

Problems of Chronology in Bahá'u'lláh's

Tablet of Wisdom

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An outstanding characteristic of the Bahá'í dispensation is the way in which scripture has often been cast in the forms peculiar to established literary genres in Islamic culture. Many individual pieces of revelation purposely utilize certain literary models as a vehicle for the Word of God. Bahá'u'lláh's *Haft Vádí* (*Seven Valleys*) recalls Farídu'd-Dín-i 'Atţár's *Mantiq'u't-Ṭayr* (*Parliament of the Birds*); His "*Qaşıdiy-i Varqá'iyih*" challenges in its mystical sublimity Ibnu'l-Fárid's "*Nazmu's-Sulúk*" ("Poem of the Way"); His Tablets to the Kings evoke the "Mirrors for Princes" literature; His *Kitáb-i Aqdas* (*The Most Holy Book*) is in its incomparable power, authority, and inimitable eloquence reminiscent of the Qur'án itself. However, the recognition that some of Bahá'u'lláh's writings have a complex cultural context in no sense implies a detraction from the vigorous originality of style and thought invariably exhibited in His Tablets.¹ Even those of His works that fall within a particular genre invariably transcend it in their meaning and spiritual impact, and it is important to note that for the most part Bahá'u'lláh chose to speak from within a highly formalized tradition only to rely to a request from a representative of that tradition.

A further case in point is the *Lawh-i Hikmat* (*Tablet of Wisdom*), which was revealed for the eminent Bahá'í teacher Áqá Muḥammad Nabil-i Akbar, who was deeply versed in Islamic philosophy.² Indeed, the *Tablet of Wisdom* provides one with several literary forms: ethical maxims, a treatise on cosmogony in the tradition of Aristotle's *De generatione et corruption* (*On Coming-to-be- and Passing-away*), a discourse on the relationship between philosophy and revelation, and a brief biographical treatment of some major Greek philosophers.³ The *Tablet of Wisdom* is a major one and will undoubtedly give rise to its own library. But I shall here be concerned only with the biographical section and its background in Islamic models. For unlike the Tablets mentioned above that fall into particular genres, the section on the biographies of the

¹ This point is cogently made by Professor Amín Banání in his "The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," *World Order*, 6, No. 1 (Fall 1971), p. 68: "In their literal-minded zeal to aver the authenticity of their Holy Writ, devotees of traditional religions have often insisted on the divine authorship of the very lexical and syntactic form of that Writ. This view not only reduces God to the use of particular and different human tongues, but it also attempts to isolate religious writings from the body of the language in which in which they were written. It equates divine origin with absolute linguistic and literary originality. Those who uphold this view are resentful of any comparison and precedence. With their perverted notion of originality, they completely miss the often striking literary originality of holy books that can only be perceived in the light of traditions in their language. By ignoring the literary traditions, conceptual methods, cultural associations — in short by denying the life of the language — they reduce rather than enhance comprehension and true appreciation of holy scriptures."

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Majmú'iy-i Alváh-i Mubárakiy-i Hadrat-i Bahá'u'lláh* (Cairo: Sa'adah Press, 1925), pp. 37-53. For the English text see *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), pp. 137-52. Future references will be to *Wisdom*, with the Arabic page numbers first and those of the English translation second.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 40-41/140 and Aristotle *On Coming-to-be and Passing-away*, original text with English trans. By Harold H. Joachim (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), pp. 151-52, 269-77, 271, 275 (esp. 329^b-330^b and 330^a30-330^b30).

philosophers contains some actual quotations from Muslim historians and biographers; this makes it particularly interesting. Bahá'u'lláh is here writing in a tradition of Muslim biographical literature on the Greeks, a tradition that includes Šá'id al-Andalusí (1029-1070 A.D.),⁴ Abú'l-Fath ash-Shahristání (1076-115),⁵ Jamálu'd-Dín al-Qiftí (1172-1248),⁶ Muwaffaqu'd-Dín ibn Abí Uşaybi'ah (c. 1194-1270),⁷ and 'Imádu'd-Dín Abú'l-Fidá' (1273-1331).⁸

But before turning to a discussion of this Tablet, it will be necessary to treat the problem of sources in relation to the study of revealed scripture. While the practice of revealing some Tablets in a form reminiscent of previous great works in Islamic culture — and even quoting from these — lends a subtlety and sophistication to Bahá'í scripture unparalleled in previous dispensations, it might also open Bahá'u'lláh to charges that His profound knowledge and insight were the natural result of long years of formal study and reading. Bahá'u'lláh Himself refers to this problem in *The Seven Valleys*:

There is many an utterance of the mystic seers and doctors of former times which I have not mentioned here, since I dislike the copious citation from sayings of the past; for quotation from the words of others proveth acquired learning, not the divine bestowal. Even so much as We have quoted here is out of deference to the wont of men and after the manner of the friends.⁹

As a member of the Persian aristocracy, Bahá'u'lláh was literate but not well educated by the standards of the Muslim intellectuals, and His only justification for speaking authoritatively on such involved subjects as dialectical theology (*kalám*), şúfism, and philosophy (*hikmah*) was His claim to innate knowledge and divine inspiration.

