

# SOME ABSTRACTS FROM THE MORMON MISSIONARIES ABOUT THE TURKS AND ARMENIANS

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**M**ost history sources on the Armenian Question refer to the strong ties established between the Armenians and the alturistic American Protestant missionaries in the Ottoman Empire. This often invites the attention of the readers to learn more about the missionaries and understand their role in the Turco-Armenian conflicts during the last phase of the Empire. There are abundance of sources displaying the missionaries' views as apologists of the Armenians especially when allegations on Armenian massacres by the Turks are concerned. These views mostly bearing the basic omission of favorable comments for the Turks, usually concentrate on popular assertions of condemning the Ottoman government of being the designer of extermination of a race. However, not much has been written and said about another group of American missionaries who have resided on the same territories for approximately forty years, stretching from 1880's to 1914. This group, representing the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, administered from their headquarters by the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City, Utah were shortly referred to as the Mormons.

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Interestingly, Mormon missionaries were also U.S. citizens, and the cause for their existence in the Ottoman Empire was not much different from the Protestant American missionaries: They were highly devoted to their religious convictions and chose to venture in distant lands to preach the Gospel. Their duty was converting, and this compelled them to be amongst and directly in touch with people. Using the advantage of benefiting from the experiences of

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their compatriots, they also chose the Armenians as potential converts and pursued their relations with them. During their mission in the Ottoman Empire, naturally they lived through the same course of history as the former group. However, when we explore into their correspondences, reports, diaries or testimonies (short life stories the Mormons had to present to the Church), we do not come across the same culmination of anti-Turk assertions preached by the Protestant missionaries, nor do we see the Armenian conflicts as the focus of their mission. Assuming that not finding the antagonism encountered in the writings of one group of American missionaries in another would inevitably urge a non-biased reader of Turkish-Armenian relations to learn more about the Mormon missionaries, some documents from Mormon records will be presented in this article.

### **Few Words About Missionary Activities In the Ottoman Empire**

Missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire can be traced back to the 16th century. However, it was not until 1820 that the American Protestant missionaries, anticipating to proselyte Ottoman subjects set foot on Ottoman territories. The 1830 Commercial Treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the United States, believed to be a power imperialistically disinterested in the Empire, also served to bring good reception to American missionaries and soon they became the most influential of the existing missionary groups. Noting the orthodox applications of the Gregorian church towards the Armenians, the American missionaries translated the Bible to Armenian, and in public places and house-calls approached this *millet* in their vernacular language. In addition their religious guidance with their benignant styles, they displayed benevolence through orphanages, Sunday schools, educational institutions, adult classes and medical centers they established especially in areas where the state remained inefficient and soon, won over the Armenians. Meanwhile they became the source of information to the United States, previously uninformed about the Ottoman Empire and the Turks. The Americans learned about this distant land and its people mainly through the correspondences, reports, and articles of the American missionaries.

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imperialistic states over the Armenians, hence, welcomed and even encouraged their activities. No hardship was encountered for the erection of American consulates when missionaries sought federal support due to Ottoman disorder which increased as Turco-Armenian relations deteriorated. As American missionary stations, and accordingly, consulates multiplied throughout the Ottoman Empire, philanthropic missionary activities started to reflect signs of American foreign policy. Consequently favorable official relations with the missionaries tarnished as Armenianism became the main factor missionaries used to influence U.S relations. Economic concerns between the United States and the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century declined to the point that in the 1890 s missionaries were the main interest of the U.S. in Ottoman lands.<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of the century, culminating effects of missionaries' correspondences and reports, no longer pietistic, multiplied imperialistic interests in the Ottoman Empire to the point of serving as an invitation to the Mormons, long in search for a suitable colonization area where they could freely practice their religion.

#### **Now Some Words on Mormonism And Mormon Missionaries**

Mormonism was initiated in Manchester, New York by Joseph Smith in the early 19th century. By 1830, the English version of The Book of Mormon was published and The Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, briefly referred to as LDS was established.

