

***JAST*, 2022; 58: 9-28**

Submitted: 13.07.2022

Accepted: 13.09.2022

ORCID# 0000-0003-3371-2074

**The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of
Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to
the Middle East**

Mert Deniz

Abstract

One of the first enterprises of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), the Palestine Mission led Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk to the Ottoman Empire in 1820. Even though the mission ended within a couple of years as Parsons passed away and Fisk followed the same fate a couple of years later, their autobiographical writings, consisting of letters and other works, were compiled posthumously by Daniel O. Morton and Alvan Bond. Benefiting from a multidisciplinary approach, this study aims at revealing the cultural and historical background of discourse in Parsons and Fisk's writings as among the earliest examples of American autohagiographies. Also discussing the foundations of the American perception of the Orient and its reconstruction in these texts, this study highlights the role of their editors as well as the current social and political setting of the Antebellum Era in which their works were written. Furthermore, it points to the influence of the ideological and religious heritage of the American Awakenings, with an emphasis on the role of the Orient in American religiosity.

Keywords: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Palestine Mission, Levi Parsons, Pliny Fisk, Orientalism, Autohagiography

Bir Amerikan Azizinin Yaratılışı:
Orta Doğu'da Görevlendirilen İlk Amerikalı Misyonerler
Levi Parsons ve Pliny Fisk'in Otohagiografileri

Öz

American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions'ın (ABCFM) ilk girişimlerinden birisi olan Filistin Misyonu, Levi Parsons ve Pliny Fisk'in 1820 yılında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'na gelmelerini sağlamıştır. Parsons'ın vefatı ve Fisk'in de bir süre sonra aynı kaderi paylaşması nedeniyle misyon birkaç sene içerisinde sona ermiş olsa da, mektupları ve yazılarından oluşan otobiyografik metinlerini Daniel O. Morton ve Alvan Bond bir araya getirmiş ve ölümlerinden sonra yayınlamıştır. Çok disiplinli bir yaklaşımdan faydalanan bu çalışma, Amerikan otohagiografilerinin erken örnekleri arasında yer alan Parsons ve Fisk'in yazılarındaki söylemin kültürel ve tarihsel arka planını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, aynı zamanda Doğu'yla ilişkili Amerikan bakış açısının temellerini ve bunun metinlerde nasıl yeniden oluşturulduğunu tartışarak editörlerinin oynadığı rolü ve eserlerin yazıldığı Amerikan İç Savaşı öncesi dönemdeki sosyal ve siyasi ortama vurgu yapmaktadır. Ayrıca Doğu kavramının Amerikan dinselindeki anlamına dikkat çekerek Amerikan Uyanışları'nın (American Awakenings) ideolojik ve dini mirasının etkisine işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Filistin Misyonu, Levi Parsons, Pliny Fisk, Oryantalizm, Otohagiografi

Introduction

Following their graduation from Andover College, one of the iconic schools of the New Divinity movement of an era roughly historicized as the Second Great Awakening by modern scholars, Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk set sail to Smyrna (modern-day İzmir), Ottoman Empire in 1820. They made this trip as two young missionaries representing the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to the Middle East Missions (ABCFM), founded in 1810 by the graduates of Williams College and Andover College. Their objective, given the name of the Palestine Mission, was to visit Jerusalem along with other major Ottoman settlements and research the conditions towards founding a mission in the Ottoman Empire. Reflecting the ideological background of its founders, the missionaries of the ABCFM initially pursued the dissemination of the Evangelical interpretation of the Bible and social and religious conversion of the target populations; for example, one of the aims of the Palestine Mission was initiating the proselytization of Ottoman Jews.

Also, from the sociopolitical perspective, the ABCFM, like similar organizations sprouting in this era, was a source of motivation providing a unifying effect in the United States in an era defined by political divisions and conflicts about the fundamentals of the young country. Regarding their cultural and intellectual roles, these organizations represented the reaction from the rural areas of New England against the ideology of the Enlightenment, which had spread in the urban centers like Boston and Philadelphia and foregrounded reason before faith. Thus, the leaders of New Divinity like Jonathan Edwards, who was also one of the most influential figures in shaping the ideology of both the First and the Second Great Awakenings (roughly from the 1730s until the Civil War) with his works, defined themselves as the descendants of the Puritan tradition and promoted the revival of their religious and political heritage (Kling 795-9). This ideological basis contributed to the enormous success of the ABCFM in its evolution into a giant organization extending all around the world throughout the nineteenth century since it received massive support in its homeland. It owed its success to being able to provide a creed for Americans that served as an ideological background for social mobility and solidarity.

