

First "Organized" Bible-work in 19th Century Jerusalem (1816-1831)

Part V: Joseph Wolff in Jerusalem (1822)

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

The fifth Bible-man – in our counting – to come to Jerusalem in the 19th century is Joseph Wolff, a Jesus-believing Jew; the first Jew who, in 1822, meets his brethren after the flesh with the gospel in the Holy City.

As to the distribution of Hebrew New Testaments to Jews in Jerusalem, Burckhardt (1818) had sold one, and Connor (1820) none. Parsons (1821) is silent about this matter – judging from his published journals. Tschoudy (1821) may have distributed a few Hebrew New Testaments, but not many. Although some sincere attempts had been made to introduce the issue of Jesus and Christianity to the Jews of Jerusalem, this had not been a notable success.¹

This changed to some degree with Wolff in 1822 – even if his work was not an unqualified success. Several myths are linked with this visit. We shall try to kill a few of them, but myths die hard, therefore there are relatively many details in this article.

Joseph Wolff, whose father was a rabbi, was born in 1795 or 1796 near Bamberg in Bavaria. He came to London on June 1, 1819 as a Christian. Under the care of the London Jews Society (LJS) he studied at Cambridge and subsequently, for a short period, at the newly established missionary college at Stanstead, in Sussex. Against the LJS's wishes he did not finish his studies there but left, in April 1821, for the Levant. W. T. Gidney describes Wolff as "the most remarkable missionary, in many ways, that ever served in the Society's ranks, [and] who must indeed be regarded as the pioneer of its Missions in the East."² We cannot comment here on the sometimes-strained relations between Wolff and the LJS. His first journey was financed by the banker Henry Drummond, and he traveled under the superintendence of Drummond and the latter's friend John Bayford – so formally he was not an LJS missionary.

The LJS nevertheless followed Wolff's work with lively interest, sup-

¹ See *Mishkan*, nos. 42 (2005), 57–67; 44 (2005), 62–75; 48 (2006), 73–85.

² W. T. Gidney, *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, From 1809 to 1908* (London: London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, 1908), 101.

ported it, and made it known to the friends of the mission through their missionary journal.³

After missionary work in Gibraltar, Malta, and Egypt, Wolff is ready to set out for Palestine in December 1821. In the course of his journey he has collected quite a few letters of introduction – from Jews and non-Jews, to Jews and non-Jews in Jerusalem. That he has to act with some caution appears from a letter to his patron, Henry Drummond, dated Cairo, December 7, 1821:

I shall, on my arrival at Jerusalem, regulate myself according to the instructions you have given me; that is, I shall lay aside for some time the Jews and Catholics, and read in the Armenian convent, the Turkish New Testament, and the writings of St. Niersus, the Augustine of Armenia. Oh, how happy should I be, if you would come to me at Jerusalem, and Mr. Bayford, and the Rev. Lewis Way. [192]

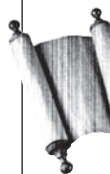
The words reveal that they have sent Wolff to Jerusalem with fear and trembling, and that they have warned him not to be too aggressive toward those who could be expected to be strongly opposed to his work as a Bible-man and maybe even try to kill him. This fear was, as we shall see, groundless.

On December 13, 1821, he leaves Alexandria in a caravan, with a certain number of hired camels [196–197].

A Myth: 20 Camels Loaded with Bibles

The notion is still alive that Wolff, in 1821, came via the desert from Egypt to Palestine “joining a caravan with twenty hired camels loaded with

³ Wolff's comprehensive journals and correspondence with his patrons were continuously published in the *Jewish Expositor*, beginning in August (1821), 311–317. These were collected in the book *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). It opens with a “Memoir” by Wolff – up to his arrival in London, June 1, 1819 (pp.1–65). From Bayford's Preface it appears that these journals are not merely extracts: “In preparing them for the press, the Editor has interfered but little with the original manuscripts, and no further than by the correction of the more striking errors in grammar and idiom, which indeed are very few, when it is considered that at his landing in England, Mr. Wolf was wholly unacquainted with the English language” (pp. iii–iv). In a critical review in the *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 441–444, it is nevertheless stated by the LJS: “we have our doubts whether a little more assistance from the pen of the Editor would not have made the work more acceptable to the English ear, without at all detracting from the simplicity and naiveté of the composition.” Three years later a slightly edited version appeared under the title: *Missionary Journal and Memoir of the Rev. Joseph Wolff [sic], Missionary to the Jews: Comprising His First Visit to Palestine in the Years 1821 & 1822. Written by Himself*. Edited and Revised by John Bayford, Esq., F.S.A. Second Edition (London: James Duncan, 1827). This is available as an e-book at www.lcje.net. The present article quotes from the 1824 edition. In order to avoid a large number of notes I have inserted the page references from Wolf 1824 in square brackets in my text.



chests of Bibles and other Scriptures."⁴ Similarly it was (still) possible to read this at the Israel Bible Society's website in September 2006: "Bible work began in the Holy Land in 1816. In 1821, Joseph Wolff, a Jewish believer, came with 20 camels loaded with Bibles."⁵

I think this is a myth, for reasons I will explain below.

It is true that Wolff comes from Egypt in a caravan, arriving in Gaza on December 26, and in Jaffa on December 28, 1821. He knows that his firman (travel permit) is underway from Constantinople, but it has not yet arrived. Since he carries letters from Egypt to Peter Abbot, the British consul at Acre, he decides to head north [199]. Furthermore – before going to Jerusalem – he intends to study, in the mountains of Lebanon, "the Syriac dialect of the Arabic language" [213], a plan he had already made while in Egypt [183]. On January 1, 1822, he sails past Carmel toward Lebanon. He is back in Jaffa on March 7.

