

The Lawh-i-Tibb (Tablet to the Physician) – Beyond Health Maxims¹

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Abstract

The Lawh-i-Tibb is a well-known, oft-referenced tablet by Bahá'u'lláh and one of the few explicitly related to medicine and healing. While the health maxims contained in it are often the focus of popular interest, relatively little attention has been paid to other aspects of the tablet. Complicating the study of this important work is the lack of an authorized English translation.² This paper, drawing on provisional

1 I am extremely grateful to Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir and Dr. Stephen Lambden for their masterful translation of the Lawh-i-Tibb and for their extensive research into this tablet. My deepest thanks go out to my family (Fakhrodin Ziaei, Zahra Pourjafar-Ziaei, Mahtab Ziaei, Michael Sabet, and Neda Ziaei) and my wife Jamal Gabriel, all of whom assisted with this manuscript and served as a sounding-board for ideas. I dedicate this paper to the memory of Dr. Rahmatu'llah Muhajir, whose professional and spiritual achievements are a constant source of inspiration to me.

2 See the Department of the Secretariat's letter regarding the difference between authorized English translations of the Bahá'í holy writings by a committee at the Bahá'í World Centre and provisional translations undertaken by individuals for personal or scholarly use.

translations, focuses on the tablet's historical context, its paradigms for the study and practice of medicine, its description of the ideal characteristics of a physician, and its foreshadowing of the evolution of medical science.

Résumé

La Lawh-i-Tibb est une tablette bien connue de Bahá'u'lláh, à laquelle il est souvent fait référence, et l'une des rares qui porte expressément sur la médecine et la guérison. Bien que les préceptes en matière de santé qu'elle contient soient souvent au cœur de l'intérêt qu'elle suscite, relativement peu d'attention a été accordée à d'autres aspects de la tablette. L'absence d'une traduction anglaise autorisée complique l'étude de cet écrit important. S'appuyant sur des traductions provisoires, l'auteur examine le contexte historique de la tablette, ses paradigmes pour l'étude et la pratique de la médecine, sa description des qualités idéales d'un médecin et son anticipation de l'évolution de la science médicale.

Resumen

La Lawh-i-Tibb es una tableta muy conocida y referenciada por Bahá'u'lláh y una de las pocas relacionadas explícitamente con la medicina y la curación. Si bien las máximas de salud contenidas en él a menudo son el foco de interés popular, se ha prestado relativamente poca atención a otros aspectos de la tableta. Para complicar el estudio de este importante trabajo es la falta de una traducción al inglés autorizada. Este artículo documento, basado en traducciones provisionales, se centra en el contexto histórico de la tableta, sus paradigmas para el estudio y la práctica de la medicina, su descripción de las características ideales de un médico y presagiando la evolución de la ciencia médica.

INTRODUCTION

The “Lawh-i-Tibb,” also known as the “Tablet to the Physician” or the “Tablet of Medicine,” was written by Bahá'u'lláh sometime in the early 'Akká period of His ministry, likely in the early 1870s (Fanapanazir and Lambden 18). The tablet was addressed to Mírzá Muhammad Ridá'-i-Tabib-i-Yazdí, a physician of the traditional style of medicine living in the city of Yazd in Iran (18). The full Arabic and Persian text of the tablet was first published in Cairo in the early 1920s (18),³ while provisional English translations of portions of the tablet began appearing in the periodical *Star of the West* in 1922 (“Physical” 252) and 1930 (Kirkpatrick 160), and in the book *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* in 1923 (Esslemont 106). The first half of the tablet—written in Arabic—discusses mainly topics related to medicine and health and is the focus of this paper. The second half of the tablet was written in Persian and contains “admonitions to Bahá'ís, designed to increase their level of wisdom, devotion and service” (Fanapanazir and Lambden 18); however, I do not intend to discuss this part of the tablet in this paper.

A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi raised the possibility that Bahá'u'lláh wrote the Lawh-i-Tibb in response to questions posed by Mírzá Muhammad Ridá' (*Compilation vol. 1* paragraph 61). Thus far, no definitive evidence has been found to confirm

this possibility (Research Department). Nevertheless, Bahá'u'lláh seems to paraphrase or quote extensively from a wide variety of historical medical texts, which would seem to be in keeping with the tablet being an answer to medical questions posed by Mírzá Muhammad Ridá'. Among these references, Bahá'u'lláh seems to intersperse His own advice. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states that the tablet “does not contain much of scientific informations [sic] but has some interesting advices [sic] for keeping healthy” (*Light* 21).

