A Door to the Masses


On 31 August 1868 Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, with His family and companions, passed through the sea gate into 'Akka, the prison city of the Ottoman Empire, from which He would, in succeeding years, raise His Banner to proclaim across the farthest reaches of the world "the unity of all mankind." On 28 November of that same year a poor baby was born in the American South, seemingly cut off from any light of justice and hope.

Yet the Banner would suddenly and powerfully attract his attention, gain increasingly the heartfelt respect of his mature years, and win his allegiance in the twilight of his life.

Robert S. Abbott was the son of former slaves. In 1897, at the age of 29, he moved to Chicago, where eight years later he established one of the most influential newspapers in United States history, the Chicago Defender. Through the voice of the Defender, Abbott played a major role in the promotion of racial equality in America. Of all African-American newspapers his was the most outspoken in the defense against racial prejudice and the denial of human rights. In many regions of the South it was banned by law, and any African-American person--man or woman--possessing or distributing it could become the victim of mob violence. One of his most significant achievements was in raising the call in the Defender for Southern African-Americans to escape the oppression of their homelands and migrate to the relative safety of the North. The Southern African-American

1 This article mirrors research completed by graduate student Henry C. Vander Voort (1970) in his ‘Robert S. Abbott’s Chicago Defender: A Study in Negro Journalism and Reform 1910-1920’ to satisfy requirements for a Masters Degree.

2 This article ends by recounting events surrounding Robert Abbott becoming a member of the Baha’i Faith.
Americans responded eagerly and from 1917 trekked northward in great waves to begin a new stage in their history.

The life of Robert Abbott, like the lives of many other early believers in the world religions throughout history, cannot be adequately treated in conversational biographic form. The basic facts of his career are clear and readily understood. Rather, it is the essence of his spiritual journey, his relation to the Baha'i Faith, that arrests one's attention.

The enthusiasm Abbott felt for the Baha'i teachings may have originated in his early spiritual education. In many ways his family and upbringing were atypical of the social and cultural norms of the Reconstruction period in his native Georgia. The son of Thomas Abbott and Flora Butler Abbott, former slaves, he was born in 1868 on St Simons Island off the coast of Georgia. In 1869 his father died. In that same year his future stepfather, John Hermann Sengstacke, arrived in Georgia from Germany, where he had been raised. Flora had gained a speaking knowledge of German from the immigrant shopkeepers for whom she had frequently worked, and it was not long before this coincidence brought her to John's attention in the small community. John and Flora were married in 1874.

John Sengstacke was not an ordinary German immigrant. Although he was European in appearance, he, too, was the son of a slave mother. In 1847 his father, Herman Sengstacke, a wealthy merchant new to America, had witnessed the plight of a slave girl, Tama, standing on the seller's block. Out of compassion he bought her and lawfully married her in Charleston, South Carolina. The following year John was born to them. Since the law specified that children follow the condition of their mother, John, and his sister to come, were legally slaves; therefore, John's father eventually decided to send them to be raised by relatives in Germany. Thus, when John Sengstacke became Abbott's strict and loving stepfather, he brought to the boy an indelible consciousness of the oneness of humanity and the inherent dignity of humankind. Throughout the years--even during World War II when some of Abbott's relatives became Nazis--he maintained regular correspondence with those members of his family in Germany who accepted him as their own and helped them with significant sums of money.

Abbott also protected another family in Georgia, the descendants of Captain Charles Stevens, who had owned his father, Thomas Abbott. The Depression reversed the Stevens family fortunes, and they turned for aid to Robert, the millionaire son of the Captain's slave. Not only did he respond generously, but he afterwards helped to educate their children. He contributed to their upkeep for nearly six years, and, in the process, a warm personal relationship was re-established. For like his father, Thomas, he felt a loyalty and sense of responsibility to these people when they were faced with extreme difficulties.

His was extraordinary behavior.

