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### Pilgrimage Compilation

Thornton Chase

14 March 1907

### Notes

Love's Odyssey: The Life of Thornton Chase  
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### Pilgrimage Compilation

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Thornton's desire to go on pilgrimage and meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá was frustrated by his company's unwillingness to grant him an extended leave of absence. But he never stopped dreaming. He noted in a letter to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1905 that "ten years ago, before any American had found Thee, I hoped then to visit Thee." His company's refusal to grant him time off in 1898 was a temporary setback; by May 1904, he had convinced Union Mutual to give him the time, once conditions in the prison city of 'Akká were right.

[^] Thornton Chase to 'Abdu'l-Bahá (copy), 21 April 1905, TC.

However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was experiencing very difficult years. A commission of the Turkish government was attempting to convince the Sultán to exile 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a remote oasis in the Sahara, where he would be further cut off from visitors and communication with his followers. Visitors to 'Akká, especially from the Occident, could jeopardize the little freedom that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had. Consequently 'Abdu'l-Bahá granted permission to very few Americans to visit. When Thornton asked for permission in the Spring of 1905, at first his request was granted. Thornton wrote a friend who was a United States Senator and requested a letter of introduction to the governor of 'Akká, in case such a document would facilitate his visit. But apparently 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to cancel the

pilgrimage because of the conditions in ‘Akká. In the Spring of 1906, Chase again acquired permission and even booked a berth on a transatlantic ship, but had to cancel it because his company refused to give him the vacation time.

[^ ] Thornton Chase to John F. Shafroth (copy), 16 March 1905, TC. [^ ] Thornton Chase to Ethel Rosenberg (copy), 11 May 1906, 2, TC.

In December 1906, writing to a Persian friend, ‘Alí Kuli Khán, Thornton complained that he could not go on pilgrimage during the upcoming Spring. At that time a close friend, Arthur Agnew, his wife, Mamie Agnew, and their infant son, Rúḥu’lláh, were going on pilgrimage. So were Corinne True and two of her daughters, who also were Chicago Bahá’ís. Apparently Thornton had again asked his company for vacation time, and they had refused to give it. But later, for some reason, they relented. Joyously, Thornton prepared for the trip to ‘Akká.

[^ ] Thornton Chase to ‘Alí Kuli Khán (copy), 19 December 1906, 5, TC.

Accompanying him was Carl Scheffler, a man in his mid-twenties, who was something of a protégé of Chase. Chase, Scheffler, and the Agnews left Chicago together on 14 March 1907, on a train bound for Boston. After attending a Bahá’í meeting there, they boarded the SS Republic on Saturday, 16 March. After stops in Porto Delgata (the Azores), Madeira, Gibraltar, and Algiers, they reached Naples on Easter Sunday, 31 March. All the places fascinated Carl, and his letters home speak of hiking around the cities with Thornton Chase.

[^ ] Carl Scheffler to “Dear Folks” (copy), 14 March 1907, photocopy in author’s personal papers; Carl Scheffler to “Dear Folks” (copy), 16 March 1907, photocopy in author’s personal papers; Carl Scheffler to “Dear Folks” (copy), 4 April 1907, photocopy in author’s personal papers. Carl Scheffler’s letters were copied into a book, apparently by his cousin, Sophie Loeding, and the book is in the possession of Mrs. Betty deAraujo, Scheffler’s daughter. Thornton Chase’s own account of the voyage exists as an untitled typescript that begins “In the houses or under them,” TS, TC.

In Naples the pilgrimage party met Corinne True and her daughters, who were on their way home and who described their pilgrimage for the travelers to ‘Akká. After five days of visiting Naples and vicinity — the Agnews even went to see Pompeii — Chase, Scheffler, and the Agnews boarded the German ship SS Oceana for Alexandria. From there, the Khedival steamer Assuan took them to Palestine. Thornton describes their anticipation, as they approached Haifa:

[^ ] Apparently the party left Naples on 4 April; on that day Carl Scheffler wrote a letter to the “Dear Folks” at home from on board the Oceana (photocopy of letter in author’s personal papers).

