

known to be devoid of life, utterly uninhabitable and only a few stars have been found with planets. How can Bahá'u'lláh know what He is talking about?

Now I propose to discuss this sentence for the balance of this essay and try to understand it in a more complete context. In my opinion Bahá'u'lláh here seems to be talking as much about religious and secular ways of knowing things as about exobiology and cosmology. He seems to be preparing us for the revolutions in knowing things that we are beginning to encounter, especially the greatest of all, far greater even than computers and the Internet, that is, our inevitable encounter with other intelligences in the universe. I think the Bahá'í Writings are so matter of fact about the existence of life beyond earth because the idea has been so well prepared for in the Qu'ran.

Here is the full paragraph containing Bahá'u'lláh's answer to an unknown question in Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,

Thou hast, moreover, asked Me concerning the nature of the celestial spheres. To comprehend their nature, it would be necessary to inquire into the meaning of the allusions that have been made in the Books of old to the celestial spheres and the heavens, and to discover the character of their relationship to this physical world, and the influence which they exert upon it. Every heart is filled with wonder at so bewildering a theme, and every mind is perplexed by its mystery. God, alone, can fathom its import. The learned men, that have fixed at several thousand years the life of this earth, have failed, throughout the long period of their observation, to consider either the number or the age of the other planets. Consider, moreover, the manifold divergencies that have resulted from the theories propounded by these men. Know thou that every fixed star hath its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute. [G1 162-163]

Clearly, it would be very useful to know what the original question was. Did it have to do with astrology? If so the purport of the above would be very different from what it would be if the question was, "What are the stars and planets (celestial spheres) made of?" Most people - enemies and perplexed believers alike - assume that this latter was the original question. But if so, why does Bahá'u'lláh say that you must inquire into the "Books of old" in order to understand the answer? Would it not make more sense to say, "Look into the most modern and powerful telescope you can find," in order to answer that particular question?

Since the Guardian chose to capitalize the word "Books" (Persian and Arabic do not have capital letters) his interpretation seems to be that the discussion is about the allusions to celestial spheres in not just any books of the past but rather in holy scripture. In that case the question may have been, "Why do the Bible and Qu'ran talk about strange celestial phenomena like stars falling out of the sky? For example Qu'ran 82:1-5,

When the heaven is cleft asunder, when the planets are dispersed ... A soul will know what it hath sent before (it) and what left behind.

The original question could have been, What is the nature of a celestial sphere

that can be "dispersed?" Or it may have been a request to clarify a passage like the following, which seems to place the planets into a "heaven" closest to the earth, one somehow related to protection from evil:

Lord of the heavens and of the earth and all that is between them, and Lord of the sun's risings. Lo! We have adorned the lowest heaven with an ornament, the planets: With security from every froward devil. [Qu'ran 37:5-7, tr: Pickthall] Unlike earlier scriptures the Qu'ran seems to assume that life is everywhere. It repeatedly states that the human race is expendable.

But nay! I swear by the Lord of the rising places and the setting places of the planets that We are Able to replace them by (others) better than them. And We are not to be outrun. [Q70:40-2] If He will, He can remove you, O people, and produce others (in your stead). Allah is Able to do that. [Q4:133] We, even We, created them, and strengthened their frame. And when We will, We can replace them, bringing others like them in their stead. [Q76:28, tr. Pickthall, cf. also Q9:39]

This could of course mean that other Arab tribes would take the place of those who had become Muslims; or that other cultures would take their place (such as the Indians and Indonesians who in modern times both have more Muslims than there are Arabs); or other species on this planet, such as the development of intelligence in other species like insects or lizards. This is a familiar theme of science fiction. But it could well mean that there is intelligent life on other planets already. Such life would have to exist already if it is to perform God's wishes in place of a human race that refuses to do so. Otherwise it would take billions of years for life to evolve and longer still for intelligent life to come about.

But then in our quote Bahá'u'lláh goes on to say that the "character of their (celestial spheres) relationship to this physical world and the influence which they exert upon it" is a mystery that only God can know. This refers to a link of some sort between us and celestial bodies. At first this seems to back up our original speculation that the query was about astrology. But it says "physical world." This opposes celestial to the physical. In that case the inquiry would have been something like, "What is the nature of the next world, of heaven, life after death, and how does it affect this life?" If that were the case Bahá'u'lláh's answer could be paraphrased as: look into how scripture talks about celestial spheres that influence our physical world. The real relation they have to this world is a mystery.

This may have been the root of the analogy that 'Abdu'l-Bahá (one of His titles is "Mystery of God) often applied between the physical world with planets circling around a sun and the supreme Manifestation of God Who like a sun dominates and sustains our souls circling around. Thus the Qu'ranic story of the prophetic dream of Joseph - a prefiguring of Bahá'u'lláh - may have been in question:

When Joseph said unto his father: O my father! Lo! I saw in a dream eleven planets and the sun and the moon, I saw them prostrating themselves unto me.

[Q12:4, tr: Pickthall]

However the phrasing of the earlier reference to the "meaning of the allusions" in scripture could also obliquely refer to a definition given in the Qu'ran of the role, nature and importance of metaphor in scripture. This passage also states that only God knows the real meanings.

