



First “Organized” Bible-work in 19th Century Jerusalem

Part VI: Wolff, Fisk and King in Jerusalem (1823)

by Kai Kjær-Hansen

In the spring of 1822 Joseph Wolff, the first Bible-man of Jewish extraction, had spent approximately three months in Jerusalem. Here he had many debates with Jews about Jesus and Christianity, and he had also distributed Scriptures, though a large part of the distributed Hebrew Bibles and New Testaments had been burnt. The most surprising thing was, however, that at the end of his visit he agreed with leading Jews that he would no longer distribute the New Testament.¹

At the end of April 1823, Wolff was back in Jerusalem together with the American missionaries Pliny Fisk and Jonas King.

This article will show, among other things, how Wolff and the Americans divided the work among themselves; it will also assess their “success” in terms of distribution of Scriptures. Of particular interest is the question of how Wolff, in 1823, acted on his 1822 agreement with the Jews of Jerusalem.

From Malta with a Large Supply of Scriptures

Joseph Wolff concluded his first visit to Jerusalem as a Bible-man at the end of May 1822. He returned to Malta on November 28 via Aleppo, Beirut, Antioch, Cyprus, and Alexandria.² Here he met the American missionaries Pliny Fisk³ Jonas King.⁴

Wolff had really intended to proceed from Malta to England; but a let-

1 See *Mishkan*, no. 49 (2006), 42–58.

2 Cf. *Missionary Journal and Memoir of the Rev. Joseph Wolf* [sic]. *Missionary to the Jews. Written by Himself*. Revised and Edited by John Bayford, Esq. F. S. A. (London: James Duncan, 1824), 316–360.

3 Pliny Fisk, born June 24, 1792. Cf. Alvand Bond, *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A.M. – Late Missionary to Palestine, From the American Board of Missions* (Edinburgh: Waugh & Innes, 1829), 1. Fisk came to the Levant in January 1820 together with his missionary colleague Levi Parsons; the latter visited Jerusalem in the spring of 1821; see *Mishkan*, no. 48 (2006), 77–82. Both were on their way to Jerusalem in the beginning of 1822, but Parsons died in Alexandria on February 10, 1822, whereupon Fisk returned to Malta. About Parsons’ death, and Fisk’s in 1825 in Beirut, see *Mishkan*, no. 52 (2007), 11–23.

4 Jonas King, born 1792, studied in Paris, but at Fisk’s request, and after Parsons’ death, he had agreed to be employed as a missionary to the Levant for a three-year period; cf. *Missionary Herald* (1822), 353–354; (1827), 344–345.

ter from one of his patrons in England, Henry Drummond, and the fact that the two Americans were about to leave for Jerusalem, made him change his plans.⁵

After Wolff ended his quarantine in Malta, the three Bible-men left the island on January 3, and arrived at Alexandria on January 10, 1823. Their plans were to be in Jerusalem for Easter of 1823. After three months of missionary work in Egypt, they set out on their journey through the desert to Palestine on April 7.⁶

Large Supplies of Scriptures at the Departure from Malta

The trio left Malta with a large supply of Scriptures. The question to be answered here is to what extent they were able to deliver them when they came to Jerusalem.

Fisk writes, in connection with their departure from Malta, "We carry with us about 2,000 copies of the Bible, or parts of it, and 4,000 tracts. I have, also, at Cairo 3,000 tracts, and three boxes of Bibles, which I left there last spring."⁷

Cleardo Naudi gives, on behalf of the Malta Bible Society, exact information about the number of *Hebrew* Scriptures which he had given the three missionaries from the London Jews Society's (LJS) depot, namely "five boxes, made in a size to be carried by the mules as usual in Palestine. These boxes contain 312 Hebrew Testaments, 29 books of the Prophets, 10 German Hebrew New Testaments, 20 of the Gospel, 800 Tracts, and 2000 Cards."⁸ It should be noted that the supply did not comprise Bibles in the sense of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanach*).

In about three months' work in Egypt, the inventory says, "they distributed, or gave away for distribution, 3,700 tracts. They also gave away 256 copies of the Bible or parts of it, and sold 644 (in all 900) for 2378 piastres or 183 dollars."⁹

On their departure from Cairo for Palestine, Fisk and King write on April 7, 1823:

"We had engaged 13 [camels], and were to pay six dollars and a half for each, for the journey from Cairo to Jaffa. Four were for ourselves and servant, one for our guide Mustapha, one for water, one for provisions, four for our trunks of books and clothes, and two for the books of the Bible Society and the Jews' Society. We had purchased four goat skins and four leather bottles, in which to carry our water."¹⁰

5 *Jewish Expositor* (1823), 158.

6 *Missionary Herald* (1823), 343–344, 378.

7 *I*, 212.

8 *Jewish Expositor* (1823), 158.

9 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 34.

