

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Robert Turner (c. 1855–1909)



A single candle lit the stairway, casting shadows on the wall as a small group made their way to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It was 1899, and these were the first American Bahá'ís to go on pilgrimage to 'Akká, in what is now Israel. Among them was Robert Turner, the first African American Bahá'í.

As they entered the room, the candlelight illuminated the radiant figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Lost in awe, the group didn't realize that one member was missing. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá noticed right away. He walked to the doorway and found Robert Turner waiting outside. As soon as he saw 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Robert fell to his knees, saying, "My Lord! My Lord! I am not worthy to be here!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá raised Robert to his feet and embraced him.

Humble Beginnings

Born in Virginia around 1855, Robert was likely born into slavery. He was about seven when the U.S. banned slavery in 1863—the same year that Bahá'u'lláh declared His station as a Messenger of God.

In his 20s, Robert married a woman named Malissa, and they moved to Washington, D.C. Robert worked as a butler for George and Phoebe Hearst, a wealthy family from California. The Hearsts admired Robert's trustworthiness and wisdom. After George died, Phoebe returned to California. Robert and Malissa moved with her and bought their own house.

One day, Robert was serving refreshments to a guest at Phoebe's home when he overheard them

discussing the Bahá'í Faith. Drawn to its teachings of peace and unity, both Phoebe and Robert became Bahá'ís. Phoebe organized the first American pilgrimage, and Robert joined the group.

Door to the Kingdom

The group left for Israel in the fall of 1898. They stopped in Paris and studied Bahá'í writings together. Due to racism and prejudice at that time, it was unheard of for wealthy white Americans to study and socialize with an African American butler. But the Bahá'í teachings inspired them to set aside prejudice and build bonds of unity.

In 'Akká, Robert was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's honored guest. 'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated the high station of servitude by serving food to everyone. He once allowed Robert the privilege of assisting him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised Robert's pure spirit and said that if he remained firm and steadfast, he would be a door through which a whole race would enter the Faith.

Throughout many challenges in his life, Robert kept what some Bahá'ís called "iron sight"—a clear vision of the truth. He said he refused to "let the world throw dust in his eyes."

When he was about 54, Robert fell ill. On June 15, 1909, he passed away, repeating the Greatest Name.* 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised Robert's "utmost sincerity." He wrote, "What a shining candle was aflame in that black-colored lamp . . . O Thou Forgiver! Glorify the precious Robert in Thy Kingdom . . . like unto the black pupil of the eye, he was a source of shining light."