

# Socrates

by Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

*Prepared and submitted by Ralph Wagner, who explains:*

*“[This is] a message from the Research Dept. to an unidentified addressee, of which I was provided a copy. I was sent both an email version and a paper version, and I constructed an HTML version incorporating the formatting in the paper version and hypertext links to the footnotes and sources. The section numbering begins at 2 because another question was asked on which the Research Dept. had no information, so that part of the communication was not worth posting.”*

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## From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

1. Verily, the philosophers have not denied the Ancient of Days. Most of them passed away deploring their failure to fathom His mystery, even as some of them have testified. Verily, thy Lord is the Adviser, the All-Informed.

Consider Hippocrates, the physician. He was one of the eminent philosophers who believed in God and acknowledged His sovereignty. After him came Socrates who was indeed, wise, accomplished and righteous. He practised 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. Thus relateth to thee this swift-moving Pen. What a penetrating vision into philosophy this eminent man had! He is the most distinguished of all philosophers and was highly versed in wisdom. We testify that he is one of the heroes in this field and an outstanding champion dedicated unto it. He had a profound knowledge of such sciences as were current amongst men as well as of those which were veiled from their minds. Methinks he drank one draught when the Most Great Ocean overflowed with gleaming and life-giving waters. He it is who perceived a unique, a tempered, and a pervasive nature in things, bearing the closest likeness to the human spirit, and he discovered this nature to be distinct from the substance of things in their refined form. He hath a special pronouncement on this weighty theme. Wert thou to ask from the worldly wise of this generation about this exposition, thou wouldst witness their incapacity to grasp it. Verily, thy Lord speaketh the truth but most people comprehend not.

After Socrates came the divine Plato who was a pupil of the former and occupied the chair of philosophy as his successor. He acknowledged his belief in God and in His signs which pervade all that hath been and shall be. Then came Aristotle, the well-known man of knowledge. He it is who discovered the power of gaseous matter. These men who stand out as leaders of the people and are pre-eminent among them, one and all acknowledged their belief in the immortal Being Who holdeth in His grasp the reins of all sciences.

I will also mention for thee the invocation voiced by Balinus who was familiar with the theories put forward by the Father of Philosophy regarding the mysteries of creation as given in his chrysolite tablets, that everyone may be fully assured of the things We have elucidated for thee in this manifest Tablet, which, if pressed with the hand of fairness and knowledge, will yield the spirit of life for the quickening of all created things. Great is the blessedness of him who swimmeth in this ocean and celebrateth the praise of his Lord, the Gracious, the Best-Beloved. Indeed the breezes of divine revelation are diffused from the verses of thy Lord in such wise that no one can dispute its truth, except those who are bereft of hearing, of vision, of understanding and of every human faculty. Verily thy Lord beareth witness unto this, yet the people understand not.

*(From Lawh-i-Hikmat, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), pp. 146-47)*

## From the Tablets and Utterances of `Abdu'l-Bahá

2. As to what thou didst ask regarding the history of the philosophers: history, prior to Alexander of Greece, is extremely confused, for it is a fact that only after Alexander did history become an orderly and systematized discipline. One cannot, for this reason, rely upon traditions and reported historical events that have come down from before the days of Alexander. This is a matter thoroughly established, in the view of all authoritative historians. How many a historical account was taken as fact in the eighteenth century, yet the opposite was proved true in the nineteenth. No reliance, then, can be placed upon the traditions and reports of historians which antedate Alexander, not even with regard to ascertaining the lifetimes of leading individuals.

Wherefore ye should not be surprised that the Tablet of Wisdom is in conflict with the historical accounts. It behoveth one to reflect a while on the great diversity of opinion among the historians, and their contradictory accounts; for the historians of East and West are much at odds, and the Tablet of Wisdom was written in accordance with certain histories of the East.

Furthermore, the Torah, held to be the most ancient of histories, existeth today in three separate versions: the Hebrew, considered authentic by the Jews and the Protestant clergy; the Greek Septuagint, which is used as authoritative in the Greek and other Eastern churches; and the Samaritan Torah, the standard authority for that people. These three versions differ greatly, one from another, even with regard to the lifetimes of the most celebrated figures.