In the light of this historical background, it can be said that the Palestine Mission was also a result of the cultural changes taking place in the United States during this period of religious revivals. Yet, it was short-lived; Parsons died due to an infection in 1822 and Fisk followed him in 1825, again as a result of an infection caused by the wounds that were inflicted during an attack on his caravan by the Bedouin raiders on his way to Beirut. In the aftermath of their demise, their writings were posthumously edited and published under the titles *Memoir of Rev. Levi Parsons, First Missionary to Palestine*

from the United States (1830), and *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A. M. Late Missionary to Palestine* (1828) by Daniel O. Morton and Alvan Bond as the editors respectively. Both of these works constitute examples of the genre of autohagiography and carry parallels in their characteristics. As a genre, autohagiography had already gained popularity during the Awakenings, and among them, *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749), again posthumously edited and published by Jonathan Edwards (Conforti 310-5), was the most widely read. Regarding its characteristic features, Brainerd's work, for example, represents him as "a frontier saint" (Conforti 315), in the words of Joseph Conforti, and it conflates elements from different religious texts such as spiritual journals, accounts of conversion, heroic manuals, and also travelogues, considering it contains the descriptions of peoples and locations remote from the white civilization (Conforti 315-23). Narratively recreating the ideals of the Awakenings, these examples of life writing trace the former and later lives of their subjects by putting their religious conversion, a sensational moment of spiritual awakening, in the center of their lives. By setting an example of true Christianity for their readers, they idealize a three-staged progress of life as in the before and the aftermath of the Awakening, as the former stands for darkness and sinfulness whereas the latter represents the remaining of the subjects' lives until their martyrdom, which represents the final stage in sealing their devotion to a mission to achieve the creed of Evangelism. As a result, in an era signified by the rising nationalist sentiments in America, these works also serve America's search for its indigenous identity as a nation. In this regard, Parsons and Fisk, imitating the early American missionaries like Brainerd, become role models with their readiness for martyrdom as the saints of an emerging nation.

Accordingly, the works of both Parsons and Fisk are replete with the images and tropes of the Awakenings. Among the outstanding works that constitute the source of the ideological foundations of the Awakenings, the works of Samuel Hopkins, particularly his *A Treatise on the Millennium* (1824), are noteworthy since his writings mold the tenants of Evangelical eschatology based on the ideas of Jonathan Edwards and Roger Williams. Envisaging the approaching Apocalypse at the end of the twentieth century—the ideology known as "Millennialism"—and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Hopkins and others attribute an exceptional role to American Protestantism as the purest and truest interpretation of Christianity with its reverence to

The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to the Middle East

the Bible as the only source of truth. They argue that it is the mission of Americans to correct and convert the rest of the world, thereby providing the ABCFM's driving motive. Creating a binary portrayal of the world divided between the darkness or the wilderness and the light or the civilization, they claim that a true Christian needs to demonstrate a desire for selfless action to save the former. Therefore, the stories of Parsons and Fisk, following the pattern set by Brainerd's autohagiography, are full of the depictions of the Ottoman Empire as a realm of darkness and assign a sublime role to the missionaries who risked their lives to spread Evangelism in the empire. In the following decades until the late nineteenth century, these depictions of the Ottoman Empire are widely circulated across America and reinforce the American sense of superiority and self-righteousness while confirming Orientalist prejudices.