The principles and practices of Mormonism, claimed to be modernized version of Christianity, actually were quite different than what had been practiced for over 1830 years. They included obedience to living prophet, performing compulsory missionary work to spread the Gospel, restricting alcoholic or caffeinated

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<sup>1</sup> Grabill, Joseph L. Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East, Missionary Influence on American Policy 1810-1927, Minn. 1971, p. 35-40

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expelled from wherever they settled as they migrated from one place to the other until they reached Salt Lake City, Utah, which became their permanent residence.

beverages as well as consumption of tobacco while they encouraged practice of polygamy in order to provide rapid development of Mormonism. Although Joseph Smith immediately gained some adherents, his small community was much resented by Christian Americans. Moreover, they were persecuted by Americans and

Utah's inclusion into the Union in 1850 compelled the Mormons to observe the Federal laws and, of course, the Constitution. This created problems for the Mormons who sought to constitute a theocratic state for themselves while the U.S. Constitution called for secularism; and wished to pursue plural marriages while initially, the social codes in all states, and later, in 1890, the Federal Government outlawed polygamy. Mormons were acknowledged about the practice of polygamy in Islamic societies, and of course, in the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, they observed the imperialistic approaches of the powerful European states towards the Ottoman Empire, considerably weakened since the beginning of the century. Accordingly, they did not lose any time in reaching across the Atlantic with the anticipations of colonizing Ottoman territories where they were sure they could freely practice Mormonism. Hence, Mormon missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire started with the arrival of Elder Joseph Spori in Istanbul in 1884. This was when American missionary activities in the Empire were at their climax and the Armenian nationalists were preparing to establish the main revolutionary societies which developed the antagonism between the Turks and Armenians, and eventually, breed the bloodshedding conflicts. Undoubtedly the beginning of the incidences can also be attributed to numbers of other causes stretching from economic to imperialistic to political, etc.

The reader must keep in mind that the objective of this article is not to argue on the causes or the consequences of the conflicts between the Turks and Armenians, subjects of the same Empire. It is an attempt to open a different and a comparative dimension to researchers of the issue by displaying some views of American

Mormon missionaries, developed during their mission in Ottoman lands. The Mormons were deprived of the support of their Government, more so, even politically and socially rejected at home. Unlike the Protestant American missionaries, this saved them from political involvements to the Armenian issue. The below abstracts from what their missionaries in the Ottoman Empire have conveyed to their headquarters as their impressions of Turks, Turkey and the Armenian incidences are more indifferent and as will be viewed, certainly do not focus on criticizing the Ottoman administration or reflecting their mistreatment of the Armenians, as claimed in the others'.

### **Mormon Missionaries In the Ottoman Empire**

The arrival of the Mormon missionaries in the Ottoman Empire was some sixty years after the American Protestant missionaries, so, they were not as ignorant about the Empire as were their compatriots, back in the 1820s. However, they probably did not have a high opinion of the Turks, possibly due to impressions related by the Protestant American missionaries. Nevertheless, their opinions started to change as they established favorable relations with state authorities they contacted in order to secure official grounds for their presence in the Empire. As a matter of fact, they even started to compare the ill treatment they were exposed to back home with the fine reception they had from Ottoman officials and the Turks. One of the pioneering Mormon missionaries, Elder Tanner, soon after his arrival in Istanbul expressed his opinion about the Turks as "After all, they are the most honest and moral of the Orientals. Like the Mormons, however, they have been wonderfully misrepresented!"<sup>2</sup>

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In Istanbul, Mormon missionaries first sought for opportunities to introduce Mormonic principles to Turks. Meanwhile, outcasted by Protestant missionaries they referred to as "American missionaries" they attempted to establish their own official contacts. To their surprise, they were able to reach even the uppermost authorities. Elder Hintze,

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<sup>2</sup> Millennial Star, 22 June, 1886

following a visit to the grand vezir was accepted by Munif Paa, the Minister of Public Education and was assured that the government would not interfere with the Mormon missionaries as long as they did not attempt to mormonize the Turks.<sup>3</sup>

Realizing that the revelation of their contacts with the Turks could jeopardize their stay in the Ottoman Empire, they took up labor among the Armenians. They tried to tempt the Armenians by talking about financial opportunities Utah offered to Mormons. As a matter of fact, some confessed that "money bought many converts". Elder Charles Locander specifying Armenian indifference about religion mentioned that some Armenians they preached straight forwardly asked how much they would be paid if baptized.<sup>4</sup>