10 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 34.



Camels and Scriptures – again! Thankfully the words are so clear that it is impossible to create a myth on their basis – that they came to Palestine with 13 camels “loaded with Bibles,” like the myth about Wolff, who supposedly came to Palestine in 1821 with “20 camels loaded with Bibles.”¹¹ While it is not possible to state the exact number of Hebrew Scriptures brought along, it will now be shown that Fisk and King came to Jerusalem with a limited number of non-Hebrew Scriptures for distribution. Fewer than 150! Add to that, however, an extra 50 copies transported through the desert on the camels, and sold in Gaza and on the journey up to Jerusalem.¹²

The Trio’s Arrival in Jerusalem – and Their Cooperation

The three missionaries arrived in Jerusalem on April 25, just one week before the Passover as kept by the oriental Christians.¹³ The Americans left on June 27, Wolff a little later, namely on July 17, 1823.

On their arrival they went their separate ways. Wolff chose living quarters in the Jewish quarter – with the difficulties and advantages connected with that (see below). The Americans rented two separate rooms in the Greek Convent of St. Michael the Archangel or Mar Michael.¹⁴

But even though Wolff and the Americans were staying in different lodgings, they were in close contact with each other through this whole period. They saw themselves as one team with different tasks. In Wolff’s words: “They [Fisk and King] went to the uncircumcision, and I to the circumcision.”¹⁵ This does not mean that Wolff could not help the Americans with their distribution of Scriptures; nor does it mean that the Americans had no contact with Jews.

Fisk’s and King’s Distribution of Scriptures in Jerusalem

It is very surprising to see how little was published in the *Missionary Herald* about the primary reason that Fisk and King were in Jerusalem, namely to distribute Bibles.¹⁶ But from the scattered bits of information it is, nevertheless, possible to present a clear picture of this and of the number of Scriptures brought along for distribution.

On April 28, three days after their arrival, Fisk writes in his first letter from Jerusalem, “The first evening my spirits were depressed and desponding. But I now feel much encouraged. We have already sold about 70 Testaments and Psalters, and have distributed more than 300 Tracts,

11 About this persistent myth, see *Mishkan* 49 (2006), 43–45.

12 Cf. *Missionary Herald* (1824), 38.

13 *Missionary Herald* (1823), 378.

14 In 1821 Levi Parsons stayed here, and Mar Michael was to become *the* place to stay not only for Bible-men; it was also the place where the first Bible Society Room was set up (see next article in this series).

15 *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 64.

16 The published material consists mainly of lengthy descriptions of Jerusalem’s demography and the Christian sanctuaries, which the missionaries visited, and of their trips to places in the vicinity, e.g. Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, etc.

and Mr. Wolff is engaged day and night in preaching to the Jews and disputing with their Rabbies [*sic*]."¹⁷

Thanks to Cleardo Naudi in Malta, we are in possession of a description of the missionaries' activities on April 29. He sent extracts of the Americans' journal to LJS in London, which subsequently published them in the *Jewish Expositor*.

April 29, 1823. Early in the morning an Armenian priest called and bought a Testament in the Turkish language, printed with Armenian letters; we gave him a second as a present. After this we¹⁸ took five such Testaments, and went to the Armenian convent, and sold them all at the door. Others were wanted. One man paid in advance, to be sure of getting one. We returned to our rooms and took ten more, but before we arrived at the convent, we sold them all to Armenians in the street. We had only five more such Testaments. We came again to our lodgings, and took these five, and sold them immediately at the convent door. More were wanted. One man followed us half way to our lodging, and begged us, for the love of God, to let him have one. We gave to a Greek from Angora [= Ankara], seventy-five tracts for distribution there. A Syrian pilgrim called and purchased five Syriac Psalters. The Roman Catholics continued to throw obstacles in the way, but these, through constant and repeated exertion, and I trust, through fervent prayers that the holy writ may find its way, and be circulate among all nations, we observe abating from day to day.¹⁹

On May 10, King writes: "Since our arrival, we have sold about seventy, and given away about forty, New Testaments, besides between five and six hundred tracts. The greater part of these were distributed within four or five days after our arrival." King's inventory has fewer details than the one in the missionaries' journal of April 29. But this is not important for the objective we are pursuing. Within two weeks after their arrival, they were running out of Scriptures, which emerges from the continuation of King's letter: "We have sometimes had thirty call upon us in a day, to purchase the Holy Scriptures, with which we were unable to supply them, on account of our boxes of Bibles, which were sent from Alexandria to Bairoat [*sic*] three months ago, not having arrived."²⁰

These boxes do not seem to have reached Jerusalem *while* Fisk and King were in town, which can be concluded from the precise inventory they drew up on June 26, the day before they left Jerusalem: "During two months that we have been here, we have sold eighty-four copies of

17 Bond, 209.

18 Who does this "we" include? Under April 30, but about the same incident, Wolff writes: "Mr. Fisk and myself went to the Armenian convent, and sold five Armenian Testaments in a few minutes; and Mr. Fisk afterwards sold fifteen more." *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 106.

