ESSAYS: ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND MISSIONARIES

AMERICAN MISSIONARIES IN OTTOMAN LANDS: FOUNDATIONAL ENCOUNTERS

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Overview

On November 3, 1819, two American missionaries named Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons sailed from Boston harbor on a ship bound towards the Holy Land and arrived in Smyrna two months later. Parsons died of sickness within two years; Fisk died within six. Yet news of their deeds spread through a popular press of American mission and church publications, which recounted and celebrated their story for decades afterwards. Typical in its praise was a Methodist journal, which in 1873 hailed Fisk and Parsons as "two pioneers of blessed memory" who had set out to save the Ottoman world from "paganism, Mohammedanism, and dead Christianity." Nearly two centuries have passed since the journey of Fisk and Parsons, and American historians now remember these two men quite differently: they note their ignorance and social blundering and their distinctly American brand of naïve idealism.

And yet, in important respects, Fisk and Parsons were indeed cultural path-breakers who initiated foundational encounters between the United States and the region that we now call the Middle East. Over the course of the century that followed, many more American evangelicals followed them in what became a vast missionary movement that stretched across the spectrum of American Protestantism and that went into every corner of the world. Among the American

missionaries who reached Ottoman territories were Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Mormons, and Pentecostals. Still others ventured elsewhere in the Islamic world, to Morocco, Sudan, and Iran—even to Muslim communities in western China.

These American missionaries were key social actors. As the historian William R. Hutchison observed, the American foreign missionary movement had become, by the late nineteenth century, "a massive affair, involving tens of thousands of Americans abroad and millions at home. Even in the early nineteenth century," he wrote, "as a movement of huge aspiration but more modest dimensions, it exceeded most other reform or benevolent organizations in size and resources. It sent abroad, through most of its history, not only the largest contingents of Americans—dwarfing all other categories except that of short-term travelers—but also the most highly educated." Hutchison concluded that "missionaries were the chief interpreters of remote cultures for the people at home, and as such played a central role in the shaping of American public attitudes." Pushing these ideas a step further, and taking a transnational view of history, one may argue that through the missionary movement, the Ottoman Empire became one of the many places where American history was made.

The reverse was also true: the social history of the Ottoman Empire changed as a result of American missionary activities. In Ottoman territories during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American missionaries established schools, printing presses, hospitals, and other institutions in which a broad array of people became involved. Those who encountered missionaries included men, women, and children; Muslims, Christians, and Jews; rich and poor; healthy and ailing; Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, and others. Ultimately, very few converted to evangelical Christianity in the way that American missionaries might have hoped, leading some scholars to dismiss the missionary enterprise as a failure. But in fact, missionary encounters strongly affected all parties involved, leading to changes in ideas, practices, and

outlooks. The missionary story vis-à-vis American-Ottoman relations is therefore a story of reciprocal impact. The following considers first, the American stage, and second, the Ottoman stage, on which this history unfolded.

The American Stage

The first American missionaries to the Ottoman Empire had little firm knowledge of the peoples of the region and the social conventions that guided them. Yet missionaries were able to draw upon some common pools of information—and misinformation—about Muslim-Christian contacts across history. They were also aware of recent American collisions with the so-called "Barbary Pirates" of North Africa, whose raids on American boats had prompted the fledgling American republic, under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson, to declare war on Tripoli in 1801. These earliest missionaries had some apprehensions about Muslim-Christian conflict, while some of their successors later invoked a language of modern crusading.

In religious terms, the earliest American missionaries to the Ottoman Empire believed that their faith carried an imperative of universal evangelization. They looked dimly upon other religions, including Islam, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and (Eastern) Orthodox Christianity, and had a tremendous confidence in their own. During this nineteenth-century period of incipient Western imperial expansion into Ottoman dominions, American missionaries enjoyed new opportunities of political and economic access, thanks to protection from American and British consuls who were planted on the ground. In addition, these Americans had money—the sums given by pious American churchgoers, who relinquished spare change or extra wealth to support the mission cause. Fisk, Parsons, and their successors therefore stood at a very specific historical juncture, when their work in the Ottoman Empire was possible.

Nineteenth-century American missions to the Ottoman world emerged from and reciprocally influenced a particular landscape of American popular culture. Several elements of this landscape stand out.

Religious Free Choice: The revival that stimulated early nineteenth-century American evangelicalism yielded what some scholars have called a "religion of the heart" that rejected previous loyalties, traditions, and orthodoxies. American evangelicals joined churches that they liked—and not necessarily the ones that their parents or even spouses had chosen—so that their religious culture was highly individualistic. Beginning with Fisk and Parsons, American missionaries carried these assumptions of individual choice into the Ottoman world, expecting that any man, woman, or in some cases, child, who found their evangelical religion compelling could simply do what it would take to convert. Many missionaries were surprised to find that this basic American assumption did not, by and large, apply in the Ottoman world.