Early 1822: Wolff in Lebanon – without Scriptures

About Wolff's work in Lebanon, Hopkins writes: "Calling on each of the many convents and monasteries that abounded in those parts, he sold them copies of the Scriptures and tried to expound to them his favourite prophetic passages."⁶

Of course he brings his own Arabic New Testament and Hebrew Bible [203, 241], both for his personal use and for conversations with people. But he does not bring Scriptures for sale. He *promises* to send Scriptures. And when he nevertheless does distribute Scriptures (a very limited number), he *buys* these in the local Bible depots.

A few examples: February 4, Wolff lists nine individuals – most of them clerics – who have *desired* Scriptures.⁷ February 6, two Melchite priests are *promised* that Wolff will send them Scriptures [234]. February 17, Wolff gives a similar *promise* to some Greek Catholic nuns: "I promised them Bibles and New Testaments, which gave them great joy" [240].

Back in Beirut from the mountains of Lebanon, Wolff writes on February 25: "I bought six Arabic New Testaments, and six Arabic Psalters; the former at six piastres of Syria each, and the latter at two piastres each Psalter. I disposed of them in the convents afterwards" [243].

So Wolff is in Lebanon at the beginning of 1822 – as a Bible-man who is not selling Bibles. The sources also make it clear that Wolff, after his visit to Jerusalem in the spring of 1822, is in Lebanon and Syria, where he distributes Scriptures. These are made available to him through the Bible depots in these regions [316–323].

In other words, Hopkins, along with others, does not distinguish be-

4 Cf. Hugh Evan Hopkins, *Sublime Vagabond. The Life of Joseph Wolff – Missionary Extraordinary* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1984), 53–54. Likewise Kelvin Crombie in *Mishkan*, no. 41 (2004), 7.

5 About the misleading year, 1816, see *Mishkan*, no. 41 (2004), 21–30.

6 Hopkins, 55.

7 *Jewish Expositor* (1822), 340. This list from Wolff's journal is omitted in both Wolf 1824 and Wolff 1827.

tween Wolff's distribution of Scriptures in these regions *prior to and after* his visit to Jerusalem in 1822.

Back to the alleged 20 camels "loaded with Bibles," brought from Egypt to the Holy Land in 1821 by Wolff: had he left their load of Bibles in Jaffa? That possibility can also be excluded.

*March 1822: Wolff in Jaffa,
Before Going to Jerusalem – without Scriptures*

On March 7, 1822, Wolff writes in Jaffa: "was very much distressed that my Bibles from Cairo, and the firman from Constantinople had not arrived." And in a letter to his patrons, Bayford and Drummond, he writes the very same day: "I am now, alas, destitute of Bibles and Testaments; the Lord, I hope, will provide again" [245].⁸

But neither the missing firman nor the Scriptures prevent Wolff from going to Jerusalem; perhaps he has been informed that the firman has arrived. He arrives at Jerusalem on March 9, "At five o'clock in the evening" [247]. In Jerusalem, on March 11, he receives the long expected firman through Mr. Leutzen, a rich traveler from Stuttgart, who has just come from Bethlehem [254].

There is no question about it: Wolff comes to Jerusalem with almost no Scriptures. I say "almost" for the following reason: In Jaffa he learns that the British Consul, Antonio Damiani, at whose place he is staying, has done nothing about the 50 Arabic Psalters which the Bible Society of Malta had sent to Damiani "two years ago" – presumably at James Connor's request.⁹ Wolff asks for permission to be put in charge of these and immediately sells three in Jaffa. In other words, Wolff, Bible-man and missionary to the Jews, comes to Jerusalem in 1822 with *fewer than 50 Arabic Psalters* in his baggage [253]. No more and no less! This should put an end to the myth about the 20 camels loaded with Bibles.¹⁰

And yet, during his stay in Jerusalem in 1822, Wolff took part in distributing approximately 1,000 copies of Scriptures – an unheard-of number compared to the previous four Bible-men. How does this add up? And to whom – Jews or non-Jews – does he distribute the majority of these 1,000 copies? We shall return to these questions below.

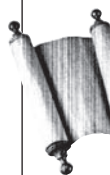
Wolff in Jerusalem, 1822

Wolff spends the first two nights at the Terra Santa Catholic convent [247]. From March 11 to April 27 he stays at the Armenian convent [250]. After this time he rents a room with a Muslim, "that I may converse with the

8 In *Jewish Expositor* (1822), 348, it is rendered even stronger with an "all": "...destitute of all Bibles and Testaments."

9 See *Mishkan*, no. 44 (2005), 67, 71.

10 It goes without saying that I am annoyed by not being able to trace how and why this myth came into being.



Jews more freely" [304].¹¹ On May 11 he takes a room in the Armenian convent again, as he has fallen ill: "the house of the Turk has been too unhealthy" [316].

Contact with Christians in Jerusalem

On March 10, the day after his arrival, Wolff delivers a letter of introduction to "the patriarch of the Armenian nation who resides in his magnificent convent." During their conversation Wolff emphasizes "the necessity of peace among Christians, and made them acquainted with the intentions, labours, and progress of the Bible Society." Most interesting is what Wolff says next, because it throws some light on his perception of himself as a missionary. "I told them clearly that I came to that city not only with the intention of preaching the Gospel of Christ to the Jews, but likewise to persuade the Christians of the several denominations to enter into a correspondence with the Christians of England, on the subject of vital Christianity, and I desired the patriarch himself to give the first example" by sending a letter to Wolff's patrons. The patriarch promises to do so and offers Wolff a room in the Armenian convent [248]. Through the whole course of events Wolff has good relations with the Armenians, and several individuals are mentioned by name.