19 *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 73.

20 *Missionary Herald* (1823), 378.



the Scriptures and given away fifty-two, and 770 tracts. Brother Wolff remains to labor a little longer among the Jews, and after that he proposes to rejoin us on mount Lebanon."²¹

In other words, during the last six weeks, approximately, of an eight-week stay in Jerusalem, King and Fisk only managed to distribute 25 copies of the Scriptures – to Christians and pilgrims in Jerusalem. When they left Jerusalem, they had used up their supply.²²

In Levi Parsons' own view in 1821, his "success" was not directly proportional to the number of distributed Scriptures. Reading the Scripture and talking with Christian pilgrims were in themselves worthwhile activities.²³ The same can be said about Fisk and King in 1823. The editor of the *Missionary Herald* commented on this when mentioning the missionaries' time in Jerusalem:

During the two or three succeeding weeks, they were diligently engaged in such missionary labors as their circumstances would permit. With the Jews, Turks, and Catholic and Greek Christians, they had frequent opportunities of free conversations, and of reading and expounding the Scriptures.²⁴

For the editor of the *Missionary Herald*, it was important to emphasize that Fisk and King had *also* had contact with Jews in Jerusalem. And certainly, this cannot be questioned. But Fisk and King were here very much dependent on Wolff. They needed him as their interpreter, as they had no common language with the Jews of Jerusalem. It seems that they expressed their appreciation of Wolff in the original journals, but the American editor of the published journals has, to a large extent, removed this information.²⁵

The Americans left Jerusalem empty-handed, i.e. without Scriptures. What became of Wolff – or "Rabbi Joseph" which, according to him, was what the Jews of Jerusalem called him?²⁶

Wolff's Arrival in Jerusalem in 1823

The way Wolff himself saw it, his first visit to Jerusalem in 1822 had been a great success. In the last article in this series we challenged this view. From Alexandria, on his way to Malta, he wrote in the autumn of 1822 about his first visit: "No personal insult took place against me in Jerusalem; except

21 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 100.

22 During their journey back to Beirut, they met the newly arrived LJS missionary William Bucknor Lewis in Sidon on July 5; from him they received a new supply of Scriptures. See next article in this series.

23 Cf. *Mishkan* 48 (2006), 81–82.

24 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 70.

25 This can be deduced from Wolff's journals and scattered fragments of the Americans' journals which were not published in the *Missionary Herald*, but elsewhere. See below in connection with the mentioned cases.

26 *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 104, 107.

that the Catholics publicly preached against me ..." And he continues: "Jews wrote to me after my departure, that I should return to Jerusalem. Greeks and Armenians, and even many Catholics, walked upon Sion, and in the valley of Jehoshaphat, and read the Gospel, and exclaimed; 'Truth! wonderful!' But you will have received my Journals by this time."²⁷

This is Wolff in a nutshell! His short-term memory leaves a good deal to be desired. Or perhaps more accurately, he writes in "the present." He "forgets" his troubles in 1822 and is focused on his hope and vision that Jews – now in 1823 – may receive Jesus as Messiah. Forgotten is the fact that Jews in Jerusalem did not only burn the Hebrew New Testament, but also the Hebrew Bibles which he distributed in 1822. Kept in his memory are the many conversations he had – also with leading Jews. He did not doubt that the contacts established in 1822 would be intact in 1823. In this he was not disappointed. One of the first things he wrote in his journal on his arrival in Jerusalem in 1823 is:

On the first moment of our arrival I called on Rabbi Mendel, and then upon Rabbi Solomon Sapira. They welcome me very cordially; and I was immediately surrounded by a great many Jews, who shook hands with me. Abraham Shlifro, who last year professed his conviction in Christ, in the evening joined me in prayer. Rabbi Mendel desired one of the Jews to give me a room, until he could procure me a better one, after the sabbath day was over ... [99]

Lodgings Among the Jews

The three Bible-men arrived in Jerusalem on April 25 "about four o'clock."²⁸ As to lodgings they needed to act quickly, as the Jewish Sabbath would begin a few hours later. As already hinted, this was when the chief rabbi of the Polish Jews residing in Jerusalem, Mendel Ben Baruch (Menahem Mendel), came to Wolff's help. The fact that Wolff was living among Jews upset the leaders of the Spanish community, among them Rabbi Zusi (Shlomo Moishe Suzin), the newly appointed chief rabbi of the Sephardic Jews, who had played an active role in 1822 in connection with the burning of Hebrew Scriptures. On April 29, Wolff was informed that they planned to send a complaint to the Pasha of Damascus about this matter. To Wolff's question, "Why will you not permit me to live in the Jewish quarter?" three arguments were given: 1) It is against the Jews' "constitution and custom" that an unmarried man should live among married people; 2) The Muslim authorities may be led to believe that the Jews of Jerusalem plan to become independent of them with the Europeans' help; and 3) This arrangement will make it easier for Wolff to

²⁷ Wolf, 331–332. Wolff's journals were published in the *Jewish Expositor* in 1824; the last part was published first. In order to avoid a large number of notes, I have inserted page references to the *Jewish Expositor* 1824 in square brackets in the text.