Mission Enthusiasm: Rank-and-file American evangelicals—the lay support base of missions—participated intensely in the foreign missionary movement. Many churches encouraged a cradle-to-the-grave engagement with foreign missions by organizing children from as young as three years old into mission support clubs or "circles" that raised funds for missions, penny by penny. The scale of this participation may be hard to imagine now, although church records survive attesting to the popularity of mission circles across the country, from the biggest of cities to the smallest of towns and rural enclaves—to places with names like Roney's Point, West Virginia; Chetopa, Kansas; and Idaville, Indiana.

Missions as Entertainment: In the age before television, the internet, and consumer magnets like Walmart and shopping malls, foreign missions offered a form of entertainment, as well as a form of vicarious travel. Through church magazines, published memoirs, and travel accounts, churchgoers and mission club members could closely track a single missionary

adventurer over the course of his or her career. As more missionaries went abroad in the nineteenth century and then returned on furlough or for retirement, churches were able to collect cultural artifacts from mission fields as well—such things as ceramic pots and embroidered dresses, or, more exotically, specimens of Egyptian papyrus, a "family of mummified cats," and even beautiful embellished Qur'ans. Churches and mission societies sometimes organized public displays of these artifacts, suggesting how a popular culture of museum-making emerged from missions as well.

Biblicism or Bibliolatry: American evangelicals evinced what some scholars have called "Biblicism," suggesting an intense love for and interest in the Bible, and what others, less favorably, have called "Bibliolatry," suggesting an unquestioning, fundamentalist devotion to the Bible. The domains of the Ottoman Empire commanded special prestige in this scheme, for they included the lands of the Bible and the places where Jesus had walked. This Biblicism or Bibliolatry seeded a keen interest in Biblical archaeology—a "science" that seemed, to many American evangelicals, either to confirm the veracity of the text and their faith or to call for new interpretations. Fascination with Biblical archaeology and geography spawned, in turn, a literature of Bible Land atlases and illustrated Bibles, which sold like hotcakes in their day.

Millenarianism: Within nineteenth-century American evangelicalism there was also a strong millenarian streak, insofar as many believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent and that it would occur in the lands of the Bible. Prompted by such beliefs, some American individuals or groups migrated to Palestine in the nineteenth century and settled down to wait for the big event. A classic example were the so-called Spaffordites, a group led by a couple from Chicago, who settled in Jerusalem and supported themselves by operating a luxury inn that still functions as the "American Colony Hotel." In time, this millenarian tendency helped to propel the ideology known as Christian Zionism, whose proponents supported first, Jewish

settlement in Palestine and later, from 1948, the Israeli state, viewing a Jewish "ingathering" in the Holy Land as a prerequisite for Christ's second coming.

New Technologies: All of these developments in nineteenth-century evangelical culture converged as new communication and transportation technologies were taking off. Photography was blossoming as an art form and social tool, and the Holy Land became a major cultural laboratory for its development and popularization. (Consider the University of Pennsylvania Libraries' recently acquired Lenkin Family Collection of Photography from the Holy Land.) In the 1850s, following the advent of steamships, the modern tourist industry was born, starting with Thomas Cook's tours of the Holy Land. One of the most famous American tourists to benefit from this new mode of travel was Mark Twain, who went on a packaged tour of the Holy Land in 1867 and wrote sardonic accounts of the American pilgrim-tourists who sailed with him.

As the nineteenth century unfolded, American missionaries to parts of sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia were boasting of large-scale conversions. By contrast, the yield of missionary converts in the Ottoman Empire remained paltry. So then why did missions continue to pour money and effort into the Ottoman "field"? Two answers stand out. First, as time went on, missionaries or mission executives in the United States appear to have fudged the numbers—producing reports for American readers back home that gave an impression of more conversions than there were. Second, and more important, the high prestige and high appeal of the Bible Lands—together perhaps with deep-rooted historical perceptions of the region as a land of crusade—guaranteed that missionaries would continue to venture into Ottoman territories regardless of their rates of conversion.

The Ottoman Stage

Of course, once the American missionaries settled down for the long haul, their work and their outlook began to change. Slowly they introduced ideas and practices that led to transformations among local people and among the missionaries themselves. To assess this story as it unfolded on Ottoman ground, consider the following points:

Adaptation: American missionaries arrived in the Ottoman world with firm convictions and grandiose plans, but an awareness of local realities prompted their revision. In their eagerness to attract Muslims, Christians, and Jews into their institutions, missionaries adapted policies and practices to make these more attractive. As time went on, in other words, missionaries became more willing to give people what they actually *wanted*, as opposed to what missionaries would have liked them to have. Above all, people wanted schools—primary schools for boys and girls, technical training schools, high schools and colleges, and among Ottoman Christians who became Protestant, even seminaries for training local ministers who could supplant missionaries in evangelical churches.

