The ABCFM press and the development of the Western Armenian language

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37363513">https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37363513</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ABCFM Press and the Development of the Western Armenian Language

Barbara J. Merguerian

The American missionary Cyrus Hamlin, speaking in his memoirs about the Western Armenian language, boasted: "We found it clay and iron, and we left it gold." The nineteenth-century educator, who headed a boys' seminary in the Ottoman Turkish capital of Constantinople (Istanbul) and later established Robert College, went on to explain more modestly: "I only claim that the seminary at Bebek had a part, and an honorable part, in the renaissance of the language. ... The entire influence of the mission went in that direction." On the other hand, Armenian scholars who have written about the development of the Western Armenian language in the nineteenth century are less likely to attribute a prominent role to the American missionaries. Typical is the rather grudging acknowledgment offered in a recent work: "The massive translations by the Protestant missionaries of religious literature in an insipid, bland, ashkharhapar [vernacular] also helped slightly to purify the language." Another Armenian scholar describes the American Protestant presence at the inception of the Western Armenian language as "perhaps exterior and circumstantial," but "not negligible."

To assess the missionary contributions to the development of the Western Armenian language, it may be useful to look closely at the aims, operations, and unique features of the American mission to the Armenians. That mission was designed for an ancient people with a long Christian tradition who claim with pride that theirs was the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion. The Armenians did not easily fit the mold of clients whose souls needed to be saved by missionaries from the west, yet the Armenians became an important focus for the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The linguistic issues faced by the early American missionaries were everywhere formidable. A major undertaking in all the missions was the translation of the Bible and Christian literature into the local dialects. The missions in the Near East in general, and among the Armenians in particular, were unique in this respect

1 Cyrus Hamlin, *My life and times* (Boston, 1893), 250.
4 The history of the Armenian mission can be found in the standard works on the ABCFM, such as William E. Strong, *The story of the American Board: an account of the first hundred years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Boston, 1910) and especially in Rufus Anderson, *History of the missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1872). Also useful is James L. Barton, *Daybreak in Turkey* (Boston, 1908).
because they encompassed the birthplace of the Bible as well as of the three great religions of the book: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In these areas biblical stories were familiar to the population, but the Holy Book was available in a literary form that had become incomprehensible to all but a highly educated elite. In a characteristic passage, William Goodell, who became in 1831 the first American missionary to the Armenians, explained that the average person in the Middle East

knows not what he prays, the prayers being always in an unknown tongue. Those at Constantinople, who pray in Arabic, speak only Turkish. The Maronites of Mount Lebanon, who speak Arabic, always pray in Syriac, a language they understand not. The Greeks pray in ancient Greek, the Armenians in ancient Armenian, the Jews in Hebrew, and the Catholics in Latin, the few Christians found in Egypt in Coptic — all of which to them are dead languages. Whenever they have any business transactions with neighbors about temporal or trivial matters, they are always careful to speak in a language which they understand. But whenever they have any business with their maker about their eternal interests, it is always done in a language which they understand not.\(^5\)

In the case of the Armenians, Goodell was referring to the fact that the religious services and the means of literary expression continued to be the classical language (krapar), perfected in the fifth century in order to translate the Bible into Armenian, and not the spoken language (ashkhahapar). Opinions differ about the extent to which the classical language was understood by the average Armenian in this period, but clearly only a small, well-educated, and mainly clerical elite fully understood this ancient form of the language.\(^6\)

The Armenian homeland was divided among Turkey, Russia, and Iran. During centuries of foreign domination, large segments of the population had emigrated, forming a widespread diaspora for whom the Armenian language, along with the autocephalous Armenian Apostolic Church, had become the chief unifying features. The spoken language was expressed in a large number of local dialects, often mutually unintelligible, which can be loosely classified into two groups: Western Armenian (spoken in Turkey) and Eastern Armenian (prevalent in Russia and Iran). Forms of both Eastern and Western Armenian were written, but they were not standardized as official literary languages. The challenge facing the American missionaries was to provide the Bible and Christian literature in a language that could be easily understood by all speakers of Western Armenian. It was perhaps inevitable that in this process the Americans would come into conflict with the hierarchy of the Armenian Apostolic Church, for whom the Armenian Bible in Classical Armenian was the word of God (the Armenian word for the Bible, Askvadzashun, means literally "breath of God") and was not to be tampered with, least of all by foreigners from America. The Americans found the Armenians a promising field nonetheless, and they embarked on an ambitious translation, publication, distribution, and education effort.

\(^5\) William Goodell, *The old and the new; or, the changes of thirty years in the East* (New York, 1853), 26-27. For a general discussion of the efforts of the Americans to provide a Bible the Armenians could understand, see Barbara J. Mergerian, "The Armenian Bible and the American missionaries: the first four decades," in *Armenia and the Bible: Papers presented to the international symposium held at Heidelberg, July 26-29, 1990*, ed. by Christoph Burchard (Atlanta, 1993), 153-69.

