Syrian Protestants & the Case of the Beirut Church: Re-imagining the American Missionary Encounter in Ottoman Syria

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In 1902, an anonymous pamphlet surfaced in Beirut depicting the Syrian Evangelical Church “crying as from the grave and its echo being heard by the missionaries and the Presbyterian Board of New York.” Adding a new layer of controversy to the ongoing division within the Protestant community in Beirut, the pamphlet proclaimed that American Presbyterians in Ottoman Syria had extended neither “mercy nor sympathy for help.” In fact, this document identified American missionaries as the direct cause of Syrian Protestant suffering. While such tensions in the American-Syrian Protestant relationship were not uncommon in the history of the American Syria Mission, traditional accounts of the mission’s history exclude such voices of dissent and emphasize points of progress.

According to a Presbyterian annual report printed soon after the pamphlet appeared, “The history of evangelical Christianity in Beirut dates back to 1823.” At this time the earliest generation of American missionaries in the Eastern Mediterranean began to meet for worship. Thus, the report indicates, the newly established American mission planted the seeds for an Arabic-speaking Protestant church in what became modern Lebanon. Education and evangelism were the focal points of this American Syria Mission. The mission, initiated by American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), expanded outward from Beirut as the nineteenth century progressed. Missionaries would soon boast of a series of accomplishments: the foundation of the first Syrian Evangelical Church in Beirut in 1848, the completion of a new Arabic Bible translation in 1864, and the establishment of Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) in 1866. These and other signposts of success feed into the traditional mode of writing mission history, which treats Americans and Europeans as the primary historical actors.

After nearly a half century of work, in 1870 the ABCFM transferred its Syria Mission stations to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions (BFM). From this date of transition, we might continue to follow the Syria Mission timeline as the American Presbyterians proceed with their work into the twentieth century. I propose in this article, however, to take this shift to Presbyterian oversight as point of departure for a deeper examination of the American mission in Ottoman Syria. In 1870, the eight men of the Mission voted to place their mission under new management. The ten American women; 50 Syrian preachers, teachers, and assistants; and hundreds of Syrian church members and mission school children did not cast their ballots. This vote did not drastically change the character or goals of the Syria Mission. The same missionaries continued their usual evangelistic, educational, and literary activities, aiming to establish self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating Syrian churches. The vote is important, however, because it points to the status and authority afforded to the missionaries, particularly ordained American men. In addition, the shift to Presbyterian Church polity from the non-denominational governing structure of loosely connected Syrian congregations became a source of contention between missionaries and some Syrian Protestants in subsequent decades, leading to the anti-missionary pamphlet circulated at the turn of the century.

In light of the discrepancy between American missionary and Syrian Evangelical representations of Protestant history in Ottoman Syria (present day Syria and Lebanon), this article aims to re-imagine the missionary narrative. Source materials written by Syrians are therefore critical, not merely to contest and reverse triumphal missionary narratives, but to reveal the enmeshed nature of the missionary enterprise, in which Syrian and American lives became intertwined. First, by drawing upon a Syrian church petition from the mid-nineteenth century, I re-define mission history from the perspective of Syrian Protestants. I
then examine the controversy between the Syrian Evangelical Church of Beirut and the American missionaries at the turn of the century. Bringing American and Syrian versions of this disagreement into dialogue, I present this story as a mutual encounter in which Syrians played an active role.

**A Syrian Protestant Perspective on the Missionary Encounter**

By the time the Presbyterian BFM took over the Syria Mission in 1870, its so-called “native helpers” outnumbered the American missionaries by more than two to one. Syrians served alongside missionaries as teachers, translators, and gospel preachers, but like missionary wives, their stories feature less prominently in annual reports and other missionary publications, most of which were written by American men. A handful of scholars have begun reconstructing early Syrian Evangelical Church history, but much more work remains to elucidate the relationship between Syrian Protestants and American missionaries. In this section, I contribute to this work by examining the petition for the first independent Syrian Evangelical Church in Beirut, which subtly contests missionary authority.

