

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa)

A Provisional Translation

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Abstract: This paper consists of an introductory survey together with a provisional translation of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa). The subject of the Tablet is the unresolved conflict in Islam between philosopher-mystics who adhere to the philosophy of existential oneness (waḥdat al-wujúd) and jurists and others who oppose this view regarding it as heresy and blasphemy. Bahá'u'lláh seeks to resolve the issue and bridge the gap between these two attitudes of mind by showing how both viewpoints can be true when taken within the context of the concept of the Manifestation of God.

The Tablet known as the *Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaḳíqa* (Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality) dates from the Akka period. In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh deals with one of the issues that has run through the Islamic world from the Middle Ages onwards. This is the controversy between two positions concerning the nature of the relationship between God and His creation. These two positions existed from the earliest days of Islam and eventually became known as *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* (existential unity, oneness of being) and *Waḥdat ash-Shuhúd* (unity in appearance only). The former was the position taken by the followers of Ibn al-'Arabí (d. 638 A.H./1240) and was more common among those inclined towards Sufism and mystical philosophy. The latter was the position commonly taken by

jurists and was given its name by Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindí (971 A.H./1563-1034 A.H. - 1034/1624-5) in the 17th century.

In brief it may be said that those who supported the position of *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* maintained that Being is one — it is that which exists. Since existence is also one of the essential attributes of God, then it may be said that all things are subsumed in the one Absolute Reality that we call God. This one Reality has different aspects according to the way that it is viewed.

Those who held to the opposing position of *Wahdat ash-Shuhúd* maintained that God is beyond any conceptualizations that can be made of Him; he is *wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará* (beyond the beyond, then beyond the beyond, and again beyond the beyond)¹. Hence the mystics' experience of unity or union or any apprehension of God through mystical experience is subjective only and has no objective validity. The unity that mystics claim with God is only an appearance and has no substance.

In Iran, the concept of *waḥdat al-wujúd* had a powerful influence especially upon many philosopher-mystics. The most important of these was Şadru'd-Dín Shírází, known as Mullá Şadrá. It is Mullá Şadrá whose dictum “All that which is uncompounded in Its Reality is, by virtue of Its [absolute] Unity, all things” (*kullu ma huwa basíṭu 'l-ḥaḳíqa fa-huwa bi-waḥdatihi kullu 'l-ashyá'*) is quoted and commented upon by Bahá'u'lláh in this Tablet. This dictum is one of the cornerstones of Mullá Şadrá's philosophy and is explicated in several of his works: *al-Ḥikmat al-Arshiyyah* (the Wisdom of the Throne)², *al-Mabda wa'l-Mu`ád* (the Origin and the Return)³, *al-Mashá'ir fí Ma'rifat Alláh* (the Staging-Posts in the Knowledge of God)⁴, and *al-Ḥikmat al-muta`áliyya fi'l-Asfar al-aqliyya al-arba`a* (The Transcendental Wisdom concerning the Four Journeys of the Rational Soul).⁵

In his work *al-Ḥikmat al-Arshiyyah*, the Wisdom of the Throne, Mullá Sadrá takes as his starting point the traditional philosophical concept that all things are composed of quiddity (*mahiyyah*, that which answers the question “what is it?”) and being (*wujúd*, that which gives existence to the quiddity). He then goes on to demonstrate that if an entity A has something

B negated of it (i.e. if A is stated to be “not B”) and if B is something that itself has being (i.e. is not merely a statement of privation or imperfection, such as “not blue” or “illiterate”), then A cannot be uncompounded in its essential reality since it must be composed of at least two aspects, an aspect by which it is A and an aspect by which it is not B. (These two aspects cannot be identical since that would mean positing that the very essence of A is something privative such that anyone who intellected “A” would also immediately intellect “not B”). Hence the converse of this must also be true, that which is uncompounded in its reality can have nothing that has being negated of it – otherwise it would consist of at least two aspects: an aspect by which it is such (such as A) and an aspect by which it is not some other (such as not B, not C, etc.), and would therefore not be uncompounded in its essential reality. Hence “that which is uncompounded in its reality” must necessarily be “all things”.⁶ Elsewhere, Mullá Sadrá makes it clear that “that which is uncompounded in its reality” is the “necessarily existent (*wájjib al-wujúd*)”, i.e. God⁷, and this is the definition also given by other writers.⁸

Mullá Sadrá's pre-eminence in the field of Iranian Shi'ī mystical philosophy (*ḥikmat*) meant that this idea was adopted and commented upon by numerous other philosophers. For our purposes, the most significant of those who commented upon this dictum was the Shaykhī leader, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsá'í. He severely criticized this dictum of Mullá Ṣadrá because of its implication of existential monism.