On March 12 Wolff calls on Procopius, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch's representative in Jerusalem and since 1820 the agent for BFBS in Jerusalem: "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 world."¹² The summary of the meeting concludes with the words, "Procopius promised to assist me with Bibles and New Testaments" [249].

Procopius keeps his word and can deliver; the same day Wolff begins to distribute Scriptures (see below). Throughout this period Wolff has a good relationship with Procopius and other Greek Orthodox Christians.¹³

Wolff's association with Catholic Christians is created through, among others, the "liberal" Anton Tolamas, even if this connection is far looser than that to the Greeks and Armenians; he has some success in selling Scriptures, also to Catholics. But at the mass on Sunday, April 28, Father Cozza bans – in the presence of 800 Catholics – Wolff and his Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments (see below) [303–304].

11 Sherman Lieber, *Mystics and Missionaries: The Jews in Palestine 1799–1840* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 163, misses the point when he maintains: "When he realized that Jews were not visiting him, he moved into a home in the Muslim quarter ..." But Wolff does not move because Jews do not visit him at all in the Armenian convent (there are several examples of this); he moves because he hopes to get in touch with *even more* Jews.

12 See *Mishkan*, nos. 44 (2005), 68–72; 48 (2006), 73–78.

13 An interesting subject for further study would be the fact that Wolff managed to maintain such good relations, though he severely criticized the Greeks and other Christians in Jerusalem, whom he even called "idolaters" – at least when he talked with Jews [264]. Cf. however what he does say on one occasion when *Christians* are present: "I passed over in silence the idolatry practised in the holy sepulchre" [289].

Contact with Jews in Jerusalem

The first Jews Wolff meets in Jerusalem are Caraites; their co-religionists in Egypt have provided him with a letter of introduction. On March 12, through the dragoman (interpreter and traveler's guide) of the Armenian convent in Jerusalem, Wolff invites the Caraites Saadiah to have coffee with him.

They soon get to the subject of the Caraites' history and faith. Only three families live in Jerusalem [251]. On March 14 he meets Saadiah again, together with Rabbi Beracha, in their synagogue. "I opened the prophet Isaiah, and explained to them the xiiiith [*sic*] chapter, and said to them, that the whole chapter has no sense, if it is not applied to Jesus Christ our Lord" [252].¹⁴ On March 16 the Caraites receive some Scriptures (see below). Right to the end of his visit there is a "peaceful" relationship between the Caraites and Wolff. On May 7, for example, they receive some Hebrew tracts: "As to the Caraites, I am sure they will not burn them" [315].

The same thing cannot be said about Wolff's relationship to the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁵ This is not to disparage the sensational fact that Wolff moves among them freely and carries on many discussions and conversations with them.

On March 18, Rabbi Mose Secot, an Ashkenazi Jew, turns up while Wolff is having a meal with some travelers. He has heard that Wolff has conversed with Jews in Egypt and – on Wolff's enquiry – he agrees to teach him Hebrew and Spanish: "I shall come to you every day ... And you shall be well received by Jews in the holy city; we shall show you our colleges and our synagogues." He informs Wolff that there are 700 families of Jews in Jerusalem [256]. Later in the day, in Wolff's room, Secot took "hold of the Hebrew New Testament, and read it with great attention." Asked if he "had ever seen that book before," Secot answers, "Not only seen, but read it through with great attention when at Aleppo, in the house of a rabbi at Aleppo." He even says, "Those passages of the Old Testament cited in the New, speak undoubtedly of the Messiah" [260].

On March 20, Abraham, the son of Reuben, comes to Wolff's room with a somewhat different opinion of the Hebrew New Testament: "no Jew will ever read it" [261].

On March 21, Wolff writes, "Abraham, the son of David Iskawish Stifro, born at Sklow, and Wolf, the son of Hirsh, called on me; the first seventeen years of age, the second, twenty." Abraham Ben David claims that he has often "argued with Christians, but none of them was able to answer" – including Melchior Tschoudy, from whom he had received a Hebrew New Testament [262]. Abraham Ben David is mentioned many times in

14 Perhaps "xiiiith" is a slip of the pen for Isaiah 53, which Wolff (naturally) refers to on other occasions.

15 On the Jewish community in Jerusalem and friction between the various groups, see Lieber, 87–156.



the following, which is not so strange as he, according to Wolff, becomes the first – and only – Jew “converted” during this visit (see below).

On March 25, Secot introduces Wolff to “rabbi Solomon Ben Menahem, from Wilna, to whom I had a letter of introduction ... He received me very kindly indeed, and promised to call on me” [265].

Then, on March 26, Wolff meets Mendel Ben Baruch (Menahem Mendel), “the chief rabbi of the Polish Jews residing at Jerusalem, who is generally acknowledged, even by the Spanish Jews, as the greatest divine of this present age.” It is Abraham Ben David who brings word that Rabbi Mendel wishes to see Wolff. Mendel “excused himself for sending for me, by saying, I [Mendel] never go out, and I should therefore be very glad to see you every day in my house” [265–266]. Even if it was not every day, Wolff did meet Mendel many times.

Altogether, Wolff mentions by name more than 40 Jews with whom he discusses questions related to the Talmud, the New Testament, and Christianity. Among those who are most often mentioned, Mendel and Abraham Ben David stand out. Next follow Mose Secot, Joseph Ben Sachariah Smaria, Solomon Ben Menahem Shfiro, and Reuben Hasid. There are also references to a number of unnamed persons.