If the youthful Abbott's social environment was progressive, so to was the religious sense gained from his stepfather. John Sengstacke labored as a missionary Congregational minister in a Baptist region near Savannah, Georgia, where the incessant sectarian antagonism he faced finally led him, shortly before his death in 1904, to write in his diary what one cannot but think may well have influenced his stepson throughout his upbringing: "There is but one church, and all who are born of God are members of it. God made a church, men made denominations. God gave us a Holy Bible, disputing men made different kinds of disciples." Abbott's missionary childhood in rural Georgia was filled with images of his father working to uplift a people who desperately needed self-development and self-knowledge of Sundays as days of rest and devotion, of work days spent with his father as he made his rounds and tended his duties in the church and community. Abbott's childhood education was religiously orthodox yet distinctly independent, fundamentalist in form yet socially progressive in spirit. Undoubtedly this unusual home life set the standard for his own career in the world and paved the way for his acceptance of a religion the principles of which were unique and yet similar to his own.
Nevertheless, Abbott's path to the Baha'i Faith was a journey that challenged many of his childhood ideals and also opened to him endless opportunities. His was a social environment devoted not to justice for the descendants of slaves but to an oppression that cannot but be recognized as a medieval anachronism; his was a suppressed culture ignorant of its own potential; his was the only people in America forbidden to read and to gain thereby all the advantages locked up in the written treasuries of past ages; his was a people whose utter despair sparked what may be described as one of the greatest manifestations of faith--pure and persevering--that Western Christianity has ever witnessed; and his was a life of humanitarian service that, although imperfect and compromised by circumstances, must be regarded as one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of American society.

There were others of Abbott's generation who won the laurels for representing African-Americans in academia, politics, education, science, medicine, the arts and international affairs; others who demonstrated greater talents; others who more surely captured the imagination, admiration and affection of the public, and still others whose names seem more securely fixed in the memory of posterity. Nevertheless, Abbott's contribution remains unprecedented and all the more distinguished by the fact that he was one of only a handful among his peers and contemporaries in the elite of American society--those of African and European background--to embrace the Baha'i Faith.

The African slaves in America, though illiterate, were clearly people of the Book, for in the words of the Bible they gained their solace and spiritual strength. The power of the word can perhaps be measured by both the assiduity with which illiteracy was forced upon the enslaved population, and by the alacrity with which Robert Abbott took up his pen and the advantages of law to champion the rights of his brothers and sisters still struggling under the heels and shadows of slavery's inheritors. Out of Chicago, where the Faith of Baha'u'llah was first mentioned in America, his weekly newspaper, the Defender, made its first tentative claims for the ears of oppressor and oppressed alike. Abbott
survived by unstinting toil and effort; by pennies, nickels and dimes, and by the unflailing
aid of friends and family. His makeshift and inauspicious beginnings seemed barren,
miserable and all but ridiculous. The slaves' descendants had had free access to the word
for only one generation. They were still barred from proper schooling and thus remained,
for the most part, beyond the reach of any literature. They had minimal economic
resources and commercial experience to support such an enterprise. They were yet to
contend with innumerable and powerful enemies in both the rural and urban societies.
They had no example to follow, no traditions to recall, no elders to guide them in an
unfamiliar world. To found a newspaper for the African-American masses in 1905
seemed the height of folly, the creation of a deluded imagina
tion, and at best woefully
premature in a city the internal political and social terrors of which were typified in those
years by the notorious "jungle" of the Stockyards, ominously overshadowing Abbott's
original readership in the streets of Chicago's South Side.

Yet slowly the venture took wing, beginning on 5 May 1905 as a newsletter the size of a
handbill, sixteen by twenty inches, six columns, and four pages, and running to three
hundred copies. From 1909 to 1912 the Defender won its first loyalty from the public by
a muckraking campaign against Chicago's notorious red light district - known as the
"Levee" - which festered on the doorstep of the African-American community. In 1912 -
the portentous year when 'Abdu'l-Baha, the Son of Baha'u'llah and His appointed
successor, visited North America to spread His Father's Faith - the first regular newsstand
sales began. The publisher was his own delivery man, depositing papers while gathering
news in the neighborhoods and storefronts. In 1915 the handbill finally reached the size
of a standard newspaper, at eight columns and eight pages. By 1916 there were
subscribers in seventy-one localities in the United States.

In May 1917, twelve years after its founding, the Defender boldly launched a highly
successful campaign promoting the mass exodus of African-Americans from the stagnant
rural south to the "promised land" of the vibrant, war-driven cities of the North, swelling
the African-American population of Chicago alone from 40,000 to 150,000 in a few years
and eventually seeing them arrive at the daily rate of 1,000. Financial success was
achieved by 1918, along with the power that catapulted Abbott to the foremost ranks of
African-American political leaders that included W.E.B. DuBois, A. Philip Randolph, and
Marcus Garvey. In 1921 the Defender moved into its own plant, a remodeled synagogue.
Abbott became a millionaire and by 1929 drew a salary of $2,000 a week. The
Depression and mismanagement brought the business nearly to an end in the mid-1930s,
yet Abbott recovered and upon his death in February 1940 bequeathed to his heirs a
viable newspaper that is still publishing today from its South Side headquarters.