Written in 1847 by the renowned intellectual Butrus al-Bustani, the Beirut Church’s petition for organization provides a basis for understanding the developing relations between Syrian Protestants and American missionaries in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The document begins by explaining how the church members, all born into one or another of Syria’s ancient Christian sects, came to the evangelical faith:

> We have forsaken our churches, prepared to undergo disgrace and persecution and loss, a part of which has actually fallen upon some of us, and the whole upon others; while we rejoiced that we were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ. And with our hopes founded upon the sure promises of God, we preach the gospel to high and low, if perchance we may bring the people around us to repentance and true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

With these words, Bustani places native Christians at the same level as American missionaries in terms of a spiritual calling to evangelize. In the language of American missionary theory, the Beirut Church is ready to be “self-propagating,” but the document claims the church members are hindered in this duty because they are not publicly manifested in an independent church. Thus the petition urges the missionaries to take up the matter of church organization as soon as possible.

Two further points are worth mentioning with regard this document’s “soft” challenge to missionary power. First, along with sharing the missionaries’ work of evangelism, the native church members count themselves as equals with the missionaries in Christ. The petition asserts God “called us by his Son to the faith of the gospel,” and it then implies that missionary oversight should be temporary. Power dynamics come to the forefront as the short document refers four times to Jesus Christ alone as head of the church. This sound evangelical theology is also a reminder to the missionaries that the Syrian Protestants did not leave their former churches to exchange one human authority for another. After all, the petition asserts, they reject “all the human doctrines and traditions which are opposed to the Bible.”

Second, the document requests complete independence under the leadership of a Syrian minister, with a missionary appointed to counsel this new pastor. It continues, “This favor we ask you to grant us, as a matter of necessity at the beginning; referring all to your decision, and praying that you may live long, we are your children in the Lord.” Such language does not betray any antagonism against the missionaries, but it reminds American Protestants what it means to be mutually united in Christ. The break the petition advocates is only with American assertions of authority, since all believers are required “to be one in faith and love.” While the mission officially organized the Beirut Church in 1848, it failed to meet the second
request to install a native pastor for the new church, even when, six years later, the members asked that the mission ordain Bustani as their first pastor. Instead, an American missionary filled the position until 1890.20

While Syria Mission reports are written from the perspective of American missionaries, they are not devoid of references to the populations among which these missionaries lived and worked. After all, from the point of view of American mission supporters who read the reports, the success or failure of the mission depended upon the local population’s response to American work. The ABCFM found the Beirut Church petition worth printing in the Missionary Herald because it demonstrated the successful establishment of a “native” congregation. Thus, American readers received the rare opportunity to hear a Syrian voice at length. In the history of the Evangelical Church of Beirut, however, other expressions of Syrian Protestant experience were not shared as eagerly with mission supporters. The records of the American Syria Mission reveal a second petition for church organization in Beirut, and the story of this less-publicized petition ends, not with the creation of an independent church, but with a written apology from a Syrian pastor for a pamphlet that labeled the newer generation of American missionaries in Syria as “a curse and nothing more.”21

Disagreement & Division: The Beirut Church Controversy

In 1892 a group of prominent members left the Evangelical Church of Beirut to form a new congregation, which operated outside of missionary control until the two churches united in 1906. According to unpublished missionary documents, the roots of this schism may be traced back to the mission vote of 1870 when “a certain section of the Church rose in rebellion and from that day to this they have made open and secret war against the Mission.”22 In this section, my reading of Syrian Protestant writings alongside missionary reports reveals that the Beirut Church controversy arose as a contestation not merely of Presbyterian polity but of American missionary authority.