By His own testimony and that of all other reliable sources for His life, Bahá'u'lláh never pursued formal studies at a *masjid* (college mosque), *masjid-i jami'* (cathedral mosque), *madrasah* (school specializing in Islamic law), or *takiyah* (şúfí seminary). As He never studied the basic syllabus of Islamic thought with a recognized master, He would hardly have been considered qualified to attend study sessions on philosophical issues (*majális an-nazar*), which were conducted only by the most accomplished and erudite scholars.¹⁰ In the world of Islamic learning, one could obtain credentials (*ijázih*) to speak with authority on a certain subject only by studying and mastering the basic texts in this field, either with their authors or indirectly through a line of their pupils.

Contemporary Westerners obtain a great part of their education through independent or at most directed reading rather than through the memorization of authoritative interpretations stretching back centuries. Indeed, they are taught to attack “authorities” unmercifully whenever the opportunity presents itself. It is thus difficult to imagine how utterly audacious Bahá'u'lláh (in His guise of the hermit “Darvish Muḥammad”) must have seemed to Shaykh Ismá'il and his students at the Khálidiyyih Takiyah in 'Iráq

⁴ Šá'id al-Andalusí, *Kitáb Tabaqát al-Umam*, in “Al-'Ilm fí Yunán,” ed. Louis Cheikho, *Machriq*, 14 (Sept. 1911), 664-81. Partially translated in Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, trans Emile and Jenny Marmorstein (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 38ff.

⁵ Abú'l-Fath ash-Shahristání, *al-Milal wa'n-Nihal*, ed. 'Abdu'l-Azíz al-Wakil (Cairo: Ḥalabí and Co., 1968), II, 119-41. Future page references are to vol. II only.

⁶ Jamálu'd-Dín al-Qiftí, *Ta'rikh al-Hukamá'*, ed. Julius Lippert (Leipzig: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), pp. 15, 198, 258.

⁷ Muwaffaqu'd-Dín ibn Abí Uşaybi'ah, *Uyún al-Anbá' fí Tabaqát al-A'ibbá'*, ed. Nizár Riḍá (Beirt: Makatabar al-Ḥayáh, 1965), pp. 63ff.

⁸ 'Imádu'd-Dín Abú'l-Fidá', *al Mukhtasar fí Akhbár al-Bashar* (Cairo: al-Ḥusayniyyah Egyptian Press, n.d.), I, 84-85. All future references are to vol. I.

⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, trans. Ali Kuli-Khan and Marzieh Gail, 3d rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978), p. 26.

¹⁰ For comments that have general relevance to Islamic educational institutions, see George Makdisi, “Muslim Institutions of Learning in Eleventh-Century Baghdad,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 24 (1961), 1-55.

when He dared to criticize certain ideas propounded by the celebrated *ṣūfī* master Muḥyū'd-Dīn ibnu'l-'Arabī in his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, on no other authority than His own.¹¹

In the face of this insistence on the importance of transmitted knowledge and the received tradition, Bahá'u'lláh championed self-reliance and innovation. He attacked the blind emulation of past tradition (*taqlīd*), which was so important for legalistic Muslims.¹² Beyond this, He defiantly announced His own independence of the centuries-long chain of transmission by claiming powers which, were they the property of an ordinary human being, would be the concern of parapsychologists. For example, Bahá'u'lláh describes in the *Tablet of Wisdom* how He often had visions during which He saw and was able to read passages from books He had not previously encountered:

Thou knowest full well that We perused not the books which men possess and We acquired not the learning current amongst them, and yet whenever We desire to quote the saying of the learned and of the wise, presently there will appear before the face of thy Lord in the form of a tablet all that which hath appeared in the world and is revealed in the Holy Books and Scriptures. Thus do we set down in writing that which the eye perceiveth.¹³

Here Bahá'u'lláh is making a definite point of the fact that His knowledge was not acquired through normal channels. More important for my purpose, He indicates quite clearly that He has quoted from some of the learned and the philosophers in the course of the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat*. I shall now proceed to investigate the sources of some of these quotations.

The knowledge the Muslims had about the biographies of the ancient Greeks came for the most part from Hellenistic Neoplatonic and Christian writers.¹⁴ Since many early Greek texts had been lost or were unavailable in the Near East, this knowledge was often limited and somewhat colored by its Christian sources. Moreover, the Muslims seem to have known nothing about the Greek system of dating either by archons or by Olympiads (the first of which occurred in 776 B.C.), and their only fairly dependable point of reference for Greek civilization was Alexander the Great's conquests, as known from Perso-Babylonian chronology. Most Muslim historians were notoriously lax about the dating of events prior to the advent of Islām, though there were notable exceptions to this generalization such as Abú-Rayḥān-i Bīrūnī (973-1050 A.D.) and the Syrian prince and geographer Abú'l-Fidá'.

One of the earlier and more influential Muslim accounts of the lives of the Greek philosophers is contained in the Andalusian historian Šá'id of Toledo's *Ta'rikhu'l-Hukamá'* (*Biographies of the Philosophers*), as well as by many other writers, including ibn Abí Uṣaybi'ah. A similar tradition of the biography of Greek sages is represented by *Shahraṣṭání's* celebrated *al-Milal wa'n-Niḥal* (*Religious Communities and Creeds*), which might well be considered one of the pioneering works in the development of the History of Religions. Finally, Abú'l-Fidá' was able to draw on all of these authors and others as well in his *al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar* (*An Abridged History of Mankind*).