The following is Part 3 of an October 10th, 1995 article from the Michigan Chronicle
Robert S. Abbott and the Chicago Defender: A Door to the Masses. By Mark Perry

Little did readers across the nation know that for most of his career Abbott had been
inspired by the Baha'i Faith. In 1912, when the Defender's first newsstand sales began,
'Abdu'l-Baha visited Chicago three times, and Abbott attended His first talk in the city at
Jane Adams's Hull House. Referring to the African-Americans and whites in America,
'Abdu'l-Baha said that: "...numerous points of partnership and agreement exist between
the two races; whereas the one point of distinction is that of color. Shall this, the least of
all distinctions, be allowed to separate you as races and individuals? In physical bodies,
in the law of growth, in sense endowment, intelligence, patriotism, language, citizen
ship, civilization and religion you are one and the same. A single point of distinction exists--
that of racial color. God is not pleased with - neither should any reasonable or intelligent
man be willing to recognize - inequality in the races because of this distinction.

"But there is need of a superior power to overcome human prejudices, a power which
nothing in the world of mankind can withstand and which will overshadow the effect of
all other forces at work in human conditions. That irresistible power is the love of God...
Baha'u'llah has proclaimed the oneness of the world of humanity. He has caused various
nations and divergent creeds to unite. He has declared that difference of race and color is
like the variegated beauty of flowers in a garden... Let all associate therefore, in this great
human garden even as flowers grow and blend together side by side without discord or disagreement between them."

On that Occasion Abbott met 'Abdu'l-Baha, Who placed His hand on Abbott's head and said, as Abbott recalled years later, "He would get from me some day a service for the benefit of humanity."

Little is known about Abbott's relationship with the Baha'i community in the years after his meeting with 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1912 and before his conversion in 1934, but his interest in the Faith was sustained in various ways. He was a member of the Chicago commission on Race Relations, which investigated the causes of the 1919 Chicago race riot. Two house-bombing victims of the riot, Mrs. Mary Byron Clarke and her husband, both active Baha'is, were included in the Commission's report and may have caught Abbott's attention. Another Baha'i, Dr. Zia Bagdadi, "was, as a fellow Baha'i recalled, the one white man who went into the African-American sections during the riot and brought food to the hungry."

Of all the Chicago Baha'is, Dr. Bagdadi ranked, along with Miss Kaukab MacCutcheon, as the most active promoter of the Baha'i Faith among the city's African-Americans; moreover, he was among the American Baha'is most dedicated to the principle of race unity. Since he served as one of 'Abdu'l-Baha's attendants during his days in Chicago in 1912, it is quite likely that Dr. Bagdadi first met Abbott at the Hull House talk and was present when 'Abdu'l-Baha spoke to the fledging publisher. In the 1930's Bagdadi, like MacCutcheon before him, succeeded in publishing Baha'i articles in the Defender. After Abbott's conversion Shoghi Effendi ('Abdu'l-Baha's grandson and His appointed successor) wrote through his secretary to Dr. Bagdadi, stating that Abbott "may truly be regarded as your spiritual son." Thus it appears that Abbott's primary connection with the Baha'i community before his conversion was his friendship with Dr. Bagdadi. Nothing more of this friendship is yet known.

As early as 1924 the Baha'i Faith won a degree of allegiance from Abbott that resulted in his being included, with his wife, Helen, in the Chicago Baha'i community membership list. Abbott's interest led him to seek and read many Baha'i books and continued to inspire him until at last he became a Baha'i during the 1934 National Baha'i Convention.

On Sunday, 3 June, the final day of that Convention, held in Foundation Hall at the Baha'i House of Worship in Wilmette, those assembled witnessed a touching and impressive incident." Dr. Bagdadi described the event a few days later in a letter to Shoghi Effendi: "Just before the closing of this Convention, speaking on the subject of publicity, I happened to think of Dr. Abbott, publisher of a newspaper in Chicago. I mentioned how I succeeded in publishing Baha'i articles on the first page of his paper. As I finished this statement, someone in the audience shouted, "Dr. Abbott is now here with us." The Delegates expressed their desires to hear a word from him, and he responded by declaring his faith in the Baha'i Cause! This was one of the happiest moments in the Convention."

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