

**Twenty-third North American LCJE Meeting
Pittsburgh 24-26 April, 2006**

**Bible Work and Bible Men in Jerusalem Around the Year 1820.
Kai Kjær-Hansen**

The British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) was established in 1804 and celebrated its 200 years jubilee two years ago.

The establishment of BFBS and of a number of mission organizations at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century came about as a result of the revival which had taken place in England and North America. The same is true also of the establishment of the Jewish mission, the *London Jews Society* in 1809.

Revival, mission and Bible belong together. That this is true can be seen by reading through source material from that time – on mission societies and Bible societies in countries bordering on the Mediterranean, the Levant. Often it is difficult to find out who the persons mentioned are working for or which society has employed them. This can be our problem today when we want to look at it historically. For people then this was not a problem. An impressive cooperation between Bible societies and mission societies took place. They needed one another in order to accomplish what each of them had set out to do.

Were the Bible societies to succeed, they needed mission societies and missionaries. If the missions and their missionaries were to succeed, they needed Bibles, Bibles in a language understood by the people in the areas where they were working. And in a similar way: without missionaries – “Bible men” – the Bible societies were nothing.

Today, revival also has to do with Bibles and Bible men – and (allow me to say!) Bible women. This is also true in the case of Jewish evangelism. Practically all old Jewish mission societies have their stories about how Jews – often furtively – read the New Testament, the forbidden book, and came to faith.

And: Bible distribution and a considerable waste are connected. Then as it is today.

Malta

Malta became an important centre for the Bible work in the countries bordering on the Mediterranean. In 1814 Malta had come into British hands. Several major shipments of Bibles came here where they were deposited until they were carried further on to the respective areas. The missionaries stationed in Malta made a number of expeditions in the Mediterranean countries to look into the possibilities for distribution of Bibles while trying to establish contacts with local Christians who were to be responsible for local Bible depots.

Missionaries are “Bible men”

The first Protestant missionaries came to Palestine and Syria *around* the 1820’s. In these glimpses I limit myself to those who in one way or other had set their eyes on Jerusalem.

The first missionaries that we know of come as travellers to explore the area and distribute Bibles hoping they might be able to establish an organized Bible work, arrange for Bible depots to be set up and, if possible, establish Bible societies. But they had no

intention of settling in Jerusalem. Others came with the hope of being able to settle in Jerusalem, something the Moslem authorities did not permit – unless the person in question was a doctor. Missionaries sent out by the American missionary society *The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission*, who arrive in Jerusalem in March 1821, set up – as a consequence of this prohibition – a mission station in Beirut in Syria.

Not until 1833 do the first Protestant missionaries get permission to settle in Jerusalem, namely John Nicolayson.

It is interesting that these *missionaries* in the early 1820's are called "Bible men", *Bibliani*. The term is used about the foreign English-speaking missionaries. From the beginning it is not the missionaries' own name for themselves. It originates with clerics in the old local churches, and it is negatively laden.

That these missionaries are called "Bible men", *Bibliani*, is partly due to the fact that they distribute Bibles, partly that they want to adhere to the Bible's message. It is knowledge about the Bible they want to promulgate, not the doctrines of the various Christian denominations.

The "Bible men" in Palestine and Syria at that time are often academically well-educated young men with an extremely strong conviction of their calling. They are marked by a Jesus-passion which, to outside observers, approaches a Jesus-mania. On their departure from their home countries they are well aware that they may not experience a return journey. But they are ready to pay the price (most of them anyway), which they also did.

Some of them are more organized than others. For some the Holy Spirit and planning seem to be conflicting forces. For others the Holy Spirit and human strategy form a synthesis.

The combination of Holy Spirit and strategy is an ever topical theme to reflect on for those who are involved in (Jewish) evangelism!

The first Bible mission and Bible men in the Levant

If you go to the homepage for *The Bible Society in Israel* you expect to get a brief description of the beginning of the work. This is also given in these words:

"Bible work began in the Holy Land in 1816. In 1821, Joseph Wolff, a Jewish believer came with 20 camels loaded with Bibles."

... 20 camels loaded with Bibles! This gives the impression that an enormous Bible project is being unfolded in the early 1820's, doesn't it? So perhaps we should just take note and allow ourselves to be inspired by it and (continue to) put a lot of Bibles on "our camels" – Tanach *and* the New Testament – for distribution in Israel today? Of course I can have nothing against the inspiration from such words.

However, there are some problems connected with this information. I admit that dates are not all that important – we can all make errors about dates – but what was the situation really like?

The year "1816" is probably wrong. Henry Lindsay has been credited with being the first Bible man visiting Jerusalem. Lindsay was Chaplain to the British Embassy of Constantinople and worked for the Bible cause and conducted negotiations on behalf of BFBS. For at least the last decade Lindsay has been regarded as the man who, in the 19th

century, was the first to come to Jerusalem with Bibles. This viewpoint is based on some “Historical Notes” from the United Bible Society (UBS) from 1995.