After the Syria Mission came under Presbyterian control in 1870, the mission gradually moved its Syrian churches toward Presbyterian Church government.23 Under the ABCFM the mission churches had no denomination and no higher governing authority beyond the mission itself. Advocating a gradual shift to Presbyterian polity, the Syria Mission waited more than a decade to establish the first of three Syrian Presbyteries, each of which would provide oversight for congregations in a particular region of the mission field. The Sidon Presbytery was organized in 1883, followed by the Lebanon and Tripoli Presbyteries in 1885 and 1890.24 The Beirut Church’s transition into the care of the Lebanon Presbytery came only in the 1890s, after the installation of Yusif Badr as the congregation’s first Syrian pastor.25 It is within this context that Syrian voices of disagreement grew stronger. By 1892, a number of Beirut Church members had left the congregation, and in January of 1893 they submitted a petition to the mission requesting the ordination of a pastor to serve their new church. Like the 1847 petition written by Butrus al-Bustani, this document shows familiarity with missionary aims:

As we are now organized into a purely native church in accordance with your request… owing to our knowledge of the fact that it is one of your desires and aims that native churches should be organized in Syria with native pastors… all the individuals of the native church assembled in a meeting held Jan. 5 1893, and unanimously elected Mr. Assad Zarub their native pastor.26

The authors request organization on the basis of the old nizam, or the old system of loosely independent churches under the ABCFM, indicating their rejection of Presbyterian polity. After more than a year of discussion amongst the missionaries and between the mission and the seceding church members, missionary Henry Harris Jessup organized a second Beirut church on March 18, 1894, with thirty founding members.27 Two Syrian pastors from the Lebanon Presbytery ordained As’ad Zarub as an
evangelist to serve the new church, although the congregation maintained no official ties to the Presbytery.  

According to Syria Mission reports published between 1893 and 1907, the split in the Beirut Church was a brief and unfortunate interlude in the mission’s history, which ended in 1906 when the Second Church accepted the services of the First Church’s pastor, dissolved its session, and reunited as the Evangelical Church of Beirut. During this period, the main concern missionaries voiced in reports to American supporters was that the split impeded the Beirut Church’s progress toward financial self-support because it “carried away a large part of the well-to-do people.” The twentieth-century historian of the Syria Mission, Abdul Latif Tibawi, follows the missionary reports in treating the schism as a relatively unimportant break in the Beirut Church’s history. Tibawi devotes one paragraph of his book to the division, describing it as a failure of the Protestant community “to put its house in order.” His book ends in 1901, so it does not recount the reunification of the two churches on a non-Presbyterian basis in 1906. Neither does Tibawi examine the related controversy over the inflammatory pamphlet written in the name of the Second Church of Beirut.  

Based on the Beirut Church’s continued rejection of Presbytery oversight after 1906 and the ongoing concern expressed in missionary correspondence, I argue that this controversy is a central point in the history of the present-day National Evangelical Church of Beirut. This disagreement also sheds light on the nature of the relationship between American missionaries and Syrian Protestants. By 1909, the BFM annual report admits that the controversy between the Beirut Church and the mission was never fully resolved. The united Beirut Church financially supports its own pastor, the report explains, but it remains “out of line” with the other mission churches even though it is the “mother church in the central station” and uses the manse and church building, “both of which belong unconditionally to the Presbyterian Board.” The report concludes:

The members of the Beirut Station have adopted the kindliest attitude possible, that of ignoring the underlying causes of disagreement as well as the property questions, and of regarding the Beirut Church as still sustaining right relations with the Mission and the Lebanon Presbytery.

From the missionaries’ standpoint, the controversy was never fully settled, and they continued their efforts to convince the Beirut Church to return to full membership in the Presbytery. At the time of the 1909 report, another unresolved issue lay beneath the surface as well. In 1902, four years before the reunification, a pamphlet attributed to the Second Church issued a sharp critique of the men of the American mission. No mention of this pamphlet is made in published mission reports, but the story can be pieced together by using correspondence among missionaries and between the mission and Second Church leaders, from 1902 until 1910. In February of 1902, As'ad Zarub, pastor of the Second Church, presented the eight-page pamphlet to H.B. Macartney, an affiliate of the British Syria Mission, who brought it to the Syria Mission. In the view of Henry Jessup, the leading member of the Beirut Station, the pamphlet was primarily the work of Zarub, a man whom Jessup described as “consumed by conceit, and no doubt, revenge for having failed to get his Diplomacy in the Pharmacy department of the College, and disappointed in not getting the pastorate of the First Church.”  

