

A Reflection on the Theory of Alchemy as Explained in the Bahā'ī Writings

Keven Brown (April 2002; revision April 2012)

This science, which is also known as the “hidden craft,” “the science of the elixir,” and “the science of the balance,” should not be confused with the modern science of chemistry, and it is improbable to understand it by recourse to the latter. Alchemy is more than about transmutation. It is about artificially reproducing and mirroring the process of creation itself in order to embody spirit in matter. As such, it is part of a knowledge of the cosmos termed the *ḥikmat ilāhī* (“divine philosophy” or “divine wisdom”), which Muslim alchemists also know as the “sister of prophecy.” In referring to the signs of the maturity of the human race, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā states that the hidden craft is part of this divine philosophy: “As for the signs of the coming of age of the human race mentioned in the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*: one sign is the advent of universal peace, and the other is the unfoldment and appearance of the ‘sister of prophecy’, the divine philosophy, of which the hidden craft forms a part.”¹ Consequently, a complete knowledge of “divine philosophy” must include knowledge of the hidden craft, and conversely, adequate comprehension of the hidden craft requires knowledge of the principles of divine philosophy. (It should be pointed out, however, that in the books of the alchemists as well as in the Bahā'ī writings on this subject both the terms “divine wisdom” (*ḥikmat ilāhī*) and “sister of prophecy” are also often used as equivalent expressions for the “hidden craft” itself.)

In the Tablet on the Uncompounded Reality, Bahā'u'llāh states that Hermes was the first person to devote himself to *ḥikmat*,² and in the Tablet of Wisdom, he refers to Hermes as the “Father of Philosophy” (*abū al-ḥikmat*), who disclosed “the mysteries of creation as given in his chrysolite tablets.”³ We can infer from this that Hermes was the first to reveal the principles of creation, which are the essential

¹ *Asrār al-athār khuṣūṣī*, comp. Fāḍil al-Māzandarānī (Tehran, 124 B.E./1968), p. 208.

² *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh* (Haifa, Bahā'ī World Centre, 1978), p. 148, footnote.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

components of the divine philosophy. Now significantly, in one of his letters on the elixir, Bahā'u'llāh quotes the words of Hermes from one such chrysolite tablet. This tablet, known as the Emerald Tablet, contains in an allusive yet very concise manner both the principles of creation and the principles of the theory of alchemy from which all future alchemists cultivated their art. To properly understand this theory, we must begin, then, with the Emerald Tablet itself. As translated from the Arabic in which it was preserved, it reads:

In truth and of a certainty, there is no doubt that the higher is from the lower and the lower is from the higher. The working of wonders is from one as all things came from one by the treatment of the one. Its father is the sun and its mother the moon. The wind has borne it in its belly, and the earth has nourished it. It is the father of talismans, the bearer of wonders, and the perfecter of powers—a fire which became earth. Separate the earth from the fire, [for] the subtle is nobler than the gross, with care and prudence. It ascends from earth to heaven and then descends back to the earth. Within it is the power of the higher and the lower, for it has acquired the light of lights, and darkness thus flees from it. This is the power of all powers which conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid. In accord with the creation of the universe is the creative operation of the work. This is my glory, and for this reason I am called Hermes Trismegistus [“thrice great”].⁴

The first point to stress here is the statement: *“In accord with the creation of the universe is the creative operation of the work.”* In His Panj Sha'n, the Bāb also states: “The knowledge of the elixir corresponds with the [knowledge of the] creation of the universe.”⁵ This type of knowledge, once again, is not to be found in the modern empirical sciences, since it is a knowledge that was revealed as a special bounty to the Prophets of God, to Hermes in particular, and elaborated upon by

⁴ *Sirr al-khalīqa wa ṣan'at al-ṭabī'a*, ed. Ursula Weisser (Allepo, University of Allepo, 1979), pp. 524–525.

⁵ Panj sha'n, digital copy (Haifa, Bahā'ī World Centre, n.d.), p. 8.

those who have practiced it. Bahā'u'llāh calls the hidden craft, in particular, “one of nature’s secrets and the essence of the knowledge of creation in the world of nature.”⁶

The first principle of the Emerald Tablet: “*the higher is from the lower and the lower is from the higher,*” as applied to creation, points to the interdependence of the higher and lower domains of existence. Thus, the material world is necessary for the timeless realities of creation to unfold as a temporal process, and the spiritual world is necessary for the temporal process to be realized. In the alchemical operation, the desired result cannot be obtained unless water and earth are mediated by the element of air during distillation. The air takes heat from the earth and gives it to the water, which in turn gives moisture back to the earth. In this way, a sharp water is obtained which is capable of drawing the oiliness out of the earth.

This correspondence between the higher and the lower also implies the correspondence between alchemy and spiritual transformation. Not only is the ultimate elixir the Word of God, according to Bahā'u'llāh, but the process of spiritual transformation in the soul is perfectly mirrored at a lower level in the artificial creation of the Stone.

“*The working of wonders is from one as all things came from one by the treatment of the one.*” These words, as applied to creation, indicate that the origin of all things is a single reality, which by subsequent differentiation manifested itself in countless forms. In the alchemical operation, a single primary substance is treated and made to pass through various stages in order to artificially create a new, living substance called the elixir. Every primary substance already contains the elixir in potential. In its untreated form, when not embodied as an elixir, it is known as the “active substance” (*jawhar al-fā'il*). This is why the Bāb states: “God has not created anything without creating a trace of the elixir within it. But all souls are not able equally to produce it, since the creation of the elixir is a creation which proves [or indicates] God.”⁷

⁶ Lawḥ-i iksīr, *Mā'idih-yi Āsmānī*, vol. 1, comp. Ishrāq Khāvarī (Tehran, 128 B.E./1972), p. 50.

