

The Demolition of the Jerusalem Library in 1857



By Kai Kjær-Hansen

In this article I shall try to give a few glimpses of how to effectively demolish a mission library. It was done in Jerusalem, in June 1857, with John Nicolayson's library – eight months after his death. Is there a “villain” here?

John Nicolayson arrived in the Levant at the end of December 1825, as a missionary sent out by the London Jews Society (LJS). It was not until 1833 that he was able to take up permanent residence in Jerusalem – the first European to do so. On November 23, 1833, he brought his family and belongings from Jaffa to Jerusalem. The American missionary couple Eliza and William Thomson arrived on April 26, 1834, but as their own house was not ready, “they have taken up their abode with us for the present,” Nicolayson writes.¹

Among Nicolayson's possessions were also books, some belonging to him personally and some to LJS; they were placed in his “study” in the house he had rented opposite the Citadel right inside Jaffa Gate. With this the first Protestant mission library in Jerusalem was established.

My guess is that apart from the Scriptures and the writings published by LJS, there were in the library various theological books, dictionaries, contemporary guidebooks, etc. Some of these Nicolayson bought himself; others were given to him, and paid for, by LJS. If Buxtorff's *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* (from 1607, reprinted at *Glasgow*, 1824) was also placed on a shelf, I do not know. A particular story is attached to this book.

During his brief stay in London in the summer of 1829, Nicolayson requested that the LJS Committee purchase Buxtorff's *Lexicon* “for the use of the Library in Palestine” – and he adds that it “might be obtained at Baynes for £ 1.10.0”! The Minutes reflect it in this way: “Resolved that the Secretaries be authorized if they see fit to purchase this Book for the Library in Palestine.”²

The book was expensive. At that time it cost one hundredth of Nicolayson's yearly salary. A check of LJS's account books may ascertain

1 *Jewish Intelligence* (1835), 183.

2 *LJS Committee Minutes*, Bodleian Library, Dep. CMJ. c. 13 #396, July 28, 1829.

whether or not the book was purchased. But I would not be surprised if it was, for John Nicolayson, having arrived from Malta, was in London for a crisis meeting and was determined to give notice. The crisis was prevented, however.

And of interest for the matter we are pursuing: I wonder what was written in the books Nicolayson received through LJS: "Belonging to London Jews Society"? Or "The Palestine Mission"? Or "John Nicolayson"? Or was nothing at all written?

Nicolayson's Library in Danger in 1834

The year 1834 is remembered by Nicolayson as "the calamitous year." On July 25, 1834, he wrote in a letter to the committee in London: "God's four sore punishments, earthquake, war, pestilence, and (in part) famine, have been abroad in this land, (and in part still are) since the close of the month of May."³ Most of the residents in Nicolayson's house fell deadly ill during the summer months. New mother Eliza Thomson, who also resided in Nicolayson's house, died on July 22.⁴

The "war" that is mentioned was a rebellion in which village fellahin (peasant farmers) forced their way into Jerusalem at the end of May 1834. The city's soldiers barricaded themselves in the Citadel and waited for reinforcement from Ibrahim Pasha, who came to Jerusalem on June 7. Nicolayson's library was in the line of fire.

About the happenings on the morning of June 4, Nicolayson wrote: "The Fellahs are now all round us ... We could not catch any of their words, but heard them first hunting the fowls in the poultry-yard, and next break open the window of my study, where, besides all my books, they would find many of Mr. Thomson's things."

In the afternoon Nicolayson ventured into his study: "I found every thing overturned in the room except the books. I looked into my writing desk which was opened and found all my papers huddled up together. A little lock-up box containing all my papers of importance was gone. To remove the books which did not appear to have been touched as yet, was impossible."⁵

Later in the day the Fellahs returned this box with papers to Nicolayson, "pretending that they have found them in the yard, but I much suspected that they had themselves committed the robbery," Nicolayson wrote.⁶

On June 5, Nicolayson hired six persons as guards and wrote about his library:

3 *Monthly Intelligence* (1834), 199.

4 *Jewish Intelligence* (1834), 200; (1835), 282.

5 *Jewish Intelligence* (1835), 204–205.

6 *Jewish Intelligence* (1835), 206.