The most significant difference between the Šá'id and *Shahraṣṭání* versions lies in their categorizations of the great philosophers. Šá'id counts five great early philosophers; in chronological order they are Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.¹⁵ *Shahraṣṭání*, however, enumerates seven eminent

¹¹ See Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 122-23.

¹² Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 5. For a classic defense of *taqlīd* traditionalism, see George Makdisi, *Ibn Qudama's Censure of Speculative Theology* (London: Luzac and Co., 1962).

¹³ *Wisdom*, p. 50/148-49.

¹⁴ For the influence of the Neoplatonist Porphyry (234-305 A.D.) on Muslim accounts of the Greek philosophers see Franz Rosenthal, "Arabische Nachrichten über Zenon den Eleaten," *Orientalia* 4 (1937), 21-67. For the general background of philosophy in Islām see Richard Walzer, "Islamic Philosophy," in Savepalli Radhakrishnan, ed. *The History of Philosophy Eastern and Western* (London: George Allen Unwin, Ltd., 1953), II esp. 120-30.

¹⁵ Šá'id, *Kitáb Ṭabaqāt al-Umam*, p. 666. For Empedocles in Islamic thought, see Plessner, "Anbādūklīs," in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, rev. ed. (London: Luzac & Co., 1871), (hereafter *El*₂). For Pythagoras, see Rosenthal, "Fīthāghūras," in *El*₂.

figures in early Greek philosophy: Thales, Anaxagoras, Anaximenes, Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato.¹⁶ Aristotle is not considered “early” by Shahrastání and is presented as the greatest of the later figures. Both Šá‘id and Shahrastání discuss Hippocrates separately from these philosophers.

Abú‘l-Fidá’ combines these two schemas.¹⁷ He treats: Thales, Empedocles, Pythagoras, Hippocrates, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as the first and the most eminent of the philosophers. He then draws upon al-Qiftí for some notices on lesser figures, including one Múrtas or Múristus, the inventor of a remarkable organ that could be heard sixty miles away.¹⁸ A comparison of these schemas will show that the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat* follows Abú‘l-Fidá’s ordering, even down to a mention of Múrtas, who is not referred to by either Šá‘id or Shahrastání.¹⁹ The major difference is that Bahá‘u’lláh’s account leaves out Thales and begins with Empedocles. As Thales was not quite so renowned in Islamic philosophy as the other figures, the omission is a natural one. Bahá‘u’lláh does treat one additional philosopher who was neglected by the above biographers: Apollonius of Tyana (b. *circa* 4 B.C.), the neo-Pythagorean who had a major influence on the development of Neoplatonism and thence on Islamic philosophy.²⁰ I have so far been unable to identify the exact source for Bahá‘u’lláh’s quotations about Apollonius.

In order to substantiate my contention that Bahá‘u’lláh both quoted from and paraphrased the Muslim historians I have mentioned I shall give examples for comparison below. The texts have been translated in such a way as to show differences in the Arabic, which is provide in transliterated form in the footnotes. Phrases in the earlier texts that are identical to ones in the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat* have been italicized.

While the statements of Shahrastání and Bahá‘u’lláh about Empedocles are similar in wording and content, they are too brief to be evidential in themselves. I shall quote them here to give an idea of the context of Bahá‘u’lláh’s assertion of the contemporary of Empedocles and the Prophet David. Shahrastání says of Empedocles:

He was a contemporary of David the Prophet, peace be upon him. He went to him and received knowledge from him. And he studied with Luqmán the Wise and obtained wisdom from him.²¹

The *Lawḥ-i Hikmat* has:

Empedocles, who distinguished himself in philosophy was a contemporary of David....²²

Both Šá‘id and Abú‘l-Fidá’ make somewhat similar statements.²³

¹⁶ Shahrastání, *al-Milal wa ‘n-Niḥal*, pp. 119-20.

¹⁷ Abú‘l-Fidá’, *al Mukhtasar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, pp. 84-85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86. Cf. al-Qiftí, *Ta’rikh al-Hukamá*, p. 322, and Bayard Dodge, ed. and trans., *The Fihrist of al-Nadim* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), II, 643 and name index. As Dodge points out, Múrtas/Múristus is discussed in Henry George Farmer, *The Organ of the Ancient* (London: W. Reeves, 1931), pp. 16-20. Farmer says that D.S. Margoliouth identified this as a reference to the ancient mathematician Ameristos, whereas Farmer himself suggested that the name is a corruption of Ktēsībious. But it could be that no reference to this figure has survived in Greek texts.

¹⁹ *Wisdom*, p. 51/150.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49/147-48. The first edition of the official translation has misidentified this figure as Pliny the Elder, the Roman natural historian. The note on p. 147 also mistakes the phrase “the father of philosophy” as a reference to Socrates; Pythagoras is probably intended. For Apollonius of Tyana in Islamic thought, see Plessner, “Bālinūs,” in *El*₂; see also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap, 1964), p. 38, n. 59. For Apollonius’ Greek biography see Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana with The Epistles of Apollonius and the Treatise of Eusebius*, with English trans. By F.C. Conybeare (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1960), 2 vols. For parallels between Apollonius and his contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth, see Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978, pp. 84-93, 188).