Missionary Tanner, also accepted and much impressed by Mnif Paa, whose actual interests lied in the educational rather than the religious aspect of the missionaries, carefully noted his parley with the Minister and included "He could not comprehend why the United States should persecute the Mormons as the Americans boasted of their great political and religious liberty".<sup>5</sup>

Actually, the friction between the two groups of American missionaries was to the point that as one of the Mormon missionaries, Fred Staufer noted in his journal, the Potestant missionaries forbade their congregations to visit the Mormons.<sup>6</sup> The resentful attitude of their compatriots must have diverted the Mormons to develop a better understanding of the Turks for their recorded impressions do not bear the bitterness viewed in those of the American Protestant missionaries'. For example, below is a passage reflecting Missionary Tanner's impressions of the Turks, titled "Who Can be So Polite and Courteaus As a Turk" from History of the Turkish Mission:

"I have often wanted to write you something about the domestic life and institutions of the Turks, but I have been among them only about eight months, and I did not wish to expose myself in a nonsensical way about people much talked of, and I am thus far convinced grossly misrepresented. During

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<sup>3</sup> Provo Archives, Msf 696, No.1 6 April, 1888

<sup>4</sup> Desert News, 22 May, 1889

<sup>5</sup> CRmh 14450, Vol.I, 13 July, 1886

<sup>6</sup> Journal of Fred Staufer, 19 July, 1850, CRmh 14250, Vol.I

odd moments, and by way of change of work as a rest, I have read some eight volumes on the peoples of Turkey-the Turkish harem –meaning the “holy”, is an object of much comment. The “haremlık” is the women’s apartment, and the “selamlık” is the men’s apartment. The harem is not an institution of polygamy, but a religious or race institution, and belongs to every household. Polygamy is little practiced in Turkey, still it is an acknowledged institution. All women wear a veil that conceals most of the face except the eyes, though among many of the modern beauties it is so thin- made of such light muslin – that the features can be distinctly seen through it. The Turkish woman by no means is a slave; indeed she enjoys many more privileges in her harem than European women do in their homes. Like many of their European sisters, they have a mind of their own and they are not afraid to let it be known. But Turkish women do not associate in any way with men, except their immediate relatives or husbands. .... Free association of men and women as among the Europeans is unknown to the Turks..... The men have their gatherings and amusements to themselves, and the women, likewise. If there is any truth whatever in the saying that “Virtue is the absence of temptation”, the Turks are vastly superior morally to the Europeans. I have formed the acquaintance of a German foreign correspondent of Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna newspapers. He has been in this country a great number of years, and has lived in Turkish families. His ideas, though embodied in those of most Europeans of considerable experience here with whom I have talked, are probably the most definite and best formulated. He has repeatedly asserted that the Turks are vastly more moral respecting women than Europeans. His theory is that if the Turks had more of that passion which, while it has developed Europe intellectually, has made its moral status so low, they would be superior to what they now are. A few of the Turks, however, practice polygamy, and that furnishes the literary artist materials to paint all sorts of pictures. Probably no city in the world presents on its surface a worse spectacle of fallen women of Christendom and Judaism than this. One often hears stories of the grossest immorality of the Turks, and he hears them just as often contradicted. There are many curious customs among the people here, and they furnish literary men and newspaper correspondents, stopping a few weeks here, stuff for many silly and nonsensical stories.

You know there is considerable political speculation about this country, and there are men here, politicians, who have made in the past and expect in the future to make money out of European interferences. There are many things I cannot praise among the Turks in their administration of affairs; but because a lets the weeds grow up in the garden, it is no excuse that B should rob him of it. The Turkish Question, or the Eastern Question as it is more generally called is weak Turkey. The Greeks want European Turkey, the Russians would like Constantinople, and England is planting strong interests here. The Germans are strongly represented, and Bismarck to-day has his fingers deepest in the pie of Turkish politics, and his influence is great with the government. England has been a greater enemy to Turkey than Russia. Russia is our awoved enemy in her attempts to enforce her pan-Slavic schemes, but England has been an enemy in the disguise of a friend-has inflicted internal wounds that are more difficult to heal than external ones inflicted by Russia.”<sup>7</sup>

If we leave aside the favorable comments of a Mormon missionary about Harem (since Mormons were polygamist), this abstract holds an analysis about the Ottoman Empire of 1886 and the Turks, through the eyes of an American. What should be noted is that it is not designed to invite hostility or contain degrading critisizms and evaluations of Turkish practices frequently observed among the documents of Protestant American missionaries.