Our hearts were so affected with thankfulness to God and with the beauty and import of that Land of Promise that we spoke but little to each other and in subdued tones. Our tongues were bound in golden silence, our eyes searched the ancient scenes and looked keenly to the

north for the first glimpse of Mount Carmel and ‘Akká and we longed for the approaching goal of our pilgrimage.

[^] Thornton Chase, In Galilee (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1985) 5-6.

They arrived in Haifa at 5 P.M. on 8 April and went to the Catholic-run “Hospice of the Little Child” for accommodations. That evening Mírzá Asadu’lláh, whom Thornton had not seen since 1902, visited his old friend. Plans were made for the trip to ‘Akká. Two days later the Agnews went to ‘Akká, while Chase and Scheffler waited in Haifa. That evening an American woman staying at their hotel and who was not a Bahá’í told the other guests of her trip to ‘Akká and her brief visit to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

She said the house of “The New Prophet” was pointed out and some one suggested that she might like to meet him. She assented, and one went into his garden and asked permission for the meeting, which was granted. He was a man of striking and attractive appearance and met her most graciously and presented her with a rose he was carrying. Through an interpreter she asked him several questions, which he answered in a courteous and gentle manner, and she could see no difference in what he said from the teachings of Jesus.

Considerable conversation ensued and one lady said she had heard that Americans sometimes came all the way there expressly to visit him and receive his teachings and she wondered how they could be such fools. . . . Mr. Scheffler and I sat there longing to open our mouths and loosen our tongues, but beyond asking some simple questions, we remained silent.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 13.

This was Chase and Scheffler’s first experience of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Holy Land.

On their fourth day in Haifa, the two men went up Mount Carmel to visit the Tomb of the Báb. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had begun construction of the tomb in 1898, when Kheiralla was on pilgrimage; by 1907 the basic, unadorned structure — a square of brownish yellow limestone — had been completed. The Persian caretaker did not speak any English, but when they said Alláh-u-Abhá to him he embraced them. He unlocked the tomb for them to enter and pray. Some Persians visited the tomb, and using gestures and a few simple words, conveyed the message to Chase and Scheffler that the next day they would travel to ‘Akká.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 14-17.

A carriage stopped at their hotel the next morning, 12 April 1907, at seven. No road had yet been built to ‘Akká, but the beach served the purpose well:

Then began the nine mile drive along the beautiful curve of the Mediterranean shore, most of the way in the water where the sand is hard and the surf plays “tag” with the carriage wheels, while the

horse hoofs clatter and splash a quick tattoo through the gliding water. . . . When we crossed the two rivers that run into the sea, we rode out forty or fifty yards from the shore so as to follow the sand bars formed by the breakers as they meet the outflowing rivers. Sometimes the water was up to the box of the carriage and the horses had to strain to pull us through. We passed carriages coming from ‘Akká, pack-trains of asses and camels, flocks of little, black, lop-eared goats, foot travelers, fishing boats and fishermen standing far out in the surf. . . . Ever before us was the walled city, rising clearer and larger from the water by which it is nearly surrounded.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 19-20.

The carriage finally reached the city and entered it. The streets were so narrow that the three horses filled them from side to side. The carriage took them right to the house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, where Chase and Scheffler entered and were shown to their room. A few minutes later, the moment of meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá finally arrived:

Some one said “The Master!” — and he came into the room with a free, striding step, welcoming us in a clear, ringing voice — “Marhabá! Marhabá!” (Welcome! Welcome!) — and embraced us with kisses as would a father his son, or as would brothers after a long absence. It is no wonder that some have thought the Master loved them more than all others, because he hesitates not to express his love and he truly loves all humanity in each one. He is the great Humanitarian and each friend is to him the representative of all mankind.