In the Hebrew Torah, it is recorded that from Noah's flood until the birth of Abraham there was an interval of two hundred and ninety-two years. In the Greek, that time-span is given as one thousand and seventy-two years, while in the Samaritan, the recorded span is nine hundred and forty-two years. Refer to the commentary by Henry Westcott,<sup>1</sup> for tables are supplied therein which show the discrepancies among the three Torahs as to the birthdates of a number of the descendants of Shem, and thou wilt see how greatly the versions differ one from another.

Moreover, according to the text of the Hebrew Torah, from the creation of Adam until Noah's flood the elapsed time is recorded as one thousand six hundred and fifty-six years, while in the Greek Torah the interval is given as two thousand two hundred and sixty-two years, and in the Samaritan text, the same period is said to have lasted one thousand three hundred and seven years.

Reflect thou now over the discrepancies among these three Torahs. The case is indeed surprising. The Jews and Protestants belittle the Greek Torah, while to the Greeks, the Hebrew version is spurious, and the Samaritans deny both the Hebrew and the Greek versions.

Our purpose is to show that even in Scriptural history, the most outstanding of all histories, there are contradictions as to the time when the great ones lived, let alone as to dates related to others. And furthermore, learned societies in Europe are continually revising the existing records, both of East and West. In spite of this, how can the confused accounts of peoples dating from before Alexander be compared with the Holy Text of God? If any scholar expresses astonishment, let him be surprised at the discrepancies in Scriptural history.

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1 The English equivalent of this name written in Persian by `Abdu'l-Bahá is not certain.

Nevertheless, Holy Writ is authoritative, and with it no history of the world can compare, for experience hath shown that after investigation of the facts and a thorough study of ancient records and corroborative evidence, all have referred back to the Holy Scriptures. The most important thing is to establish the validity of God's universal Manifestation; once His claim proveth true, then whatsoever He may choose to say is right and correct.

The histories prior to Alexander, which were based on oral accounts current among the people, were put together later on. There are great discrepancies among them, and certainly they can never hold their own against Holy Writ. It is an accepted fact among historians themselves that these histories were compiled after Alexander, and that prior to his time history was transmitted by word of mouth. Note how extremely confused was the history of Greece, so much so that to this day there is no agreement on the dates related to the life of Homer, Greece's far-famed poet. Some even maintain that Homer never existed at all, and that the name is a fabrication.

*(From a Tablet, translated from the Persian)*

3. As to deistic philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, they are indeed worthy of esteem and of the highest praise, for they have rendered distinguished services to mankind....

Now concerning philosophers, they are of two schools. Thus Socrates the wise believed in the unity of God and the existence of the soul after death; as his opinion was contrary to that of the narrow-minded people of his time, that divine sage was poisoned by them.

*(From a Tablet to Dr. A. H. Forel, published in The Bahá'í World: 1968-1973 (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), vol. XV, pp. 37, 40 [Ed. - online at p. 7, 13])*

4. O thou handmaid of God! It is recorded in eastern histories that Socrates journeyed to Palestine and Syria and there, from men learned in the things of God, acquired certain spiritual truths; that when he returned to Greece, he promulgated two beliefs: one, the unity of God, and the other, the immortality of the soul after its separation from the body; that these concepts, so foreign to their thought, raised a great commotion among the Greeks, until in the end they gave him poison and killed him.

And this is authentic; for the Greeks believed in many gods, and Socrates established the fact that God is one, which obviously was in conflict with Greek beliefs.

The Founder of monotheism was Abraham; it is to Him that this concept can be traced, and the belief was current among the Children of Israel, even in the days of Socrates.

The above, however, cannot be found in the Jewish histories; there are many facts which are not included in Jewish history. Not all the events of the life of Christ are set forth in the history of Josephus, a Jew, although it was he who wrote the history of the times of Christ. One may not, therefore, refuse to believe in events of Christ's day on the grounds that they are not to be found in the history of Josephus.

Eastern histories also state that Hippocrates sojourned for a long time in the town of Tyre, and this is a city in Syria.

*(Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), section 25, p. 55)*

5. Moses established laws and ordinances; these gave life to the people of Israel, and led them to the highest possible degree of civilization at that period.