I have scrutinized the sources and have to conclude that these notes contain some misreadings and are first of all based on the fact that Lindsay had some conversations with the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem. Since Lindsay met the Greek Patriarch *of* Jerusalem, surely that must have taken place *in* Jerusalem? But no! At that time the Greek Patriarch *of* Jerusalem resided *in* Constantinople. So if the thesis that “Bible work began in the Holy Land in 1816” is to be maintained, someone else, instead of Lindsay, must be found. And as far as I know, this has not yet been done.

1. Christoph Burckhardt

The first Protestant Bible man to come to Jerusalem is, as far as I can see, the Swiss Christoph Burckhardt. Again briefly: The journey starts in Malta and takes him first to Egypt; having visited Jerusalem he ends in Aleppo, where he dies in August 1818.

The journey is made in a spirit of great and high-flown expectations about forming a Bible society in Jerusalem. Burckhardt carries no letter of introduction. He just turns up. He is in Jerusalem and Bethlehem during the Easter of 1818 and for a maximum of 10 days. He distributes Bibles and Bible parts among the local Christians and succeeds in selling one – yes one - Hebrew New Testament to a Jew in Jerusalem.

As a pioneer Burckhardt had many odds against him. As a Bible man in the eastern part of the Levant he was remembered after his death for being an undaunted fiery soul with great visions. He does not appear to have been a great mission strategist. As a historian I can vouch for that. But even if Burckhardt was not a great mission strategist, he is worth remembering. He gave his life in service for Jesus.

2. James Connor

The next Bible man visiting Jerusalem is James Connor, sent out by Church Missionary Society (CMS). He arrived in Jerusalem on the 6th of March 1820 and began a visit that was to last for about six weeks. His journey was well-organized, in his luggage he carries not only Scriptures but also a letter of introduction to Procopius, the chief agent of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, who – naturally lived *in* Jerusalem.

Connor distributes some Bibles and Bible parts in Jerusalem. But: Whereas Burckhardt did succeed in selling one (sic) Hebrew New Testament to a Jew in Jerusalem, Connor did not, a fact he does not try to conceal. He writes:

Among the Jews I have not been able to do any thing. The New Testament they reject with disdain, though I have repeatedly offered it to them for the merest trifle. As for the Prophecies, they say, the Book is imperfect, and therefore they will not purchase: and, as for the Psalters, they tell me there is no want of them in Jerusalem. Had I brought a complete Hebrew Bible with me, I could have sold many.

3. Procopius

On his departure Connor was able to leave a considerable amount of unsold Bible and Bible parts with Procopius. And not just that. They enter into an important agreement,

namely that Procopius should have a depot of Bibles with him and continuously receive Bibles from abroad.

In other words: Procopius, the most influential person in the Greek Orthodox church in Jerusalem, became – quite interestingly – the first Bible agent for the Bible cause in Jerusalem. He dies in the summer of 1823. From the entering of the agreement in 1820 and until his death several Bible men arrive in Jerusalem. They are all full of praise for Procopius and his zeal for the Bible cause.

On “20 camels loaded with Bibles” – and Jerusalem

And now a few comments on the words for the Israel Bible Society’s homepage: “In 1821, Joseph Wolff, a Jewish believer, came with 20 camels loaded with Bibles.”

The words refer to Wolff coming to the “Holy Land”. He comes from Egypt to Jaffo at Christmas 1821, and immediately sets off for Syria. Whether or not there is an element of “myth” in the words about the “20 camels loaded with Bibles” is a matter I’m not going to comment on here. He comes to Jerusalem in the beginning of March 1822 – and without “camels loaded with Bibles”.

In his journal Wolff writes from Jaffa March 7, 1822 – two days before he arrives in Jerusalem that he “was very much distressed that my Bibles from Cairo, and the firman¹ from Constantinople had not arrived.”

In a letter to his benefactors John Bayford and Henry Drummond, he writes the same day and from the same place: “...Mr. Mackworth will tell you, that I am now, alas, destitute of Bibles and New Testaments; the Lord, I hope, will provide again.”

On the 12th of March he writes from Jerusalem: “I called on the amiable and zealous Christian, the Rev. Procopius, undoubtedly the most *active*, most *sincere*, and most *disinterested* promoter of the cause of the British and Foreign Bible Society in this part of the Worlds ... Procopius promised to assist me with Bibles and New Testaments”.

On the 14th of March 1822 Wolff writes: “I called again on Procopius; he gave me a quantity of Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic New Testaments ...”

The same day he writes that he has sold 13 of the 50 Arabic Psalters, which for two years have lain unsold at the British Consul’s at Jaffa.

There can be no doubt that Wolff – and other Bible men visiting Jerusalem – sold or gave away New Testaments in Hebrew to Jews living there. At this moment I dare not guess about the number. What I dare say is that Jerusalem’s Jews around 1820 did not stand with outstretched hands eager to receive the good news in the form of a small book, the New Testament in Hebrew.

What the missionaries could offer was the translation that London Jews Society had prepared and which had been published in 1817.

So what did they do?

They offered people Bibles in Hebrew with the Tanach *and* the New Testament, bound in one volume.

The following is an episode about this from the summer of 1826 – from Beirut.