Reading the Scriptures and Debating with Jews

It is for another article to describe the many debates Wolff has with various rabbis. He seems to have been in his element here and – in his own opinion – he wins practically all discussions! He rejects the Talmud in strong terms. His objective is to win Jerusalem’s Jews for Christianity, pure and simple – not the idolatry they see among the Christians in Jerusalem. But it is not only Wolff who missionizes; Rabbi Mendel and others “missionize” toward him! On May 2, Wolff writes: “Rabbi Mendel, and rabbi Isaac, from Safet, again tried to convert me to Judaism” [307]. Common to Mendel and Wolff are quite unrealistic expectations of converting – or reconverting – each other.

But Mendel has other motives for maintaining good relations with Wolff. He hopes that Wolff – through his contacts in Europe – can contribute to relieving the hardships that the Jews of Jerusalem find themselves in, partly due to financial exploitation by the Muslim government, partly because financial support from Jews in the diaspora has failed to come due to the political situation [302–303]. Mendel even uses Wolff as a kind of postman, probably in an attempt to ensure that the Muslim authorities do not become privy to the communication from Jerusalem to the European Jews. On April 24, Wolff writes: “Rabbi Mendel consigned to me several letters, to forward to rabbi Hirschel the High Priest in London” [295].

Mendel cannot, however, close his eyes to the potential danger when less-learned rabbis debate with Wolff. In addition, Wolff – both in his room and elsewhere – gets people to read the Hebrew New Testament. So while continuing his own debates with Wolff, Mendel endeavors to prevent others from seeing him. On April 17, Wolff is informed that Rabbi

Mendel "tried, with some other rabbies [*sic*], to pronounce an anathema against those, who should dare any longer to argue with me, but the majority of them declared that they would not in any case take notice of the anathema of the rabbies" [290].

An "anathema" like this only makes sense if Wolff poses a threat.¹⁶ Although Mendel can hardly have heard about Abraham Ben David's confession on April 19, he may have sensed a risk that Wolff might win some over to Christianity. On April 19, Wolff writes about Abraham Ben David that he "calls on me every day, [and] confessed to-day with tears in his eyes, that he is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and that he will now speak with his wife and mother about Christ Jesus the Lord" [294]. From April 24 he is referred to as "the converted Abraham Ben David" [296].

With this, Wolff sees the first fruit of his work in Jerusalem.

But now to Wolff's work as a Bible-man proper, i.e. a distributor of Scriptures in Jerusalem.

Wolff's Distribution of Scriptures before April 25, 1822

In Aleppo, on August 1, 1822, Wolff writes about his distribution of Scriptures during his stay in Jerusalem: "I have distributed a thousand copies of Holy Writ at Jerusalem, which to my delight I saw read by the inhabitants of Lydda, Bethlehem, Ramla, and Jaffa" [319]. How can these figures be explained, when he came to Jerusalem with fewer than 50 Arabic Scriptures?

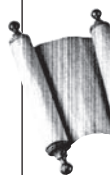
The explanation is simple. Procopius, agent for BFBS, has, as we will see, a large depot of Scriptures which he leaves to Wolff to distribute. Furthermore, on April 25, Wolff's trunks with Scriptures arrive in Jerusalem from Cairo [297].

Wolff's distribution of Scriptures in Jerusalem can thus be divided into two periods, with April 25 as the dividing line. To whom does this Bible-man to the Jews distribute Scriptures in these periods? And is the Greek monk Neophytos of Cyprus – Wolff's contemporary in Jerusalem – correct when he writes about Wolff's 1822 visit: "More than 1000 Hebrew Gospels did he distribute among them" – i.e. the Jews?¹⁷

On April 18, Wolff writes: "I called in the afternoon on the Rev. Procopius. I have partly sold, partly given gratis, the following quantity of the Holy Writ, with which Procopius has furnished me." So Wolff draws up an inventory and commits it to paper, presumably because he has now

16 Lieber, 166, rejects Wolff's assertion that this "anathema" had no effect: "but that is inconceivable, in view of the religious authority and power over the community possessed by the Jewish leadership." However, out of the approximately 20 named Jews that Wolff was in contact with before this "anathema," approximately 10 stay in contact with Wolff, and more than 20 new names are mentioned *after* the "anathema."

17 About Neophytos, see *Mishkan*, no. 48 (2006), 74–75; here quoted from Friedrich Heyer, *Kirchengeschichte des Heiligen Landes* (Stuttgart – Berlin – Köln – Mainz: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1984), 173.



emptied out the stock of Scriptures which has been in Procopius' possession. However, Wolff's editors did not find that inventory interesting; instead of printing it, they write in brackets, "[Here follows an account of Bibles, Testaments, and Psalters, distributed]" [294].¹⁸ What a pity!

From the information supplied by Wolff, it is, however, possible to reconstruct in outline the number of Scriptures distributed.

On March 14, Wolff writes: "I called again on Procopius; he gave me a quantity of Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic New Testaments" [252].¹⁹ On the same day he sells or gives away 16 copies (13 Arabic Psalters, one Greek New Testament, two Syriac New Testaments). On March 17, Wolff gives the Arabic Psalter to his (Muslim) master in Arabic and Turkish, who "instructs me every day, two hours." Missiologically speaking, Wolff's comment in this connection makes good sense: "It would be better to leave out in the beginning of the Psalters, the inscription, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit,' for Jews and Mussulmen [Muslims] would then more readily receive them" [255].