Shaykh Aḥmad wrote in several of his works commenting upon this dictum. The most extensive of these critiques was in a commentary that he wrote on Mullá Ṣadrá's work the *Mashá'ir* (composed in 1234/1818-9 in Kirmánsháh). He also deals with this subject in his last major work, his commentary on Mullá Ṣadrá's *Ḥikmat al-'Arshiyya* (completed in 1236/1820-1 in Kirmánsháh). In the latter, he states that this dictum is erroneous because:

He [Mullá Sadrá] has concluded that if one negates something of it and this negation is comprehended in the mind, then this necessitates composition. And we say to him: the uncompounded reality is a pure matter,

not something from which nothing can be negated because your words that “it is something from which nothing can be negated” is similar to your words that “it is something from which something can be negated”; for in both cases there is need for composition. There is need for composition from existent matter and non-existent matter in what you have rejected and there is need for composition from existent matter and existent matter in what you have taken recourse in, and it is that from which nothing can be negated.⁹

This subject also arises in a treatise that Shaykh Aḥmad wrote for Mullá Muḥammad Damaghání in 1232/1816-7, and in a treatise written for several unnamed Sayyids in (date not known)¹⁰. In the last-named work, Shaykh Aḥmad states that:

When he (Mullá Ṣadrá) says “the uncompounded reality is all things”, this expression would suggest that He [God], praised be He, is all accidents (*ḥawadith*), since things are accidents. The error of this statement is clear since accidents are in the realm of contingency (*al-imbkán*) and the necessarily [existent], praised be He, is pre-existent (*azal*) and is not in the realm of contingency ...

Shaykh Aḥmad goes on to give several possible meanings of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and demonstrates the falseness of each.¹¹

The Báb, in a few places, criticizes the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujúd* as it was generally understood among Sufis. He disapproved, in particular, of the concept that God could somehow be considered to be dispersed among created things. In the course of this criticism, He mentions the concept of *basít al-ḥaqíqa*. In His *Risála adh-Dhahabiyya*¹², the Báb states that:

Most of the Islamic philosophers, the peripatetic philosophers, the followers of Mulla Ṣadrá (aṣ-Ṣadrá'yyin), and the Theosophical philosophers (al-iláhiyyin) have erred in their explanations of this station. The signs of the effulgences (tajalliyát) of creation were mistaken by them for the countenance of

the Essence [of God]. Thus they went along with erroneous statements concerning the Eternal Archetypes (a`yan thábita) being in the Essence [of God] in order to establish His knowledge (praised be He)¹³; and with mention of the Uncompounded Reality in order to establish causality (‘illiyya) in the Essence [of God]; and with mention of the connection between the Essence [of God] and [His] actions and attributes; and with the mention of the oneness of Being (waḥdat al-wujúd) between the Creator (mújíd) and the one who has gone astray (al-mafqúd). All of this is absolute heresy (shirk maḥḍ) in the estimation of the family of God, the Imáms of justice, for God has always been the All-Knowing without the existence of anything having form and shape (? – shay'un bi-mithl ma inna-hu kana shayyár). Just as He does not need for His being alive the existence of anything other than Him, He also does not need for His knowledge the existence of objects of knowledge. And the Essence [of God] continues to be connected to things. The causation (‘illiyya) of created things is His handiwork (san`ihi) and this is the [Primal] Will, which God has created through itself by itself without any fire from the Essence [of God] touching it. And God has created existent things through it and it continues. The All-High does not speak except through it; and the All-High does not give any indication of its essence (dhátiyyatihá). And God has not given any sign of His Essence in [the whole of] creation (al-imkán), for His Being (kaynúnátihi) sets beings apart from being known, and His Essence (dhatiyyatihi) prevents essences from being explained. Verily the relationship of the [Primal] Will to Him is like the relationship of a verse [of scripture] to God. It is a relationship that is conferred upon Creation not upon the Essence [of God], for It is sanctified from the mention of any indications or relationships or evidences or signs or stations or effulgences or breezes relating to It; and that being the case none can know It except Itself. And such expressions as Oneness of Being and the mention of the Uncompounded Reality is witness, in the estimation of the people of the

covenants (ahl al-`uhúd), to its falsity, for He is the one who there is no-one other than He with Him. How then is it possible to say any words concerning His Being. On the contrary, all signs in the world of Láhút, Jabarút, Malakút and Mulk are possibilities of the hearts and souls [of human beings] and what has occurred to their imaginations. All who describe God, except Himself, have lied and deceived for anything other than Him is not of Him and cannot speak on His level and cannot have existence with Him, even the purest expression of the Oneness of God. And I have set forth proofs in two thousand manuscripts (fi'l-nuskha al-alifayn) in explanation of the secret of the confusion (? - ilhá') of the errors of the words of these men. The beginning of the saying of such words is the passage from Muhyi ad-Dín, may God delay his punishment, such as what he has said in the Fuṣúṣ [al-Ḥikám]. And this is sheer idolatry (shirk) in the estimation of those who have inner knowledge (ahl al-buṭún).