⁷ Panj sha'n, p. 9.

The statement, “*its father is the sun and its mother the moon,*” as applied to creation, refers to the fact that the original active matter of existence cannot differentiate into anything unless it is inherently a dyad, that is, both matter and form, active force and recipient. Neither can have any actual existence or effect without the other. In the same way, the final product of the alchemical work, the elixir, requires the interaction and moderation of the active and passive principles: “spirit and soul,” “mercury and sulfur,” “male and female,” and so forth, in order to become purified from the intervening drosses. As Bahā’u’llāh explains: “the treatment is specially designed so that this precious, life-giving substance, which has appeared from the divine mine, may be purified and cleansed of dirt, blackness, and external, corruptive and immoderate moistures, which prevent the appearance of its effect and action.”⁸

“The wind has borne it in its belly, and the earth has nourished it. It is the father of talismans, the bearer of wonders, and the perfecter of powers—a fire which became earth. Separate the earth from the fire, [for] the subtle is nobler than the gross, with care and prudence. It ascends from earth to heaven and then descends back to the earth.” These words in particular allude to the chief stages of the alchemical work: the separation of the primary substance into the four elements, its purification and moderation by its principles in order to obtain two homogeneous elements, their marriage in order to give birth to the child, known as the Stone, and the subsequent nurturing of the child in order to obtain the elixir. The main goal is to bring the elements of the Stone into a state of perfect balance and purity so that nothing will remain which hinders the effect of the underlying active substance.

“Within it is the power of the higher and the lower, for it has acquired the light of lights, and darkness thus flees from it. This is the power of all powers which conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid.” This passage testifies to the power of the active substance latent within the Stone, which after being released from its impurities, has the power to penetrate solid matter and change its nature.

⁸ Lawḥ-i Māriyyah, *Mā’idih-yi āsmānī*, vol. 1, p. 37.

Not all primary substances are equal in their ease of treatment. Some already possess a greater balance in their natures, which makes them easier to treat, and hence will yield the desired result in a shorter amount of time. In this regard, Bahā'u'llāh advises: "Strive therefore to recognize amongst the primary substances (*ma'ādīn*) those things which are in equilibrium. Should you discover them, you will find them to be easier of treatment in performing the work, for all that this thing then requires is separation, purification, and marriage. This, verily, is a certain truth, to whose reality the tongues of all the Prophets of God bear witness."⁹ In another passage, Bahā'u'llāh declares: "If ever the elements of a substance come into perfect equilibrium, that substance can neither be burned by fire nor drowned by rivers of water. Truly, it is the pure gold which has been cooked by nature."¹⁰

From the time this hidden craft was first revealed by Hermes until the time of Bahā'u'llāh, many would-be alchemists have striven to produce the real elixir and have failed and wasted away in their attempts. They either lacked complete knowledge or were misled by their own imaginations. But, as one of the gifts of God to this unique day and age, Bahā'u'llāh claims that he has torn asunder "the veils enshrouding this most great science and this most exalted and ancient secret," which had never before "been torn asunder in this manner, either for His chosen ones or for His loved ones."¹¹

Though Bahā'u'llāh testifies to the power of the elixir to transmute baser metals into gold, this does not appear to be his motive for explaining and confirming such an astonishing science. He says, rather, that "what has been revealed was set forth for the purpose of imparting proof, so that this earth should not be deprived of visible testimony"¹² of the truth of his Revelation. In other words, the product of this noble science will not be explainable in terms of the empirical sciences, which are based upon a materialistic view of life. Instead, it will only be

⁹ Lawḥ-i āyih-i nūr, *Mā'idih-yi āsmānī*, vol. 4 (Tehran, 129 B.E./1973), pp. 82–83.

¹⁰ Lawḥ-i iksīr, *Mā'idih-yi āsmānī*, vol. 1, p. 55. The words quoted are missing in the published text but appear in the handwritten copy of Zayn al-Muqarrabīn, Bahā'u'llāh's secretary.

¹¹ Lawḥ-i Māriyyah, *Mā'idih-yi āsmānī*, vol. 1, p. 35.

¹² From an unpublished Persian compilation on alchemy, p. 32.

explainable through acknowledging the existence of a metaphysical world whose forces interact with but are not directly perceptible to physical creatures.

Like other great gifts which can only be used wisely and properly appreciated after the attainment of maturity, Bahā'u'llāh has made the appearance of this gift in the world conditional upon the maturity of the human race. He says: “The appearance of this hidden treasure amongst these people [the wise] is the sign of the coming of age of the world.”¹³ Other signs that will signal that that time is at hand include “the advent of universal peace,”¹⁴ “the adoption of a universal auxiliary language,” and “the refusal of kings to reign.”¹⁵ But until maturity is attained, the successful acquisition of the elixir cannot be hastened. In this regard, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā advises: “In regard to the question of alchemy, this matter is under divine protection and secrecy. The day of its manifestation has not yet come, and until that day arrives, which is the stage of this world’s perfection, its acquisition is not possible. Therefore, however much they endeavor and strive to attain it, and spend their time on this matter, in the end no fruit or result will be forthcoming.”¹⁶

¹³ Lawḥ-i Māriyyah, *Mā'idih-yi āsmānī*, vol. 1, p. 41.

¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, qtd in *Asrār al-athār khuṣūṣī*, p. 208.

¹⁵ Bahā'u'llāh, *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa, Bahā'ī World Centre, 1992), pp. 250–251.

¹⁶ From an unpublished letter of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā addressed to Mīrzā Mihdī Khān Sharīk-i Jināb-i Amīn (Haifa, Bahā'ī World Centre archives, AC001/001/01086).