On March 18, Wolff presents his firman to the Muslim governor in Jerusalem. The latter, one of the judges, and one of the principal officers are given a total of 7 or 9 Bible portions [259–260]. On March 24, 49 Arabic Psalters and one Greek New Testament are given as presents to the Greek priest, Petrus Jesus [265].²⁰

On March 31, Wolff writes: "Several Greek boys, very poor indeed, requested *Arabic* Gospels and Bibles; I was not able to comply, my trunks not having arrived from Damietta. I sold them seven Arabic Psalters for forty barras (one piastre.) I gave twenty Arabic Psalters to Moses [*sic*] Secot to sell to Christians, and ten Psalters to Isaac Ben Solomon" [278]. From this we can deduce that in Wolff's trunks, which have not yet arrived in Jerusalem, there are not only Hebrew Scriptures but also Arabic Scriptures. This is confirmed when a peasant from Bethlehem besought Wolff "to give him Arabic Psalters and Gospels." When Wolff told him that his trunks were not arrived from Damietta, "he desired me to receive his money, that I might not forget to send the books as soon as they should arrive at Jerusalem, an offer which I did not accept" [279].

With this, approximately 115 copies of Scripture (and there may have been more) have been accounted for. The most surprising thing is that Wolff gets *Jews* (who, like other agents, do business on a commission basis) involved in his Bible project to Christians. But not only that: he also involves Jews in selling Scriptures to Muslims!

These very acceptable figures for distribution of Scriptures, after less than three weeks in Jerusalem, are quite remarkably surpassed on April

18 So also *Jewish Expositor* (1822), 511; and Wolff 1827, 298.

19 Presumably also other languages, e.g. Persian; on March 18, said to be given to, among others, the Muslim governor.

20 It is not possible here to include Papas Isa (Ysa) Petros – a scholarly local Greek Orthodox priest – in my presentation, even though he, through the 1820s and until his death in 1834, is a part of the various Bible-men's history in Jerusalem as a language teacher, translator and, not least, as an important contact to the Greeks.

1. One of the explanations may be that quite a few pilgrims have now arrived in the city.²¹

The Great Bible Day in Jerusalem

I leave it to Wolff to describe what must be called the Great Bible Day in Jerusalem, 1822:

April 1. – I gave twenty Arabic Psalters to the Jew, Abraham Ben David, to sell; he sold them in a moment to Mussulmen [Muslims], and brought me the money for them. I sold this morning, before I arose from my bed [*sic*], eighteen Arabic Psalters at ten barras a piece; two Greek New Testaments for one piastre; a Greek New Testament to a poor man for thirty-six barras; also four other Greek New Testaments for two piastres. An Armenian asked for Turkish Bibles, written in Armenian characters. Sold two Syriac New Testaments by Abraham Ben David, for two piastres. The old Greek priest, Jacobus Jerusalemitanus, requested *Persian*, Greek, and Arabic Bibles and Testaments. Several other Armenian gentlemen called for Bibles and Testaments.

It has been fortunate that I gave Arabic Psalters, and Greek and Syriac New Testaments, to Jews to sell, for they sold them to Mussulmen; and those Christians who were jealous, and did not like to see the New Testament in their hands, came to me in the Armenian convent – priests, merchants, peasants, children, poor and rich, so that more than 300 persons came at once to me, and the members of the convent desired me to give all my New Testaments and Psalters to the charge of the dragoman of the patriarch, who carried my cases of Testaments and Psalters in the public street, near the gate of the convent, and in this way I sold 150 Psalters, and fifty Greek New Testaments, in less than half an hour: besides this, I gave fifty Arabic Psalters, in the presence of Procopius, to a Greek priest, called Petrus Jesus, to give gratis to poor Greek. I was obliged to go the second time to Procopius, to supply me with 100 Greek Testaments, and the same number of Arabic Psalters, the whole of which the dragoman sold for fifty-two piastres. I got 160 piastres for the whole. [278–279]

A total of almost 500 copies of Scriptures were sold on April 1. Wolff was active in distributing at least 600 copies in less than three weeks. Impressive, even if it has to be said that Wolff was more free with Scriptures than was, for example, Levi Parsons,²² and that Wolff could only do this because Procopius – BFBF's agent – had a large amount in his depot.

²¹ In 1822, the Orthodox churches celebrated Palm Sunday on April 7, and Easter Sunday on April 14 – dated by Wolff's and "our" Gregorian calendar.

²² Cf. *Mishkan*, no. 48 (2006), 80.



A comment on this by one of Wolff's editors in 1827 says: "Had this demand for the scriptures been the only effect of Wolff's sojourn in Jerusalem it would have been sufficient."²³ A statement like this needs, however, to be taken with a grain of salt, since it cannot be related to Wolff as "Missionary to the Jews." The majority of these 600 copies of Scripture were distributed among Christians, and some among Muslims.

After the Great Bible Day in Jerusalem, it seems that Wolff has emptied out Procopius' stock. On April 24 he sells three Syriac New Testaments, but these he had bought or re-bought from the above-mentioned Catholic Anton Tolamas [296].

With this, an account has been given for at least 600 of the alleged 1,000 Scriptures sold. With the uncertainty inherent in the material, it may just as well be 700. Add to this what was sold to Jews; as we shall see, it makes no major difference to the *overall* number.

Distribution to Jews

The following free distributions are mentioned:

March 16: Saadiah and two other Caraites receive a total of three Hebrew New Testaments and three Arabic Psalters [254].

April 7: Rabbi Mendel receives one Hebrew New Testament; "he did not take it readily, but as he has taken it, and promised to read it, I hope the grace of the Lord will enlighten his *prejudiced* heart" [281]. April 11: "Rabbi Mendel has not yet looked into the New Testament" [285].