²¹ Wa kána fī zamani Dá‘úda ‘n-nabí ‘alayhi ‘s-salámu maḏá ilayhi wa talaqqá minhu ‘l-‘ilma wa ‘khtalafa ilá Luqmána ‘l-ḥakími wa ‘qtabasa min ‘hu ‘l-ḥikmah.

²² Inna Abiduqlísa ‘lladhí ‘shtahara fī ‘l-ḥikmati kána fī zamani Dá‘úd.... (*Wisdom*, p. 45/145).

Concerning Pythagoras, *al-Milal wa 'n-Niḥal* says:

*He lived in the days of Solomon the Prophet, the son of David, peace be upon them, and acquired Wisdom from the treasury of prophethood. He was wise and virtuous, a possessor of sound views and a serene mind. He claimed that he perceived the exalted worlds with his senses and his intuition. He practised self-discipline until he reached the point where he heard the whispering sounds of the heavens and reached the station of the angels.*²⁴

The *Lawḥ-i Hikmat* has:

while Pythagoras lived in the days of Solomon, son of David, and acquired Wisdom from the treasury of prophethood. It is he who claimed to have heard the whispering sound of the heavens and to have attained the station of the angels.²⁵

Here the entirety of Bahá'u'lláh's account is quoted or paraphrased from Shahrastání. Abú'l-Fidá' has a much shorter biography for Pythagoras than does Shahrastání and drops the phrase "and acquired Wisdom from the treasury of Prophethood."

But while the wording of the *Tablet of Wisdom* is closer to that of Shahrastání in the case of Empedocles and Pythagoras, the section on Socrates obviously depends rather on Abú'l-Fidá'. The latter writes:

Among them was Socrates. Shahrastání said in *al-Milal wa 'n-Niḥal* that *he was indeed wise, accomplished and righteous. He practised self-denial and turned away from material pleasures. He withdrew to the mountains where he dwelt in a cave. He forbade men to join partners with God or worship idols, until the rabble rose up against him. They obliged their king to kill him. So he imprisoned him and gave him poison to drink.*²⁶

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

After him came Socrates who was indeed wise, accomplished and righteous. He practiced self-denial, repressed his appetites for selfish desires and turned away from material pleasures. He withdrew to the mountains where he dwelt in a cave. He dissuaded men from worshipping idols and taught them the way of God, the Lord of Mercy, until the ignorant rose up against him. They arrested him and put him to death in prison.²⁷

While Abú'l-Fidá' is quoting Shahrastání in this section, he introduced some slight changes into the text, changes which also appear in the *Tablet of Wisdom*. This would seem to indicate that Bahá'u'lláh's quotations for some of these biographies were mediated through Abú'l-Fidá'. In some cases, however, phrases present in the Shahrastání version that were dropped by Abú'l-Fidá' show up in the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat*. This suggests that either Bahá'u'lláh was drawing upon both Shahrastání and Abú'l-Fidá' or that some later compiler collated the two, and Bahá'u'lláh was quoting the later source.

²³ Šá'id, *Kitáb Ṭabaqát al-Umam*, p. 666. Abú'l-Fidá', *al-Mukhtaṣar fi Akhbár al-Bashar*, pp. 84-85,

²⁴ Wa kána fi zamani Sulaymána'n-nabí 'bni Dá'úda 'alayhírná's-salámu qad akhadha'l-ḥikmata min ma'dani'n-nubúwati. Wa huwa'l-ḥakímu'l-fáḍilu dhú'r-ra'í 'l-matíni wa'l-'aqlí'r-raṣíni yadda'í annahu sháhada'l-'awálima'l-'alawíyyata biḥissíhi wa ḥadsihi wa balagha fi'r-riyáḍari ilá an sama'a ḥafífa'l-falaki wa waṣala ilá maqámi'l-malak (p. 132.)

²⁵ Wa Fithághúrarḥu fi zamani Sulaymana 'bni Dá'úda wa akhadha'l-ḥikmata min ma'dani'n-nubúwati wa huwa'lladhí zanna annahu sama'a ḥafífa'l-falaki wa balagha maqáma'l-malak (*Wisdom*, pp. 45-46/145).

²⁶ Wa minhum Suqrátu qála 'sh-Shahristání fi'l-Milal wa 'n-Niḥal innahu kána ḥakím' fāḍil^{an} záhid^{ah} wa 'shtaghala hi'r-riyáḍati wa a'raḍa 'alá maládh^{hi}'d-dunyá wa 'tazala ilá'l-jabali wa aqáma fi ghárin wa nahá'n-nása 'ani'shirkí wa 'ibádati'l-awtháni fa thárat 'alayhi'l-'ammatu wa alja'ú malikahum ilá qatlihi faḥabasahu thumma saqáhu's-samm (p. 85).

²⁷ Wa ba'dahu Suqrátu innahu kána ḥakím^{an} fāḍil^{aa} záhid^{ani} 'shtaghala b'r-riyá-ḍati wa nahá'n-nafsa 'ani'l-hawá wa a'raḍa 'an maládh^{hi}'d-dunyá wa 'tazala ilá'l-jabali wa aqáma fi ghárin wa mana'a'nása 'an 'inádati'l-awtháni wa 'allamahum sabila'r-Rahmání ilá an thárat 'alayhi'l-juhḥálu wa akhadhúhu wa qatalúhu fi's-sijn (*Wisdom*, p. 47/146).