²⁸ *Missionary Herald* (1824), 39.



draw Jews to Christianity. “We cannot turn you out by force, but we shall send immediately to the Pasha of Damascus” [101–102].

Probably the complaint was never sent. Rabbi Mendel intervened and found a compromise: “He procured me a house in the Jewish quarter, which belongs to a Turk [Muslim]; I hired it for a whole year. This house stands upon Mount Zion” [102].

In characteristic Wolff language it is said under May 12:

My house where I lodge, and which stands on mount Zion, is close to a house of a Spanish Jew, named Isaac, so that we can converse with each other from the terrace. I tell him every evening; – Isaac, I love Jesus my Lord. How much I feel his love in me! He is the very Lion of the tribe of Judah! [145]

Wolff’s Contact with Jews

Apart from a number of unnamed Jews, Wolff’s published journal mentions approximately twenty-five Jews with whom he conversed in 1823. Of those mentioned by name, approximately ten are individuals encountered in 1822. One of the most frequently mentioned names is Rabbi Mendel. Of the first nine days, Wolff had contact with Rabbi Mendel on at least seven! On April 28, Wolff introduced Fisk and King to Mendel and acted as their interpreter.²⁹ Wolff continued to be in contact with Rabbi Solomon Sapira in 1823, and in 1823 Rabbi Joseph Marcowitz appears for the first time. And then there is, of course, Abraham Ben David Shlifro, who in 1822 was already called “the convert” (see below).

But even if contact was maintained with a number of Jews – in addition to some new contacts – one should not be deceived. The kindness and hospitality Wolff received from Rabbi Mendel and others should not be construed to mean that the latter was “open” to the gospel. Just as Wolff wished to convert Jews to faith in Jesus, there were Jews in Jerusalem who still hoped to win Wolff back to Judaism. Wolff had no doubt as to what Mendel thought of him. Already on Wolff’s first evening in Jerusalem, a Jew accused him of having embraced Christianity for the sake of personal interests. Mendel intervened with the words: “We must be just, and confess, that Mr. Wolf [*sic*] did not profess his faith in Jesus of Nazareth, on account of money. Mr. Wolf is sincere; he has been led astray in his early years by reading the New Testament, and for this reason I am very much grieved, to see him so firm” [99].

Rabbi Solomon Sapira went even further in his efforts to win Wolff back to Judaism. Under May 7, Wolff writes:

Rabbi Solomon Sapira called on me and said. “I beg one thing of you: believe in the Talmud; for even if you believe in Christ, and trans-

29 Cf. Wolff’s description [100]. This is not mentioned in the *Missionary Herald*. In the Americans’ original journal, it is said: “Went with Mr. Wolf [*sic*] to call on Rabbi Mendel” [71].

gress the whole law of Moses, still if you believe in the Gemarah, you will finally be saved." [142]

Solomon Sapira's "offer" made no impression on Wolff. But then Wolff's "offer" of salvation in Jesus did not make any great impression on the Jews of Jerusalem, either.

Some of the leading personalities from the Spanish/Sephardic community pursued a different tactic and attempted to keep Wolff at a distance through bans. They were, for example, very annoyed that Wolff was able to study Jewish writings, borrowed from Jewish people, in his efforts to win Jews for his cause. Under May 27, Wolff writes:

Ye cannot imagine the stir which was produced among the Spanish Jews, as soon as they observed that I was reading their books, and trying to shew that they are in error out of their own books. Several excommunications were proclaimed in the synagogue against those who lend me their books; but none of them regarded the excommunication. Rabbi Isaac Abulafia, the most respectable Jew among the Spanish Jews in Palestine, even made me a present of some treatises on the Talmud. Rabem Zuzi [Suzin], the high-priest of The Spanish Jews, observed, that it never was seen at Jerusalem, that a Jew should come there for the purpose of persuading them that Jesus is the Messiah." [268]

It appears from Wolff's journals that a number of Spanish Jews visited him and that he also read the New Testament with them.

Wolff's strategy

With Mendel's help Wolff succeeded in finding a place to stay *among* the Jews of Jerusalem. Wolff is able to report about almost daily conversations and debates with Jews who came to see him. In several cases he studied the New Testament with them. Once he went to see some Sephardic Jews in a Turkish coffee house [267], but as a rule they came to him and his house.