April 16: Rabbi Reuben Hasid receives one Hebrew New Testament [289]. April 17: "Rabbi Reuben Hasid has declared publicly that he is reading the New Testament to examine it, and to tell me his candid opinion about it" [290].

It is also to be expected that, among others, Abraham Ben David, Wolf, the son of Hirsh, and Mose Secot have received Hebrew Testaments. Then again, we have to consider the possibility that not all Hebrew New Testaments have been mentioned. But this does not challenge the overall picture. Only one or two handfuls of Scriptures have been distributed to Jews. The above-mentioned "anathema" applies to conversations with Wolff, not the purchase of New Testaments. The obvious explanation is that only a few New Testaments have been distributed. There is no mention of Bibles (Old Testaments) in this period. This situation changed when Wolff's trunks with Scriptures arrived in Jerusalem.

Distribution of non-Hebrew Scriptures after April 25, 1822

On April 25, Wolff's long awaited trunks with Bibles and New Testaments arrive in Jerusalem. "My Bibles and Testaments arrived from Cairo" [297]. As mentioned above, the trunks hold not only Hebrew Scriptures.

On the basis of the extant material it is not possible to give a precise fig-

²³ In *Sketch of the Life and Journal of the Rev. J. Wolff, Missionary to Palestine and Persia* (Norwich: Jarrold and Son, 1827), 61.

ure for the non-Hebrew Scriptures distributed, but there is no doubt that distribution has taken place. On April 26, Wolff gives the first dragoman of the Armenian patriarch "the charge of selling the Bibles" – and adds that the dragoman "has employed his boy to sit the whole day with them in the streets, to sell them, and to distribute tracts among the Jews" [299]. On April 27, he writes: "Several Catholics also called on me, and many of them acknowledge that the Scripture quickens their mind and heart" [300]. On April 29, he sells "ten Italian New Testaments to the Greek convent of St. Demetrio" and gives away ten Italian tracts [303].

That Wolff has succeeded in distributing a certain number of Scriptures to Catholics is evidenced by Father Cozza's ban on Sunday, April 28. According to Wolff it was worded thus:

As that *man* who lately arrived at Jerusalem for the destruction of the Catholic religion, has distributed several books, I command you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to deliver to me all the books which he has distributed, and to tell me the names of those who have bought them; and whosoever shall dare to act contrary to this order, shall be excommunicated in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. [303]

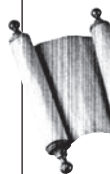
Wolff continues: "The liberal Catholic Anton Tolamas assured me that the Rev. Cozza has already had a quantity of Psalters and New Testaments delivered to him" [303–304].

Wolff may very well have distributed 100–200 non-Hebrew Scriptures, even if this can only be guesswork based on the available material. And it would seem that he soon ran out of the stock in his trunks, for on May 4 he writes: "Armenian and Greek priests called on me to-day, and desired to purchase Greek, Arabic, and Armenian Bibles and Testaments, but I was not able to comply with their wish; I therefore wrote again to John Barker, Esq. in Aleppo, and to Peter Lee, Esq. in Alexandria, to send me Bibles, Testaments, and tracts" [309].²⁴

On May 5, Wolff writes that the Greeks and Armenians "receive the word of God with gladness and eagerness" and ask him "whether another stock of New Testaments will soon arrive" [314–315]. He still has some Greek tracts. On May 7, he can say: "I have distributed some hundred Greek tracts to-day" [315]. He concludes his journal for May 11 with the words: "I never take a walk without being entreated by Greeks, and Armenians for tracts and Bibles, and even by many of the Catholic inhabitants, in despite of the excommunication de' frati" [316].

The same thing cannot be said about the distribution of Hebrew Scriptures – from Wolff's trunks – to Jews.

24 The BFBS agent in Aleppo, Benjamin Barker, writes on June 24, 1822, "I furnished him [Wolff in Jerusalem] with a supply of Arabic Testaments and Psalters." Cf. BFBS *Nineteenth Report* (1823), 100. I dare not say whether or not they got to Jerusalem while Wolff was still there, but when the figure "1,000" is discussed, these copies sent from Barker cannot be totally ignored.



Distribution of Hebrew Scriptures after April 25, 1822

Scriptures are distributed gratis to Jews because of their dire financial circumstances [302–303].

Distribution of Hebrew New Testaments

Wolff is extremely sparing with information about the distribution of Hebrew New Testaments, probably because only a few were handed out. But then he is not given much time. As early as April 27, two days after his trunks arrived, the Jewish leaders reacted by proclaiming, in Wolff's own words, "their excommunication against the New Testament" [304].

The following details are worth mentioning: On April 29, Wolff writes that the rich Jew Joseph Ben Sachariah Smaria has received a Hebrew New Testament; "he shows me the remarks he has made upon the New Testament, which he will give me in letter" [302]. However, he returns this copy to Wolff on May 1 [305]. Also on April 29, a Spanish Jew, Jacob, receives a copy. Wolff writes on the same day that he gives the Jews Bibles and New Testaments free [302–303]. On May 4, he writes: "Several Jews called on me, and asked for New Testaments, tracts, and Bibles. – I gave them the books gratis. They read them in the streets, but the Jews from Barbary [North Africa] took them out of their hands, and burnt a great many" [309]. It is worth noticing that if Wolff's dating is accurate, this burning of New Testaments and Bibles – the *Tanach* – takes place on a Sabbath!

This calls for an explanation.