The Life Writings of Fisk and Parsons as American

Autobiographies

The Life of David Brainerd serves as “the archetype for the missionary memoir” (Conforti 311) since his life stands as a striking example of not only the Christian devotion that eventually leads to his martyrdom but also manifests the doctrine of Evangelism. He personifies the righteous and benevolent empire of America, in a sense becoming one of its saints, in his quest to disseminate the teachings of the Bible among Native Americans in order to Christianize the American continent. Both Parsons and Fisk references Brainerd as an influential example and testify to the importance of the messages in his work. Meanwhile, the narrative structure of *The Life of David Brainerd* focusing on the journey of an ideal Christian toward salvation, given in the example of Brainerd, also constitutes the model for future works such as those of Parsons' and Fisk's life writings. Both of their writings are edited by Daniel O. Morton and Alvan Bond according to the same structure by starting with the subjects' early childhood with an emphasis on their exemplary character and pointing out to their predestination for salvation. This preliminary stage of their lives concludes with their eventual spiritual awakening during the education of theology that they received after following a period of self-inquiry, anxiety, and depression (Parsons 13; Fisk 14). This early section of their memoirs

is also important in underlining their preordination as favored people by God, implying their pre-election for salvation, representing the influence of the Evangelical point of view in the construction of their works by their editors. The marks of these can be seen in the notes of Parsons' editor Morton as follows:

Perhaps some facts, but recently communicated, and then only in confidence to a christian friend, ought not to be suppressed. Levi was particularly a subject of prayer before his birth, and when in the cradle he was selected from the rest of the sons to be a preacher. Thus early was he loaned to the Lord to minister before him all the days of his life. The thoughts of the pious reader will instantly recur to the early dedication of Samuel, the prophet. (Parsons 8)

As the discourse of predestination, Morton's remarks on Parsons' birth point to an analogy between Parsons and Samuel in an attempt to glorify the former by comparing him to prominent religious figures like saints and prophets.

Since this very similar rhetoric is repeated in Fisk's book as well, it represents a characteristic of American autohagiographies of the era, which is the reconstruction of the subjects as examples of ideal Christians comparable to the saints of the older Churches of Europe. In this regard, it should be noted that during the publication dates of Parsons' and Fisk's autohagiographies, in 1828 and 1830 respectively, the essential values of the United States were still subjects of political discussions, which would eventually evolve into a massive schism in the following antebellum years, culminating in the outbreak of the American Civil War. Leading Evangelists of this era, such as Lyman Beecher, the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, were also involved in these discussions as they advocated that salvation required not only religious but also social reformation to prepare for the new millennium, echoing the ideals of the Awakenings. Their political agenda covered a large variety of subjects including woman's suffrage, the education of children, and the abolishment of slavery (Ahlstrom 518). Parsons' and Fisk's lives, in this sense, serve as tangible evidence of the providence of God as the preordination of two citizens of the United States to lead a return expedition to the Holy Lands. In other words, they are made into heroes of the Evangelical movement that was organized around

The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to the Middle East

the institutions like the ABCFM with a reformist political agenda. Therefore, the second stage in the structure of autohagiographies, namely the spiritual awakening, is not only about their individual experiences of religious sentimentalism but also about the motivation and unity of the religious and political movement they represented.

The third and last stage was the mission itself, which depicts the ordeals of the missionary and their unwavering resolution as a sign of their dedication to God. Both Parsons' and Fisk's writings display parallels again. They are eventually portrayed as martyrs, and the editors praise their lives for achieving the highest state a Christian could reach as a result of their journey. However, besides the tropes of spiritual awakening and salvation, destination and mobility are also quite significant in their works, similar to the pilgrimage narratives. The analogies between the Biblical stories of the Israelites such as their journey to Canaan and the interpretation of the history of New England were widely iterated from an eschatological point of view in the works published in this era. Pointing out to the perceived similarities that occur in their history since the first Protestant settlers escaped from religious persecution in Europe, the writers of the Awakenings sought confirmation of American Exceptionalism in their stories. On this ideological basis, early missionaries, like Brainerd, attempted to spread Christianity in America as the new Canaan offered to the elected people of God, referring to Protestant settlers and their descendants. For the same reason, some of the first missions of the ABCFM were not established overseas, but meant to serve for the Native Americans in the American West. However, when the Native American missions proved unsuccessful, the aim started to change, and some missionaries searched for new destinations. The Middle East came forth among other locations as "the Bible Land" due to the already-existing texts drawing parallels between the experiences of American settlers and the ancient Israelites (Kieser 32; Makdisi 685). Therefore, when Parsons desired to follow the path that Paul the Apostle followed in the Bible, he was actually dreaming about returning to the origins of the Bible by using destination and mobility as a form of performance to materialize his ideology (Parsons 298).