Naturally not all of the missionaries’ writings praised the Turks. However, their complains generally culminated around the restrictions of Abdulhamit II’s absolutist reign. They specifically pointed out to points such as the sanctioning required for practices of different beliefs, the serious censor applied to all publications and restrictions for such instruments as typewriters, for they prevented the observation of individuality of handwritings and telephones, with the fear that they would be used for conspirations against the government.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 1886, 31 July, SLC/CRmh14250 Vol.I, Turkey Mission

<sup>8</sup> Desert News, April 25, 1908 (Possibly, these impressions were of an earlier date, however, their appearance in Salt Lake City journals are after the conclusion of Abdülhamit II’s absolutism, by his disposition.



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Impressions related in the correspondences of the later Mormon missionaries, particularly of those serving in the Ottoman Empire during the time of deportation and the First World War were also different from the Americans'. Mormons' independence from being the agents of American foreign policy in the Middle East even reflected in the writings of their Armenian converts. Most of these Armenian converts wrote their testimonies or notes after they migrated to the United States, which means they had nothing to fear from expressing their true feelings. Yet what they wrote were mostly simple history or their personal lives. As it will be observed in the lengthy passages deliberately given in the examples below,<sup>9</sup> although they sometimes contained incorrect verdicts (as is seen in the first), which the authors resorted to for reflecting negative opinions of the Ottoman administration, this was not very frequent. In other words, they were not written to incite hatred and hostility between the two people who, for centuries, have coexisted peacefully.

The first example is, from "A short History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in The Middle East" by Abraham Handoian, an Armenian who was born in Aleppo and later immigrated to Salt Lake City where he lived for 60 years until he passed away in the 1970s. The short text begins with a retrospect to the initial steps of Mormon missionaries in the Ottoman Empire:

"The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints first came into contact with the Middle East when, on October 1841, Welder Orson Hyde dedicated the Holy Land for the return of the Jews. Since that time the Church has sent missionaries to that area to preach the Gospel to the Christian people there, especially the Armenian people, whose long heritage (theirs was the first nation to fully embrace Christianity) made them receptive to the message of the restoration."

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<sup>9</sup> These examples are documents from the Brigham Young University Archives in Provo, Utah.

"Active missionay work began with the arrival of Elder F.F. Hintze in Istanbul, Turkey in 1888. At that time, Turkish was the only language legally in the use throughout the Turkish Empire. Penalty for the use of any other language was the loss of the offending person's tongue. Consequently, the Armenian people spoke Turkish, and brother Hintze studied this language. He became very proficient in it, and, using Armenian characters, translated the Book of Mormon into the Turkish language."

The second paragraph is sufficient to indicate the biased, antagonistic attitude the author nourished towards the Ottoman administrators, for sources on Ottoman history very clearly underline Ottoman tolerance displayed and the linguistic, religious and traditional liberties granted to different communities within the Empire. Nevertheless, Hindoian did not bother to write about any of the pre-1915 Turco Armenian conflicts and incidences we read about. Mentioning the First World War and the 1915 relocation he gave the much argued Armenian death toll as one and a half million. However, he indicated that this figure included those killed by hunger and disease as well.

Hindoian continued by mentioning that at the end of the war, in 1918, the surviving relocated Armenians returned to their homes and the members of the Mormon Church were gathered, organized and reactivated.<sup>10</sup>

He concluded the part of his memoirs about the Ottoman Empire with noting deprivations applicable to all, and the post-war developments in his region prior to Mormons' migration to Syria:

"Peace did not last long. The Turks began fighting the French in the Aintab area, as Aintab was in the French mandate, and the Truks wanted to expell the French. The Armenians began allying themselves with the European power, and they were consequently hated and killed by the Turks whenever and wherever they were caught. During this time, there was little food and clothing for the members, and they experienced a terrible time. At times, the people had to eat the leaves of trees. Fortunately, only two members were injured during the hostilities."