There is no English translation authorized by the Bahá'í World Centre of the full text of this tablet. A provisional translation of the full tablet published by Khazeh Fanapanazir and Stephen Lambden will be used in this paper as the main English translation, as it is the most recently published one. The other full translation of this tablet was done anonymously and was found among the papers of Dwight Barstow, a U.S. Bahá'í (Bahá'u'lláh, “Tablet”). This translation is similar to excerpts of the tablet translated in *Star of the West*, also by an anonymous translator (“Physical” 252; Kirkpatrick 160). The Barstow and *Star of the West* translations will be referred to only where their rendering of the original Arabic departs substantially from the Fanapanazir and Lambden translation. Lines are numbered in this paper to give the reader a sense of the order of information presented in the tablet, but these numbers are not present in the original.

This tablet, mainly referenced for its

3 See Bahá'u'lláh, *Majmu'a-yi al-wah-i mubaraká*, 222–26.

health advice, is one of the few Bahá'í holy writings with specific guidance on nutrition, medication, lifestyle factors (such as exercise), mental health, and spiritual aspects of healing. A detailed study of the health maxims in the tablet is difficult without an authorized translation; thus, these maxims will only be superficially discussed. Largely missing from contemporary discourse in the Bahá'í community is the fact that the tablet describes fundamental concepts related to health and the practice of medicine, as well as the characteristics desired in a physician. In both the explicit statements and implicit conclusions in this tablet, Bahá'u'lláh prophesied the evolution of the practice of medicine.

MEDICINE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PERSIA

Shoghi Effendi writes,

The Tablet to a Physician was addressed to a man who was a student of the old type of healing prevalent in the East and familiar with the terminology used in those days, and [Bahá'u'lláh] addresses him in terms used by the medical men of those days. These terms are quite different from those used by modern medicine, and one would have to have a deep knowledge of this former school of medicine to understand the questions Bahá'u'lláh was elucidating. (*Compilation vol. 1* paragraph 61)

According to Fananapazir and Lambden (18), the medical maxims and advice contained in the Lawh-i-Tibb are similar to those found in ancient Greek and early Islamic literature. Medical practice in Persia at the time when Bahá'u'lláh wrote the Lawh-i-Tibb included an eclectic blend of traditional and modern—so-called “Western”—concepts (Ebrahimnejad, *Medicine* 7). As explained by Shoghi Effendi in the passage above, Mirzá Muhammad Ridá' likely based his practice on a tradition of ancient Greek medical knowledge that had been expanded upon by various physicians throughout history, including Hippocrates, Alcmaeon, and Avicenna (Pourahmad 96). Unsurprisingly, there were also Zoroastrian and Indian influences on Persian medicine throughout its history (Gignoux). Persian medical textbooks contemporaneous with this tablet were typically written for an audience of both physicians and the lay public (Ebrahimnejad, “Theory” 173), and Bahá'u'lláh seems to employ this approach in the Lawh-i-Tibb.

Humoralism, a medical philosophy that explains disease as a consequence of an imbalance in one or more of four humors (or fluids) of the body, was the central tenet in nineteenth-century traditional Persian medicine. These four humors are blood (*khun*, *dam*), phlegm (*balgam*), yellow bile (*safra*), and black bile (*sawda*), and each of them is associated with a particular organ: the heart, brain, liver, and spleen, respectively (Pourahmad 96). In addition, each of the humors could be described

as either hot (*garm*) or cold (*sard*), and wet (*tar*) or dry (*khoshk*) (Pourahmad 96). In this theory, it is believed that a “vital force” (*Quwwat-i-Mudabbira*) maintains these humors in a dynamic equilibrium and thereby keeps the body healthy (Syeda 971). The correct proportion of these four humors can be affected by six factors,⁴ comprising various environmental, dietary, and psychological influences (Verotta 61). Curing disease often involves suppressing the over-active humor while encouraging the under-active one. Even “modern” Western medicine in the nineteenth century integrated some theories related to humoral medicine (Mahdavi 170).