Upon learning of the pamphlet’s harsh criticisms of the mission, Salim Kassab, a leading member of the Second Church, repudiated the document and withdrew from the independent church. In a letter to the Beirut missionaries, Kassab wrote, “[A]s there is no other Evangelical Protestant church save your Presbyterian one, the organization of which I cannot conscientiously approve; I have made up my mind to attend Divine Service in your Presbyterian church as a visitor taking no part in its regulations.” While for Salim Kassab the disagreement between Americans and Syrians remained at the level of proper church governance, for his former pastor and other members of the independent church, the dispute ran
deeper. After demanding that the Second Church repudiate the document, the missionaries waited for more than a year for the church’s reply.36 This response eventually came through Khalil Sarkis, the son-in-law of Butrus al-Bustani and a founding member of the Second Church. Sarkis explains that his brethren believe the conflict is between As’ad Zarub and Henry Jessup alone, and that the two should resolve the issue privately. However, Sarkis indicates his own opinion that the problem involves both the mission and the larger church, and thus he concludes, “What use is it to repair the roof if the foundation underneath it is crumbling?”37

Khalil Sarkis does not explain what caused the relationship between his church and the mission to crumble, but the pamphlet itself lists twelve points of contention, aimed not only at Henry Jessup but also at other American missionary men. It speaks reverently about the early members of the Syria Mission under the ABCFM, but then describes how the Presbyterian Board took control:

Meanwhile, the new missionaries began to change the system and discipline of the Syrian churches, from the simple old system to the Presbyterian denomination. They came by force to compel the churches to accept the rules of Presbytery as they are, without letting them understand what it meant. They organized a senate and a general assembly, and forced the people to believe in the government of the church.38

The polity issue emerges again in the claim that the earlier generation of missionaries preached Christ and organized an “undenominational” church, but the current missionaries preach “the Presbytery and the government of the church.”39

After accusing the missionaries of lifting themselves up higher than Syrians, using mission money to build castles in the Lebanon mountains, charging exorbitant fees for schools and medical care, and treating Syrian Christians like servants, the pamphlet moves to more personal attacks. It singles out Henry Jessup and George Ford for lying about Syria to American audiences during lectures that Syrian immigrants in the United States have attended. Such missionaries, the pamphlet claims, exaggerate their successes and “make Syria the darkest place upon the surface of the globe, and its race in the most savage state, while things in reality are far from being so.”40 Finally, the document references Ford’s immoral acts with a Syrian woman and an unmarried female missionary. The pamphlet upholds its claims on behalf of the only independent Evangelical Church in Syria, which saw the corruption of the mission and thus “proclaimed independency” from the American missionaries. It explains, “When this band of Christians started alone as the first native and self-supporting church… the American missionaries tried by all means to scatter this band and destroy their activity and development from the world.” As it closes, the pamphlet juxtaposes the Christian faithfulness of the Second Church not only with the missionaries but also with other Syrian Protestant churches when it claims that the independent church is the one “remnant in the East which will not bow a knee to ‘Baal.’”41

In their personal correspondence with the Second Church, the Beirut missionaries never attempted to refute the pamphlet’s claims. They regarded the entire document as false, and after concluding that it was the work of As’ad Zarub alone, the mission attempted for eight years to induce the Syrian pastor to repudiate the document.42 After immigrating to the United States and sending a partial apology to the
mission in 1906, Zarub finally signed a formal recantation in 1910. By that time, the two Beirut churches had reunited, Zarub had returned to Syria, and some members of the old Second Church had invited him to preach from their pulpit which, the missionaries protested, was actually the pulpit of the church building owned by the Beirut station. When the missionaries refused to allow the “unreconciled” Zarub to preach, he signed a formal apology, and that particular matter was laid to rest. The Beirut Church’s subtle contestation of missionary authority lingered throughout the early twentieth century, however, as the Evangelical Church of Beirut maintained its independence from the Presbytery of Lebanon and chose Congregationalist rather than Presbyterian polity.