One of the consistent emphases in these biographies, both in the Muslim historians and in the *Tablet of Wisdom*, is the debt owed by the early Greek philosophical tradition to the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets. Shahrastání has Empedocles study with David, and all are agreed that Pythagoras studied Solomonic philosophy in Egypt. The possibility that the strong ethical emphasis and the tendency toward monotheism observable in many of these Greek thinkers owes something to a cultural diffusion from Palestine of Hebraic religious concepts cannot be discounted, though there is no direct proof for it in the Greek sources. But the assertion that Empedocles and David, and Pythagoras and Solomon, were contemporaries stands in direct contradiction to the dating of both ancient and modern Western scholarship and even to that of most Muslim historians.

While David and Solomon are thought by modern historians to have lived in the tenth century B.C., Diogenes Laertius asserts that Pythagoras flourished in the sixtieth Olympiad (540-536 B.C.).²⁸ Quoting Apollodorus, the same source says that Empedocles went to Thurii just after it was founded (c. 445-444 B.C.).²⁹ That is to say, our ancient Greek and Hebrew sources have Empedocles live after Pythagoras and die a full five hundred years after the passing of Solomon. There is, then, a very great discrepancy between these dates and those given by Šá‘id and Shahrastání.

One of the earlier sustained discussions of the chronological relationship of ancient Israel and Greece is contained in the *Stromateis (Miscellanies)* of Clement of Alexandria (150-211/15 A.D.). Clement attempted to show that Hebrew wisdom was far older than Greek philosophy and that the Greeks knew the Jewish scriptures intimately, often quoting (or misquoting) them. For example, he argued that the createdness of the world in Greek thought derived from a knowledge of the book of Genesis.³⁰ Clement examines the chronological traditions about Jewish and Greek figures and demonstrates that Moses lived not only before the birth of men in the Greek system but before many of their gods came to be.³¹ He asserts that the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, who prophesied at the time of Darius, lived before the oldest of the Greek philosophers, Thales. He has Pythagoras flourish even later, in the sixty-second Olympiad (540-536 B.C.).³² Clement seems to have erred by about a hundred years in the former statement; for, if modern dating is correct, Zechariah began his ministry in October-November 520 B.C. (Zech. 1:1), about a century later than Clement apparently reckoned.³³ But this Greek scholar, while he may have made Persian dates a century too early, clearly insists that Pythagoras is very close to that of Diogenes Laertius.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) was also struck by the similarities between some of Plato's concepts and those of the Hebrew prophets. He wrote in his *De civitate Dei (The City of God)*:

Some have concluded from this that when he [Plato] went to Egypt he had heard the prophet Jeremiah, or, whilst travelling in the same country, he had read the prophetic scriptures, which opinion I myself have expressed in certain of my writings. But a careful calculation of dates, contained in chronological history, shows that Plato was born about a hundred years after the time in which Jeremiah prophesied.³⁴

²⁸ See William Foxwell Albright, *Archeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 130. Albright gives David's reign as c. 1000-960 and Solomon's as c. 960-922 B.C. See also Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, with English trans. by R. D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1958), p. 361. On Diogenes as a source, see Richard Hope, *The Book of Diogenes Laertius* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1930), esp. pp. 65-70 for difficulties of chronology.

²⁹ Diogenes, *Lives*, p. 367.

³⁰ Clement, *Strom*, V:14, quoted in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 466.

³¹ Clement, *Strom*, I:21, quoted in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, p. 325.

³² Clement, *Strom*, I:21, quoted in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, p. 329.

³³ See *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), VI. 1058. For the evidence on Darius' reign see Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press, 1956), p. 16.

³⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 256 (VIII:2).

Augustine also notes that the Old Testament had not yet been translated into Greek in Plato's time and finally suggests that God's grace rather than any direct cultural contact can explain the similarities between the Greek philosophical and the Judeo-Christian traditions.

But while early Christian scholars like Clement and Augustine argued that the Hebrew prophetic tradition was centuries older than the Greek philosophical tradition, by medieval times a different chronology held sway. Even during the Renaissance many scholars believed that Pythagoras had been a contemporary of Moses and had read the Hebrew scriptures. The Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614-87) wrote: "that Pythagoras drew his knowledge from the *Hebrew Fountains*, is what all Writers, Sacred and Prophane, do testifie and aver."³⁵ The Greek biographical tradition about Pythagoras asserted that he went to Egypt and studied with Pharaonic priests. Since Egypt was the birthplace of Mosaic Judaism, it was natural for Jewish and Christian authors to wonder whether Pythagoras might not also have encountered Hebrew wisdom there. The Muslim historians' assertions about Pythagoras and Empedocles having lived in the time of David and Solomon may thus be seen as variation on this medieval legend.

Given that the Muslim writers assert that the founding of the Hebrew kingdom and the inception of the pre-Socratic age in Greece were practically simultaneous, it would seem useful to attempt to relate this relative chronology to an absolute chronology. When did the Muslims think these things occurred?