And in a letter addressed to Mírzá Muḥammad Sa'íd of Zavárih¹⁴, the Báb states:

And with regard to the reply concerning the uncompounded reality, which the philosophers have mentioned in order to assert that there is Being between the Creator and the one who has gone astray, there is no doubt that this is erroneous in the estimation of one who possesses the musk-like fragrance of fair-mindedness.

Bahá'u'lláh takes a much milder and more accommodating attitude towards the monist ideas in Sufism. In the Baghdad period, He spent some time associating with Sufis in Sulaymaniyya. He also wrote several works in the Sufi style and idiom. Among these were the Seven Valleys (*Haft Vádí*), the Four Valleys (*Chahár Vádí*), and the poem *Qaṣída 'Izz Varqá'iyyih* (The Ode of the Dove) which was written in the style of the famous poem *at-Tá'iyya* of the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fárid. Although Bahá'u'lláh wrote less on overtly Sufi themes in later years, the Tablet which is the subject of this paper and

which was revealed in the Akka period is one of those in which He returns to some of these themes.

Given the fact that both Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ahsá'í and the Báb had written on the theme of *Basīṭ al-Ḥaḳíqa*, it was perhaps inevitable that someone among his followers would ask Bahá'u'lláh for His comments on the theme of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum. It would appear from the text that one of Bahá'u'lláh's followers, named Ḥusayn, had been asked by someone who was a follower of Mullá Ṣadrá to ask for Bahá'u'lláh's comments on the question of *Basīṭ al-Ḥaḳíqa* and this Tablet was revealed in response to the question.

In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh again displays his benevolent attitude towards Sufi themes. He refrains from condemning Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum outright, and instead states that those who have condemned this approach have misunderstood it and have taken it too literally.

Bahá'u'lláh first explains the nature of the division among Muslims over Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and the associated concepts. He brings forward verses from the Qur'an in support of both positions. For those who follow Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which He here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Wujúdi* (existential oneness), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "All things perish save [His] face" (28:8, cf. 55:27) and interprets this to support the position of those who assert that the only reality is the Divine Reality. For those who opposed Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which He here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Shuhúdí* (oneness in appearance only), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves." (41:53) This He interprets as saying that any evidence of union between the Divinity and creation is only the result of the fact that the signs of God are apparent in all things.

Having defined the two sides of the conflict, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that those who have attacked Mullá Ṣadrá's position have looked only at the literal meaning of his words rather than the underlying meaning. He then goes on to give an interpretation of Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum in terms of the concept of the Manifestation of God. This is one of Bahá'u'lláh's most explicit statements of one of the most interesting and potentially controversial aspects of His doctrine: His assertion

that all of the statements that occur in the scriptures relating to God (including references to His names and attributes, and statements about His actions and commands) refer in reality to the Manifestation of God, since no statement can be made about the Essence of God, which is unknowable.

The Tablet then continues with Bahá'u'lláh's statement that there is no benefit to be gained from disputing such points. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that His appearance renders all such disputation secondary. Whichever side of the argument an individual is on, his status with God depends only on whether he accepts or rejects Bahá'u'lláh.

There is not much history available regarding this Tablet. It is from the Akka period and is evidently addressed to an individual named Ḥusayn, but there does not appear to be any information regarding the identity of this individual. In the Tablet the contemporary Iranian philosopher Ḥájí Mullá Hádí Sabzivári is referred to and condemned for failing to respond to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The following material from the manuscript history of the Bahá'í Faith in Ashkhabad by Ustád `Alí Akbar Banná is of interest in relation to this. In the course of his account of one of the Iranian Bahá'í emigres in Ashkhabad, Ustád Aḥmad Kuláh-dúz Sabzivári, Ustád `Alí Akbar Banná writes:

Prior to his conversion [to the Bahá'í Faith], he kept company with the mystical philosophers (*urafá*). Despite his illiteracy, he sought to acquire the illumination of wisdom (*ḥikmat*) from being in the presence of Ḥájí Mullá Hádí, Ḥakím-i Sabzivári. After his acceptance of the Faith, he related: "I went to the afore-mentioned philosopher (*ḥakím*) and informed him about this matter. The philosopher fell silent and after a pause said:

