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Telling Fisk's Story

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Telling Fisk's Story

Abstract

Pliny Fisk (1792-1825) was one of two missionaries sent in 1819 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to the Ottoman Empire. This made them not only the first American missionaries in the Muslim majority world, but two of the first Americans to make a permanent move to the Middle East. Hubers' book explores what it meant for Pliny and his companion Levi Parsons to make that trip, exploring in particular the impact this had on their perceptions of the religious other.

What makes this an interesting study is noting that Fisk never met a Middle Easterner in person--Christian, Muslim or Jew--before he went, developing his perceptions of the people among whom he would be working on a purely theoretical basis. The assumption in this case is that these initial perceptions would be significantly altered by an existential encounter. The reality turned out to be something different.

The following excerpt sets the stage for Hubers' exploration into the mind and ministry of this pioneering missionary.

About the Author

John Hubers earned a doctorate in world Christianity and global mission from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He has 13 years of experience living in the Middle East, where he initially taught English and then served as a pastor of congregations in Oman and Bahrain. Upon returning to the United States, he pastored a congregation composed primarily of students from the University of Michigan before joining the Reformed Church in America's headquarters as the denomination's supervisor of mission programs in the Middle East and South Asia. Most recently he was senior pastor of the Reformed Church in Plano (Texas). Hubers' areas of expertise include Christian Zionism, ecumenical and interfaith relations, and the history and current practice of Christian mission among Muslims.

Telling Fisk’s Story

by John Hubers, Ph.D.

Soon after his premature death on the mission field in 1825, Pliny Fisk’s former Andover classmate, the Rev. Alvan Bond, wrote what was at the time his definitive memoir.¹ Like other memoirs of the era, this was less a critical examination of Fisk’s life and ministry than it was an attempt to portray him as a model of selfless missionary service for the purpose of encouraging others to consider similar service. Bond makes this clear in his preface.

If this record of [Fisk’s] religious exercises and benevolent works may but excite others to emulate his sterling virtues, or inspire any one with the holy resolution to gird himself for the perils, conflicts, and sacrifices of the same self-denying service, the labor of preparing it for the press will not have been in vain.²

This memoir was published in 1828. Since that time no scholar has seen fit to revisit the Fisk oeuvre to give it a less hagiographical, more critical treatment. This book will be the first to do so in a comprehensive fashion.

Here the recent work of two scholars needs to be mentioned for their less comprehensive, yet similarly critical treatment of Fisk’s narrative. The first is the work of historian Ussama Makdisi who writes about Fisk’s ministry in two recently published books, *The Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East*³ and *Faith*

¹ Alvan Bond (ed.), *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A. M., Late Missionary to Palestine*. Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1828.

² *Ibid.*, vi.

³ Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.-Arab Relations: 1820-2001.⁴ Makdisi used many of the same primary materials I have collected for this project. His focus, however, is both broader in purpose and narrower in scope. His broader purpose is to locate Fisk and other early American missionaries to the Middle East in the larger context of an eventful, sometimes tortured American encounter with Arab culture that would eventually lead to “a liberalism that can be credited neither to Americans or Arabs alone but to a transnational history that demands a new kind of narrative.”⁵ The narrower scope of his work is its concentration on the time Fisk spent in the Ottoman Empire.

The second, even more recent work, is that of Samir Khalaf who writes about Fisk in his book *Protestant Missionaries in the Levant: Ungodly Puritans, 1820-1860*.⁶ Khalaf’s work is more comprehensive than Makdisi’s as he spends more time covering what Khalaf calls the American-based “Nurseries of Piety,”⁷ that is, universities and seminaries that shaped the missionary vision of people like Fisk and Parsons. His interest in this case is as much with the American evangelical vision that formulated the mission as it is with the mission itself. But, as with Makdisi, Khalaf examines this foundational narrative in order to examine how it determined the shape and impact of pioneering missionary discourse on Levant cultures. In his own words:

I am...concerned with exploring the interplay between the religious and secular components, the “Christianizing” and “civilizing” features, or in the idiom of this study, the “godly” and “ungodly” attributes of New England Puritanism as a cultural transplant.

⁴ Ussama Makdisi, *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.-Arab Relations: 1820-2001* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2010).

⁵ Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 1.