Šá'id's account has it that Pythagoras lived a while after Empedocles and that he personally taught Socrates and Plato.³⁶ He then says that Aristotle was Plato's favorite pupil and that Aristotle went on to teach Alexander the Great.³⁷ He later mentions that Thales was one of Pythagoras' teachers.³⁸ Thus it is very clear that Šá'id thought Empedocles and Pythagoras to have lived just before the age of Alexander the Great.

Shahrastání's ordering, listing Thales, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Pythagoras, and Socrates, also seems to indicate that he is following a chronology similar to that of Diogenes Laertius, who puts Thales c. 624-545 B.C., and who has Pythagoras flourish just after Thales' death. Like Šá'id, Shahrastání says that Socrates studied with Pythagoras.³⁹

Abú'l-Wafá' al-Mubashshir says that Empedocles and Socrates were both contemporaries of Zeno.⁴⁰ This squares with the accepted dates for these figures (Empedocles: 490-430 B.C.; Socrates: 470-399; Zeno: 495-430). Following al-Mubashshir, ibn Abí Uşaybi'ah report that Pythagoras was a young man during the reign of Cyrus, that he was still alive when Cambyses succeeded his father.⁴¹ Cyrus reigned from 559-530 B.C., and Cambyses from 530-522, according to our ancient sources.⁴² Modern historians give Pythagoras' dates as c. 50-500 B.C. If these dates are valid, Pythagoras would in fact still have been a young man when Cyrus acceded to the throne in Persia and would have still been alive throughout Cambyses' reign.

Thus all major Muslim sources *without exception* agree that Pythagoras and Empedocles lived sometime in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Moreover, this dating generally conforms with that of our classical sources, except for the tendency to make Empedocles Pythagoras' older contemporary. Their assertion that these two philosophers were contemporaries of David and Solomon clearly implies that they thought the

³⁵ Quoted in C. A. Patrides, *The Cambridge Platonists* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1969), p. 7 and n.

³⁶ Šá'id, *Kitáb Ṭabaqát al-Umam*, pp. 667-68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 672.

³⁹ Shahrastání, *al-Milal wa'n-Niḥal*, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Rosenthal, "Arabische Nachrichten über Zenon," p. 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52; cf. ibn Abí Uşaybi'ah, *Uyún al-Anbá fi Ṭabaqát al-Aṭibbá*, p. 65.

⁴² Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology*, p. 14.

founders of the Hebrew kingdom to have lived after the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. — the event which brought the independent Jewish kingdom to a end!⁴³ This claim is not only preposterous according to Western dating, but it is also at variance with what the Muslims themselves wrote about the chronology of ancient Israel.

While Muslim historians had a great deal of difficulty with ancient dates, even they agreed that David and Solomon had lived centuries before the birth of Nebuchadnezzar. Abú-Rayḥán al Bírúní says that between the founding of the Temple during Solomon's reign and its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar was 410 years.⁴⁴ Moreover, he indicates that from the beginning of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar to the accession of Alexander the Great to the Babylonian throne was 285 years.⁴⁵ The modern date for the beginning of Solomon's reign is c. 960 B.C.; for the destruction of the Temple, 586 B.C.; for the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, 605 B.C.; and for Alexander's conquest of Babylon, 331 B.C. It can thus be seen that Bírúní's chronology for these events differs only by a few decades from that of modern historians but certainly not by centuries.

A slightly greater discrepancy with modern dating can be found in Abú'l-Fidá's chronology. This geographer and historian, whose *al-Mukhtaṣar* is essentially an abridgment of the *al-Kámil fī 't-Ta'rikh* by ibnu'l-Athír (1160-1233 A.D.), was keenly struck by the latter's carelessness about dates of pre-Islamic events. He, therefore attempted to construct a conversion table for finding equivalents of dates from the Jewish, Perso-Babylonian, Christian, Greek, and Roman sources. He does not take into account, however, the difference between solar and lunar calendars. For the sake of simplicity I shall treat his years as solar years.

Since Abú'l-Fidá' gives dates before Christ in one column of his table, it is a simple enough process to establish his chronology for the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers.⁴⁶ Below is a comparative chart with Abú'l-Fidá's dates on one side and modern chronology on the other.

	<i>Abú'l-Fidá'</i> (B.C.)	<i>Modern Dating</i> (B.C.)
Moses	d. 1716	d. 1200s
David	d. 1181	d. 960
Solomon	d. 1141	d. 922
Nebuchadnezzar	r. fr. 738	r. fr. 605
Thales	fl. c. 738	624-545
Hippocrates	fl. 542	460-377
Socrates	fl. 369	470-399

There are some interesting features in Abú'l-Fidá's chronology. He dates Moses five hundred years earlier than is now thought likely. He is quite correct that Thales was a contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar, though he has placed the beginning of the latter's reign 133 years too early.⁴⁷ Since he dates Hippocrates as

⁴³ D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1961), pp. 72-73.

⁴⁴ Abú Rayḥán al-Bírúní, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. C. Edward Sachau (London: William H. Allen and Co., 1879), p. 89.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ Abú'l-Fidá', *al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, pp. 6-7, 84-85.