Secularization: As the nineteenth century unfolded, some mission schools showed signs of secularization, insofar as they minimized their explicitly Christian or evangelical dimensions in order to appease or reassure governments, religious authorities, and families, and thereby bolster enrollments. Schools that adapted in this way began to emphasize a mission of social service rather than a mission of religious conversion. Secularization of this kind occurred at institutions such as the Syrian Protestant College (known after 1920 as the American University of Beirut) and the American College for Girls in Istanbul.

Nationalism: As the twentieth century opened, too, American instructors in the mission schools began to express public and private sympathy for the nationalist aspirations of their students—whether these aspirations were Turkish, Egyptian, pan-Arab, or otherwise. Many of

the missionaries who spent long careers in the region thus came to identify closely with the people among whom they lived. Yet despite these local sympathies, missionaries were neither able nor willing completely to shake off their associations with Western powers. Partly as a result, therefore, some Muslim intellectuals came to resent missionaries as agents of cultural imperialism. Certainly in Egypt, anti-missionary sentiment gave a boost to a kind of modern Islamic activism that became increasingly popular and that expressed itself, in 1928, with the debut of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Mobilization of Women: Although most American missionary "heroes," authors, and executives of the nineteenth century were men, American women became the bulwark of missions in the decades after the U.S. Civil War (1861-65). By 1900, women significantly outnumbered men as missionaries in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere. Missions offered American women new professional opportunities as teachers, translators, medical doctors, and more. In this way, by providing American women with the option of careers outside the home, the mission stations of the Ottoman Empire became sites for the liberation of American women. Reciprocally, by opening and operating schools, American missionary women dramatically expanded educational opportunities for their female counterparts in the Ottoman Empire and set foundations for female education on which national governments later built. Strikingly, although mission girls' schools in the Ottoman Empire (like nineteenth-century girls' schools in the United States) emphasized what later became known as "domestic science," educating girls for a future as good wives and mothers, most American missionary women themselves never married. They thereby provided paradoxical and subversive examples to the girls they taught—examples of career womanhood that some of their female students went on to follow.

Conclusion:

Missionaries were political animals. They operated in the Ottoman lands against the complicated context of Western imperialism, while their evangelical agendas—however muted they may have become over time—ran counter to the Islamic law that maintained that anyone could convert into Islam but that no one could leave it. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries on the ground—mostly British, but Americans as well—pushed for change to this rule. They lobbied British authorities to persuade the Ottoman government to declare support for religious liberty and celebrated the Humayun decree of 1856, which they interpreted (then and for nearly a century afterwards) as a theoretical endorsement of the right for individuals to change religious allegiances. Yet after 1856, Ottoman government authorities continued to recognize the *de facto* ban on Muslim out-conversion, while Muslim communities at the grass roots stood ready to apply legal and social sanctions against apostates from Islam. These circumstances help to explain why, from the 1820s onwards, American missionaries in the Ottoman world focused their evangelical efforts almost completely on local Christians, whose ecclesiastical leaders had limited power to block Protestant overtures. In formal terms, to the extent that American missionaries converted "Ottomans," they converted people who were almost always Christian already.

However, if we take conversion in a broad, metaphorical sense to signify major turns or changes of outlook, then American missionary "conversions" were substantial. For example, American missionaries encouraged the use of vernacular Bibles in Orthodox churches, thereby changing the way that Bulgarians, Egyptian Copts, and Armenians worshipped. In some cases, in mission schools or in Protestant churches, they introduced practices of voting on community decisions—thereby seeding ideas of representative government, consensus-building, and civic engagement. They transformed cultures of modern schooling by introducing new ideas about

how and what children and adults should be taught. They influenced the history of everyday life (including such things as how girls dressed and how "modern" families arranged their households) in ways that historians have only just begun to assess. They provided a basic know-how about American ways that facilitated early emigration from parts of the Ottoman Empire (such as Mount Lebanon) to the United States. At pacesetting institutions like the Syrian Protestant College (AUB), liberal missionaries even introduced ideas about Darwinist thought and evolutionary biology, thereby stimulating parallel discussions among Muslim intellectuals about connections between religion and science.

By 1899, as the nineteenth century ended, what did it mean for American missionaries in Ottoman lands to be evangelical? Certainly it did not mean the same as it had done in the days of Fisk and Parsons. Missionaries were embracing a mission of social service that anticipated and provided early foundations for the work of what we now call NGO's (non-governmental organizations that function as charities). They were also beginning to serve, self-consciously, as American—and not exclusively Christian—cultural emissaries. Yet the missionaries by 1899 were not totally secularized either, in the sense that they were not devoid of religious motives and assumptions. Among the missionaries of 1899, one idea from the early days of the American missions persisted: the idea of religious free choice, and the conviction that if individuals found merit or solace in the missionaries' faith, then they should have the right to embrace it. Among American evangelicals today, this idea continues to resonate. Indeed, in 1998, American evangelical lobbyists helped to persuade members of the U.S. Congress to pass the International Religious Freedom Act, which enshrines the promotion of religious free choice across the world as a goal of U.S. foreign policy. Here we can see a very visible missionary legacy for present-day American diplomacy, one which arguably privileges a particular view of *religious* human rights at the expense of other kinds of human rights.