An Enmeshed History of the American-Syrian Encounter

As this essay has indicated, American men controlled the Syria Mission’s decisions, resources, and nearly all of the published information that Americans read about missions in Syria. The Beirut Church petition of 1847, the 1893 petition for the second Beirut church, and the 1902 pamphlet offer an alternative historical narrative, reversing the sort of historiography that focuses exclusively on missionary activities and perspectives. The rough edges of mission history in Ottoman Syria begin to emerge through Syrian viewpoints that are absent from the missionary record. Nevertheless, I do not propose a revisionist writing of history only from the underside, at least in the case of Syrian Protestants who contested missionary dominance while also remaining tied to Americans through a shared evangelical faith.

The history of the Evangelical Church of Beirut should be approached not as a debate in which one side is the mirror opposite of the other, but as an enmeshed history in which Syrian and American Protestants were entangled in each other’s lives. The complexity of this Syrian-American relationship is indicated, first, in the fact that the majority of the Beirut Church members chose to remain within their original congregation. Likewise, the numerous Syrian Evangelical churches outside of Beirut accepted the mission’s Presbyterian polity. Second, the complex interrelationship between Syrian and American Protestants is also apparent in the ongoing correspondence between the mission and figures like Salim Kassab, Khalil Sarkis, and even As’ad Zarub. Despite differences of opinion, none of these representatives of the Second Church rejected the American missionary enterprise as a whole. Rather, while asserting their right to choose their own pastors and form of church government, each of these Syrian Protestant leaders sought to sustain their relationship with fellow Protestants in the American mission. Kassab rejected the pamphlet and returned to worship with the First Church of Beirut, Sarkis served as the mediator between the Second Church and the Beirut mission station, and Zarub sought personal reconciliation with the missionaries the letter he sent from the US in 1906. Upon his return to Beirut in 1910, in what missionaries described as a more sincerely contrite manner, Zarub recanted his involvement with the pamphlet.

This interpretation of Syrian Protestant critiques tempered by appreciation for missionary work is upheld even in the controversial pamphlet. Despite its accusatory tone toward contemporary missionaries, the pamphlet overflows with praise for the first generation of missionaries in Syria. These included Eli Smith, William Thomson, and the revered doctor, professor, and Bible translator Cornelius Van Dyck, who is deemed the “dearly beloved father of all the Syrian people.” Therefore, while the Beirut Church controversy in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries prompts us to redefine the American missionary enterprise and recognize its shadow sides, we must also acknowledge the general partnership and collegiality between American and Syrian Protestants. The Second Church’s eventual reunification with the Evangelical Church of Beirut indicates the desire and willingness to maintain a relationship with the mission. At the same time, this church’s continued refusal of Presbyterian polity posed a challenge to American control. Despite their lack of power, privilege, and resources in comparison to the American missionaries, the early generations of Syrian Protestants found ways to interpret and enact their own
history. The story of American missions in Ottoman Syria would remain incomplete without these Syrian voices.


1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Society of Church History conference in Washington, D.C. on January 2, 2014, under the title, “‘We preach the gospel to high and low’: Syrian Protestants and the American Missionary Encounter.”

2 I use the terms “Protestant” and “Evangelical” interchangeably to describe the Presbyterian and Congregationalist church structures in Ottoman Syria.


6 The ABCFM was a Congregationalist-initiated mission society that initially included Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed members.