Additionally, the works such as Samuel Sherwood's writings disseminated the binary representation between Christianity and non-Christian destinations of the ABCFM missionaries both inside and outside the American continent (Chaney 4-9), which were popular

among the students at the theology schools, including Andover College where Parsons and Fisk attended. The discourse that represented the drive behind the rush to the West in the later decades of the nineteenth century, impressionistically called Manifest Destiny today, stemmed from these same origins. Even if a consensus about the exact location to start and end did not exist, which in fact made their works adaptable over time, these theologians left a teleological perspective as their heritage in the emergence of the discourse of the Awakenings. On this matter, they brought in a providential interpretation of history as a linear progression with a monumental ending that marks the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, they claimed that it was the predestined task of the missionaries to enable this progress by any means and build the Kingdom of God on Earth. Consequently, this outlook is reflected in Parsons' words below:

I think much of my parents, and rejoice that their consolation is from above. The presence of the divine Saviour is preferable to the society of earthly friends. The sum of all my desires is, to do the will of him who died for me, and through whose blood I hope for eternal life. I ask not for wealth nor for honor, but for the spirit of martyr. I know that I am sent out as a lamb among wolves. I shall live in the midst of death yet the Saviour will lead me in the right way to Canaan, even if I wander forty years in the wilderness. (Parsons 222)

Therefore, the destination and its characteristics were important elements in the narrative of the missionaries while they also became an intrinsic element in their identity formations as Fisk summarize their quest along these lines:

It is my duty *to do what I can to excite others to suitable, views, feelings, and efforts on this subject.* For this purpose I should labor to remove all objections that are brought against missions; to correct all erroneous impressions respecting the state of the heathen world, and respecting the designs and exertions of missionaries, and missionary societies; to point out to the rich and the poor, the various ways, in which property may be earned or saved for this purpose. I should endeavor to direct the attention of those who are preparing, or who ought, perhaps, to prepare for

the ministry, to the examination of their duty, and to the claims of the perishing pagans. In short, I should make it my object wherever I go, whenever I write or speak, read or preach, or whatever I do, to bring into view in every suitable manner the wants of the heathen, and our duty toward them; to urge on ministers to preach, Christians to pray, young men to enlist, and people of every age and class to do all they can to extend the borders of Zion. (Fisk 69)

As can be seen, his interpretation was signified by a kind of romantic idealization about the role of the missionaries to such an extent that it would lead them to radicalism at certain points. A reason for this romanticism was their distance from the concerned locations, and Parsons' and Fisk's knowledge regarding the Middle East was mostly based on secondary sources such as British missionaries' accounts, among which they adored Henry Martyn's work the most (Fisk 173). This distance from their target location was an important factor since it contributed to their romanticism, which was not necessarily positive at all times. The Middle East also became an important element in their identity formation since it became the location where they were required to perform and gain confirmation for their faith (Makdisi 688-90). For this reason, in contrast to the European missionaries of their era, Fisk and Parsons did not initially blend in with the local population by adopting their clothes and manners, and they insisted on pursuing an American way of life at their destination. This was because they perceived the land as a location that had to be the subject of conversation in their model. Being an intrinsic element of progress toward forming their identity, this zeal was also an expression of the American sense of superiority during the decades when the nationalist sentiments of America were on the rise, especially after the War of 1812. Hence, the Middle East had to be redefined as a land of darkness and corruption, which was waiting for salvation through the efforts of the missionaries, and this ideology was projected as a crusading tone in Parsons' and Fisk' writings.