In 1851, Persia’s first medical school teaching a European-style curriculum was established in Tehran (Pourahmad 98). It was called Dar al-Fanoun, and by 1925, 253 general medical practitioners had trained there. In the same year, from other training settings, there were 652 medical practitioners who had learned medicine through the more traditional, experiential model (Pourahmad 98). Interestingly, the Dar al-Fanoun school provided training in both modern Western and traditional medicine (Ebrahimnejad, *Medicine* 102), in order to quell the conflict between the traditional and modern medical sciences brewing among the lay public, clergy, and medical practitioners (Mahdavi 185).

4 Some sources describe five or seven external factors, but most sources agree on six (Jarcho 372; Berryman 515). Galen originally described six “non-natural” influences on health (Niebyl 486).

Religion and faith practices were an important component of nineteenth-century Persian medicine. The Qur’án was seen as a complete guide to health, and everyone, especially the ‘ulamá (Muslim clergy), was expected to have some knowledge of medicine (Ebrahimnejad, “Theory” 175). Consequently, religious interpretations and practices were often intermingled with medical treatments (175). In fact, prior to the introduction of so-called “Western” medicine in Persia, the ‘ulamá had a “monopoly” on medical education (Mahdavi 186). The ‘ulamá used their knowledge and practice of medicine as a means of maintaining authority and control over the population. Western medicine thus became a threat to the clergy’s power (186). It is in this context that one can glimpse the interaction between Bahá’í religious practice and medicine in the Lawh-i-Tibb.

Traditional medical practitioners in nineteenth-century Persia were known by various designations (*tabib*, *hakim*, *mo’alej*, among others), depending on their area of expertise (Ebrahimnejad, “Theory” 173). The designation *tabib* typically denoted a practitioner who treated illness through the use of diet and medications, while other titles were often nebulous in meaning (173). In addition, other practitioners—such as barbers, bath attendants, and bone-setters—performed some medical tasks (173).

There were several Western-trained physicians in Iran during the 1800s, some of whom were well known in Persia’s upper class. One of these was

Dr. William Cormick, an Irish-Armenian physician living in Tabriz in 1848 (Momen). He attended to the Báb while the latter was imprisoned in Tabriz (Browne 260). It is noteworthy that when the Báb was offered medical assistance for a facial injury inflicted during an interrogation there, instead of requesting a Persian surgeon, He asked specifically for Dr. Cormick. The doctor's report, written directly to the Shah himself, helped temporarily save the Báb's life (Browne 261).

MEDICINE AS SCIENCE:

ESTABLISHED MEANS, CAUSE AND EFFECT, AND ATTAINING EQUILIBRIUM

In the Lawh-i-Tibb, Bahá'u'lláh describes medicine as the “science of healing,” and explicitly advocates a scientific and rational approach to practicing it:

41 Say: The science of healing is the most noble of all the sciences.

42 Verily, it is the greatest instrument given by God, the Quickener of mouldering bones, for the preservation of the bodies of peoples. God hath given it precedence over all sciences and branches of wisdom.

20 Counter disease by utilizing established means (*bi'l-asbab*).

21 This utterance is the decisive command in this discourse. (Fananapazir and Lambden 23)⁵

To paraphrase: medicine is a “science of healing” that seeks to discover and use proven therapies (“established means”) to counter disease.

Since the time this tablet was written, humanity's knowledge of “established means” has been shaped by a remarkable evolution in scientific knowledge, both in medical fields such as anatomy, physiology, microbiology, and nutrition, and in related disciplines such as chemistry, biology, epidemiology, psychology, physics, and mathematics. These scientific discourses have helped us understand the causes and consequences of disease, have allowed us to perform diagnostic tests with accuracy and reproducibility, have given us therapeutic targets, have created a common vocabulary, and have resulted in a systematic approach to further research.

Having designated medicine a science, Bahá'u'lláh describes two concepts in relation to its study and practice. The first concept is the phenomenon of cause and effect:

27 We, assuredly, have decreed a cause (*sababan*) for all things and vouchsafed everything with an effect (*al-athar*).

28 All of this is by virtue of the effulgence of My Name, the Efficacious (“Producer of Effects,” *al-mu'aththir*) upon existing things. (Fananapazir and Lambden 23)

20 and 21 thus: “Search for the cause of disease. This saying is the end of this speech” (Bahá'u'lláh, “Tablet”).