\(^6\) Krapar ceased to be a spoken language by the late eighth century. The various dialects of Middle Armenian, which display different or simplified grammatical forms, and which absorbed numerous loan words from the spoken tongues of the Armenians’ Muslim and other neighbors, influenced the written krapar of the Middle Ages; while spoken dialects came to diverge as greatly from krapar as Modern Greek does from the classicizing language of learned books.
Establishment of the Armenian Mission

American Evangelical missionaries were first attracted to the Armenians through the efforts of earlier European missionaries, notably the Englishman Claudius Buchanan, whose work in India had led him to observe the remarkable veneration for the Bible exhibited by the Armenians. In a book published in 1812, Buchanan described the great demand for Bibles among the Armenians in India (“a copy can scarcely be purchased at any price”) and advocated publication of the Bible in the Armenian language. Buchanan was the first to suggest that the availability of the Armenian Bible would serve a dual purpose: first, to enlighten the Armenian people themselves; and second, to stimulate the Armenians to spread knowledge of the Bible among other peoples. Similar observations about the Armenians and their devotion to the Bible were made by the first ABCFM missionaries in India in 1814.

Familiarity with these sources led William Goodell, then a student at Andover Theological Seminary, to present a report in 1818 before the school’s Society of Inquiry entitled “Brief history and state of Armenia as a mission field.” Goodell argued that the text of the Armenian Bible had become contaminated over the centuries as the result of “many alterations and corruptions from the Vulgate” and called for a “true” translation of the text. Building on Buchanan’s analysis, Goodell concluded that the Armenian people, with their devotion to Christianity and their widely scattered commercial communities throughout the Near East and Asia, could become catalysts for the spread of Christianity. “Give them the incorruptible seed, the word of God,” urged Goodell, “and they will transport it with their other commodities to every country.” Little could Goodell have imagined the ramifications of his proposal or the key role he himself would play in its implementation.

The ABCFM established a mission in the Near East in a great burst of enthusiasm to reclaim for Christianity the lands of the Bible. When Pliny Fiske and Levi Parsons were sent to Jerusalem in 1819 to found a mission in Palestine, they were instructed to consider:

What can be done for Jews? What for pagans? What for Mohammedans? What for Christians? What for the people in Palestine? What for those in Egypt, in Syria, in Persia, in Armenia, in other countries to which your inquiries may be extended?

The American missionaries in the Near East had the same experience as those in India: a great demand for Bibles in the Armenian language. (Parsons, for example, quickly ran out of his small supply and wrote in his journal from Jerusalem in 1820, “Repeated and earnest applications were made for Armenian Testaments, but it was not in my power to procure them.”) Similar experiences were recorded by Fiske and by Goodell (the latter joined the Palestine mission in 1823, after it was moved from Jerusalem to Beirut). By 1824 the American missionaries in Beirut recommended an expansion of the mission, specifically to work with the Armenians. The missionaries called for the appointment of two additional workers, a survey trip to the interior of Asia Minor to study “the promising field which Armenia presents,” and the addition of

7 Claudius Buchanan, Christian researches in Asia, in Works, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1812), 281-86. Buchanan was rector of the College of Fort William in the Bengal, India.
9 Goodell’s report was published the following year in The Boston Recorder 4:10 (5 Mar. 1819).
10 Strong, Story of the American Board, 80.
of Armenian-language capability to the missionary press which had been established in 1822 in Malta. Goodell, they urged, should devote himself to publication work designed for the Armenians. "We are anxious to see something done as soon as possible for the Armenians," they wrote. "We can hardly expect to obtain a competent supply and a sufficient variety of scriptures and tracts for the occasion until we see a press in operation for the express purpose of furnishing them."A false start in Armeno-Turkish

At this point Goodell made a curious decision which is difficult to understand on the face of it: that the work among the Armenians should be carried out in the Armeno-Turkish language, that is, Turkish written with Armenian characters. Goodell rationalized this decision by pointing out that most Armenians knew Turkish. By taking this course, however, he was disregarding centuries of Armenian tradition. The Armenian Church had been closely associated with the Classical Armenian language for centuries. Armenians were exceptionally devoted to their Bible, as the Western observers quickly noted, and indeed had clung to the Christian religion despite centuries of submission to foreign (and mainly non-Christian) empires. To use the Armeno-Turkish language was to approach the Christian Armenians through a language alien to their deeply held religious traditions. However much the Armenian Bible had become corrupted (according to Goodell) by Latin influences, surely a version based on the familiar verses beloved by Armenians would have been preferable to one provided in a different language.

To cite a small but telling example, Goodell experienced great difficulty in finding Turkish words for "Holy Spirit." After much searching and deliberating, he reluctantly settled on a Persian phrase. But to engage in such an exercise for the Armenian people, who possessed an extensive Christian vocabulary, bordered on the ridiculous. The American missionaries' confidence in their infallibility, and their insensitivity to the beliefs of the native populations they served, were remarkable. As one perceptive student of the missionaries has written, they "bespoke a supercilious and often demeaning attitude towards religions that the recipient people considered integral to their cultures."Goodell's decision can be understood only within the larger aims of the mission—to spread the word among the Muslim population. The Turkish government's ban on proselytizing among Muslims left the missionaries no choice but to limit their work to the non-Muslim peoples of the empire, but there is no doubt that a major long-term goal was to convert the Muslims to Christianity. A Bible in Armeno-Turkish had the advantage that it could be understood by all of the Turkic-speaking peoples. This was especially significant because the Sultan barred distribution of the Bible in Turkish in the Ottoman Arabic script, but did not object to the publication and circulation of the Armeno-Turkish version. Therefore, in Sidon that summer, Goodell began his study of Armeno-Turkish with the assistance of native Armenians.15