He bade us be seated on the little divan; he sat on the high, narrow bed at one side of the room, drew up one foot under him, asked after our health, our trip, bade us be happy, and expressed his happiness that we had safely arrived. Then, after a few minutes, he again grasped our hands and abruptly left us. I think we had not spoken at all except to answer “yes” or “no.” We could not. We knew not what to say. But our hearts were full of joyful tears, because we were “at home.” His welcoming spirit banished strangeness, as though we had always known him. . . . Those were moments of deep happiness; yet I could not fully realize the great blessedness of that meeting, which was the goal of my hope; but now its remembrance has become my joy and the treasure of my heart. I was filled with wonder at his simplicity, with admiration for his strength and dignity and love for his tenderness; these, mingled with delight and thankfulness, possessed me.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 27-28.

This was the beginning of Thornton’s spiritual adventure. His account of it, In

Galilee, is one of the most articulate descriptions of a visit to ‘Akká ever written. It provides a detailed portrait of his experiences:

Five days we remained within those walls, prisoners with Him who dwells in that “Greatest Prison.” It is a prison of peace, of love and service. No wish, no desire is there save the good of mankind, the peace of the world, the acknowledgement of the Fatherhood of God and the mutual rights of men as His creatures, His children. Indeed, the real prison, the suffocating atmosphere, the separation from all true heart desires, the bond of world conditions, is outside those stone walls, while within them is the freedom and pure aura of the Spirit of God. All troubles, tumults, worries or anxieties for worldly things are barred out there.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 24-25.

In spite of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s confinement to the prison city, he was a very busy man, with a constant stream of visitors. Thornton Chase’s window overlooked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s courtyard, and from there he was able to watch ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. A government sentry house that always contained an armed guard also had a full view of the garden and its surroundings:

. . . we saw ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Mírzá Asadu’lláh walking back and forth on the paths, sometimes stopping and conversing earnestly. I could not but think of a lion pacing his cage. . . . Later a soldier came, carrying his gun, delivered a message and went away. An old man with a cane came to the garden gate, about fifty feet from where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sat in the tent. He bowed low with his hand on his heart, talked a while at that distance and then, with deepest respect, moved backward through the gate and away. . . . Visitors, tourists and officials came and went constantly. One afternoon came three black robed Catholic nuns, one portly woman with a black robe and no head-dress, and several ladies unveiled, with olive complexions. They were directed to the tent of the Master from his room window and he met them there later.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 38-39.

Chase and Scheffler had several personal audiences with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He would often visit their room unexpectedly, especially just before bedtime. He would always begin by inquiring about the pilgrim’s health and happiness and then give “an instructive discourse of ten or fifteen minutes, or possibly three or four minutes. We took no note of time.” In addition, most pilgrims saw Him at lunch and supper. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá usually gave a short talk at the meal table, which constituted the primary opportunity for pilgrims to take notes. Thornton Chase described the talks thus:

[^] Chase, In Galilee 35.

Each conversation started with some simple reference to a natural

thing, the weather, food, a stone, tree, water, the prison, a garden or a bird, our coming, or some little act of service, and this base would be woven into a parable and teaching of wisdom and simplicity, showing the oneness of all Spiritual Truth, and adapting it always to the life, both of the individual and of mankind. All of his words are directed toward helping men to live. Unless questions of metaphysics, dogmas and doctrines be introduced, he seldom mentions them. He speaks easily, clearly, in brief phrases, each of which is a gem. Whatever the lesson may be it always culminates in some sort of teaching of unity.

[^] In Galilee 33-34. Interestingly, Chase never published his notes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks with him, although a typescript of them exists in TC.