5 Another translation renders lines

The second concept is the equilibrium among various constituents of the human body. In describing the effects that His instructions will have on the body, Bahá'u'lláh employs the medical terminology used in theories of humorism—terms that were familiar to the tablet's recipient:

30 Say: Through all that which We have expounded the [equilibrium of the] four humours (*al-akhlalat*) will not exceed their moderate balance (*al-i'tidal*); neither will their measures deviate from their mean conditions.⁶

31 The [human constitutional] foundation will remain in its purity and the “sixth part” and the “sixth of the sixth part” (*wa'l-suds wa suds al-suds*) in their stable condition.⁷

32 The twin active forces (*fa'ilan*) and the twin passive realities (*munfa'ilan*) will be rendered whole. (Fananapazir and Lambden 23)

Line 30 suggests that Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—either those conveyed in this tablet or throughout His entire

6 The Barstow translation offers a slightly different perspective on this passage: “Say: From what We have explained, the humors of the body should not be excessive and their quantity depends upon the condition of the body” (Bahá'u'lláh, “Tablet”).

7 Another translation suggests the following: “One sixth of each sixth part in its normal condition (is the right proportion)” (Bahá'u'lláh, “Tablet”).

revelation—will help one achieve a healthy equilibrium among the four humors as well as healthy levels of each.

Fananapazir and Lambden provisionally translate a quote from Bahá'u'lláh wherein He answers a question regarding line 31 of this tablet (47).⁸ In His explanation, Bahá'u'lláh states that the “sixth part” and the “sixth of the sixth part” are referring to humoral balance. Interestingly, He also says that this description of humoral balance “accords with the belief of the people” (47). In adding this qualifier, Bahá'u'lláh may indicate He is utilizing terms and humoral concepts so that the people of the time (especially the recipient of this tablet) could understand. To a modern reader, this response on His part might suggest that Bahá'u'lláh's knowledge of scientific reality transcends the knowledge of His time, while these theories of humoral balance may be at best an incomplete understanding of medicine, and at worst a faulty medical paradigm.

Notably, Bahá'u'lláh also states that there are “other explanations” for line 31 (Fananapazir and Lambden 47). To give one such explanation, this line could refer to the six “un-natural” (or external) influences that can affect the levels of humors in the body: air (or environment), food and drink, sleep and wakefulness, motion and rest, evacuation and repletion, and passions of the mind (Barryman 517). These influences formed part of the classical Greek (Barryman 517) and Islamic (Deuraseh 4)

8 For the source of the quote, see Bahá'u'lláh, *Ma'ida-yi Asmani*.

understanding of hygiene and preventive health, and were also part of therapeutic modalities for a number of diseases (Barryman 517).

The “active forces” and “passive realities” from line 32 are terms first used by Aristotle to describe the properties of the physical world (Ma’ani). The “twin active forces” are the properties of cold and warm, while the “twin passive realities” are those of wet and dry (Aristotle 482). The Islamic philosopher al-Kindi believed that medicines worked by exerting certain effects based on their physical qualities of warmth, coldness, wetness, or dryness (Ma’ani). In declaring that His teachings would bring about equilibrium in the human body, Bahá’u’lláh is using terms that were likely familiar to Mulla Muhammad Ridá’. Interestingly, in His Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá’u’lláh refers to the “active force” while describing the origin of the physical universe (*Tablets* 140).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in one of His tablets, expounds on the theme of equilibrium in health and disease, and encourages the “temperance and moderation of a natural way of life” (*Selections* 153). In this same tablet, He refers to medicine as a “science,” and on two separate occasions He emphasizes that the concept of equilibrium in medicine “requireth the most careful investigation” (*Selections* 153–54).