⁴⁷ Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology*, p. 12.

having flourished 196 years after Nebuchadnezzar took power, his error puts the famous doctor's dates off by over a century as well. But if one subtracts the error, one has Hippocrates flourishing in c. 409, which is a good approximation. The date he gives for Socrates, "about a thousand years before the Hijrah," is only some sixty years too late, if we take the years as solar years.

It is apparent that Abú'l-Fidá' was confronted with a dilemma when he contemplated the biographical tradition of Šá'id and Shahrastání, which claimed that Pythagoras both lived in the time of Solomon and taught Socrates. Even a medieval Muslim historian knew that many centuries separated the Hebrew sage from the Athenian philosopher. Yet Abú'l-Fidá' gives no indication that he seriously attempted to draw conclusions from his assertion that Empedocles and Pythagoras lived in the time of David and Solomon. He still follows Shahrastání's arrangement, listing Thales first and so implying that he was the first philosopher. But according to his own chronology Empedocles should have lived five centuries before Thales. All this is to say that the Muslim chronology was on this point seriously flawed by an irreconcilable internal contradiction.

Abú'l-Fidá' himself, however, had no illusions about the accuracy of the dates he was suggesting for ancient events. He wrote in the preface to his history:

Anyone who meditates upon ancient dates should know that there are very great differences among the historians concerning them. Ibnu'l-Athír said in discussing the birth of Christ that he — peace be upon him — was born 560 years after Alexander's victory according to the Zoroastrians but that according to the Christians he was born 303 years after Alexander's victory. This is a huge discrepancy! ... As for what is taken from pre-Islamic historians, it is also not dependable, because they used to date from the beginning of their king's reign, so that their chronologies came to have many starting points. Ĥamzah al-Išfahání said that their histories were irretrievably ruined because of this. This is, moreover, compounded by the distance in time, the changes of languages, as well as the antiquity of the books composed on this art. The verification of ancient dates is for these reasons impossible or extremely difficult.⁴⁸

One may conclude, then, that whatever ancient dates the Muslim historians gave were approximations and were not considered trustworthy even by themselves. Moreover, they ran into serious trouble when they attempted to cross-date between calendars.

All this would seem to indicate that the Muslim writers' statement that Pythagoras and Empedocles were contemporaries of David and Solomon is an historical and factual error. However, such a conclusion raises some difficulties for the Bahá'í scholar, insofar as this apparently inaccurate assertion was quoted by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat*. Such an eventuality raises for Bahá'ís the same sorts of questions about the possibility of historical error in revealed scripture as have been raised by modern biblical criticism in Christianity.

One possible resolution might be that Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that these figures were contemporaries was not meant to be taken literally. The Arabic "*fi zaman*" would be taken to mean "in the age of" rather than "at the same time as."⁴⁹ This suggestion, however, involves a number of difficulties. We now know that Bahá'u'lláh was ultimately quoting from Shahrastání, sometimes through Abú'l-Fidá', and Shahrastání says that Empedocles actually met and studied with David. Second, the very structure of Bahá'u'lláh's

⁴⁸ Abú'l-Fidá', *al-Mukhtaṣar fi Akhbār al-Bashar*, pp. 3-4 (my translation).

⁴⁹ The Universal House of Justice has kindly informed the author that Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, seems to have made this suggestion in response to an inquiry about the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat* from an individual believer. His secretary wrote on his behalf concerning the contemporaneity of these figures, " 'We must not take this statement too literally; contemporary may have been meant in Persian as something far more elastic than the English word' " (Cited in personal correspondence, Aug. 7, 1978). It is this writer's own feeling that Shoghi Effendi was here making a tentative suggestion (as indicated by his secretary's use of the word "may") rather than an absolutely binding interpretation of the phrase "*fi zaman*." He was, however, quite emphatic that no strictly literal understanding of contemporaneity is required by the verse.

statement seems to preclude it from being a general assertion that they lived in the same age. For He had Empedocles live in the time of David and Pythagoras in the time of Solomon, indicating by the sequence that contemporaneity is meant. Finally, an example of how this phrase was used by Arab biographers is provided by al-Qiftí, who says, “*Wa kána Suqrátu fi zamaní Afláṭún*” (“And Socrates was in the time of Plato”).⁵⁰

Another possible resolution of the problem would be to reject the reliability of such sources as Diogenes Laertius, the Bible, and Ptolemy for establishing ancient chronology.⁵¹ In order to advance beyond such a general skepticism, however, it would be necessary to establish that the Muslims had access to a more reliable chronological tradition about the ancient world, which has since been lost. However, I have shown that Muslim historians like Abú'l-Fidá' by and large agree with both the classical chronology of the philosophers and the biblical chronology of the prophets. Yet they go on to contradict themselves, asserting that Pythagoras was a contemporary of both Socrates and Solomon, while simultaneously holding that Solomon lived centuries before Socrates. Since they do not offer a tenable alternative chronology, a modern historian has no grounds for using their statement of the contemporaneity of these figures to criticize currently accepted dating. Unless some evidence can be brought forward supporting their case, I can only conclude that the Muslims were confused on this point and that their chronology is not trustworthy.