He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except God. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord:" and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.

[Qu'ran 3:7, tr: M. H. Shakir]

So those who like the Muslim opponents and their allies the covenant breakers intentionally seek to twist allegorical allusions to destroy unity among believers are severely upbraided in the Qu'ran. Bahá'u'lláh, by echoing this passage that only God really understands the tie between physical celestial bodies and allegorical ones could thereby be foreshadowing and preparing for the rethinking of scholars' understanding of scripture that will result from the discovery of ubiquitous life in the universe.

Then Bahá'u'lláh goes on to talk cosmology. Now clearly it is science not scripture that is being talked about. The learned, He says, have fixed a limited date on the history of the planets and stars. He points out that these savants have been theorizing and observing for a long time yet still they disagree among themselves. Most assume that all the planets and stars came about in a short, computable time span. Then comes the statement at issue, that every non-binary star has planets and every planet has life.

On the face of it this is a very risky thing to say. All it takes is one planetless sun or one lifeless planet to prove it false. There are trillions of stars and undoubtedly many more planets. With so many to choose from the chances are very great that at least one case will someday be found to disprove the whole statement. By the criterion of philosopher of science Karl Popper the falsifiability of this statement qualifies it as a scientific theory. Religious writing, he says, is concerned with questions about why not how. Questions about how, propositions that can be shown correct or incorrect, are the primary qualification and concern of scientific writing.

You do come across falsifiable statements from time to time in Bahá'í holy Writ but I agree with Popper that this is only incidental to their main concern. Any science there is in scripture is meant only to help along the main purpose, answering questions like why we are here, what God is about, and so forth. It is unusual to see a scientific theory put forward by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, especially one so clearly falsifiable as this.

I suspected that there was more to this quote than met the eye but this is as far as I got on the point until recently when I came across the following in a

review of a book called "Probability 1: Why There Must Be Intelligent Life in the Universe" by Amir D. Aczel, in the February 2000 issue of Scientific American [p. 104],

The idea [of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe] is very old; Aczel quotes Epicurus (341-270 BC) as saying there are many worlds, all with "living creatures and plants and other things we see in the world."

This citation from Epicurus seemed so close to Bahá'u'lláh's statement that I began to wonder if He was in fact intentionally quoting Epicurus. It is not unusual for Bahá'u'lláh, in conformity with the conventions of the time and place in which He lived, to paraphrase and even quote word for word other writers without acknowledgement or footnotes. So, let us review the last two sentences of the paragraph from Gleanings:

Consider, moreover, the manifold divergencies that have resulted from the theories propounded by these men [i.e. ancient savants who calculated the earth to be only a few thousand years old]. Know thou that every fixed star hath its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute.

There seems to be quite a gap between the first and second sentence here. In order for the second sentence to follow logically the same theme as the first you could assume an interposition like: Epicurus for example said, "Know thou..." Or: If you have to choose among these conflicting theories those on the side of ubiquitous life in the universe were closest to being right, for example ancient writers like Epicurus who said, "Know thou ..." But this ignores what went before. If we assume that the original question was something like, "What is the influence of other celestial worlds on our world?" The implications of Bahá'u'lláh's overall answer could be paraphrased thus:

There are many other worlds and they are greater in number and have been around longer than it is possible to calculate. Life has evolved everywhere, so you cannot understand how fate works in homocentric terms. The universe does not revolve around this planet; our fate is not astrologically tied to heavenly bodies in any way we can understand or systematize. The tie celestial bodies have to us is real but obscure to all but God. It works through and by God, not directly from the spheres to us. The answer is only confused by looking at it in terms of scientific theories which must ultimately contradict (though some, like the theory put forward by Epicurus, come pretty close to hitting the nail on the head). The best way is to look at the allegories in scripture which are intended to draw out what is most important: not that the universe is homocentric but that God has a clear purpose for us and that it is comprehensible. We should first ask God why before we get confused with scientific questions of how or, more important in view of the astrological error, confuse questions of why with questions of how.

So, after coming across this saying of Epicurus here is where my present understanding on this very challenging paragraph by Bahá'u'lláh rests. Needless to say, this is only my personal speculation and carries no authority

as an interpretation even for myself.

It is universally agreed that the discovery of life on other planets will be the most revolutionary breakthrough in knowledge in human history. If and when the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (the SETI project) uncovers life humans will come across knowledge for the first time conditioned by other intelligences. Computers and the Web fade in comparison because they are advances in scientific and technical how. Communication with extraterrestrial intelligence will effect questions of why as well as how.

For example, it will have tremendous impact upon believers if extraterrestrials are atheists or on unbelievers should all other forms of life freely accept the existence of a Deity. The Qu'ran prophesies a challenge where knowledge from "the planets" ultimately vindicates the guidance given humanity in scripture.

I call to witness the planets, the stars which rise and set, ... That this is in truth the word of an honored messenger, Mighty, established in the presence of the Lord of the Throne, (One) to be obeyed, and trustworthy; And your comrade is not mad. [Qu'ran 81:15-22, tr: Pickthall]

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