To such a development did they attain that the philosophers of Greece would come and acquire knowledge from the learned men of Israel. Such an one was Socrates, who visited Syria, and took from the children of Israel the teachings of the Unity of God and of the immortality of the soul. After his return to Greece, he promulgated these teachings. Later the people of Greece rose in opposition to him, accused him of impiety, arraigned him before the Areopagus, and condemned him to death by poison.

*(Some Answered Questions (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), pp. 14-15)*

6. It is furthermore a matter of record in numerous historical works that the philosophers of Greece such as Pythagoras, acquired the major part of their philosophy, both divine and material, from the disciples of Solomon. And Socrates after having eagerly journeyed to meet with some of Israel's most illustrious scholars and divines, on his return to Greece established the concept of the oneness

of God and the continuing life of the human soul after it has put off its elemental dust. Ultimately, the ignorant among the Greeks denounced this man who had fathomed the inmost mysteries of wisdom, and rose up to take his life; and then the populace forced the hand of their ruler, and in council assembled they caused Socrates to drink from the poisoned cup.

*(The Secret of Divine Civilization (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 77)*

7. The philosophers of Greece—such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and others—were devoted to the investigation of both natural and spiritual phenomena. In their schools of teaching they discoursed upon the world of nature as well as the supernatural world. Today the philosophy and logic of Aristotle are known throughout the world.

*(The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by `Abd'ul-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912 rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 327)*

8. In the splendor of the reign of Solomon their sciences and arts advanced to such a degree that even the Greek philosophers journeyed to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of the Hebrew sages and acquire the basis of Israelitish law. According to eastern history this is an established fact. Even Socrates visited the Jewish doctors in the Holy Land, consorting with them and discussing the principles and basis of their religious belief. After his return to Greece he formulated his philosophical teaching of divine unity and advanced his belief in the immortality of the spirit beyond the dissolution of the body. Without doubt, Socrates absorbed these verities from the wise men of the Jews with whom he came in contact. Hippocrates and other philosophers of the Greeks likewise visited Palestine and acquired wisdom from the Jewish prophets, studying the basis of ethics and morality, returning to their country with contributions which have made Greece famous.

*(The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 362-63)*

9. Even the celebrated philosophers of Greece journeyed to Jerusalem in order to study with the Israelitish sages, and many were the lessons of philosophy and wisdom they received. Among these philosophers was the famous Socrates. He visited the Holy Land and studied with the prophets of Israel, acquiring principles of their philosophical teaching and a knowledge of their advanced arts and sciences. After his return to Greece he founded the system known as the unity of God. The Greek people rose against him, and at last he was poisoned in the presence of the king. Hippocrates and many other Greek philosophers sat at the feet of the learned Israelitish doctors and absorbed their expositions of wisdom and inner truth.

*(The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 406)*

## **From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi**

10. It was eventually through Arabs that civilization was introduced to the West. It was through them that the philosophy, science and culture which the old Greeks had developed found their way to Europe. The Arabs were the ablest translators and linguists of their age, and it is thanks to them that the writings of such well-known thinkers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were made available to the Westerners.<sup>2</sup>

*(27 April 1936 to an individual believer)*

11. `Abdu'l-Bahá stated that Socrates visited the Jewish doctors and imbibed the wisdom of the Hebrew Prophets. At present in the library here we have no books substantiating this statement. However as we know that the Master asserted its truth, no doubt historical evidence will be forthcoming in the future to support it.<sup>3</sup>

*(19 April 1941 to an individual believer)*

12. The Master said that Socrates—the Prince of the Grecian philosophers—received inspiration and

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2 The question addressed to Shoghi Effendi concerned the factors that contributed to the efflorescence of European culture during the Renaissance

3 The questioner referred to `Abdu'l-Bahá's statement in extract [8], and states that he understood the Master told a pilgrim that eastern historians had recorded the visit of Socrates. He asks which writers mention this point.

instruction from the Hebrew Prophets; so we cannot say that Greece was devoid of contact with any Prophetic Source.<sup>4</sup>

*(5 April 1945 to an individual believer)*

13. We must not take many of `Abdu'l-Bahá's statements as dogmatic finalities, for there are other points which when added to them round out the picture. For instance, when He calls Aristotle and Plato Philosophers of the East, He is obviously placing them in that category because He believes they belong more correctly to Eastern culture than to Central European and the New World cultures of the West. When He calls the philosophers of the West materialistic this does not for a moment mean He includes all Western philosophers for, as you truly point out, many of them have been very spiritual in their concepts....

