A Legacy Transformed

Historical American Missionary Institutions in Turkey

Revs. Pitly Fisk (1792–1825) and Levy Parsons (1792–1822), the ABCFM’s first missionaries to the Ottoman Empire. They were enjoined to go as “Ministers of Christ commissioned to testify the Gospel of the grace of God to Jews and Gentiles to people of every nation and name and condition.” Their instructions also included a Gardener directive: “The two grand inquiries ever present to your minds will be—What good can be done? and, By what means?”

The published account of Eli Smith and H.C. Dwight’s survey of central and eastern Anatolia in 1830–31, which inspired the ABCFM to view this region as a new field of labor.

Built on the initiative of the American Bible Society’s Middle East representative Isaac Bliss, and with the help of the ABCFM, the Bible House in Istanbul (dedicated 20 June 1832) enabled the consolidation of all Protestant missionary activity in the city under one roof.

The family of Elias Riggs (heated third from left). A prominent member of the American Board in Turkey in the 1800s, Riggs is best known for his translations of the Bible into Armenian and Bulgarian, as well as his work on a Turkish version. He served the ABCFM for 63 years, primarily in publishing, and two of his sons and a daughter followed him in missionary work.

Gazanfect American Hospital, surgery room. Under the direction of chief physician Dr. Fred Douglas Shepard (third from left), this ABCFM medical facility played an important role in introducing modern medical services and techniques in central Anatolia during the late nineteenth century.

American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) founded in USA to “devise, adopt, and prosecute, ways and means for propagating the gospel among those who are destitute of Christianity.”

ABCFM chartered in State of Massachusetts as a corporate association, subsequently headquartered in Boston, with executive authority vested in the Prudential Committee. In the coming decades, the American Board’s missions would expand across North America, Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia.

Mission to Palestine launched.

First missionaries to Ottoman Empire, Pitly Fisk and Levi Parsons, arrive in Smyrna (Smyrna) en route to Jerusalem.

Mission press established at Malta to serve the Mediterranean.

ABCFM’s work in Malta, Turkey, and Syria united in Mission to Western Asia; the focus and administrative boundaries of missionary labor in this region—primarily undertaken among Greeks, Armenians, Nestorians, and Jews—would shift over the next several decades.

Eli Smith and Harrison Gray Otis Dwight journey through Anatolia, the Caucasus, and Persia to investigate potential for missionary work; William Goodell takes up residence in Istanbul (Constantinople); Mission to Greece established.

Churches, hospitals, presses, schools, and colleges founded in Ottoman Empire to support local Protestant communities.

Malta press transferred to Izmir (ABCFM regional headquarters in Turkey) and Beirut.

Mission to the Armenians in Turkey established as distinct administrative unit.

Armenians who associate with Protestants or accept their teachings excommunicated from Armenian Apostolic Church.

Protestant subjects of Ottoman Empire granted millet status.

Declaration of Protestant millet reaffirmed.

Syrian Mission established.

Regional ABCFM headquarters and press transferred to Istanbul.

Mission to the Armenians divided into northern and southern branches, with a total of 15 stations, or missionary residences, in various parts of Anatolia.

Work initiated among Bulgarians in European Turkey.

Northern and Southern Armenian Missions and Assyrian Mission reorganized into Western, Central, and Eastern Turkey Missions, mainly to serve Armenians, Greeks, Nestorians, and Bulgarians, as well as some Kurds, comprising 23 stations, 81 outstations, 44 missionaries, 3 doctors, 45 female assistant missionaries, 199 schools with 3,088 students, and a press in Constantinople (annual expenditure = $120,523-20).