12 Joint Letter from Fiske, King, Bird, and Goodell (Beirut), 26 May 1824, ABC 16:6 vol. 5 no. 220.
13 Exchange of letters, British and Foreign Bible Society agent Leeves (Corfu) to Goodell (Malta), 16 Apr. 1830, and Goodell's reply, 22 June 1830: ABC 16:9 vol. 1 no. 1.
15 William Goodell, Journal (Beirut), 27 April 1824, and letters dated 20 July 1824, 5 Jan., 1825, and 14 March 1825, ABC 16:6 vol. 2 nos. 27(19), 30, 34, 38. Goodell's motivation in working in Armeno-Turkish at this time, "with an eye upon the Turks by and by," is acknowledged in ABCFM sources; see for example N.G. Clark, The Gospel in the Ottoman Empire (Cambridge, 1878), 4.
The ABCFM Press and Western Armenian

The missionary press in Malta took an important step forward in December 1826, with the arrival of printer Homan Hallock from America. Armenian fonts were not acquired until a year later, when Jonas King of the Greek mission, on his way home to the United States, stopped in June 1827 in Paris, ordered Armenian fonts, and raised the funds to pay for them from the local Americans.16 With Armenian fonts in hand, Goodell was now able to issue five tracts in Armeno-Turkish.17 Still stationed in Beirut, Goodell prepared the translation of the New Testament into Armeno-Turkish, which was completed by 1828, when war forced the Americans to flee Beirut for safety in Malta. Goodell brought two of his Armenian assistants with him and concentrated on the printing of the New Testament in Armeno-Turkish, a project he completed in 1831.18 By now, however, a closer acquaintance with local conditions had raised the larger issue of the suitability of the Armeno-Turkish language for work among the Armenians.

Development of Western Armenian

The ABCFM, responding to the recommendations made by the missionaries in Beirut, sent two men on a research expedition across the Armenian homeland to learn more about these people who seemed to offer such a promising missionary field. Eli Smith, accompanied by H. G. O. Dwight, left Constantinople in May 1830 on a trip that would last fifteen months and take them across Asia Minor to Russia and Iran and back.19

On observing Armenian communities in Asia Minor, Smith quickly realized the importance of the Armenian language. In a letter to Goodell in January 1831, written from Tabriz, Smith reported that, even in Smyrna (Izmir) and Constantinople, “Armenian is the family language of the Armenians.” In Erzurum, “Armenians so much spoke pure Armenian that, instead of borrowing Turkish words, Turks sometimes spoke Armenian.” Smith concluded, “In short, I should not be at all inclined to print anything in Armeno-Turkish for the Armenians of Armenia proper.” Smith noted in particular the religious significance of the Armenian language to the people, who “consider Armenian not only their native language, but a Christian language.” Finally Smith wondered why books should be printed in Armeno-Turkish “when Armenians would read books in Armenian with much more pleasure.”20

Goodell therefore was not surprised when, soon after his arrival in the

16 On the preparation of Armenian fonts, Jonas King wrote: “Professor Kieffer, the great orientalist, offered to oversee the process, and Mr. Curtis to oversee delivery to Marseilles,” on the way to Malta. Letters of Jonas King (Paris), 14 Jan. and 24 July 1827, ABC 16.6 vol. 3 nos. 189, 190.
17 The tracts were: A new heart the child’s best portion (20 pp.), Little Henry and his bearer (68 pp.), A sermon on the Lord’s Prayer (24 pp.), The history of Dinah Doudney (44 pp.), and Christ, the way to heaven (24 pp.), each issued in 1,000 copies. The list of books published by the Malta Press in the first seven years (reproduced on pp. 14-15 of this issue) shows the great majority to be in Greek, with a few in Italian, in addition to Armeno-Turkish.
18 The publication was subsidized by the British and Foreign Bible Society and was issued in what was described as a small edition of 2,500 copies (letter of Daniel Temple (Malta), 15 Sept. 1830, ABC 16.9 vol. 1 no. 32).
19 The signing of a treaty establishing diplomatic relations between Turkey and the United States made it possible for Smith and Dwight to travel with a U.S. passport. An informative account of this eventful trip was later published: Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H.G.O. Dwight in Armenia: Including a journey through Asia Minor, and into Georgia and Persia, with a visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Ommiah and Salmas, 2 vols. (Boston, 1832).
20 Eli Smith (Tabriz) to Goodell (Malta), 17 Jan. 1831, ABC 16.9 vol. 1 no. 66. Like Goodell, Smith noted that the Armeno-Turkish might be useful for work in the Cilician region of Turkey, where Armenians more readily used the Turkish language.
Ottoman capital, he visited the Armenian Patriarch and received a less than enthusiastic reaction to the copy of his Armeno-Turkish New Testament he presented as a gift. According to Goodell’s report of the meeting, the Patriarch was polite, but remarked that the Testament was not much needed, as in the capital all of his people understood Armenian, and in the interior he had directed that the Armenian language be taught in all the schools. The Patriarch added, according to Goodell, that “it was a disgrace for Christians to be dependent on the Turks for a language on subjects pertaining to religion.” Though temporarily discouraged by these negative comments, Goodell continued in Constantinople the work he had begun in Beirut, revising his translation of the New Testament and completing a translation of the Old Testament in Armeno-Turkish.21