Historians cannot be sure Socrates did not visit the Holy Land. But believing as we do that `Abdu'l-Bahá had an intuitive knowledge quite different from our own, we accept His authority on this matter.<sup>5</sup>

*(7 June 1946 to an individual)*

14. 2nd. We have no historical proof of the truth of the Master's statement regarding the Greek philosophers visiting the Holy Land etc., but such proof may come to light through research in the future.

3rd. We must not take this statement too literally; "contemporary" may have been meant in Persian as something far more elastic than the English word. Likewise, the whole translation probably needs revising.<sup>6</sup>

*(15 February 1947 to an individual believer)*

## **From Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice**

15. There are, indeed, a number of things that Bahá'u'lláh says in the Lawh-i-Hikmat which differ from the current concepts of western historians. Yet it is surely significant that in this very Tablet He states:

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 sayings 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. Verily His knowledge encompasseth the earth and the heavens.

When asked about the statements in the Lawh-i-Hikmat, `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, in a Tablet addressed to Miss Ethel Rosenberg, that the histories of the times before Alexander the Great are very confused, and that the Words of Bahá'ulláh are the standard. He adds that the statements made in the Tablet of Wisdom are in accordance with certain of the historical records of the East.

*(10 September 1978 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)*

16. The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 20 October 1987 and has directed us to convey the following in response to your question about Empedocles and Pythagoras referred to in the Lawh-i-Hikmat.

In a Tablet written in response to questions raised about this Tablet, `Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies the perspective toward statements made by Bahá'ulláh in the Lawh-i-Hikmat which differ from the current concepts of western historians. The Master states that histories of the times before

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4 The answer was provided in response to a question about what was the motive force of the great civilization of Greece.

5 The questioner cites several statements from `Abdu'l-Bahá and takes issue with the Master's categorization of western philosophers. He also challenges the assertion that Socrates visited the Holy Land on the grounds that Socrates was too poor to travel and that the travels were likely to have been undertaken by Plato, the student of Socrates.

6 The questioner enquires whether there is evidence to support the statements of `Abdu'l-Bahá concerning Socrates' visiting the Holy Land, and how the statement of Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet of Wisdom concerning Empedocles and Pythagoras being contemporaries of David and Solomon is to be understood.

Alexander the Great are very confused and that when the subject came under scholarly discipline in later times the greatest difficulty was, and still is, experienced in giving dates with any certainty. He further points out that the Words of Bahá'u'lláh are the standard and that the statements made in the Tablet of Wisdom are in accordance with certain of the historical records of the East.

In reference to the specific passage in the Lawh-i-Hikmat regarding Empedocles and Pythagoras being contemporaries of David and Solomon, the following is an excerpt from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer who enquired about this passage:

We must not take this statement too literally; “contemporary” may have been meant in Persian as something far more elastic than the English word.

*(15 February 1947)*

It is noteworthy that at both the beginning and end of this section of the Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that He is quoting “some accounts of the sages”. These would have been the historical accounts familiar to the person whom He is addressing in the Tablet. The fact that Bahá'u'lláh makes such statements for the sake of illustrating the spiritual principles that He wishes to convey, does not necessarily mean that He is endorsing their historical accuracy. In this connection it is interesting to note the answer given by the beloved Guardian's secretary on his behalf to a question about the “fourth heaven” mentioned in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. The translation of the passage is as follows:

As to the ascent of Christ to the “fourth heaven” as revealed in the glorious Book of Íqán, he [the Guardian] stated that the “fourth heaven” is a term used and a belief held by the early astronomers. The followers of the Shi'ah sect likewise held this belief. As the Kitáb-i-Íqán was revealed for the guidance of that sect, this term was used in conformity with the concepts of its followers.

*(3 November 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)*