelian physics was dominant in Islamic science, and became so in Western thought, in the medieval period, and continued to be held in Iran by most thinkers until the twentieth century. Bahá'u'lláh in using it was simply employing the terms that would be understood by his immediate audience, Nabil-i Akbar and other traditionally-trained Muslim philosophers.

Bahá'u'lláh then expatiates on his Logos theology, which holds that the origins and development of the universe ultimately depend not merely on natural forces, but upon the active Word of God (kalimat Allah) (Cole, "Concept of Manifestation," pp. 8-9). Nature itself, he says, is a reflection of the will of God. He makes it clear that his advocacy of a theology of science, wherein delving into nature represents an exploration of the divine will, is intended to counteract the influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European materialism and positivism (Lawh-i Hikmat, pp. 141-144).

Bahá'u'lláh points out that modern European thought owes a great deal to the philosophical tradition of classical Greece. He goes on to quote verbatim from medieval Muslim writers such as Abu'l-Fath Shahrastani and `Imadu'd-Din Abu'l-Fida in praise of Empedocles, Pythagoras, Hippocrates, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He further discusses Apollonius of Tyana (Ar. Balinus, b. 4 B.C.), and speaks of the Hermetic corpus (a group of anonymous, esoteric Greek writings produced in the centuries immediately after Christ and incorrectly attributed to Hermes of ancient Egypt; see Affifi, "Influence," pp. 840- 855).

The medieval Muslim biographers of the Greek philosophers quoted in this Tablet stress two important themes. First, the Greek philosophers tended to believe in the divine, and most were not materialists. This is true enough, though neither were all these Greeks Muslim-style monotheists, as Shahrastani and Abu'l-Fida tended to paint them. Second, they maintain that Pythagoras was influenced by Hebrew prophetic wisdom, and that other philosophers also "acquired their knowledge from the Prophets." (Lawh-i Hikmat, Eng., pp. 144- 145). The latter belief was held in Europe, as well, among thinkers such as St. Augustine and the Cambridge Platonists, but no historical evidence exists for it. These Muslim sources placed Empedocles in the time of David and Pythagoras in the time of Solomon, a chronology typical of Greco-Islamic works but which is mistaken (Cole, "Problems of Chronology," pp. 32-38). Here, as throughout this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh quotes or presents information from the standard Middle Eastern reference works considered authoritative at the time among thinkers such as Nabil-i Akbar (`Abdu'l-Bahá/Ethel Rosenberg, 1906, in A. Ishraq-Khavari, Ma'idih, 2:69).

Bahá'u'lláh maintains that the philosophers of antiquity were not solely concerned with abstract thought, but were often imbued with a spirit of experiment. The sources he quotes say that Aristotle first suggested the power latent in steam, and a Greek figure whose name the Arabic sources transliterate as Murtas or Muristus (Gr. Ameristos?) was said by Abu'l-Fida to have "invented an apparatus which transmitted sound over a distance of sixty miles" (Lawh-i Hikmat, Eng., p. 150). In quoting Abu'l-Fida on this figure, Bahá'u'lláh is arguing that the philosophical and scientific advances of the European Enlightenment and nineteenth century are not unique; that they have parallels on a smaller scale in past world civilizations; and that in the other instances such civilizational progress was not associated with atheism or materialism (and so need not be now).

Bahá'u'lláh's forthright championing of figures such as Socrates, and his favorable view of modern science, was remarkable in a nineteenth-century figure from a Muslim background who had not studied in European or European-style schools. Many Muslim clergymen of the time rejected either Greek philosophy or modern Western science, or both. Bahá'u'lláh's "Tablet of Wisdom" raises some of the same issues as similar essays by reformers such as the Iranian Sayyid Jamalu'd-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and the Egyptian Rifa`ah at-Tahtawi (d. 1873). This Tablet strongly affirms of the value of philosophy and modern science while insisting on the continued validity of religious beliefs.

Bibliography

The Tablet of Wisdom in English translation may be found in Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitab-i- Aqdas, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2nd edn. 1988), pp. 137-152; the Arabic text may be found in the companion volume, Majmu`ih`i az Alvah-i Jamal-i Aqdas-i Abha kih ba`d az Kitab-i Aqdas nazil shudih (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í Verlag, 1980)

Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet on the dates for the philosophers in the Tablet of Wisdom is in Ma'idih-'i Asmani, ed. A. Ishraq-Khavari,2 vols. - (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), 2:68-71 (new pagination). For its cultural context, see: A.E. Affifi, "The Influence of Hermetic Literature in Muslim Thought," BSOAS xiii (1950):840-55

Aristotle, Aristotle's De generatione et corruptione (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982)

Avicenna, ash-Shifa', ed. Ibrahim Madkur et al., 7 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-`Arabi, 1984)

J. Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," Bahá'í Studies 9 (1982):1-38

J. Cole, "Problems of Chronology in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom," World Order vol. 13, no. 3 (1979):24-39

Fazlur Rahman, "The Eternity of the World and the Heavenly bodies in Post- Avicennian Philosophy," Essays in Islamic Philosophy and Science, ed. G.F. Hourani (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1975), pp. 222-237

Franz Rosenthal, The Classical Heritage in Islam (London: Routledge, 1992)

Franz Rosenthal, Greek Philosophy in the Arab World (London: Variorum, 1990)

Richard Walzer, Greek into Arabic (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962)

Frances Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition (New York: Vintage, 1969).

For Muslim views of the Greek philosophers mentioned in this tablet, the articles in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edn., written in English but given under the philosophers' Arabic names, are essential: R. Walzer, "Aflatun;" R. Walzer, "Aristutalis;" S.M. Stern, "Anbaduklis;" M. Plessner, "Balinus;" A. Dietrich, "Buqrat;" F. Rosenthal, "Fithaghuras;" M. Plessner, "Hirmis."

METADATA

Views26733 views since posted 1999; last edit 2024-12-31 07:07 UTC;

previous at archive.org.../cole_encyclopedia_tablet_wisdom;
URLs changed in 2010, see archive.org.../bahai-library.org
Language
English
Permission
author
Share

Shortlink: bahai-library.com/461
Citation: ris/461

select Collection:
Archives
Articles
Articles-unpublished
Audio
Bibliographies
BIC
Biographies
Books
Chronologies
Compilations
Compilations-NSA
Compilations-personal
Documents
East-asia
Encyclopedia
Essays
Etc
Excerpts
Fiction
Glossaries
Guardian
Histories
Introductory
Letters
Maps
Music
Newspapers
NSA-documents
NSA-letters
Personal
Pilgrims
Poetry
Presentations

Resources
Reviews
Scripts
Software
Statistics
Study
Talks
Theses
Transcripts
Translations
UHJ-documents
UHJ-letters
Video
Visual
Writings

home

sitemap

series

chronology

search:
author

title

date

tags

adv. search
languages

inventory

bibliography

abbreviations

links

about

contact

RSS

new
— Tablet of Wisdom (Lawh-i-hikmat) (Used by permission of the curator)