PUBLIC SPACE AND PRIVATE SPHERES:
THE FOUNDATION OF ST LUKE’S HOSPITAL OF
NABLUS BY THE CMS (1891–1901)

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Introduction

A more commonplace notion about Muslim societies than the strong separation between public and private space can hardly be found. Denominational affiliation, however, transcends this distinction; while sociability may be different indoors and outdoors, religious identities are permanent, with very few exceptions. Conversion is cause enough for scandal. Such an idea is important to understand some of the strategies Protestant missionaries set up in the Palestinian field in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Conversely, the multiplication of missionary hospitals sheds light on the agency of the distinction between public and private space.

A postulate of medical mission in Muslim lands was that curing patients gave legitimacy to the missionaries’ public work and greatly facilitated preaching. Hospitals furthermore afforded a spatial framework which would be under complete missionary control and where the institution’s rules would create different sorts of interpersonal relations. One of the goals of that strategy was to escape the difficulties met in trying to ensure conversions, that is, a public change of community. A look into the foundation of St Luke’s Hospital in Nablus by the Church Missionary Society illustrates the shortcomings of the strategy, as much as illustrates the process of redefinition of the public space in the late Ottoman period. The medical mission was closed twice and threatened some more times; and every time, the missionaries themselves treated it as the manifestation of a general confrontation between defensive Christianity and aggressive Islam: a central discursive pattern which we might name, after the core conflict of Greek tragedy, an ἀγών. However, the early history of St Luke’s hospital shows other patterns of intervention.

In the ten years separating the foundation of the medical mission in Nablus by CMS medical missionary Dr Bailey in 1891 from the
opening of the newly-built hospital in 1901, the missionaries managed to make of the place they occupied an autonomous space under their exclusive and close supervision. Its conflicted relations with the Nabulsi society illustrate local resentment against the missionaries, as well the scope and nature of the support that the mission’s opponents and proponents enjoyed. Publicity and the avoidance thereof on the part of CMS missionaries are, we argue, at the core of that story. The mobilization of authority through unofficial means or by way of petition and public debate were decisive in the continuation of medical missionary work and the completion of the hospital. This, we intend to show through the analysis of the conception of inter-religious relations in Nablus that the missionaries entertained; the constitution of the autonomy of the hospital; the publicity and privacy of the debates around the medical mission, and the networks mobilized during those debates.

\[A \text{ clash of religions?}\]

The dispensary that Dr Bailey founded on his arrival in Nablus during the summer of 1891\(^1\) was closed almost immediately.\(^2\) Until the opening of the mission hospital in the year 1901, the missionaries were never certain about the survival of that medical mission. Many of the steps they took in order to ensure the legal position of the medical mission were motivated by the fear that technicalities might bring down their work. This was understandable, given the repeated difficulties met earlier on by the CMS mission in Nablus since its inception in 1854;\(^3\) the assertion that the mission was permanently threatened by fanatics and should therefore be secured by every possible institutional means, became the motto of the missionaries in

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\(^1\) Church Missionary Society Archives, Birmingham University (from now on: CMS), G 3 (Group III—Mediterranean and Palestine Mission) P/O (Original Papers) 1891/222, Dr H. J. Bailey to General Touch, Nablus, 21/07/1891.

\(^2\) CMS G 3 P/O 1891/233, Zeller to the Secretaries of the CMS, Jerusalem, 19/08/1891.