Mírzá Asadu’lláh and Hájí Mírzá Haydar-‘Alí visited the pilgrims daily as well to give them instruction, usually by amplifying a talk given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Yet Thornton does not describe the content of the lessons in his notes, as much as their cumulative effect:

At ‘Akká nothing in appearance is marvelous; all is simple, direct, natural, without effort or preparation. Yet the effect is deep, strong and wonderful, because all that is said or done is an expression of complete assurance in the Truth of God, entire reliance upon His Guidance, devotion to His will and love for His service. This certainty of rightness, this abnegation of self in favor of God and His will as expressed through His Messengers and Servants, causes a simplicity and power which penetrates the hearts and kindles in them quenchless flames of love, service and unity.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 46.

Thornton found the same lesson taught to him by all the Bahá’ís he met:

Everywhere among the friends, at ‘Akká, Haifa, Port Sa’íd, Alexandria and Cairo, we were given lessons of humility, simple, loving service, unselfishness and happiness in living the life of the Kingdom. There is no ostentation or striving for effect, but courtesies and offerings, a flower, a cup of tea, a bit of candy, carrying a parcel or doing some service, are blended with such a simple, affectionate spirit that they charm and attract.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 42-43.

Elsewhere in his account of his pilgrimage, Thornton notes that “wherever there were believers we found courteous, gentle, loving, earnest people, looking only for opportunities to serve one another.”

[^] Chase, In Galilee 51.

Thornton’s notes are filled with several references to the children of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s household and especially to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oldest grandson, Shoghi Ef-

fendi. He found that even the children were examples:

The most visible effect of that power [of love] is in the lives of the believers everywhere, the pilgrims from every land, and the children. Such children I have never seen, so courteous, unselfish, thoughtful for others, unobtrusive, intelligent, and swiftly self-denying in the little things that children love, such as toys, candies, fruit, etc.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 51.

In 1902, in a letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Thornton had expressed his longing to see the face of Bahá’u’lláh. While on pilgrimage he was able to see a photograph of Bahá’u’lláh, taken in 1868:

How often has imagination tried to outline his face; how eagerly have those been questioned who had looked upon him; how earnestly has the wish been that the knowledge of him and the pilgrimage to his presence might have been made in his day.

The picture is a large photograph taken of him during the later years of his life. It is a majestic face, that of a strong, powerful, stern man, yet filled with an indescribable sweetness. Even in the photograph the majestic power shows through the lines of light and shade. . . . No word was spoken. It was a time for silence.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 39.

In the same 1902 letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Thornton had expressed his desire for certainty that Bahá’u’lláh was indeed God’s manifestation for this day. While on pilgrimage, he apparently achieved that certitude:

In his [‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s] presence, faith in God, in the power of the good, in the victory of the Spirit, became confirmed. Confidence was supreme in the impregnable certainty of the Cause of God. The feeling possessed us that the Day of God’s triumph was shining, that we were admitted as humble factors in his work of gladness, and that the might of man’s bondage to the tyranny of self was being illumined by the Glory of God. Fear and trembling vanished; prayer and praise sang joyously within us.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 46-47.

Undoubtedly the lesson of the pilgrimage, for Thornton, was unity, love, and service. The account of his pilgrimage is filled with many gemlike descriptions of these qualities and their importance. Many could be quoted, but one seems to serve as a summary of his experience:

Service is the key to unity, and Unity is the one great theme of the Teacher of ‘Akká. Without unity nothing is accomplished. . . . Unity of the few, the assembly [Bahá’í community], many assemblies, the country, many countries, the world. . . . And unity which is

confined to the society or assembly alone is not unity; it must be open armed unity, seeking oneness of will, of purpose and of work with all other groups and assemblies. Each individual strengthens his individuality, not by maintaining it alone, but, on the contrary, by joining himself, his powers and abilities with others. Thus his own efficiency is enlarged and multiplied by cohesion with others. . . .

This in reality is the Message of Bahá'u'lláh in this Day — Unity, Love and Service in the Name of God; service in love, service to the friends and to all; living with such sweetness, usefulness, happiness and cheerfulness that the life itself attracts notice of others and draws them to the beauty of such living; service to every one around, no discrimination in service, but simply a great desire to be of use in every possible waking moment to some one of God's creatures.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 59-60.