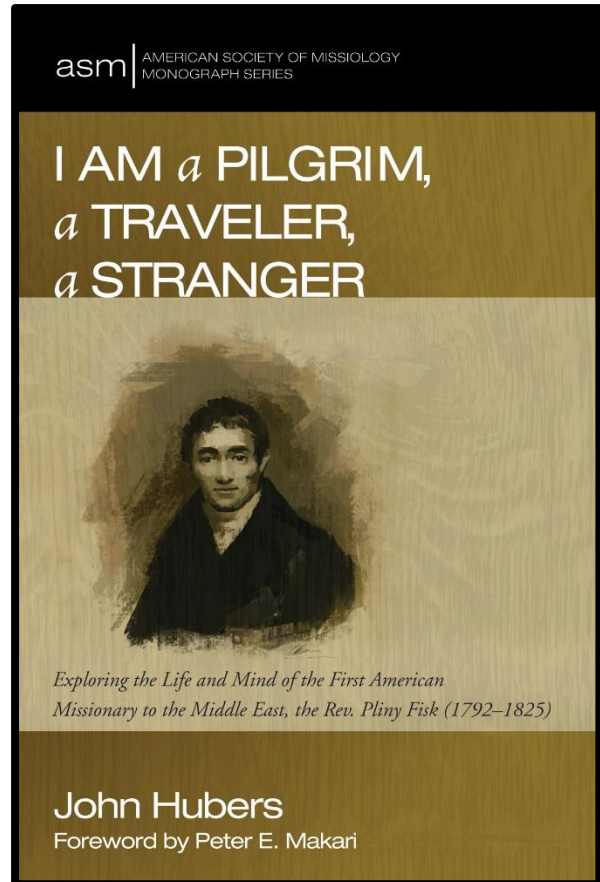
⁶ Samir Khalaf, *Protestant Missionaries in the Levant; Ungodly Puritans, 1820-1860* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

More explicitly, it is my hope to demonstrate how the “ungodly” features of Puritanism come to prevail.⁸

For both Makdisi and Khalaf, Fisk is primarily a representative figure, one of many who produced a transformative encounter between American and Middle Eastern cultures. To a certain extent this is also true with what follows. I, too, am interested in locating Fisk in a larger narrative, in this case an historical narrative about the encounter of American missionaries with people of other cultures and faiths. But I am also interested in telling Fisk’s story in a way that will allow him to be something more than just a representative figure, as his story is significant in and of itself.

It is significant first of all because he was the first American missionary (one of two) to live and work among the peoples of the Ottoman Empire at a time when only a handful of Americans had made this move at all. This was, as Makdisi puts it, a “foundational encounter between Americans and Arabs.”⁹ The observations Fisk makes about life in the Ottoman Empire



Cover of book from which this is excerpted.
Image from American Society of Missiology.

⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁹ Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 7.

are, in this case, of critical historical value whether or not one is interested in exploring his missiographical significance.

It is also significant in that this book will join a growing body of literature¹⁰ that avoids both the extreme of furnishing these early missionaries with halos, as per Bond’s hagiographical treatment of Fisk, or condemns them as tools of Western imperialism. Makdisi understands the temptation to do the latter when he writes:

To denounce missionaries as cultural imperialists is...to misunderstand the often ambivalent location missionaries occupied within their own societies as well as in foreign fields. And it is to ignore the polyvalent registers of native worlds and the deliberate choice made by many individuals such as As’ad Shidyayq to associate with foreign missionaries.¹¹

It is hoped that the person who emerges out of the pages of this book will help counter missionary stereotypes of either extreme. Pliny Fisk, like every other missionary who went to their chosen field of service in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was a complex individual whose perceptions were shaped by an interplay between his unique psychological and social profile and an eclectic, often contradictory blend of religious and culturally determined sub-texts that shaped the New England Calvinism that served as his spiritual home. We will see in particular in Fisk’s story the tension that existed between Enlightenment rationality and evangelical piety, a tension that was never fully resolved. We will find in him contradictory

¹⁰ This includes the work of secular historians, some of which has recently been published in a book edited by Mehmet Ali Dogan and Heather Starkey entitled *American Missionaries and the Middle East: Foundational Encounters* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011). The topics covered in this book indicate a desire to move beyond the romantic stereotypes that have been created by hagiographies on the one side and accusations of cultural imperialism on the other.

¹¹ Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 10. As’ad Shidyayq was the first celebrated convert of this early missionary venture. His tragic story forms the basis for the primary narrative of Makdisi’s book.

impulses that make it difficult to over generalize developments in his character and attitudes.

And that may be the most significant reason for re-visiting his story. Just as orientalist scholarship has made it difficult for Westerners fully to understand their Middle Eastern neighbors as neighbors, so hagiographical memoirs on the one side and post-colonial critiques of these early American missionaries on the other have made it difficult to recognize the complexities in their personality profiles and missional visions. There is a contingent *narrative* that needs to be heard here, as well. The second purpose of this book is best understood in this way: as an attempt to allow that *narrative* to be heard in the story of one of the first Americans to make a significant missionary journey across cultural barriers.