Reuben Ouzounian, an Antep born Armenian was another member of the LDS Church who migrated to Salt Lake City in

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<sup>10</sup> BYU Archives, Provo, Utah.

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referred to the war and hardships of the time with only the following few sentences:

“We had very hard times during the first war. My Dad passed away with (colera)(sic) disease, all the responsibility was upon my shoulders. My brother, Carle, could hardly manage by himself having few looms himself. We remained in Aintab, Turkey because of our rug business. The Turks never let us leave the country because of our business in the year 1915. I went into the army while my sisters ran the business themselves...”

This last sentence of the above paragraph in Ouzounian’s notes is an indication to the fact that not all Armenians (especially those not involved in actions against the state and simply continued their business) were relocated.

Another Mormon, Hagop (Tumas) Thomas Gagosian, an Armenian who was born in Zara (Sivas), in his 19 page diary first wrote about his parents’ marriage as he explained in detail Armenian marriage traditions, almost identical with the Ottoman Turks’. On later pages, he gave lengthy accounts on the introduction of Mormonism in Zara, the opening of the first Mormon church there on 6th of October, 1888; conversion of his family to Mormonism and alliance to the LDS Church, his baptism in 1894, his own marriage and his professional experiences on different practices from hair-cutting to plastering .

Gagosian’s notes continued:

“I had been active in Hunchagian party. This party secretly worked against the government because the government had mistreated the Armenians. I went to the Chairman of the party and asked him to release me of my duties on account of my new religion (Mormonism). I did not believe as I used to. He held a meeting with the other members. They decided they

could not release me. If they did they feared I might reveal some of our secrets to the government. Some of them advised the leader to get rid of me. They figured it was better for one man to die than the whole party loose their lives. The leader was a good friend of mine. He told them he'd never do that but he could not convince many of the others that course of action was not best because many were afraid of their own lives. My friend, the leader, came to me and advised me to leave the country as soon as possible because he did not know how long he could stop the party from doing something drastic. There was not much to do but to leave the country ...."

He continued by relating how, after this development, his concern for personal safety added to desire to learn more about Mormonism and took him to Utah after a long journey through many Turkish cities and Cyprus, where he stopped to join his Armenian acquaintances, and worked for some time. The island, as he wrote, was under British control at that time. Gagosian wrote that "...Years ago, when the Greeks owned this Island, they mistreated the Armenians so they say that the Armenians opened one of the gates and let the Turks in for which the Turks gave them some land and an old church."

His notes later include his days in Utah and return to Turkey, in 1898, with a group of Mormons after "F.F. Hintze convinced me that I should go back with them because when they colonized the Armenian Mormons over there I would be here alone".

The later pages of Gagosian's notes contained details of the time he spent in the Ottoman Empire until 1910, when he returned to the United States for a permanent stay. The diary concluded with his mostly family life in the United States until he passed away in 1952.

It is in the part on his stay in Cyprus, while trying to escape from the Hunchak threat that, in approximately half a page, he mentioned the incidences between the Turks and Armenians: He wrote of hearing orders "to massacre Armenians" and the Turks' ill treatment and receiving the news about his family's safety that a Turkish woman had saved his son's life by risking her own.

There are parts in all of the above examples and other documents referring to the hardships and poverty suffered, and these were reflected as the main reason why the Armenian converts wanted to immigrate to the United States, where they

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economic decline of the state. Nevertheless, the end of the First World War became a turning point for the LDS Near East Mission. The Mormons abandoned their imperialistic ambitions in Turkey, and discontinued their missionary activities at the begining of the Turkish Indepedence War. However, the Armenian converts they took to Salt Lake City, in the course of time justified the remark Elder Charles Locander made in the begining of Mormon missionary experiences in the Ottoman Empire, "money bought many converts"<sup>11</sup> and became astounch advocators of the anti-Turkish political polemics of Armenian propagandists.

were promised a prosperous life by the Mormon Church. Yet, depreviations which undoubtedly multiplied by wars, were not what the Mormons or Armenians alone had to endure, but as mentioned before, were applicable to all Ottomans suffering from the brunts of the

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<sup>11</sup> Desert News, May 30, 1889