The American missionaries to the Armenians who followed Goodell to the Ottoman Empire, H.G.O. Dwight in 1832, John B. Adger in 1834, Cyrus Hamlin in 1839, and Elias Riggs in 1844, learned and worked in the vernacular Armenian language either instead of, or in addition to, Armeno-Turkish. This language presented a host of difficulties, which were succinctly summarized by Hamlin:

The modern Armenian has entirely lost its ancient beautiful and philosophical structure. Its idioms and its collocations of words are entirely Turkish. Its grammatical structure is broken up and marred by the introduction of Turkish and Persian peculiarities. Its use of tenses, cases, prepositions and other particles is completely Turkish, and the opposite of what the genius of the language demands. Many of the words in common use are borrowed from the Turkish. The Armenians are beginning to cultivate their own language with more attention, and it is now improving ... And in books we have not the usual assistance, the modern Armenian having neither dictionary, grammar, nor law. But it is not only necessary to study the Turkish, it is equally necessary to study the ancient Armenian, which contains nearly all the literature of the nation, and from which the modern tongue must be enriched and improved.22

The missionaries now joined with progressive and educated Armenians in developing and regularizing the vernacular Western Armenian dialects into a written language.23

While the missionaries were grappling with these Armenian-language issues, the press in Malta was undergoing changes. In 1833 the Arabic work was transferred to Beirut while the printing in other languages was moved to Smyrna. The appearance of the press on the Turkish mainland had not proceeded smoothly, however. The missionary director of the press, Daniel Temple, reported that he had arrived in Smyrna on 23 December 1833 with his staff, including one of Goodell’s Armenian assistants, Bishop Dionysius Garabedian (known to the mis-

21 The Armenian Patriarch accepted the Armeno-Turkish New Testament and “while he has not done anything to promote it, neither has he done anything to prevent its circulation,” Goodell reported (Goodell (Constantinople) to Leeser, 29 Feb. 1832, ABC 16.9 vol. 1 no. 332). See also William Goodell, Forty years in the Turkish Empire; or, Memoirs of Rev. William Goodell, D.D., edited by E.D.G. Prinsep (New York, 1877), 169–70; and Goodell (Constantinople), letter dated 28 Dec. 1832, ABC 16.9 vol. 1 no. 159. The Armeno-Turkish language continued to be taught and used by the missionaries in Turkey, particularly in the major cities and in programs for Armenians living in Cilicia, or south-western Turkey.

22 ABCFM Annual Report for 1840, 90.

23 A number of secular works published in the seventeenth century for the growing Armenian commercial class were written in an early form of modern Armenian. The first such book was the Arasth hamarouttan (Handbook on Accounting), printed in Marseilles in 1673. On the development of the Armenian language in printed books, see Jean-Pierre Mahe, “The spirit of early Armenian printing,” Preface to Raymond H. Kévorkian, Catalogue des “insaisibles” arméniens (1531/1693) ou chronique de l’imprimerie arménienne (Geneva, 1986); Vrej Nersessian, Catalogue of early Armenian books, 1512–1850 (London, 1980), 16; and Nichanian, Âges et noms, 184–201, 266–82.
sionaries as Karapet). Three weeks later (on 11 January 1834), the United States consul David Offley came with orders from the government to deport Temple and the press within ten days; otherwise they would be seized by the police. Karapet, who was apparently the chief cause of the problem (he was a former celibate bishop who had been forced to leave the Armenian convent in Jerusalem and had been defrocked following his marriage), was given three days to leave. Offley had protested to the government, which relented to the extent of allowing the press to stay, but decreed that Karapet had to go. It appears that the Armenian church leaders had protested Karapet’s presence to the Ottoman government. Temple hid the offending clergyman and appealed for advice to the Constantinople missionaries, who in turn consulted the Armenian Patriarch. At the time, the missionaries were hopeful of effecting reform within the Armenian church by cultivating good relations with the hierarchy. Therefore it was decided to transfer Karapet from Smyrna to the press in Beirut.  

Another problem arose with Armenian fonts. The initial fonts made in Paris for Goodell’s Armeno-Turkish publications were deemed inadequate for publication in Western Armenian, partly because they lacked some of the letters (Armeno-Turkish does not use all of the Armenian letters) and also because they were not very attractive, the Armenian people having become “somewhat difficult to please on this point by the beautiful type employed in the books issued from the Catholic-Armenian press in Venice.” In June 1835, printer Hallock returned to the United States on leave and ordered Armenian fonts made, particularly a large size suitable for the cards used in the Lancastrian schools favored by the Americans. Meanwhile, the missionaries in Turkey discovered they were able to purchase two sets of Armenian fonts from the Mekhitarian (Armenian Catholic) press in Vienna. With these acquisitions, the press was prepared to publish in Western Armenian.