CHARACTERISTICS OF A PHYSICIAN

In the Lawh-i-Tibb, Bahá’u’lláh describes features that would be desirable

in a physician. As mentioned in the previous section, physicians are encouraged to be rational in their search for the causes and effects of disease, and to regard medicine as a science. They are to look for ways of re-establishing equilibrium in the patient, and to use established means in their medical practice. Bahá’u’lláh also counsels the tablet’s recipient to approach treatment methodically; in the following example, He advises using foods to heal before resorting to medicines:

8 Treat an illness firstly with nutrients (or foods, aliments, *agh-dhiya*) and proceed not [immediately] unto medications (*adwiyat*). (Fananapazir and Lambden 22)

Another desirable attribute for physicians to manifest is a humility born from an understanding that God is ultimately responsible for healing, and therefore, both the patient and the physician should turn to God for assistance:

29 Verily, thy Lord is the One who exercises command over all that He wills.

33 And upon God is all our trust.

34 There is no God but Him, the true Healer, the Omniscient, the One Whose succor is sought by all. (Fananapazir and Lambden 23)

Wisdom is another highly prized attribute cited in the tablet, because it allows the physician to withhold or

remove medical treatment when it is not needed:

6 Do not avoid medical treatment (*al-'ilaj*) when thou hast need of it but abandon it when thy constitution hath been restored (*istiqamat*).

10 Abandon medication (*al-da-wa'*) when thou art healthy but take hold of it when thou hast need thereof. (Fananapazir and Lambden 22)

Finally, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the importance of physicians being firm in their faith. For example, He encourages what may be prayer and reflection on His writings (“remembrance of thy Lord”) as part of a physician’s treatment regimen.

35 O Physician!

36 Firstly, heal thou the sick ones with the Remembrance of thy Lord (*bi-dhikr rabbika*), the Lord of the Day of Mutual Invocation (*yawm al-tanad*) and afterwards by that which We have ordained for the health of the constitutions of the servants.

37 By My life!

38 Merely attaining the presence of the physician who has drunk of the Wine of My Love confers healing and his mere breath brings mercy and hope.

39 Say: Adhere to him for the restoration of the body’s well-being.

40 For, verily, such a physician is assisted by God for the treatment of ills.

In this same vein, the tablet contains a short healing prayer, which has been authoritatively translated by Shoghi Effendi:

Thy name is my healing, O my God, and remembrance of Thee is my remedy. Nearness to Thee is my hope, and love for Thee is my companion. Thy mercy to me is my healing and my succor in both this world and the world to come. Thou, verily, art the All-Bountiful, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, chapter 170)

IN THE ABSENCE OF PHYSICIANS

In the third line of the tablet, Bahá'u'lláh makes a profound statement that provides much insight into the tablet itself:

3 The Tongue of the Ancient of Days utters that which shall be a sufficient treasure for the wise ones in the absence of physicians. (Fananapazir and Lambden 22)

By describing His revealed writings as a “sufficient treasure” when no physician is available, Bahá'u'lláh seems to be implying that physicians are to be consulted for matters of health.⁹

9 Bahá'u'lláh explicitly enjoins people to consult “competent physicians” in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (paragraph 113).

It is worth noting that if a physician is available, he or she may conceivably treat a patient in a way that is at variance with Bahá'u'lláh's injunctions in this tablet and, presumably, elsewhere. In Bahá'u'lláh's other writings, He permits exemptions to certain Bahá'í laws if advised by a physician. For instance, Bahá'u'lláh forbids the taking of alcohol or "opium and similar habit-forming drugs," unless specifically prescribed by a physician (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* notes 144 and 170; *Compilation* vol. 2, 247). Another example can be found in a statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

should a physician console a patient and say, "Thank God, you are doing better and there is hope for your recovery," although these words may be contrary to the truth, yet sometimes they will ease the patient's mind and become the means of curing the illness. And this is not blameworthy. (*Some Answered Questions* 215–16)

Here again, even though Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers to be truthful,¹⁰ the physician is exempt from being absolutely truthful in such an instance as cited above.

Another implication of this verse concerning the absence of a physician could relate to humoral medicine. The tablet's recipient was a physician who presumably used humoral theory in his medical practice. Bahá'u'lláh may be implying that in the absence of doctors

such as the recipient, the injunctions in this tablet would be sufficient to produce a balance of the humors. Consequently, one may not need the services of a doctor trained according to humoral theory if one follows the tablet's advice in this regard. This interpretation is further corroborated by lines 30 to 32 (described above), which seem to indicate that the key to balancing the humors lies in the tablet's counsels—though there could be a bit of irony in line 3, as Bahá'u'lláh is explaining to a physician how a patient can stay healthy without a physician. This line is also reminiscent of a book by Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi (also known as Rhazes) that is entitled *Man La Yahduruhu al-Tabib* (Meri 672), translated as "For one without doctor" (Mollazadeh 1154) or "He who has no physician to attend him" (Osborn).