Thornton was beginning to articulate his conception of the Bahá'í Faith, a conception radically simple yet radically different from any approach that Americans usually took, even to this day: that the Bahá'í Faith is a way of living, or, simply, living itself. The teachings themselves, often given as principles or formulae of thought, are unimportant except to the extent they are internalized and lived by believers. This was why 'Abdu'l-Bahá rarely gave formal instruction, beyond simple comments on how one should be. As Thornton summarized Bahá'í pilgrimage:

They come from every land, from every religion, from all kinds of training, each with his little cup or larger bowl, seeking answer to his quest. . . . And, after a week, a day, or an hour, they return to their distant homes, all filled with love, most of their questions unasked and forgotten, curious no longer, but satisfied and overflowing with love to the human race and a great longing to bear the Word of Revelation to their friends, and to serve every creature of God, without regard to family, race or religion.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 50.

Particularly important was Thornton's observation that pilgrims often forgot to ask 'Abdu'l-Bahá their questions. His notes of his visit to 'Akká make no mention of questions that Thornton asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá and very few words spoken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Only once did Chase, Agnew, and Scheffler ask questions; they had brought questions concerning the business of the Chicago House of Spirituality and the Bahá'í Publishing Society.

During one of their last evenings in 'Akká, 'Abdu'l-Bahá held a supper for forty Persian and American pilgrims and asked Chase, Agnew, and Scheffler to speak briefly. It was one of the few opportunities for Persian and American Bahá'í pilgrims to mingle; the Persians were delighted to meet their coreligionists from



the West and listened to them with “utmost attention.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá passed among his guests, seating each one personally, giving them napkins, and serving them.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 63.

On the last day of the pilgrimage, the women of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s household met the American men — something that would have been impossible in most Middle Eastern homes in 1907. They asked the men to carry their love, hopes, and prayers to their sisters in America and to express their desire that the Bahá’í women of the West “so strive and work that they might accomplish not only their own duty in the Cause of God but also that of the helpless ones in the Orient.”

[^] Chase, In Galilee 45.

The time to leave ‘Akká had come. Thornton did not want ever to leave, and he was scheduled to remain a few days longer. Enemies of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, had informed the governor that Americans were staying at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s house, placing the household in danger. Each pilgrim met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá privately and briefly for a few final words. Thornton described his meeting as follows:

Soon after the noon meal ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met me in the little upper court. He embraced this servant, and, moving away a few feet, he turned, looked steadily and pronounced a promise that is a precious memory and hope. Then he went into the apartments of the household.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 66.

Apparently ‘Abdu’l-Bahá promised Thornton that they would meet again. As he descended the stairs to leave the house, Thornton told Carl Scheffler that “the Master has assured me that I will return to this place soon. This reconciles me to this unbearable departure.” The return, however, was not to take place physically.

[^] Carl Scheffler, “Thornton Chase: First American Bahá’í,” *World Order* 11.5 (August, 1945):157.

The pilgrims were then taken two miles by carriage to Bahjí, where Bahá’u’lláh’s tomb was located. Each one entered the inner chamber alone and prayed as long as possible there. Thornton described the visit as the “culmination” of the pilgrimage. Then they traveled to the garden of Riván, a Bahá’í property that Bahá’u’lláh had often visited to enjoy the trees and the stream. Finally, they returned to their hotel. Thornton noted that “through all the nine mile drive to Haifa we scarcely spoke,” and Scheffler says that Thornton’s tears did not finally dry until they reached the “Hospice of the Little Child,” where they stayed overnight.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 68-70; Scheffler, “Thornton Chase” 157.