Distribution of Hebrew Bibles

On April 25, the very day that Wolff's trunks with Scriptures arrive, "the young rabbi Abraham Ben David bought five Hebrew Bibles and Prophets to dispose of among our brethren the Jews" [297]. (Whether this means 5 or 10 copies is hard to determine.) But he has no success reselling these because the Bible edition is, so to speak, not kosher. In Wolff's own words:

... but as soon as they [some Sephardic Jews] observed in it (Reineccius's edition) the sign of the cross in the margin,²⁵ they thought, as none of them here are able to read the Latin notes, that the English friends put that mark on account of superstitious worship paid to the cross, and the Jews therefore became so enraged with poor Abraham, that they immediately asked how many piastres he had given for them; and having learnt that he gave fifteen piastres, they gave him fifteen floggings upon his feet. The poor fellow, therefore, came back with the Bibles to me, and I returned him the whole of his money immediately. Rabbi Solomon Ben Menahem told me, he was displeased with the ignorance of the Spanish Jews. I

25 In the books of that age – religious as well as non-religious – the "sign of the cross" was used as one of many reference symbols.

declared, however, publicly, that I would never suffer any one to be insulted whom I employed to sell my books, as every one is free to purchase them or not. [297–298]

On April 28, “several Jews” requested Hebrew Bibles. “I told them I could not give them Hebrew Bibles without permission of their high-priests.” He gets Rabbi Solomon Ben Menahem Shfiro and Rabbi Mendel to examine the copies and subsequently receives “some lines from a rabbi, in which he permits me to distribute the copies” [301].

On April 29, Rabbi Mendel asks for 6 Hebrew Bibles, which he receives free of charge. Furthermore, one copy of the Hebrew Prophets is sold to a Spanish Jew, for one piastre [302–303].

On April 30 Wolff visits Rabbi Joseph Ben Wolf. “I observed that several leaves had been torn out of the Hebrew Bible which I have presented him with. I asked the reason for it.” It is due to “an enthusiastic Jew ... on account of the crosses which are to be found in the Bible.” Wolff spends the night in the house of Rabbi Solomon Ben Menahem Shfiro. The latter claims that there are several mistakes in the Bible, e.g. in Isaiah 9:6, and he does not think the Samaritan text should be cited in the notes, “and the sign of the cross, notwithstanding the innocency of the intention, ought not to have been chosen.” He also thinks that the characters are too small and that the letter *kaf* is often used instead of the letter *beth* [304–305].

Although it is difficult to get an impression of the precise number of distributed Hebrew Scriptures – Old and New Testaments – Wolff does give one significant piece of information in his reference to the excommunication against the Hebrew New Testament on April 27. He writes, “I have given Hebrew Bibles and Testaments, and Tremellius’s Catechism, to twenty-seven rabbies.” The same day a Jewish boy is given a Hebrew Bible and Tremellius’s Catechism [304].²⁶

The number of Hebrew Scriptures distributed before May 5 cannot be stated precisely. A conservative estimate is 50 copies – perhaps fewer; but it could also be 100 copies, or even more. Some of them are burnt. And it will get even worse, as we shall now see.

“Every Jew Must Burn the Hebrew Bibles”

On May 5, Abraham Ben David informs Wolff that the Sephardic chief rabbis, that very morning, have “proclaimed in the synagogue, that every Jew must burn the *Hebrew Bibles*, (Reineccius’s edition), on account of the Samaritan text, and the crosses which are to be found in the notes.” In order to “prevent so great an evil,” Wolff draws up a letter to the leading rabbis “of the Spanish persuasion.” The content of the letter is as follows:

26 “Tremellius’s Catechism” is really Calvin’s Catechism, translated into Hebrew by the Jewish-born John Immanuel Tremellius in 1551.



To the Rabbies, the Princes, and the Learned!

I have learned that public orders have been given in your synagogue, that the twenty-four books, containing the Old Testament, should be committed to the flames. I desire rather to receive them back; if not, you must pay me the full price of the books, and all expenses of them, for I have given them to you to learn from, and not that they should be burnt. Woe to you shepherds of Israel, saith

JOSEPH WOLFF

P.S. The mark which you suppose is a sign of the cross, is nothing but a mark of Keri and Ketib. [309]

The letter is delivered to the Sephardic Jews by Abraham Ben David, and Wolff is immediately invited to a meeting in “the committee-house of the Spanish Jews.” Many Jews turn up, and the meeting results in a dramatic resolution.

The Agreement Not to Distribute Bibles

Rabbi Meyahis, who acts as spokesman at the meeting, asks in Spanish if they can carry on the conversation in Hebrew. Wolff agrees.

Meyahis points out, according Wolff, that among the Jews in Jerusalem there are such as are “ignorant, and are not able to discern good from bad ... and therefore we must watch over them.” He points out that in the distributed Bibles there are notes from the “Samaritan Codex” and adduces Deuteronomy 5 as an example: “I have commanded you to-day upon the mount Gerizim.” “We rabbies,” says Meyahis, are the only ones who are able to distinguish between text and notes, the youth cannot do that, “and may easily be induced to believe that the law does not go out from Sion, but from mount Gerizim.” And Meyahis continues: “and with respect to the New Testament which you have distributed, you must know yourself, for you are of the seed of Israel, that it is against the law of Moses, which you yourself so highly esteem, and we are therefore determined to burn every copy of it” [310–311].