Figure 1: Bonfils, Jacob's Well, 1880s.
Lenkin Family Collection of Photography.
Courtesy of the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies,
University of Pennsylvania.
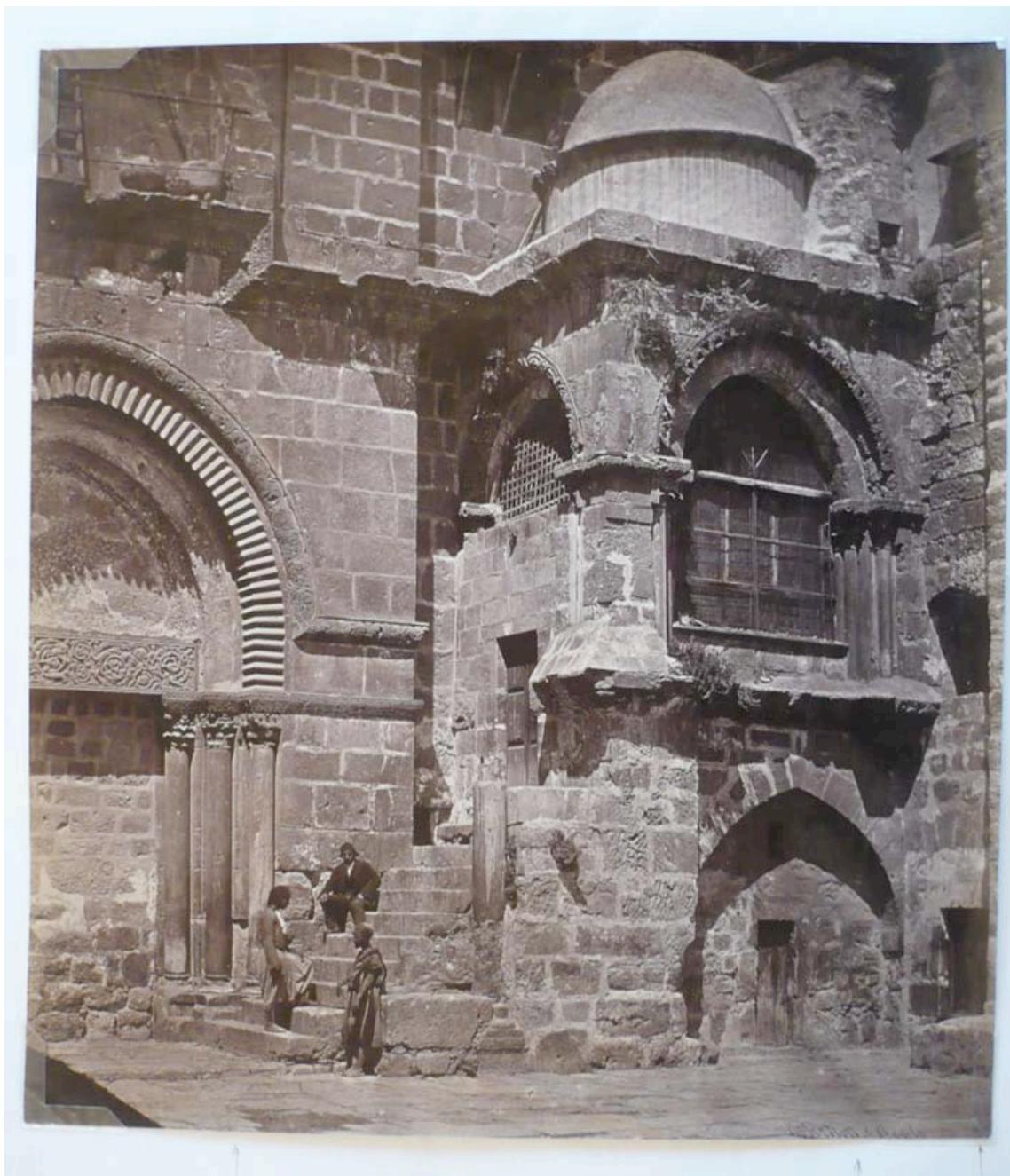
Figure 2: Robertson & Beato, Jerusalem, Holy Sepulc Facade of Angel's Chapel, March 1857.
Lenkin Family Collection of Photography.
Courtesy of the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies,
University of Pennsylvania.

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