Finally, Bahá'u'lláh does not specify to what or to whom He is referring when He uses the word "physician." The Universal House of Justice has stated that "no specific school of nutrition or medicine has been associated with the Bahá'í teachings" (*Compilation* vol. 1, 488). As we have noted, in nineteenth-century Persia, there were a variety of medical practitioners (Ebrahimnejad, "Theory" 173). Such diversity persists in the present day, as there are a variety of medical and surgical specialties, often with overlapping areas of practice. In addition, disciplines such as nursing, nutrition, physiotherapy, speech language pathology, and others are also involved in the treatment of and care for patients.

¹⁰ See, for example, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 119.

HEALTH MAXIMS

DIET AND NUTRITION

A considerable part of the tablet concerns diet and nutrition. Bahá'u'lláh counsels the reader regarding healthy eating as well as treatment of illness through diet. This emphasis on nutrition is in keeping with one possible purpose of the tablet: to give advice on health to the general population when a physician (who can prescribe medication or another treatment) is unavailable. However, another possibility is that Bahá'u'lláh revealed this tablet specifically for its recipient; Mirzá Muhammad Ridá's title was *tabib*, which typically denoted a medical practitioner who treated illness through diet and medications (Ebrahimnejad, "Theory" 173).

In brief, Bahá'u'lláh draws attention to the relationship between eating and prayer; the proper order, timing, and chewing of food; foods to avoid; what to do after eating; the importance of eating breakfast; the dangers of over-eating; and food as medicine. As mentioned earlier, line eight of the tablet contains the following advice:

8 Treat an illness firstly with nutrients (or foods, aliments, *agh-dhiya*) and proceed not [immediately] unto medications (*adwiyat*). (Fananapazir and Lambden 22)¹¹

11 Another translation renders line 8 as follows: "Treat disease first of all through the diet and refrain from medicines" (Bahá'u'lláh, "Tablet").

In this line, Bahá'u'lláh clearly wants the reader to first use diet to cure illness. Based on His injunction to leave off medications when the "constitution hath been restored" (Lawh-i-Tibb line 6),¹² only when food does not produce healing should medications be used.

Bahá'u'lláh implies that meditating on the health-related maxims contained in this tablet, would be "a sufficient treasure for the wise ones in the absence of physicians" (Lawh-i-Tibb line 3). One possible reading of line eight might thus be that in the absence of physicians, patients are to first treat their illness through diet rather than through self-medication. This reading of the line is further corroborated by Bahá'u'lláh's prefacing line 4 (and the beginning of His list of health-related maxims) with this general invocation to humanity as a whole:

4 O People! Eat not except after having hungered, and drink not after retiring to sleep (*al-huju*). (Fananapazir and Lambden 22)

The first half of this line may be seen as a warning against eating for reasons other than hunger, such as depression, boredom, stress, or, more obviously, gluttony. A thread running throughout the tablet is that people should be aware of their "natural, inborn equilibrium" (*Selections* 152) and of their attendant body signals. In the first part

12 "Do not avoid medical treatment (*al-'ilaj*) when thou hast need of it but abandon it when thy constitution hath been restored (*istiqamat*)."

of line four, Bahá'u'lláh specifically draws our attention to the hunger signal. The second half of this line, however, deserves further consideration.

Fananapazir and Lambden (31–33) provide an excellent review of the Arabic word *al-huju'* and its possible meanings, with reference to Greco-Islamic medical sources. In each of the three translations referenced in this paper, the word *al-huju'* has been translated as “sleep.” It can, in fact, also be translated as being satisfied, appeased, or subsided (as it relates to hunger) (Steingass 1165; Wehr 1195). So, line four could be read as Bahá'u'lláh cautioning against drinking fluids (or taking in food of any kind) after having achieved satisfaction (or satiety) with a meal. Pursuing this reading, and assuming that eating and drinking are essentially the same action, Bahá'u'lláh's injunction may be paraphrased as: do not eat except when needed to overcome hunger, and do not overeat.