He was, however, happy to accept invitations to eat in their homes. This implies that he had to make up his mind about how to act in a Talmudic-Jewish table fellowship.

Food and Table Fellowship

Two days after his arrival Wolff wrote: "I have adopted the Jewish fashion of eating, to satisfy the Jews more fully, that neither meat nor drink, has induced me to embrace Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour" [100]. While enjoying table fellowship with leading Jews – and although he was their guest – Wolff set boundaries on which Jewish rituals he was prepared to follow. The following are two examples.

On May 3, in Mendel's house, Mendel asked him to wash his "hands



before dinner, and to say the Talmudical prayer." Wolff refused both, adding, "but I said most readily some other prayers, which they are accustomed to say." This made Mrs. Mendel angry, but the meal could now begin. Wolff continues: "The conversation was about Jesus Christ during the whole dinner" [106].

On May 9, the mother of Rabbi Isaac Ben Shloma offered "to give me board at a very cheap rate, on condition that I would accommodate myself to the Jews, in asking the blessing." What is he to do? "As most of their prayers are quite innocent, I really would do it, if they would dispense with my washing the hands before eating, which is a Talmudical ceremony; for great advantage would arise from sitting at table with Jews, and I might always converse with six or seven rabbies, who dine there." But he stuck to his principles, as explained in a letter to Isaac Ben Shloma:

My dear Rabbi Isaac,
I have considered the matter, and I believe that my conscience will not permit me to wash the hands before eating, for I find in this law something against the Gospel, and I shall always be ready to lay down my life for the Gospel, which is the power of God. I beg you therefore to send the victual to my room. Neither can I ask the blessing after the dinner, which the Jewish liturgy prescribes.

Your true friend, JOSEPH WOLFF.

May 9, 1823 [142]

Wolff, the Talmud, and Mission

Wolff had no high opinion of the Talmud. At most, he conceded that the "Tanaim, *i.e.* the compilers of the Talmud, sometimes speak the truth involuntarily, and through ignorance" [142]. On May 9, he and Rabbi Mendel were engaged in a discussion about the Talmud. Wolff expressed his view in the following words: "The Gemarah cannot be believed by a conscientious man, for it is in open contradiction to the law of Moses and the prophets; the Old Testament, for instance, says that David sinned; and the Talmud says 'If any one body should say that David had sinned, he would be in a great mistake.'"

Rabbi Mendel defended the Talmud, and David, whereupon Wolff ended with this volley: "You have confirmed me by your answer, that the whole Talmud is nothing but nonsense. In spite of your Talmud Jesus Christ is the Son of God"³⁰ [144].

Still, Wolff used the Talmud quite a lot in his efforts to convince Jews that Jesus is the Messiah.

30 I will refrain from comment on and criticism of Wolff's language here and elsewhere. An examination of the language of Wolff and other contemporary missionaries would doubtless call forth contradiction – also from people involved in Jewish evangelism today.

Talmud for the Sake of the Jews

Wolff's strategy for how the Talmud can be used is expressed in these lines:

Although the arguments out of the Talmud have no weight with me, they have weight with the Jews, and for this reason I shall make use of the Talmud for some months, until I have shewn them the folly of believing in it, and shall have given my friends in England a little picture of the spirit which prevails among the Jews at Jerusalem, to shew future missionaries how one may get access to the Jews at Jerusalem, which is really not so easy. It gives, at the same time, a good insight into the root of their errors. I hope, after some time to adopt the method of speaking simply with them about the love of Christ, and to translate Baxter's *Saints' Rest* for the Jews at Jerusalem, into the Hebrew and Jewish-German. [268]

Such words caused William Jowett to note, with satisfaction, that Wolff "latterly has grown ... disinclined to argue with them from the Talmud."³¹ This refers to Wolff's visit in 1823, but it does not reflect how Wolff then worked in Jerusalem. Throughout this period he argued from the Talmud in his debates with the Jews.

One rabbi even helped him to find good arguments.

Wolff Receives Help from Rabbi Joseph Marcowitz

Joseph Marcowitz, an 80-year-old Polish rabbi, was not among the Jews Wolff met in 1822. On May 1, 1823, Marcowitz and the 19-year-old Rabbi Isaac Ben Shloma "called on us," as it is said in the *Missionary Herald*, which gives a summary of their conversation on the coming of the Messiah and the understanding of "Shiloh" in Gen 49:10.³²

First: Who were "us"? For readers of the *Missionary Herald*, the obvious conclusion was "our" American missionaries! But a comment from Fisk, recorded in a different context, says that "Mr. Wolf was present, and acted as interpreter."³³

Next: In the *Jewish Expositor*, it was said that Marcowitz "was many years ago convinced of the truth of Christianity, but never making any public profession of it" [102].