Reconstructing the Orient in America

Long before Parsons' and Fisk's missions, a lively debate on the proper approach to Islam and the Orient was going on in America,

meaning the American attitudes on this matter were not a monolith but a multifaceted discussion in which different views contested. The books like Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), and John Bigland's *A Geographical and Historical View of the World* (1811), a highly popular work in its era, were widely circulating in the libraries and schools of the cities such as Boston and Washington D.C. Whereas Gibbon and Bigland had a relatively positive portrayal of Islam as a monotheistic religion, the periodicals of the era, particularly those known for their support for Evangelism, along with some popular captivity stories such as the one written by Maria Martin, represented Islam as a corrupt religion and the Orient as an uncivilized land (Heyrman 21-7). However, Islam was not the only sign of darkness; Parsons expressed his views of the Catholic and Orthodox churches and Judaism as follows:

After reading the revelation, and comparing it with Daniel and Ezekiel, I know not how to avoid the conclusion, that distresses far more aggravating than have yet been known, are in reserve for Zion. Yet in this awful conflict with pagans, catholics, Jews and infidels, she will at length be victorious, and take the undisturbed possession of the world. But in the mean time, may not benevolent operations greatly increase, multitudes be converted, missionaries be sent forth, and *heathen* join themselves unto the Lord. And is it not probable that the success of these Christian operations will excite the rage of the enemy, and induce the beast, the false prophet, unconverted Jews, and hardened infidels, to make one fatal struggle for the extermination of true religion? (Parsons 257)

Parsons' words indicate that the struggle of the missionaries was not against only Islam but all major religions of the Orient that constituted its characteristic multiculturalism. Especially considering the role of religion in the social and political structures in the region, the missionaries problematized the currently established order of the region, which also brings an explanation to the scope of the social and religious reformation that they dreamed about. In his work *Time and the Other* (1983), Johannes Fabian offers an explanation to this situation with an emphasis on the perception of time in the Orientalist discourse. He argues that the colonizers of the nineteenth and twentieth

The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to the Middle East centuries perceived time as “a one-way history: progress, development, modernity,” and they excluded the local populations from these concepts by regarding them as underdeveloped and backward (Fabian 144). The teleological perception of time in the providential history that dominated the works of the theologians of the Awakenings created a similar impact on the missionaries by leading them to perceive the Orient as an aberration in time that was stagnating in progress. Since this interpretation of time defined it as progress toward the resurrection of Jesus and the evangelization of earth, anything that represented the opposite of this was seen as an obstacle for progress. Resonating the characteristics of the colonialist discourse, the missionaries consequently became a contributor to what is called Orientalism by scholars today.

Along these lines, when he arrived at Smyrna in 1822, Fisk saw it as a city “full of souls bound to eternity, but enveloped in the most dreadful moral darkness” (112), but he kept his optimism and expressed his wish by saying “the whole Mahommedan world will be subdued by the Gospel” (114). The source of his self-confidence was hidden in the perception of his and his fellow missionaries’ role in the making of history. Furthermore, Parsons and Fisk deliberately chose the tropes of wilderness and darkness in their writings. The image of the wilderness existed in the discourse even as early as the first writings of American history. Despite the initial optimism that was expressed in John Winthrop’s allegorical “the city-upon a hill” (47), the first settlers realized shortly after that the wilderness of America was not their friend. Therefore, the wilderness not only represented a life-threatening environment in obstructing and contrasting the image of a utopian city built upon a holy land, but also constituted a literary space that needed to be conquered and converted as an obstacle (Heimert 361-2). This trope of the wilderness was adopted and further conceptualized during the Awakenings, which can be seen in Samuel Sherwood’s use of wilderness and darkness as representations of non-Christian lands and peoples (Chaney 83; Hutchison 38-42).

However, the writers of the Awakenings were aware that the condemnation of their significant others, may it be Native American, Muslim, Jewish, or another denomination of Christianity, was creating a discrepancy because it would mean attempting to “civilize” those who were destined to be inferior by divine ordination; so what would prevent such an enterprise from being a waste of time and investment

or even defying the intended order of beings as God's creation? To respond to this concern, the theologians of the Awakenings again provided an example for the missionaries. In this context, the concept of disinterested benevolence was another one of the popular ideas emerging in the works of those like Edwards and Hopkins; in fact, Brainerd's case was an example of it. Briefly, it foresaw the missionary act as an example of selfless service to God, which was done in the sacrifice of Jesus first. They argued that the civilizing mission was also a form of service to God and a cause that was worth dying for. Apparently, this idea carried striking similarities with another one called the white men's burden referring to the self-assigned duty of the white men to civilize and govern the others as an act of charity even against their own will if necessary. The trope of martyrdom that is continuously repeated in both Parsons' and Fisk's works is an extension of this concept while it is also a precondition of the saint-like status that they are exalted to by their editors. For instance, Parsons declares in his farewell address in Andover on September 23, 1817, that