The initial publications in Western Armenian were supervised by H. G. O. Dwight, who had been Smith’s companion on the fact-finding trip through Armenia and who was in 1832 assigned to Constantinople to work among the Armenians of Turkey, along with Goodell. Dwight became the first American missionary to study modern Western Armenian – indeed he claimed he was the first foreigner in the capital to do so. He reported that the language was generally considered “outlandish and barbaric in the extreme,” but he found it “not devoid of beauty” and “in its original state a rich and copious language full of terms and adapted to almost every species of writing.” As an educator, Dwight naturally looked first to publications that would be useful in the schools that were beginning to be established. The first Armenian-language publication of the Smyrna press, issued in 1836, was a grammar of the English language. This work was designed to meet the needs of the large number of young Armenians who wanted to learn English; it appeared in the early days of the mission, before the ABCFM officially discouraged the use of English in the missions, alarmed that students who had no interest in Evangelical Christianity were taking advantage of mission facilities to

---

24 Letters of Temple (Smyrna), 23 Dec. 1833, 16 Jan. 1834, 10 Feb. 1834, ABC 16.9 vol. 3 nos. 6, 7, 8; letter of Goodell, Schaeffer, Dwight (Constantinople) to Temple (Smyrna), 10 Jan. 1834, ABC 16.9 vol. 3 no. 109. A character sketch of Temple and description of the incident are in David H. Finne, Pioneers East: The early American experience in the Middle East (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).  

25 Hallock had been authorized to spend up to $5,000 in the United States for the acquisition of fonts and other equipment for the Smyrna press: ABCFM Annual Report for 1834-45; letters of Dwight (Constantinople), 8 June 1835 and 12 Oct. 1835, ABC 16.9 vol. 2 nos. 38, 42.
acquire skills for secular careers. The second book was a small Christian almanac, using the new Vienna type. Subsequently Dwight supervised the printing of a popular spelling book, as well as large Lancastrian cards for use in the schools; he also began preparing for publication the book of Psalms in Western Armenian. 26

Since neither the director of the Smyrna press (Temple) nor the printer (Hallock) knew Armenian, and Dwight was away in Constantinople, the responsibility for the development of the Armenian-language press rested with a newly assigned missionary, John B. Adger, who immediately upon his arrival in November 1834 began to look for an Armenian teacher. By March 1836, Adger reported that he could converse in the language, but “it is hard to learn it well.” One of his first projects was the translation of Pilgrim’s progress into Armenian, working with Armenian assistant Sarkis Hohanissian. Another early project was the translation of C. C. Jones’s catechism, working with assistant Muggerdich Tomasian (Jones had been Adger’s classmate at Princeton Theological Seminary and wrote this work for use among the slaves in South Carolina and Georgia). Later Adger worked with Armenian scholar Andreas Varjabed Papasean on the major project of abridging and translating into Armenian Merle D’Aubigné’s History of the Reformation, a work with obvious relevance to the Americans’ goal of reforming the Armenian Apostolic Church. 27

Adger began in 1836 the publication of a popular monthly magazine, Shitemaran pitani getelists (“Treasury of useful knowledge”), which is recognized as a pioneering attempt to publish in Western Armenian. Nichanian writes in his study of the Armenian language that this periodical was “the first to work in a conscientious and effective way to reform the civil language, with the object of creating a language at the same time free of Turkish words, passably uniform, and above all adapted to the needs of expressing modern realities.” 28 Its contents were about half “decidedly religious” and the rest “entertaining and instructive.” 29

The missionary editor-publishers depended to a great extent on their Armenian associates, most of whom were well educated and, if somewhat skeptical of the Americans’ religious goals, sincerely shared their zeal to develop a Western Armenian language capable of expressing contemporary ideas and being understood by the people. Describing the struggle of his Armenian associate Hohanissian in translating passages into Armenian, Adger wrote:

The popular language of the Armenians was very much corrupted by being mixed with Turkish words, and these Sarkis, like every other intelligent Armenian, abhorred. They were so many badges of his people’s ignorance and servitude to the Moslem. That the vocabulary of the modern Armenian should widen, as well as become purified, if education was to make any progress amongst the people, was just such a necessity as had been felt amongst the Greeks . . . Their language must have words dug out from the disuse of centuries under whose ruins they were lying buried, because they had need of those words to express the new ideas they were beginning to entertain. 30

Another zealous missionary assistant was Hamlin’s first language instructor, Mesrob Tagliatine (Taghhatians), one of the early authors who wrote in modern Armenian. A Russian subject who had emigrated to Turkey, Tagliatine had been

26 Letters of Dwight (Constantinople), 17 July 1834, 18 July 1836 and 24 Dec. 1836, ABC 16.9 vol. 2 nos. 25, 51, 54. 27 John B. Adger, My life and times, 1810-1899 (Richmond, 1899), 98, 100, 103. 28 Nichanian, Ages et usages, 291. 29 The almanac was published for four years, then suspended for lack of funds, then resumed in 1844 (ABCFM Annual Report for 1846, Appendix, 252). 30 Adger, My life, 98-99.
saved from arrest in 1839 by Hamlin’s quick thinking, and he managed to flee to India, where he subsequently enjoyed an illustrious career as author and educator (his Vep Vardgesi is considered the first work of fiction in modern Armenian literature).\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{ATTEMPTS TO PUBLISH THE ARMENIAN BIBLE}