Finding that some of the books had been taken out of the study, I employed three guards in bringing the rest over to this part of the house, and stowed them all in one of our little rooms. I cannot at present tell how many may be missing, but I believe that they have only taken blank books, cutting out, I find, such parts of them as were written on. Thus they have destroyed several of my labours, on which I have been employed for years. In another room in the same part of the house a few books had been forgotten, and these they have all cut up since.⁷

Or, in Eliza Thomson's words in a letter to her sister in the USA: "Mr. Nicolayson obtained permission to remove his library below, but found to his great regret, that many of his most valuable books were gone, many sets broken, and many wantonly cut up for wadding for their guns. His valuable maps and engravings were ruined."⁸

For posterity, the most regrettable thing is that Nicolayson's maps and engravings have been lost. This was before the camera came to Jerusalem.⁹

However serious this attack on the library was, things could have been far worse. The majority of the books in the library were still safe after the rebellion. The "attack" on Nicolayson's – or the Mission's – library after his death was far more serious.

The Library Torn Apart in 1857

John Nicolayson died in Jerusalem on October 6, 1856. Mrs. Jane Nicolayson was in Ireland at the time, and the estate had to be dealt with. At his death Nicolayson was a naturalised Englishman; unasked, British Consul James Finn intervened in the affair. LJS was represented by the strong personalities of Bishop Samuel Gobat and Dr. Edward Macgowan of the Jerusalem Local Committee. Without going into details, it is safe to say that there were no cordial feelings between Finn on the one hand and Gobat and Macgowan on the other.

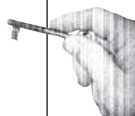
I will now briefly describe the process that led to the dispersal of the library. Who was the "villain"?

That the situation had reached a deadlock is apparent from a letter written May 23, 1857, by LJS, to the British secretary of state for foreign affairs, George William Frederick Villiers, 4th Earl of Clarendon. This letter contains a protest against Consul Finn's intervention in the affair, as LJS

7 *Jewish Intelligence* (1835), 206–207.

8 Extract of William Thomson's journal and Eliza Thomson's letter to her sister, see *Missionary Herald* (1835), 44–53.

9 In her book *Reminiscences of Mrs. Finn* (London and Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd, no date), 114–115, Elizabeth Anne Finn claims that she had made "attempts at photography," and when the LJS missionary James Graham arrived in December 1853, he "brought with him a fine photographic apparatus, which he used with excellent effect ... That was the beginning of photography in Jerusalem."



had “representatives on the spot,” namely the Local Committee, and Mrs. Nicolayson had full confidence in the Society’s treatment of the matter. A pension had been arranged for Mrs. Nicolayson “from the commencement of the quarter in which her lamented husband died ... the same means that she had enjoyed during his life time while residing, which she has done for some time, in Europe – an act, which ... has been gratefully acknowledged by her.” Moreover, the letter maintains that Mrs. Nicolayson “desired that his [Nicolayson’s] Library at Jerusalem should be presented to the Society”; as for money, “a Balance remains in favour of the Society.”¹⁰

Mrs. Nicolayson in Ireland can therefore be eliminated from the suspects. LJS and the Jerusalem Local Committee were trying to prevent the sale of the books. We are thus left with Consul Finn, the son-in-law of Alexander McCaul, renowned missionary to the Jews and author of the book *The Old Paths*. Consul Finn was, as a matter of fact, intensely committed to the welfare and salvation of Israel.¹¹

We shall pass over those matters in the account of the estate that are related to Nicolayson’s salary, his payment in advance of rent for the house he lived in, and the sale of his personal belongings, and instead focus on his library.

From May 25 to 27, 1857, the involved parties in Jerusalem were busy. They exchanged notes and letters with each other. They were in different rooms, but perhaps in the same compound – Christ Church!

According to the Minutes of the Jerusalem Local Committee

On May 25, the Jerusalem Local Committee read a letter from LJS Secretary Capt. Layard, dated London April 28, from which it appears that it was Consul Finn’s intention “to offer the Library of the deceased for Sale by public auction,” whereupon he would hand over the keys of the house to the Secretary. The Jerusalem Local Committee responded with the following decision:

Resolved.

That the Secretary in reference to the announced Sale, remind Mr. Consul Finn of the expressed wishes of Mrs. Nicolayson and the claims of the Society on the books left by the late Rev. J. Nicolayson, and if necessary, that he enter a protest against their being sold by public auction.¹²

On May 27 a letter was sent to Consul Finn, signed by the Secretary, Macgowan. It opens in this way:

10 *LJS Letter, London August 23, 1857* to the Earl of Clarendon, Bodleian Library, Dep. CMJ. c. 110.

11 See Sybil M. Jack, “James and Elizabeth Finn: Missionary Activity in Jerusalem 1848–1863,” in *Mishkan*, no. 15 (1991), 13–24.

12 *Minutes 1842–1867*, Christ Church, ITAC Archives, Jerusalem: Minutes no. 44, p. 321.