[t]rue religion implies a disposition to forsake father and mother, friends and country, for Christ. Every truly devoted Christian will enquire, not where he can enjoy the most ease, escape the most trouble, obtain the most wealth or honor, but where he can most successfully labor in the cause of *Christ*, and promote the *salvation* of men. He lifts his eyes to heaven and says, "Lord send me; send me to the ends of the earth; send me far from parents, friends, country; to the wilderness, to prison, or to death, if it be for thy glory, and for the promotion of thy kingdom. If *duty* bid me suffer at the stake, I will go there without a trembling emotion, if I am to be separated from every earthly enjoyment, I will *rejoice* that I am counted worthy to *suffer* for Christ." Such, in an eminent degree must be our feelings, brethren, in this inquiry. With the *world* under our *feet*, and with our eyes fixed on the *cross*, we must determine to count all things as loss and dross for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ. (405)

In this part of his address, Parsons summarizes multiple fundamentals of the ideology of Evangelism. He refers to the disinterested benevolence by his call for selfless action to "promote the *salvation* of men" (405), and he also employs the image of "the wilderness" compared to

The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to the Middle East “prison” and “death,” and the tropes of martyrdom and suffering are also given as sublime acts displayed in the example of Jesus.

This passionate rhetoric was more of a sign of their awareness of the images and of the message appealing to their audience in America rather than adhering to blinding idealism. Although the missionaries despised taking advantage of secular means, spanning from calling for military action to teaching non-religious subjects at their schools, to reach their ends, they, in fact, utilized them whenever they felt that they had to. Similarly, one of the most important decisions of Parsons and Fisk was being instrumental in bringing a printing press to Malta with the help of Isaac Bird and Daniel Temple (Obenzinger 246-56). The foundations of the early ABCFM missions focused on social and religious reformation in line with the ideals of the Awakening, which explains the importance of the printing press. Dissemination of ideas was at the core of the mission with its objective to civilize the wilderness, in the missionary rhetoric, so distributing copies of the Bible and tracts in public areas was a common method that they employed (Makdisi 697). To give an example of the content of their materials, *Young Minister’s Companion* (1813) was among the materials that they gifted to the Orthodox school on the island of Chios. Translated into Greek with the help of Neophytos Bambas, the head of the school, it was a compilation of religious texts intended to guide and prepare future ministers. For instance, the fifth text of the compilation, entitled “The Reformed Pastor,” was a widely popular text of its era written by Richard Baxter, a minister himself. Baxter defines an ideal minister through meeting social responsibilities such as organizing a church and “overseeing” the congregation along with the more traditional duties like preaching (*Young Minister’s Companion* 445-53). In other words, Baxter’s text reiterates two essential ideals of the Awakenings, namely social and religious reformation as complementary to each other.

As might be expected, neither the ideas of Baxter nor the American version of the Bible was welcomed in the Ottoman Empire. Shortly after they started distributing them, the missionaries found themselves being regarded as a threat. Most of the written materials in the Ottoman Empire were still hand-written and literacy was not a common skill among its subjects. In other words, written works, especially religious texts, were strictly controlled by the authorities of the empire, among which the Ancient Churches of the Middle East were also included, and the reproduction and interpretation

of religious works required skilled labor and time. Therefore, even the printed version of the Bible that Parsons and Fisk brought with them was a challenge to the established institutions in the Ottoman Empire, not only for Islam but also for the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, because the printing press meant publishing religious texts in large numbers and local languages. Eventually, the publication and distribution of the Bible in Arabic became the last straw. As a result, Fisk, together with Isaac Bird, got arrested in Jerusalem because of the distribution of books that were “neither Mussulman, nor Jewish, nor Christian” in the words of the Ottoman judge in the city (Fisk 360). It is important that in the course of their discussion, the judge responded to the objection of Fisk and Bird by saying that “*The Latins say these are not Christian books*” (360), so it is understood that the Catholic authorities of Jerusalem were also disturbed by the materials published by the missionaries. It is comprehensible when one takes into consideration that the Protestant interpretation of Christianity was quite critical of certain practices of the Catholic church, especially with regard to their reverence for the Pope as the head of religion and the veneration of saints and icons in religious practice (Fisk 167).