As to *Bibles* (Old Testament), Wolff refers in his response to the fact that the Bibles have been distributed “not only with the permission, but even at the desire of rabbi Mendel Menahem, the great rabbi of the Ashkenaim [*sic*].” Mendel “requested for himself three copies of the whole Bible, as well as of the editions of the Prophets and Psalters.” Three other named rabbis have followed Mendel’s example, “and the Bible does not deserve, in any case, to be burnt,” Wolff states. As to the New Testament, Wolff denies that it is perverting the Law of Moses, but then he comes up with an unexpected initiative and promise: “but as you are determined to burn them, I shall not longer make presents of them, for I have given them to be read and not to be burnt. These my sentiments I declared, after their manner, on paper.”

Rabbi Koba, in an attempt to keep the focus on the principle at stake,

interferes and says, "It is the tenet of the Talmud: 'A Torah, written by heretics, must be burnt.'" But Rabbi Meyahis is completely satisfied with the result achieved, and concludes by saying, "Let us not quarrel, but be friendly together; we will, with all our hearts, receive from the English nation, copies of our Bible, but *without notes, without comment, without any preface, and without any Latin character.*" To this Wolff replies: "And you shall receive such as you desire." Whereupon all answer: "Amen! Amen!" [311–312].

At this point Rabbi Mendel and Rabbi Joseph Ben Wolf entered the room (apparently Rabbi Mendel does leave his house when matters require it; cf. above), and "all arose from their seats." Again we will listen to Wolff:

I. Rabbi Mendel, did you not desire me to distribute the copies of the Old Testament?

Rabbi Mendel: Yes.

Morenu Meyahis and the other then explained to him the reason, as above-mentioned, for desiring me not to distribute them. He conceded to their decision, but recommended highly, the editions of the Hebrew prophets and Psalters, published by the London Society for promoting Christianity amongst the Jews – and they entreated me not to distribute New Testaments any more. I gave them my word of honour on paper, not to make presents of them or of the tracts, among the Jews in Jerusalem, any more, when I perceived that they were determined to burn every copy. But this does not prevent me lending copies of the New Testament to those who, I am sure, will not burn them. [312]

The agreement is an amazing one. If it is ignored, we will get a one-sided picture of Wolff's visit to Jerusalem in 1822. But all hope is not gone.

Already the next day, the rich rabbi Isaac Abulawfia asks, through Abraham Ben David, for Wolff to *lend* him a Hebrew New Testament, which he promises to return when he has read it. Later the same day, Wolff hears that Abulawfia is reading it "with a loud voice." When Wolff entered Abulawfia's room, the latter said, "A man like me should never burn a book, but rather read and examine it; the family of Abulawfia was known six hundred years ago in Palestine" [315].

Wolff Leaves Jerusalem

On his departure from Jerusalem, Wolff has distributed, to Jews, "Some thousand tracts ... Many of them have been burnt by the rabbies" [299]. He has distributed approximately 1,000 Scriptures, the main part to Christians, some to Muslims, and some to Jews. Neophytos is certainly mistaken when he says that Wolff has distributed more than 1,000 *Hebrew* Gospels to Jews. Wolff has also recognized that he has essentially lost



the battle for distribution of Hebrew Scriptures to the Jews of Jerusalem. But he has not worked out the number of burnt Scriptures. The fact that some were torn up and burnt by the Jewish leadership has been recorded by Neophytos.²⁷ After his visit to Jerusalem at the turn of the year 1823–1824, LJS missionary William Bucknor Lewis reports that the record of the Scriptures that had been distributed to Jews, and “afterwards [were] committed to the flames,” has been kept in the Greek Orthodox convent where he stayed.²⁸ After his next visit in 1823, Wolff can ascertain that at least a few copies were not burnt (see the next article in this series).

On May 7, Wolff distributed some one hundred Greek tracts, even though he was ill: “I have been very poorly indeed today; and therefore called in an Italian surgeon, who bled me” [312–313]. His journal ends abruptly on May 11. Exactly when he left Jerusalem is difficult to say. A letter from Aleppo, dated August 2, 1822, begins with the words, “After I have remained three months at Jerusalem ...” [316]. Perhaps it is actually two months.²⁹

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Wolff created commotion about Jesus and Christianity among Jerusalem’s Jews. But regardless of how many or how few Hebrew Scriptures he distributed, and regardless of how many conversations he had with rabbis in the Holy City, the question remains: Were the Jews of Jerusalem “open” to the gospel? Wolff believed they were. So did his patrons and the LJS.

At the LJS’s Anniversary Meeting, on May 9, 1823, they chose – without hiding the opposition to Wolff – to concentrate on all the positive things which looked promising for future work. That Wolff “had been allowed at all to bring forward the subject of Christianity” was considered a striking fact, even though he was considered an “apostate.”³⁰ Time would show that the Jews of Jerusalem were not generally “open” to the gospel.

Other things being equal, and with respect for Wolff’s work, what Gidney writes about Wolff in Jerusalem in 1822 – “he circulated numerous copies of the Hebrew New Testament and other Christian publications”³¹ – is close to being a myth.

Less than a year later, in 1823, Wolff is back in Jerusalem in the company of two American missionaries, Pliny Fisk and Jonas King. We will follow them in the next article in this series.

27 Cf. quotation in Heyer, 173, where Neophytos also says that the Turks (Muslims) used the Scriptures for wrapping paper when they sold spices.

28 *Jewish Expositor* (1825), 15.

29 Wolff does not say when he arrives in Beirut, but he sends a letter from that city dated June 12, 1822, cf. *Jewish Expositor* (1822), 512. This means that he must have left Jerusalem at the end of May, or maybe even earlier, as we also must consider the lessons in Samaritan he receives in Jaffa [319]. It is certainly not after “three or four months,” as supposed by Gidney, 164, nor “in July 1822,” as claimed by Lieber, 166.

30 *Jewish Expositor* (1823), 226.

31 Gidney, 104.