7 The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA [hereafter BFM], The Thirty-Fourth Annual Report (New York: Mission House, 1871), 36.


up the pearls of knowledge and adorn ourselves with the jewelry of literature’: An Analysis of Three Arab
13 On Bustani’s authorship of this document see A.L. Tibawi, “The American Missionaries in Beirut and
14 “Syria: Organization of a Native Church,” Missionary Herald xlv, no. 8 (Aug. 1848), 266.
15 Ibid., 266-67.
16 Ibid., 267-268.
17 Ibid., 266.
18 Ibid., 268.
19 Ibid., 266.
21 PHS 115-4-4: “Syria and the Mission Work.”
22 PHS 115-4-4: F.E. Hoskins, Untitled timeline of the Beirut Church, 1910.
23 Presbyterian congregations are governed by an elected group of elders (or presbyters). Each
congregation belongs to a regional body known as a Presbytery, made up of local pastors and elders.
24 Jessup, Fifty-Three Years in Syria, vol. 1, 356; BFM, The Forty-Seventh Annual Report (New York:
25 The organization of the Lebanon Presbytery was not complete until 1896 when the First Church of
Beirut joined the Presbytery along with the other churches of Mt. Lebanon. BFM, The Sixtieth Annual
Report (New York: Presbyterian Building, 1897), 207.
26 PHS 115-4-3: Naameh Tabet, Khalil Sarkis, Michael Mosully, Abdullah Saigh, and Daud al-Khuri to
the Syria Mission, January 14, 1893; translated by Henry H. Jessup.
27 PHS 115-4-3: Notes of Henry H. Jessup, March 18, 1894. According to Jessup, the founding members
of the Second Beirut Church included Khalil, Louisa, Amin, and Adele Sarkis; Naameh, Adna, and Elias
Tabet, Abdullah and Luciya Saigh, Michael, Amelia, Liza, and Lulu Mosully; Amin and Afifi Abcarius;
Khalil Meshulany; Alice Bistani; Daud and Sabat Harari; Selim, Selma, Nellie, and Lulu Araman; Selim
Susa; Asim Fuaz; Khalil and Selim Saleh Nusr; Daud and Laia Khuri, and Abdullah Mitwat. Before the
split, the Beirut Church had 236 members.
31 Tibawi, American Interests, 281.
32 Tibawi makes a brief reference to a pamphlet the Second Church issued against the mission but does
not cite the pamphlet itself or specify its date or content. Tibawi, American Interests, 281.
34 PHS 115-4-4: Henry Jessup to Miss Caroline Thompson, March 1, 1902.
35 PHS 115-4-4: Salim Kassab to the Beirut Station, March 22, 1903.
36 PHS 115-4-4: Franklin Hoskins, Samuel Jessup, Henry H. Jessup, and Daniel Bliss to the Committee of
the Evangelical Independent Church of Beirut, March 11, 1903.
37 PHS 115-4-4: Khalil Sarkis to Henry H. Jessup, May 6, 1903; my translation. Sarkis was also the
founder of the long-running Nahda journal Lisan al-Hal. See Ami Ayalon, The Press in the Arab Middle
Evangelical Armenians in Anatolia during this period indicate that such tensions went beyond simple
matters of church polity. Armenian pastor Thomas Boyajian, for example, speaks of the disagreements
between American missionaries and Armenian Evangelicals as a “leak which threatens the safety of the
boat.” Boyajian, The American missionaries and the Armenian Protestant Community (s.l.: s.n., 1869), 2.
See also Controversy between the Missionaries of the American Board and the Evangelical Armenian
Churches in Turkey (New York: Armenian Young Men’s Christian Association, 1882). The Evangelical
Armenian Churches in Anatolia remained under the ABCFM after 1870 and became denominationally Congregational.

38 PHS 115-4-4: “Syria and the Mission Work.”
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 By 1910, Franklin Hoskins had concluded that Zarub was not the only author of the pamphlet. See PHS 115-4-4: Franklin Hoskins to Syria Mission, March 9, 1910.
43 PHS 115-4-5: As’ad Zarub to the Syria Mission, June 24, 1906; PHS 115-4-4: Franklin Hoskins to Syria Mission, March 9, 1910; PHS 115-4-5: As’ad Zarub, “Retraction and Plea for Forgiveness,” March 22, 1910.
44 Further research is required trace the relations between American missionaries and Syrian Protestants throughout the twentieth century.
45 These churches today form the National Evangelical (Presbyterian) Synod of Syria and Lebanon.
47 PHS 115-4-4: “Syria and the Mission Work.”