In addition, modern archeology has sent support to the general reliability of the Bible as an historical document, insofar as events like Nebuchadnezzar's accession to the throne can be more precisely fixed now that the ancient language, documents, and calendars have been deciphered. It is true that much of our chronology for ancient events depends on literary documents such as king-lists, the absolute reliability of which is difficult to ascertain. But it seems highly unlikely, given the evidence now available to us, that such important figures as David, Solomon, and Pythagoras have been misplaced by hundreds of years.

This it seems probable that Bahá'u'lláh quoted in the *Tablet of Wisdom* a statement that — however, sound it may have been within the cultural confines of Islamic civilization — has proved to be factually inaccurate by any standards of reasoning and historical documentation available to contemporary historians.

For an explanation of this anomaly, one must move from history to theology — or in H. Richard Niebuhr's terminology, from “external history” to “internal history.”⁵² Unfortunately, however, there is no well-developed tradition of Bahá'í theology upon which one can draw for the resolution of such dilemmas. No systematic theology of the Bahá'í Faith has been written, and no rigorous studies of such theological works as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions* have appeared. Ideally, a Bahá'í counterpart of Christology and buddhology should be developed on the basis of Bahá'í scripture (we might suggest the neologism ‘theophanology’).

In the absence of such a body of scholarship, one can only pose questions and state tentative hypotheses. I have reached the conclusion that statements that are factually inaccurate can become embedded in divinely revealed texts. In the Bahá'í Faith, as in other religions, however, there is a natural desire on the part of its adherents to hold that statements contained in the Holy Writ are inerrant and infallible. But the problem of

⁵⁰ al-Qiftí, *Ta'rikh al-Hukamá'*, p. 199.

⁵¹ In a Tablet written in 1906 to Mrs. Ethel Rosenberg, 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself stated that the conventional dating of events before Alexander the Great is untrustworthy. See 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd Ishráq'i Khávarí, ed., *Má'idiy'i Ašmání* (Tihrán: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 129 B.E.). II, 65-67. (My thanks to the Universal House of Justice for generously providing me with a xerox copy of this Tablet in ms.)

'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments on this subject are similar to those made by Abú'l-Fidá' in the introduction to his *al-Mukhtaṣar*, and may be taken to be typical of the view of Muslim historians before the modern era. It might be argued that the advances of archeology after 1906 have rendered the dating of the pre-Alexandrian period somewhat less doubtful. For the bases of ancient chronography, see E. J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968) and Alan E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagshandlung, 1972), pp. 189-249. See also Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964).

⁵² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 44-66.

“infallible statements” involves us in the question of the meaning of a statement. Professor George A. Lindbeck, a Lutheran theologian, made this point in discussing the controversy in the early seventies in the Roman Catholic Church over the infallibility of the Catholic teaching office. He points out that linguistic philosophers such as Wittgenstein have made us aware of the dependence of statements upon their context for their meaning. He adds:

Also contributing to the problem of meaning is the immense growth of historical knowledge. This is the point of which K ung is especially aware. We have become much more conscious of historical relativity and of intellectual and cultural pluralism. What a given form of words means in one epoch, society or intellectual discipline is often very different from what it means in another; or conversely, what look like entirely dissimilar affirmations may function similarly, may have the same meaning in different settings.⁵³

No modern thinker can fail to be intensely aware of the historically conditioned nature of all human knowledge and thus of all human statements of that knowledge. Insofar as a divinely revealed text is nevertheless communicated in a human language, employing human concepts in a particular human social milieu, the statements therein are inevitably historically conditioned.

Lindbeck goes on to point out, however, that while all statements may be historically conditioned, the propositions for which they serve as the vehicles can be immutably true.⁵⁴ This, he argues, requires only the adoption of two-valued logics in which a distinction is made between meaningful propositions and the particular statement of these propositions. As an example, we might cite the damage wrought to the English phrase “The sun rises” by the modern scientific revolution. While it is, technically speaking, inaccurate to talk of the “rising” of the sun, we continue to do so meaningfully. The statement is incorrect. But the proposition expressed by it, that the sun becomes visible above the earth’s horizon, remains true.

In the *Tablet of Wisdom* the proposition being argued is that Jerusalem exercised an important spiritual influence upon Athens. The statement that Pythagoras was Solomon’s contemporary was made as part of that proposition and was meaningful in the context of Islamic scholarship. This particular statement is erroneous from the wider point of view of world history. However, Bah u’ll ah’s proposition that Greek philosophy owed a debt to Hebrew prophecy is not thereby invalidated. The proposition can remain true in spite of the error that has crept into the statement of it owing to the inevitable historicity of statements made in human languages. One may thus argue that the central *propositions* contained in the *Tablet of Wisdom* can be infallibly and eternally true, although particular statements that express or support those propositions might prove inaccurate outside their original context.

In concentrating upon a tiny chronological inconsistency, I do not intend to draw attention away from the more significant issues raised for the cultural history of mankind by the *Lawh-i Hikmat*. Chief among these is Bah u’ll ah’s assertion that Western philosophy and its offspring, modern science, derived their metaphysical basis from prophetic monotheism. My aim, however, was to make a contribution to the still embryonic “science” of Bah i scriptural exegesis, and science progresses through the examination of anomalies.

⁵³ George A. Lindbeck, quoted in John J. Kirvan, ed., *The Infallibility Debate* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971), p. 110.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-18.