Bible work was central to the mission, and the scarcity of Armenian Bibles has been noted. This publication, however, posed special problems. The Armenian church hierarchy remained adamantly opposed to the publication or distribution of the Bible in any but the classical and traditional form. According to Dwight, when representatives of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) raised the question of modern translations of the Bible as early as 1823, the Armenian Patriarch in Constantinople “refused his sanction in the most positive terms and threatened, that if such a work were attempted, he would prohibit the perusal of it, and even punish such as should be found with it.”\textsuperscript{32} Undeterred, the BFBS had commissioned the biblical scholar Hovhannes Zohrap (or Hovhann Zohrapian) to translate the New Testament into Western Armenian, a work which was published in Paris in 1824.\textsuperscript{33} In his memoirs Hamlin, after describing Western Armenian in the 1830s as “a rough, uncultivated language,” asserted that the idea of translating the Bible into such a language was ridiculed in Armenian literary and religious circles, which continued to be dominated by adherents of the classical language. In an apparent reference to Zohrap’s work, Hamlin described it as “a very imperfect translation of the New Testament” which was “referred to with contempt.”\textsuperscript{34}

The continued scarcity of Armenian Bibles led the missionaries in Constantinople to assign a high priority to this publication. In Smyrna, Adger turned his attention to the edition of Psalms prepared by Dwight in Constantinople, and at the same time he began to translate the Old Testament into Western Armenian. Soon after, however, at a meeting of the mission, it was decided that Adger should give priority to preparing a new edition of the New Testament in both classical and Western Armenian – classical in order to bring the Armenian Bible into conformity with the Protestant standard and Western to try to improve the language of Zohrap’s translation.\textsuperscript{35}

Adger immediately showed himself more sensitive to the feelings of the Armenians than Goodell and the other early missionaries. As he began his study

\textsuperscript{31} Hamlin describes the incident with Taghiatians in Among the Turks (New York, 1878), 30-40; an assessment of the man’s subsequent achievements is in Oshagan, “Modern Armenian Literature,” 147.

\textsuperscript{32} H.G.O. Dwight, Christianity served in the East; or, A narrative of the word of God among the Armenians of Turkey (New York, 1850), 10. The British and Foreign Bible Society was a precursor of the Americans in publishing and distributing Bibles throughout the world. Unlike the Americans, however, the agents of the BFBS did not preach, but limited their work to printing and distributing the Bible. Nor did they insist, as the Americans did, that the foreign-language Bibles conform to current Western standards. The BFBS had subsidized the printing of the classical Armenian Bible in Calcutta (1813), St. Petersburg (1813-17), and Constantinople (1823).

The BFBS had also financed the publication of an Armeno-Turkish Bible in Russia in 1819 and later a translation into Eastern Armenian. The BFBS sponsored Goodell’s translation of the Bible into Armeno-Turkish as well as the early missionary publications of the Bible in Western Armenian. See William Canton, History of the British and Foreign Bible Society, vol. 1 (London, 1904).

\textsuperscript{33} Zohrap had been the editor of the first critical edition of the classical Armenian Bible, issued in San Lazzaro by the Armenian Catholic (Mekhitarist) press in 1805; he died in 1820, before completing the translation of the Old Testament into Western Armenian.

\textsuperscript{34} Cyrus Hamlin, My life and times, 210-11.

\textsuperscript{35} Letter of Adger, 16 Nov. 1836, ABC 16.9 vol. 3 no. 70.
of the classical Armenian New Testament, he found it to be extremely close to the Greek original, and wondered why he should make changes in the classical text. "If possible, I would wish to avoid the necessity of giving offense to the nation by altering their old version, a version for which they entertain feelings of the deepest veneration, and one which well deserves their esteem," Adger wrote.36 His arguments won the day, and Adger's New Testament reproduced the classical Armenian text, with marginal notations for passages in which "the Greek is of undoubted correctness." This edition of the New Testament was issued in two sections: the Gospels in 1837 and the entire New Testament in 1838. At the same time Adger directed his efforts to the more difficult task of preparing a revised edition of the Zohrap New Testament in Western Armenian. The Gospels were published in 1841 and the entire New Testament in 1842.37

Adger was one of the most able and productive of the American missionary editors and translators, but after twelve years he was obliged to give up the work. A southern Presbyterian, he differed in outlook from his colleagues, most of whom were Congregational northerners; moreover, he was suffering from an eye weakness experienced by many early missionaries working in the Armenian language and exacerbated by his returning to work too soon after a bout of smallpox.38

Before leaving Smyrna in 1845, Adger prepared a catalog of Armenian and Armeno-Turkish publications of the missionary press up to that time. It is an impressive document, listing over forty publications in Western Armenian issued in the eight years from 1836 to 1844. In addition to the New Testament and Psalms, the list includes such substantial works as Adger's translations of Merle d'Aubigné's *History of the Reformation* (the first volume in 680 pages had just been released in 1,000 copies), Jones's catechism (203 pp., issued in 1842 in 3,000 copies), *Mother at Home* (288 pp., 3,000 copies, 1840), and Sarkis Hohanissian's popular spelling book (four editions totalling 7,500 copies, 1837-44). Several shorter works, including some translations of publications of the American Tract Society (which paid for the Armenian editions), were also issued, with such titles as "Joy in Heaven," "Light of the Soul," "Progress of Sin," "Sin No Trifle," and "What Must I Do?" Particularly favored by the missionaries were such sentimental works as Legh Richmond's *The dairyman's daughter*. Textbooks included Worcester's astronomy and Abercrombie on mental culture.39