When a Bible salesman turns Bible purchaser

¹ In Turkey and some other oriental countries a firman was a decree or mandate issued by the sovereign to a traveler to insure him protection and assistance.

John Nicolayson had been sent out to do missionary work in Jerusalem for London Jews Society. He arrived in Jerusalem at the beginning of January 1826. The Society's envoy, the medical doctor George Edward Dalton, had received permission to settle there, so the London Society assumed that Nicolayson would also get such a permission. But Dalton dies the same month that Nicolayson arrives. Nicolayson has to leave Jerusalem, he goes to Beirut and joins the American missionaries there.

Nicolayson writes in his journal:

Feb. 27 [1826] – The Jews of this place are few, and much prejudiced against Christianity, of the real nature of which they seem entirely ignorant: they have, consequently, as the American brethren tell me, been very reserved, and have avoided all intercourse with the Missionaries.

In June some Jews from Safed come to see him in Beirut. At first they are not interested in buying the Hebrew Bibles from him that contain Tanach as well as the New Testament in Hebrew in one volume, but later on they do.

I will let Nicolayson himself tell about the painful story about how he, a Bible man, becomes a Bible purchaser:

June 20 [1826]. – Having a few days ago received something from the city, wrapped up in a leaf of the Hebrew New Testament; and being afterwards told, that more of the same leaves had been seen in Muslem shops; I suspected that the Jews had torn out the New Testament from the Bibles I had sold them; I therefore employed a person to make inquiries. Accordingly he brought a New Testament, almost entire, and informed me, that, if I wished to buy any more, they were to be had for six piastres a rattle, which is between three and four pounds English weight.

I therefore went into the city, and purchased forty of them, thinking it better to get them back into my own hands, than to leave them to be torn to pieces by people who did not understand the language. This is a serious check to the encouraging hopes we had been let to entertain of late concerning the Jews in this country; and as annexing them to the Hebrew Bibles seemed the only way the New Testament could be placed in the hands of the Jews; and as it would have given them an extensive circulation throughout all East, our disappointment was the greater. Hitherto I have scarcely been able to prevail upon any Jew to receive the New Testament by itself, or tracts.

Nicolayson's stocktaking after 11 months' work

In Safed Nicolayson takes stock in a letter from the end of November 1826 to the committee in London. He has been in the area for about 11 months. It is 16 months since he left London. In this period he has written several letters to the committee but, as he says, "I have not yet had the pleasure and advantage of receiving any letters from you." Of course the committee in London has written to him. The letters have just not reached him yet.

Such was life for a young Bible man in the 1820's. At this time Nicolayson is 23 years old.

He writes, among other things:

From my Journal you will see that that the New Testament has been torn out from some of the Bibles I have sold: might it not, therefore, be better to send the Old Testament only? Of New Testaments, in a separate volume, there are many here; but no Jew will take them as yet.

That Jews refuse to receive New Testaments does not cause Nicolayson to stop being a Bible man. He says:

It is true also, that the chief object of a missionary to the Jews, and which ought ever to be kept in view, is to draw their attention to the Sacred Volume, which they acknowledge as the infallible Word of God and especially to those of the prophecies which relate to the great question of the Messiahship of Jesus, and the other great truths connected with it ...

For Nicolayson it is therefore meaningful to distribute Tanach among Jews now that they will not receive the New Testament.

But it needs to be the right edition of the Tanach. What is meant by this? This requires an explanation. Most of the 1820's Bible men in the "Holy Land" deal with this question. Several of the Hebrew editions that were offered the Jews had notes or marks with regard to the various readings; these were indicated with a sign similar to a cross, which was then a common way to denote a reference. Moreover there were the three Hebrew letters Yod, Shin and Waw, which could be read as Yeshu in the notes to Psalm 3. Such matters meant that Jews had problems receiving the Tanach from the Bible men at that time. And we have to admit that it was not very expedient.

Of course this does not mean that the 19th century Bible men were ashamed of the cross, of what the cross of Jesus stands for: life out of death. And they were ready to die so that Jews as well as non-Jews might hear the word of life.

I keep returning to some words by Pliny Fisk, the young American missionary who was to have five years as a missionary in the Levant. On his deathbed in Beirut in 1825 he dictates the following short message to his father:

Dear beloved aged Father, – I compose a few lines for you upon a sick, probably a dying bed. When you gave me up for this mission, you gave me up for life and death. You know to whom to look for consolation and support. The same God who has comforted you so many years, under so many troubles, will comfort you under this. You know his consolations are neither few nor small. I leave these lines as a pledge to you, and my brothers and sisters, my nephews and nieces, that I love you all most dearly, though so long separated from you. I hope all, or nearly all our number, have been enabled to give themselves to Christ, and that we shall meet with our departed mother in heaven.

Moving words from a 33-year-old man to his old father. May we moved by such words continue to reach the gospel of Jesus to the Jewish people. Under different life conditions than the 19th century Bible men, but with the same commitment and calling.

I don't think anybody believes that Jewish evangelism is easy today. Who says that it was easy for the 19th century Bible men?