CHAPTER 1

Contested Origins and Contested Contributions

Henry H. Jessup was an American missionary sent to Syria by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (ABCFM). He arrived in the spring of 1856 just in time to attend the annual gathering of American missionaries in Beirut. At the meeting, he was introduced to the head of the mission’s Arabic Bible translation project, the Rev. Eli Smith. Reflecting on his first meeting with Smith, Jessup described him as “pale, thin and scholarly.”1 Within a year of their first meeting, Smith would be dead from cancer. Smith’s responsibilities were handed over to another missionary colleague, the medical doctor Cornelius Van Dyck. Van Dyck completed the monumental task on August 23, 1864.

Henry Jessup eventually became the self-appointed recorder and historian of the American Syrian Mission. His two-volume work, Fifty-Three Years in Syria, which he completed only months before he passed away in 1910, quickly became the official history of the Mission. This work, belonging to the genre of missionary historiography, is an important record of how the American evangelical missionaries understood their role within the Ottoman Empire. In the history, Jessup chronicles the origin, development and completion of what is now known as the Van Dyck Bible. Writing fifty-six years after the event, Jessup remembers the missionary community’s celebration of the completion of the seventeen-year long translation project.

In the upper room, where Dr. Smith had labored on the translation eight years, and Dr. Van Dyck eight years more, the assembled missionaries gave thanks to God for the completion of this arduous work. Just then, the sound of many voices arose from below, and on throwing open the door, we heard a large company of native young men, labourers at the press and members of the Protestant community, singing to the tune of Hebron, a new song, “Even praise to our God,” composed for the occasion . . . Surely not for centuries have the angels in heaven heard a sweeter sound arising from Syria than the voices of this band of pious young men, singing a hymn composed by one of themselves, ascribing glory and praise to God, that now, for the first time, the Word of God is given to their nation in its purity.

Hail day, thrice blessed of our God!
Rejoice, let all men bear a part.
Complete at length Thy printed word;
Lord, print its truth on every heart!

To Him who gave His gracious word,
Arise, and with glad praises sing:
Exalt and magnify our Lord,
Our Maker and our glorious King!

Lord, spare Thy servant through whose toil,
Thou gav’est us this of books the best,
Bless all who shared the arduous task
From Eastern land or distant West.

Amen! Amen, I lift up the voice:
Praise God whose mercy’s e’er the same:
His goodness all our song employs,
Thanksgiving then to His Great Name!

Jessup’s description of this event within his history of the mission is a classic example of nineteenth century Western missionary hagiography, of bringing salvation, freedom, and liberty to the Orient through a divinely ordained plan. His version of the heavens opening to provide the gift of the eternal Word provided exciting reading for the missionary community and its supporters in Europe and the United States. The actual completion of the translation, however, ended with much less pomp and circumstance. Edward Van Dyck, Cornelius’s son, provided his own recollection of the day his father finished the translation to Isaac Hall.

His father remained at work long after the hour for going to dinner—a rarity for his regular habit then—while Edward was waiting below, and busying himself as one who waits. All at once he heard his father’s step upon the balcony, and, all very quietly: “Edward, it is finished. Thank God! What a load is off me! I never thought I was going to live to finish this work.”

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2 Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, 76–77. The hymn originally composed in Arabic, was translated by Jessup. We do not currently have the original Arabic text.