'Whatsoever has been accepted by the emotions of the heart (*wujdán*) cannot be opposed by explanation

So keep your lips from moving in explanation of these three B of opinion (*dhaháb*), of gold (*dhahab*) and of your religion (*madhhab*)"

Ḥájí Muḥammad Riḍá the martyr (killed in Ashkhabad in 1889) stated: "One day I went to the door of the house of Ḥájí Mullá Hádí and gave him a copy of the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality. I said to him: 'Study this tablet today and I will come tomorrow to take it back.' He took the tablet and I left. The next day I went and took the tablet back, He did not say a word about it."¹⁵

This historical account would mean that the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality must be dated to before 1878, the date of the death of Sabzivari. Thus this Tablet dates from the first decade of time in Akka.

The text which is provisionally translated here¹⁶ is that published in the compilation *Alváḥ Mubarakih Ḥaḍrat Bahá'u'lláh: Iqtidárát wa chand lawḥ digár* (usually known as *Iqtidárát*, no date, no of publication, pp. 105-116), the facsimile of a manuscript in the hand-writing of Mishkín-Qalam, dated Rajab A.H. 1310/January 1893. The text of this Tablet has also been published in *Ma'idih Asmání* (vol. 7, pp. 140-7) and by Alexander (Aleksandr) G. Tumanski (d. 1920) in his translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, *Kitabe Akdes*, Zapiski Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk S. Petersburg, 8th series, vol. 3, no. 6, 1899, pp. 61-4. Manuscripts of this Tablet include one in the collection of manuscripts bought from Mr. Dunlop of the British Legation in Tehran by the University of Leiden (Manuscript Or. 4971, section 7, item 1).

NOTES

1. Sirhindi quoted in Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *The Mujjaddid's Concept of Tawhid*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, repr. 1970, p. 81.
2. In this paper the text for this work is taken from Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í's commentary on the work (see note 9), the translation is adapted from James Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
3. In this paper, use has been made of the Persian translation by Ahmad Ardikání (Tihran: Markaz Nashr Danishgáhi, 1362).

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- ⁴. The Arabic text used is that found in unnumbered pages at the back of the Persian translation by Ghulam-Husayn Áhangí (Tihran: Intishárát Mawla, 2nd printing 1361).
- ⁵. Qumm: Maktabat al-Mustawfi, 1378/1958, vol.1, p. 116-7
- ⁶. Morris, *Wisdom*, pp. 98-9. A similar argument can be found in *al-Mashá'ir*, *Mash'ar* 6 of *Manhaj* 1 (Persian translation, p. 63).
- ⁷. See for example, *al-Mabda*, pp. 52-3
- ⁸. Muḥammad Sharíf Al-Jurjání, for example, in his dictionary of religious terms, *Kitab al-Ta'rifát* (Beirut: Maktaba Lubnan, 1969) states that *al-basit* can be considered in three ways. The first of these is *al-ḥaqíqí*, which is "that which has no parts (or divisions, *juz*)" to it at all, such as the Creator, exalted be He." (p. 46).
- ⁹. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í *Sharh al-'Arshiyya* vol. 1 (Kirman: Sa'ádat, 1361), pp. 80-1
- ¹⁰. For details of these works and manuscript and published sources for them, see M. Momen, *The Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í* (Bahá'í Studies Bulletin Monograph, no. 1, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1991, nos. 22, 25, and 39, pp. 52, 55-6, 64-5.
- ¹¹. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í, *Majmu'a ar-Rasá'il*, vol. 30, (Kirman: Matba'a al-Sa'ádat, second printing, n.d.), pp. 131-2
- ¹². Iranian National Bahá'í Manuscript Collection, vol. 86, pp. 95-6. I am grateful to Stephen Lambden for finding this and the next quotation in this paper.
- ¹³. This refers to the assertion that if Knowledge is an essential attribute of God, then the Eternal Archetypes of all created things must be within the Essence of God in order for there to be something that is the object of God's knowledge.
- ¹⁴. Iranian National Bahá'í Manuscript Collection, vol. 69, p. 422-3
- ¹⁵. Ustád 'Alí Akbar Banná, *Taríkh 'Ishqábád* (manuscript in Afnan Library), p. 314-5
- ¹⁶. I am grateful to Keven Locke for some suggested corrections to the translation and to Jack McLean for his suggestions for the improvement of the English text. Others who suggested improvements and corrections to my commentary include John Walbridge, Nima Hazini, and Bijan Masumian