However that may be (see below), Marcowitz made his rabbinical expertise available for Wolff and his cause and even challenged Wolff with the following words: "You ought to argue with Jews from the Talmud, and there are many things in the Talmud which favour the system laid down in the New Testament." (One example: When the Messiah comes,

31 William Jowett, *Christian Researches in Syria and the Holy Land* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1825), 231.

32 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 67-68. With a few editorial changes, also printed in the *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 72.

33 Isaac Bird, *Bible Work in Bible Lands* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1872), 57.



the law will be abolished and the eating of pork will be permitted.) Wolff also wanted to become acquainted with passages from the Talmud which can vindicate the truth of what the Letter to the Hebrews says about Jesus' sacrifice, etc. [102–103].

Wolff and Marcowitz spent days and nights together studying the Talmud. This caused both King and Mrs. Marcowitz to worry – although for different reasons. King feared that “it must soon injure his health materially, and if persisted in, deprive the Christian world of one of its ablest missionaries to the long-lost and despised people of the seed of Abraham.”³⁴ Mrs. Marcowitz was worried because she feared that “the whole congregation of Israel ... may talk about it” – a worry that Marcowitz did not share: “one word of mine will surely silence the whole congregation of Israel; go home, my love, and sleep very sweetly.”

After this “good night” to his wife, Marcowitz, who had a reputation for being able to cure by means of Shem HaMeforash, acquainted Wolff with the mystery of the ineffable name [104–105]. Marcowitz, on a later occasion, told Fisk “that faith is not a matter of the head, but of the heart” [222].

According to Wolff, Marcowitz had watched “my conduct, and observed that it is the conduct of a true Jew, unblameable and pure.” Wolff was aware that this smacked of self-praise, and added: “But with all this I feel that I am a sinner, and can only be saved by Christ” [145].

Whether Wolff had characterized Marcowitz to LJS as “a secret believer in Christianity” cannot be decided. This is how he is described at the LJS Annual Meeting in London in 1824.³⁵ But the following episode calls such an opinion into question.

Under May 16, Wolff writes:

After these rabbinical discussions, I asked the old Rabbi Marcowitz whether he had often thought of dying? Rabbi Joseph Marcowitz shrunk back when I mentioned death; but I continued to say to him, “You must die,” and if the door-post of your soul is not sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ, you will not enter the heavenly Canaan, whether you be buried at Jerusalem or at Safet. I preach to you forgiveness of sins by Jesus Christ; by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses. [223]

It is difficult to imagine that Wolff would be talking in this way to a “convert” – or to a “secret believer in Christianity.”

But Marcowitz was not the only one to help Wolff gather arguments from the Talmud for his cause. Others lent him books (see above).

And now: How, and in what numbers, did Wolff lend or distribute Hebrew New Testaments in 1823?

³⁴ Cf. LJS *Sixteenth Report of the London Society*, (1824), 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Hebrew New Testaments in Jerusalem, 1823

Quite a few of the Hebrew Scriptures that Wolff had distributed in 1822 had gone up in flames. On paper he had given his word of honor “not to make presents of them [the New Testament] or of the tracts, among the Jews in Jerusalem, any more, when I perceived that they were determined to burn every copy.” Yet with the following addition: “But this does not prevent me lending copies of the New Testament to those who, I am sure, will not burn them.”³⁶

In 1823, were any of the New Testaments which Wolff had distributed in 1822 left?

At least three prominent Jews had kept the New Testaments they received in 1822.

Rabbi Salomon Sapira. On August 1, 1822, after his first visit, Wolff writes from Aleppo: “The great Solomon Sapira, who is considered as the greatest Hebrew critical scholar at Jerusalem, has written a criticism upon the Hebrew New Testament and the Hebrew Bible I gave to him.” Wolff was told about this in a letter he received in Jaffa; Sapira wanted Wolff to return to Jerusalem “for he does not dare to trust the letter to any one else,” says Wolff.³⁷ However, Wolff did not then return to Jerusalem.

In 1823, Wolff said about Rabbi Solomon Sapira that “he had read the New Testament I gave him, but found no wisdom in it.” But it is typical of Wolff that he did not give up, which becomes clear from the following words: “We therefore read together again 1 Cor. i.ii” [142].

Rabbi Menahem Mendel. Mendel had also looked at the Testament he received from Wolff in 1822. Under May 3, 1823, Wolff writes: “Rabbi Mendel to-day shewed me the words of Jesus Christ, ‘I came not to abolish the law;’ cited in the Talmud, Treatise Sabbath, chapter xvi. page 116” [107].

Isaac Abulafia. After the 1822 agreement, the rich Jew Isaac Abulafia had asked Wolff to *lend* him a New Testament and promised that he would not burn it. In 1823 he told Wolff that he had read seven of the twelve folios of Talmud. “Men must read Talmud! Talmud! Talmud! ... I find delight, in my old age, in reading the Talmud. But I have read, however, thrice, the New Testament you gave me” [223].