These achievements of the press did not come about without difficulties. In 1836 a newly elected Armenian Patriarch attacked missionary publications and in 1839 forbade the faithful from reading them and almost succeeded in having the missionaries expelled from Turkey. Only the Ottoman military defeat at the hands of Mohammed Ali and the accession of Sultan Abdul Mejid saved the situation. These events, accompanied by bitter verbal attacks and counterattacks, served to isolate and marginalize the Americans and their Armenian adherents.40 At the same time critics in the United States were charging that the missionaries

---

36 Ibid. In the same letter Adger described the classical Armenian version of the New Testament as "truly admirable" and asserted, "I do not believe it is at all inferior . . . to our own excellent English translation."
38 The ABCFM Secretary Anderson was shocked to discover in 1844 that Adger, through his wife, owned a few slaves. Adger describes the circumstances of his resignation from the ABCFM in My life, 136-63.
39 ABCFM Annual Report for 1846, Appendix, 249-54.
spent too much time on publications, to the neglect of direct preaching.41 An ABCFM delegation that included the powerful Secretary Rufus Anderson visited the Near East in 1844 and endorsed these criticisms.42

ACHIEVEMENTS OF ELIAS B. RIGGS

At the very time that Anderson and others were criticizing the missionaries for excessive time spent on publications, the ABCFM decreed a significant expansion of the work among the Armenians (indeed the mission in Turkey was renamed the “Armenian Mission”).43 The chain of events that led to the excommunication of the Evangelicals by the Armenian Patriarch in 1846 and the sub-

---

41 ABCFM Annual Report for 1835. In a letter dated 31 May 1835, Dwight responded that, without education and publications, there could be no preaching: “Let those who criticize missionaries for not preaching enough—let them come and teach, and we will preach.” ABC 16.9 vol. 2 no. 37.

42 Report to the Prudential Committee of a visit to the missions in the Levant by Rufus Anderson (Boston, 1844). Anderson suggested that the danger facing the missionary-translator, that “he sinks into an author and editor,” could be avoided by having all dealings directly with the ABCFM Prudential Committee rather than with the societies. He also noted that the Board had sold its presses in Smyrna to the printer and now owned only $3,000 worth of type, two-thirds of it Armenian (53). In a letter appended to the report, Rev. Dr. Joel Hawes, a member of the Delegation, echoes Anderson’s views on the press (41-42). As a result of this trip, Anderson ordered the press in Beirut closed for one year.

43 It was decided to close the Greek section of the mission to Turkey, to separate the Jewish section, and to augment the staff in order to concentrate on the promising Armenian field (Strong, American Board, 104; ABCFM Annual Report for 1844, 98-101).
sequent establishment of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Turkey made the need for a modern Armenian Bible and other publications essential. Fortunately for the missionaries, a capable scholar to complete the work begun by Adger was found when the linguist Elias B. Riggs of the Greek mission was assigned to the Smyrna press in 1844. A graduate of Amherst College and Andover Theological Seminary, Riggs had written a grammar of Arabic at age eighteen, published a Chaldean manual in his last year of theological studies, and knew classical Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, as well as Turkish and Bulgarian. Riggs now turned his considerable talent to Armenian for the next seven years, concentrating on completing the translation and publication of the Bible in Armenian. But first Riggs realized that this new written language should have a lexicon and grammar, and he immediately set about to fill the need, publishing during this period three slim

44 An account of the events surrounding the establishment of the Armenian Evangelical Church can be found in Goodell, Forty years, 337-72; Hamlin, Among the Turks, 131-19; Chopourian, Evangelical Reformation, 77-91, and Leon Arpee, The Armenian awakening: A history of the Armenian Church, 1820-1860 (Chicago, 1905).
volumes to assist in the study of the Western Armenian language. The first, in 1847, was *A brief grammar of the Modern Armenian language as spoken in Constantinople and Asia Minor*. In the preface, Riggs noted the existence of a number of excellent grammars and lexicons for the study of ancient Armenian but claimed that his book represented the first attempt to offer a grammar of modern Armenian, the Armenians having, “as yet, published no grammar of their spoken language.” Riggs was perhaps unaware that, as early as 1713, the Abbot Mekhitar, founder of the Armenian Catholic order which bears his name and which played a key role in the development of modern Armenian literature, had written a grammar book for students (in Armenian–Turkish) which included a small section on vernacular Armenian. In any event, Riggs pointed out:

> It is only during the present century that the modern language has begun to be cultivated as the language of books, the genius of the age and the best interests of humanity requiring that authors should no longer, as formerly, veil their ideas in a dialect accessible only to the few, but should spread them far and wide in the free and idiomatic use of the languages vernacular to their countrymen.