LIFESTYLE HABITS

Some of the health maxims in the tablet concern healthy lifestyle habits, such as exercise and “purification of the bowels”:

25 Purification of the bowels (*tanqiyat al-fudul*) constitutes a pillar [of health, *al-'umdat*] when accomplished in the temperate seasons (*al-fusul al-mu'tadila*). (Fananapazir and Lambden 23)

Another translation of the same line

reads: “To cleanse the body is essential, but only in temperate seasons (should it be done frequently)” (Bahá'u'lláh, “Tablet”).

This line is sparse in details, but a comparison of the two translations above may assist the reader in arriving at a reasonable interpretation. “Purification of the bowels” performed in the “temperate” seasons, which acts to “cleanse” the body, may be a reference to fasting, and in particular the Bahá'í Fast. Bahá'u'lláh lived in the northern hemisphere, and the Bahá'í Fast occurs in March, which coincides with the northern hemisphere's temperate season.

MEDICATIONS

Bahá'u'lláh gives advice on the appropriate use of medications for illness. He differentiates between “elemental nutrients” and “compound treatments”:

9 If that which thou desire results from elemental nutrients (*al-mufradat*) refrain from the compound treatments (*al-murakkabat*). (Fananapazir and Lambden 22)

As stated in line 3 (see above), this tablet provides advice to the reader in the absence of a physician (whose training allows him or her to supersede the above advice). In this case, the first appropriate pharmacological treatment should be one that is composed of a single medicinal ingredient, or “elemental nutrient.” Because measuring the effectiveness of a treatment is more

straightforward when a single medicine is used rather than a compound one, this advice implicitly reinforces a methodical and logical approach to the practice of medicine.

MENTAL HEALTH

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's health maxims also concern mental health, specifically the avoidance of harmful habits of the mind, such as substance addiction, anxiousness and depression, and envy and rage, as well as the importance of striving to attain a condition of contentment under all circumstances. As we can see from the relevant passages quoted below from Fananapazir and Lambden's translation, each admonition is accompanied by a brief rationale:

19 Eschew harmful habits [i.e. addictive substances (*al-i'ada al-mudirra*)] for they truly, are a calamity for created beings. (22–23)

23 Eschew anxiety (*al-hamma*) and depression (*al-ghamm*) for through both of these will transpire a darksome affliction (*bala' adham*). (23)

24 Say: Envy (*al-hasad*) consumeth the body and rage (or anger, wrath, *al-ghayz*) burneth the liver: avoid these two as ye would a fierce lion (*al-asad*). (23)

22 Most necessary to thy well-being is contentment

(*al-qana'at*) under all circumstances for through it will the soul be saved from sloth and ill-being. (23)

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the *Lawh-i-Tibb*, medicine is described as a harmonious blend between the physical and the spiritual, the practical and the mystical. The tablet enjoins a rational approach to the study and practice of medicine and encourages humanity to discover medical truths. This same approach is invoked in another of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, where humanity is urged to free itself "from idle fancy and imitation," and to "look into all things with a searching eye" (*Tablets* 157). This exhortation stands in contrast to the study and practice of medicine in Persia during the time this tablet was written, both of which were largely under the control of the 'ulama (Mahdavi 186; Ebrahimnejad, "Theory" 175), who would blend medical prescriptions with rituals, prayer (Mahdavi 186), astrology, and magic (Ebrahimnejad, "Theory" 175). By challenging any part of established medical knowledge or practice, Bahá'u'lláh may have been understood by some to be challenging the power and authority of the clergy.

As we noted at the outset, many of Bahá'u'lláh's health injunctions are similar to those found in antiquity (*Tablet* 19–21). Likewise, many of the diverse composers of authoritative medical texts in nineteenth-century Persia, ranging from the Twelver Shia Imam's to empiricists like al-Razi,

drew on knowledge first recorded by ancient Greeks. To illuminate this intellectual lineage, Fananapazir and Lambden (18–53) have cross-referenced Bahá'u'lláh's health injunctions with both ancient and more contemporary Greco-Islamic medical literature.

Why does Bahá'u'lláh extensively quote and paraphrase past medical sources, which may have already been familiar to the tablet's recipient? Assuming the Lawh-i-Tibb was revealed in the same rapid and uninterrupted manner as many of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, a reader of the tablet might consider this work to be miraculous, given His ability to effortlessly quote or closely paraphrase such a number and breadth of sources. There are examples of this impressive feat in Bahá'u'lláh's other writings, too; in His Lawh-i-Hikmat, Bahá'u'lláh quotes verbatim from well-known historians of antiquity, demonstrating to the reader His knowledge of, and authority on, historical matters.¹³ He also extensively quotes (in a similarly rapid and uninterrupted manner) from His own decades-long corpus of writings in His *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. These demonstrations may have the effect of galvanizing a reader's faith in Him.