The number of other Hebrew Testaments that were not burnt in 1822 cannot be determined. Of course Abraham Ben David Shlifro kept his; see below.

Especially interesting is the position Wolff, in 1823, took on his 1822 agreement.

36 See *Mishkan* 49 (2006), 57.

37 Wolf, 318.



Wolff's Distribution of Hebrew New Testaments

A number of Jews actually had Hebrew New Testaments and studied them in Wolff's house. But few brought them home. From the following it appears that there had not been an active "distribution."

April 29: "Rabbi J--- M--- [Joseph Marcowitz], the next morning, took the New Testament home with him to mark those passages, which correspond with parts of the Talmud" [106].

May 3: "When I went to my room, two very fine young Jews, of the Spanish community, called. I shewed them Isaiah liii. They said, that they did not understand it, and they desired me to expound the chapter to them. I expounded the chapter for more than an hour; they promised to read it over, and to tell me the next day the result of their enquiry. They desired me to give them a New Testament, saying: 'We swear by our head, to read it, but we beg you not to tell our rabbies of it.' I gave the Testament to both" [107].

May 9: "Papas Seraphim, a monk of mount Sinai, whom I saw when I was there, called me. I gave him a Hebrew New Testament for the library of the convent upon mount Sinai" [143].

May 12: "Three Jews called on me; I read to them Acts vii. and ix; they listened with great attention. I besought them farther, not to turn away from the tender mercies of Christ, which are set forth in the gospel, for he is able and gracious to perform his promises. They earnestly desired the New Testament, which I gave to them" [145].

May 30: "A Jew of the Spanish community called on me ... He immediately brought forth the New Testament which he has received from me ..."³⁸ [291].

July 2: "I lent two Hebrew New Testaments to two Spanish Jews, Rabbies, at their own request, and several Hebrew tracts, in order that they might read them, and write down on paper their objections" [65].

July 4: "A Jew from Damascus called on me, and requested a Hebrew New Testament, which I gave to him, with some tracts" [66].

Even on the assumption that something has been missed and that not everything was included in the published journals, the picture seems clear. Wolff was not actively engaged in distributing Scriptures in the streets of Jerusalem. He could not offer people Hebrew Bibles (*Tanach*). He lent and gave Hebrew New Testaments to the very few people who came to him and expressed an honest desire to receive a copy. By doing this he consid-

38 A droll story is connected with this. The Jew in question wanted to borrow 60 piastres from Wolff, and with the newly received New Testament in his hand he referred to "Matthew v. 42: 'From him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away.'" Wolff then writes: "I told him that this verse does not shew that we are to do things which it is not in our power to do. Go on, however, I said, in reading the New Testament, and if you find any inconsistency between my conduct and the profession I make, tell me of it; I shall be most ready to hear your admonition, but I would, however, advise you, not to read the New Testament for the purpose of imposing me about money, but rather that you may be taught that you are a sinner, and need to be saved by the blood of Jesus Christ" [291-292].

ered the agreement from 1822 respected. There are no hints in the material of books being burnt. The distribution was done rather secretly. In Jerusalem of 1823, the Bible-man Wolff behaved rather more cautiously than when he worked outside Jerusalem.

Wolff and Abraham Ben David Shlifro

In 1822, Wolff left a 17-year-old “convert” in Jerusalem.³⁹ On August 1, 1822, he writes from Aleppo: “I hasten to give you the following accounts: – Rabbi Abraham Ben David Shleifer has professed his faith in Christ, at Jerusalem.”⁴⁰ This manner of writing is typical of Wolff. It is up to the reader to guess whether Abraham Ben David had professed his faith *openly* to Jews or “only” to Wolff. The latter seems to be the case.

On the very evening of Wolff’s arrival, Abraham “joined me in prayer” [99].

On the first Sunday, April 27, Wolff and Abraham went together to the Americans’ lodgings. Wolff writes: “... we read the Scriptures and prayed. I read and prayed in Jewish German, in order that Abraham might understand it. Abraham told me afterwards, that he was very much edified by our prayer”⁴¹ [100].

On April 29, Abraham said that the Spanish Jews would send a complaint to the Pascha; see above [101].

Under May 10 it says: “Abraham’s wife has desired regular instruction from me in Christianity. In the evening I prayed with Abraham Shlifro” [144].

On May 14, Abraham and Isaac (presumably Ben Shloma) showed Wolff around Jerusalem “to take a view of the Jewish antiquities” [220–222].

On June 27, Abraham and Isaac accompanied the Americans, King and Fisk, when they left Jerusalem [65].