In reference to your note of the 25th Inst. in which you intimate your intention to offer the library of the late Rev. J. Nicolayson for sale by public auction, I am instructed by the Jerusalem Local Committee to remind you that in a letter to Capt. Layard under the date of 10 Dec. last, Mrs. Nicolayson states that she had written to the British Consul to hand over any books bearing her or her husband's name to the library of the Mission with the exception of those which she wishes to be selected as remembrances by friends in Jerusalem. The books without names, are, I conceive the property of the Society purchased on their account by the late Mr. Nicolayson for his own use and that of the Mission.

Macgowan next maintains that the books are important for the Mission but that they will "probably fetch little or nothing at a public Sale." And he asks, with a due regard "to Mrs. Nicolayson's expressed wishes and to the rights of the Mission," that the Consul would take the Jerusalem Local Committee's request into consideration, "and that you will be pleased either to deliver the said property over to me with the keys of the house or to refer the matter as well as that of the Salary to London to be settled between the Foreign Office and the Committee of the London Society."¹³

Consul Finn answered promptly, the very same day. So did the Local Committee – with a letter, no. 2 to Finn, also dated May 27:

Mr. Finn declines referring the question to the Foreign Office, and declares his intention of holding a Sale of the books on the morrow. (28th Inst.)

The Secretary writes to Mr. Consul Finn, proposing that the books be left under his charge or that of the Secretary until a legal award be made respecting them. In case of this proposal being declined, the Secretary encloses a copy of the Resolution Minute 44 protesting against the sale.

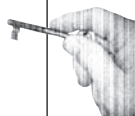
This also got a prompt response from Finn, whereupon the Committee wrote letter no. 3 to Finn – still on May 27:

Mr. Consul Finn repeats his intention of holding the Sale, but defers it to Monday the 1st June, affirming that he is acting according to the directions of his superiors. Supposing that the Secretary had given up the claim upon the books without name, he will not note down the dates and places of their printing.

The Secretary corrects the mistake of Mr. Consul Finn that he has relinquished his claim to the books without name as he [the Secretary] believed them to be the property of the Society.¹⁴

13 Ibid., Minutes no. 45, p. 322.

14 Ibid., Minutes no. 45, p. 323.



So, Consul Finn demanded that the Jerusalem Local Committee draw up a list of the books without names written in them, which they refused to do.

But all the protests of the Jerusalem Local Committee were of no avail. There is no reason to go into details. The books were put up for sale.

Consul Finn's Sale of Nicolayson's Books

I shall here restrict myself to the relevant information from Arnold Blumberg's (much) abbreviated version of Consul Finn's Diary:

APRIL 6 – Sale commenced of Mr. Nicolayson's goods.

APRIL 7 – Sale continued; but by auction.

APRIL 8 – Auction renewed but no people came. This being the preparation of passover – no Jews came, of course.

APRIL 9 – Discussion as to the estate of Mr. Nicolayson of the remainder of the Quarter upon which he had entered before death – refusal to give up the house without that payment to the Consul.

APRIL 10 – Present of books to certain persons according to direction of Mr. Nicolayson –

JUNE 1 – Keys of the Nicolayson house given up to Dr. Macgowan on behalf of the London Society – and receipt taken from him for the same –

Sale of the Hebrew books in the office delayed to Monday 4th for want of sufficient competitors –

JUNE 3 – Sale of Books of Mr. Nicolayson (not Hebrew) – At 3 o'clock – adjourned to Friday 6th.

JUNE 4 – Sale of Hebrew books of Mr. Nicolayson.

JUNE 5 – Sale of General books of Mr. Nicolayson – left unfinished – till Tuesday 9th.

JUNE 13 – Final sale of Nicolayson Books.¹⁵

It remains to be investigated why Consul Finn acted as he did. That he demolished Nicolayson's – and the Jerusalem Mission's – library in Jerusalem is beyond discussion. John Nicolayson was a close friend of the consul and his wife till his death in 1856.¹⁶

Perhaps his actions can best be understood in light of the power struggle between the two conflicting parties. Consul Finn won this struggle, but

¹⁵ Arnold Blumberg, *Jerusalem, 1849–1858. The Consular Diary of James and Elizabeth Anne Finn* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1980), 256–259.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth Anne Finn, no date, 142–146, 160–162.

at the same time destroyed a part of Nicolayson's – and the Mission's – library.

Many private libraries have since been destroyed, usually when the heirs sold the books for a song to second-hand bookshops. In these cases it would be better to pack up the library and send it to the mission, although this is not a guarantee of anything. New people in the mission do not always have an eye for the value of old books. But that is a different matter.

It might be a good idea to go through our libraries and leave instructions for the distribution of our books, so that our heirs will not have a choice.

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