By extensively quoting medical sources, Bahá'u'lláh (who never received any formal medical training)

13 Bahá'u'lláh's reason for quoting these historians is "that the eyes of the people may be opened thereby and that they may become fully assured that He is in truth the Maker, the Omnipotent, the Creator, the Originator, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise" (*Tablets* 144).

was also demonstrating that He was conversant with the medical knowledge of His time. To any contemporaneous reader of the tablet, Bahá'u'lláh speaks as an authority on medicine. This authority is important, given Bahá'u'lláh's challenge in the tablet to elevate medicine to a scientific discipline above the reach of ecclesiastical control and superstition.

Does Bahá'u'lláh endorse the medical advice that He references? On the one hand, He does not explicitly suggest that this advice is faulty, nor does He implicitly critique it as He may have critiqued the humoral theory elsewhere in His writings.¹⁴ On the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh may be hinting that the medical advice in the tablet can be superseded by physicians and by medical science in general.¹⁵ One possibility is that Bahá'u'lláh omitted any critique of the health advice in the interests of wisdom and conciliation, evoking His well-known maxim, "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it" (*Gleanings* 176). Moreover, from the perspective of a modern reader, none of the health advice is unreasonable or dangerous to follow. And one must remember that Bahá'u'lláh uses terminology that the tablet's recipient would

14 See discussion above; also see Fananapazir and Lambden (47) for their provisional translation of a tablet from *Ma'ida-yi Asmani*.

15 Lawh-i-Tibb, line 3.

understand, rather than more accurate terms that would have been unintelligible to His audience.

This tablet is the first instance in which the Founder of a major world religion calls for medicine to be viewed as a science (utilizing proven diagnostics and therapies) and specifically advocates for paradigms (cause-effect and equilibrium) meant to help it advance in a rational way. In retrospect, Bahá'u'lláh's description of medicine is prophetic. In the years since the tablet was written, medical science has, in many ways, evolved and matured far beyond what physicians contemporaneous with the tablet could have imagined. To determine the cause of illness, the modern physician, aware of disease categories and how commonly they present, is trained to obtain a thorough history and to use validated, evidence-based physical exam maneuvers and tools, such as diagnostic imaging and laboratory tests, to arrive at a list of possible diagnoses. These same maneuvers and tools allow for ongoing monitoring of the equilibrium in the body. A physician anywhere in the world can, using a common vocabulary and shared understanding, discuss a patient's case with a physician elsewhere.

In nineteenth-century Persia, conflict existed between practitioners of Western and traditional medicine (Mahdavi 185). Disagreements on medical diagnosis and treatment aside, other factors played into their conflict, such as medicine's role in the social, political, and religious control of the masses (185). The *Lawh-i-Tibb* seems

to provide a point of conciliation and a common frame of reference for these opposed practitioners, in that Bahá'u'lláh wrote the tablet in a style accessible to any reader, and He used terms familiar to both Western-trained and traditionally-trained physicians.

Bahá'u'lláh also challenges both types of physicians: while possibly casting doubt on the time-honored beliefs about humoral theory held by traditionalists, He also affirms the role of God and spirituality in medicine, which may have been, and may still be, difficult for "Western" medicine to accept. Today, this dichotomization between "Western" "allopathic" medicine and "traditional" "holistic" medicine continues. Bahá'u'lláh's focus on fundamental concepts in medicine (such as cause and effect, equilibrium in the body, use of established means, and spirituality in healing) can form the basis of a discourse to which anyone—lay public or physician of any kind—can contribute, and the discussion of which will likely be at the heart of ongoing efforts to unify medicine.

Bahá'u'lláh, speaking from a place of authority, refers to medicine as a science. Scientific discovery involves, among other things, justice, consultation, and putting ego aside in preference for the search for truth. The vast Bahá'í teachings shed light on these and many other relevant concepts. In this way, as it does for all other fields of human endeavor, Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation provides a foundational framework for the study and practice of the science of medicine.

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