That same year Riggs published in Smyrna the 162-page *Vocabulary of words used in modern Armenian but not found in the ancient Armenian lexicons*, which contains more than 6,000 words. A second edition of his grammar was published in 1856 in Constantinople, by A. B. Churchill. In a footnote to the second edition, Riggs noted that in 1853 “a grammatical treatise” had been published in the capital entitled *Correct method of speaking the modern Armenian language*, adding that it is “not so much a grammar of the spoken language, as an exhibition of the author’s ideas of what that language should be, departing in many instances very far from existing usage.” The reference here is apparently to the work by the dedicated reformer Nahabed Rusinian, who had just returned to Istanbul following a decade of study in Paris. His efforts to reform the Armenian language according to the rules of logic failed, but he was an influential member of the renaissance generation that subsequently developed Western Armenian into a rich, lucid, and expressive language.46

During this period Riggs revised Adger’s New Testament and Dwight’s edition of the Psalms and translated the Old Testament for the first time into Western Armenian. These publications were based on the original languages (i.e. the Old Testament on the Hebrew and the New Testament on the Greek); however, all proper names were rendered in the form found in the classical Armenian text. Riggs established a procedure similar to that used earlier by Goodell and Adger. Armenian assistants produced a first draft, Riggs then reviewed and com-

---

pared this draft with the original to produce a second draft, and finally this draft was circulated among scholars in Smyrna and Constantinople for evaluation prior to publication. The Old Testament was published in Smyrna in four parts between 1849 and 1853 in small quantities (500 copies each) to allow further commentary and correction. The Bible was published in one volume in Smyrna in 1853 in what was described as a small press run of 5,000, to allow more commentary and review. Riggs, an efficient worker not usually given to complaining about his assignment, nonetheless made note of the many hours he had spent with his associates in reviewing the translation: “This is not a small matter in relation to a language which is so much in a forming state as the modern Armenian.”

The Armenian-language output of the Smyrna press was remarkable. In 1853, according to the mission’s annual report, 6,374,500 pages were printed in Armenian, out of a total for all languages of 6,989,500. The entire output of the press, since its establishment, was put at 116,511,460 pages, of which a significant portion, well over half, must have been in Western Armenian. With the completion of publication of the Bible in Western Armenian, the ABCFM press and Riggs were transferred to Constantinople in 1853. Soon after, in 1856, his health failing, Riggs came on furlough to the United States, and while in New York was prevailed upon by the American Bible Society to oversee the publication of the entire Bible in Western Armenian, a massive undertaking for Riggs, who nonetheless found time to serve simultaneously as professor of Hebrew and Chaldee at Union Theological Seminary. This project was completed in 1858. Subsequently the Riggs edition of the Western Armenian Bible continued to be printed, with only minor linguistic variations, for well over 100 years.

A contemporary Protestant scholar has written, “It was this Bible translation that formed the foundation of modern western Armenian,” noting that it “contributed to the final triumph of the vernacular” as the literary language. An Armenian journalist wrote at the time, “henceforth by reading the western Armenian Bible our people will learn how to speak and write their mother tongue.” A debate over the development of the language in subsequent decades became an important part of the intellectual ferment among Armenians—a debate which ended in a clear victory for the proponents of the use of the vernacular.

CONCLUSION

In assessing the role of the missionaries in the development of Western Armenian, one cannot claim that the Americans were either the first or the only ones to recognize the need for such a language, nor were they responsible for the development of the vernacular into a literary means of expression that, by the early twen-

47 Letter from Elias Riggs (Smyrna), 13 Mar. 13, 1850, ABC 16:7:1 vol. 14 no. 355. Additional fonts had been needed for so ambitious a work: Hallock, who by now had returned to the United States, was commissioned to obtain matrices from which a Smyrna printer could cast type. The letters from Riggs in this period chronicle his translation work. (nos. 354, Smyrna 8 Sept. 1846, to 453, 20 Dec. 1859).
48 ABCFM Annual Report for 1853, 62.
49 Dwight, “A mighty worker.”
50 Numerous attempts to revise it failed, and only at the beginning of the 1980s have new Western Armenian versions of the Bible been published (Manuel B. Jinbazian, “Modern Armenian Translations of the Bible,” in Armenia and the Bible, 105–10).
51 Ibid., 105.
tenth century, enjoyed its “silver age” of great literature (compared with the “golden age” of classical Armenian in the fifth century). What can be said is that the missionaries arrived at the intellectual center of the Western Armenian people at a time ripe for the development of a modern written language and that they immediately understood the need to publish not only secular works, but religious and philosophical literature as well, in a form that could be understood by the large majority of Armenians. Practicing what they preached, they dedicated significant human and financial resources to translating and publishing a large body of religious literature in Western Armenian. Many Armenians who worked with them went on to become authors and grammarians in the modern language. The missionary activities provided an impetus for others to follow their example (either as admirers or competitors), and a tremendous outpouring of printed material, periodicals as well as books, followed. The development of the Western Armenian language became a significant component of the growth of Armenian nationalism in this period.

It is beyond the scope of this paper, but worthy of note, that the Americans also established a broad network of schools designed to teach literacy as part of a basic education. Not only did these efforts help to educate a large reading public and to create a demand for printed material, they also played a role in breaking down the oligarchy that had heretofore dominated Armenian society. Particularly revolutionary was the dissemination of the concept that all people are equally able (and indeed bear a responsibility) to use their God-given abilities to become literate, educate themselves, and form their own ideas and opinions—a basic tenet in the development of democracy. The fact that these results were for the most part unintended consequences—the ABCFM always claiming that it had no social or political agenda beyond its religious purposes—does not diminish their significance in the modern history of the Armenian people.