The pilgrimage, now over, was to exert a profound effect on Thornton for the rest of his life. An experience that occurred when he was leaving ‘Akká demonstrated the extent to which Thornton had been transformed by his pilgrimage. He noted that as they left the house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and “entered the world again,” “it was with a sort of chill as when one steps from a warm room into a cold night air.” The carriage, pulled by two horses, carried them through the crooked streets of ‘Akká and out through the city gate. There they stopped so that a third horse could be added to the team. While waiting, we were surrounded by vendors and beggars calling out the names of the loved ones we had left, evidently hoping thus to extract money from us. We had descended from a realm of happiness, peace and light to an underworld of greed and strife. Never before had we so perceived the ignorance and animalism which possesses men, and at first we shrank from them, but when we noted their condition, their sickness, their burdens and griefs, a longing tenderness welled up in our hearts toward them and to all creatures, a great wish to pour out on them the fragrances of peace, good-will and love, to lift them up from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from hell to heaven — and to serve them, even to the extinction of self.

[^] Chase, In Galilee 67.

Thornton’s transformation had gone so far that he yearned for death in his service of others. In a letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1902, he had written of his longing desire to surrender his will completely to the will of God. In this act of dedication to others, perhaps, he had achieved that goal.

Nor was this transformation temporary. Eighteen months later, in a book he wrote, Thornton emphasized the primacy of service; he even identified it with love:

. . . the love of mankind is an affection for the welfare and highest good of each and of all, recognizing that all are children of one Father and brothers of one family. It may cause but little emotion, but it demands service. Each member of humanity becomes a type of the whole, and love, that is, service, goes out unsparingly to all without regard to kinship or recompense. If there be any preference, it is for the poor, the needy, the helpless, because the essence of love is to exalt the low and feed the hungry.

[^] Thornton Chase, Bahá’í Revelation (Chicago: Bahá’í Publishing Society, 1909) 155-56.

Thornton’s statements are remarkable when one considers the racial prejudice that was taken for granted in his society, not only against blacks but also against Orientals and even Eastern Europeans. Thornton elaborated further about service:

We cannot serve God: He needs no creatures’ service. Neither can we serve ourselves alone, because such selfishness results in death,

not life. But we can serve others. We can train ourselves to grow in strength and ability to serve humanity, that is — our neighbor, the ones near to us and around us as well as those far away, excluding none from our service. That is God’s service, for two reasons — because it is obeying his Command, and because it is the God-like in man that we serve. . . . Each human being has something of the “image of God” in him, and it is a blessing to us if we be able to serve that God-like quality and aid it to shine forth.

[^] Chase, Bahá’í Revelation 148-49.

Bahá’u’lláh, in his description of spiritual growth as a series of valleys, notes that after the valleys of search, love, and knowledge come those of unity, contentment, wonderment, and true poverty and absolute nothingness. The valley of knowledge he calls the “last plane of limitation.” Before his pilgrimage, the evidence suggests that Thornton had traversed at least the first three valleys; now, perhaps, he entered the remaining four. He reached the station of seeing “in himself neither name nor fame nor rank, but findeth his own praise in praising God.” He had tasted of “dying from self and the living in God, the being poor in self and rich in the Desired One.” This was the lasting legacy of his five days with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

[^] Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, trans. Marzieh Gail and ‘Alí Kuli Khán (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1945) 17. [^] Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 18, 36.

Thornton returned home, rededicated to serve the Bahá’í Faith. He redoubled his efforts to initiate the construction of a Bahá’í Temple in Chicago; he, Agnew, and Scheffler had spent a few moments discussing the project with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during their last day in ‘Akká. The experience transformed Thornton’s view of individuals; his personal correspondence after the pilgrimage breathes a depth of love, devotion, and care for others that was absent previously. More important, the pilgrimage reawakened the creativity of Thornton’s pen. While in ‘Akká ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had picked up Thornton’s large fountain pen and commented that “the battle axe must fit the hand of the wielder.” With his return, Thornton picked up his pen to write two books, several essays, and, again, poems, all dedicated to his Lord.

[^] Chase, *In Galilee* 44.