Under April 27, the Americans wrote that Abraham “seems to have been converted to the truth of Christianity by Mr. Wolf’s labours last year” [71]. That this did not imply a *public* profession seems to emerge from the following words, which are the editor’s summary:

On the 8th day of June Mr. Fisk had a conversation with Abraham Shlifro, in which Shlifro assented to all leading truths of Christianity, and said that he did not tell his countrymen his belief, but should do it if they asked him. In reply to the inquiry what he supposed the Jews would do to him if he should do this, he said, “Reproach and persecution I think I could bear; but I fear they would secretly take my life.”⁴²

39 Wolf, 262.

40 Ibid., 318. In the sources his last name is also rendered Shliffro and Stifro.

41 This meeting is reported in the *Missionary Herald* (1824), 65, but the report does not say that Wolff was the active party during the devotion.

42 Ibid., 99.



So what became of Abraham Ben David? It is an open question. At a meeting in Norwich in 1827, Wolff was asked about the number of conversions during his stay in Jerusalem in 1823. To this he answered: "I know of no conversion except of Abraham. He continues to proclaim the gospel, and does not leave Jerusalem because of his wife and children."⁴³ Until other sources emerge, it is legitimate to retain a certain skepticism about the information that Abraham Ben David "continues to proclaim the gospel" in Jerusalem.

Wolff's Last Three Weeks in Jerusalem

Under June 27, the day Fisk and King left Jerusalem, Wolff writes: "I judged it best to remain myself at Jerusalem, as I had still something to do here" [65]. He continued conversing with Mendel and other rabbis, and on July 3 he paid a sick call to Mendel, where they discussed whether or not there is a connection between sickness and demons. Wolff himself fell ill on July 5, "so that I was obliged to keep the bed; a great weakness of the nerves overpowered me, so that I was frequently unable to speak from weakness" [66]. From the learned Greek monk Papas Ysa (Isa) he received an Arabic translation of one of LJS's tracts (no. 29)⁴⁴ [67]. Some weeks before he had received a translation of tract no. 8, Dibrei Nizahon; in Papas Ysa's words: "In order that every Christian in this country may become a Missionary to the Jews, and be able to converse with them about the great topics of Christianity" [64–65].

Still weakened by sickness, Wolff left Jerusalem on July 17, together with a distinguished English traveler. They arrived at Sidon on July 23, 1823, via Nablus and Nazareth [69].

Concluding Remarks

Wolff, Fisk, and King agreed that Jerusalem needed Scriptures. As to the *selling* of Scriptures, the Americans set certain bounds. On Sundays one could not sell Scriptures, as is said in the Americans' journal under April 27: "A number of persons came in the morning, to purchase the Scriptures; – but were refused, because it was the Lord's day."⁴⁵

While Fisk and King soon distributed their Scriptures to Christians, very few Hebrew New Testaments were distributed by Wolff to Jews. Wolff read the New Testament with quite a few Jews, and he gathered ammunition from the Talmud in an attempt to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah – but he failed. Similarly, Rabbi Menahem Mendel and others failed to bring Wolff back to Judaism.

⁴³ *Sketch of the Life and Journal of the Rev. J. Wolff. Missionary to Palestine and Persia* (Norwich: Jarrold and Son, 1827), 111.

⁴⁴ Ysa had acted as a teacher of Arabic for Fisk. *Missionary Herald* (1824), 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

In a letter from June 21, Wolff interpreted the many conversations he had in the following way:

There is now at Jerusalem, by God's grace, a feeling and a spirit of enquiry excited among the Jews, even according to the confession of the Rabbies, which never existed among them before. But there is still much to be done ... [64]

Author info:

Kai Kjær-Hansen (D.D., Lund University) is General Editor of *Mishkan* and serves as International Coordinator of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE). He is chairman of the Danish Israel Mission.
Mail: lcje-kai@post4.tele.dk

At the LJS Anniversary Meeting on May 7, 1824, in London, Wolff's optimistic interpretation of the situation in Jerusalem was accepted. Here it was said, among other things, that Wolff furnished "New Testaments and Tracts to all who desired them."⁴⁶ This is not untrue, yet it must be stamped as mission rhetoric, for it creates the impression that Wolff distributed many copies of the New Testament, which was not the case. But it must also be added that for Wolff – as for Parsons, Fisk, and King – "success" cannot be measured in numbers of distributed Scriptures; conversations and testimonies also count.

Still, it must be said that Wolff's views are subjective, and give too optimistic a picture of the Jews' "openness" to the gospel in Jerusalem in 1823. But no one can dispute the zeal Wolff displayed in his efforts for the Jews' salvation. The missiological question that can be raised is whether this zeal did not sometimes lack enlightenment.

Not until 1829 did Wolff return to Jerusalem, with his Lady Georgiana, a journey we will look at in another article. Pliny Fisk, however, was back in Jerusalem five months later, in November 1823; we will cover that in the next article in this series.



46 LJS *Sixteenth Report of the London Society* (1824), 33.