This incident reveals another important point when examined closely. Fisk and Bird were wearing a white turban—hence not their Western clothes—at the time they were arrested, and as understood in their conversation with the governor of the city, one of the points that disturbed the judge was that the books that they distributed were in the Arabic language as well, so they were printed in the language that the Muslim community could understand (359-61). Providing an example of the transience of signifiers in transcultural affairs, cladding in Oriental clothes was not a rare incident, but it points to a change in Fisk’s methods since they initially kept their American lifestyle as long as they could after they arrived at the Ottoman Empire. However, the main point requiring attention is that both their transcultural dressing and employment of the Arabic language as a medium of communication, their materials represented an attempt to trespass the cultural borders that the Ottoman authorities rigorously tried to sustain. In other words, the political power in Jerusalem, embodied by the Ottoman officials in this incident, tried to regulate and control the borders between social groups signified by their ethnic and cultural distinctions in order to enforce their authority. Once Fisk and Bird defied the rules of this domain, they became infiltrators and attracted the aggressions of the authority.

All in all, the ideology of the Awakenings that Parsons and Fisk were exposed to during their education was not solely about an eschatology of the Bible that foresaw the end of times and envisioned a special role for America in this regard. It also involved a certain description of the other that stood for a contrasting opposite of the Evangelists who both produced and adhered to the discourse of this eschatology. In this regard, as seen in Parsons' and Fisk's accounts, the Orient was not an unknown land for the members of the Palestine Mission; instead, they arrived with a certain view that they received from the works they read like Henry Martyn's autobiographical writings. With this ideological basis, the missionaries perceived their role as redeemers and correctors of the Orient that needed to be reconstructed according to their worldview. Consequently, they constituted a challenge against the established authority in the Ottoman Empire, and, as was expected, they got in trouble with the authorities, which further contributed to their prejudiced view of the empire.

After he was released and given an apology, mainly owing to Consul of Britain Bartholomew E. Abbott, Fisk interpreted this incident as a ground to further his argument that the Ottoman Empire was in disarray, lacking any coordination among its institutions (366-8). These repeating negative depictions of the empire were actually given to support the Millennialist divinations that foresaw the fall of the current order in the Middle East before the arrival of Jesus and the foundation of the promised Kingdom of Christianity. Consequently, the Turks were particularly given to be the forces of oppression as observed in Fisk's words:

This affair gave us new information about Turks, Turkish government, and Turkish justice. I trust too that it gave us new proofs of our attachment to Christ and his cause, and of our willingness to leave ourselves, and our plans, and all that concerns us, in his hands. We feel that we deserve and need disappointments and trials, and hope to profit by them. All that we have as yet suffered, however, is nothing compared with what the first Christians suffered, nor indeed is it any thin compared with what the Christian and Jewish subjects of the sultan daily suffer at the hands of their tyrants. (364-5)

Therefore, Fisk continued perceiving his environment in the Middle East from a romantic perspective that led him to compare their condition to the first Christians in the same location; it is also significant that he could not distinguish between ordinary Turkish people, the government, and state institutions. Moreover, he could not even recognize the differences between the Muslim populations of the empire. Eventually, the Turk represented everything that was not Christian or Jewish to him, so he expressed his depression after finding “a few mud huts, inhabited by ignorant, stupid, filthy Turks” in the place where once stood the city of Sardis (132).

It should also be noted that Parsons’ and Fisk’s autobiographical writings were extensively edited by Morton and Bond. Similar to their subjects, the editors had their views of the Orient, too, and they organized the texts and added commentaries accordingly. Bond’s words regarding Fisk’s accounts on the Greek War of Independence that broke out in 1821 are as follows:

Thousands had fled for their lives, and the streets of Smyrna were crimsoned with Grecian blood. It was estimated that 2000 had been massacred, and heavy exactions of money were demanded of others for the privilege of living. The bodies of the slain were seen frequently floating in the bay. In a word, exactions, imprisonment, or death, met the defenseless Greeks in every direction. And yet, strange to tell, multitudes, only because they were better protected from Turkish violence, went thoughtlessly to the assembly-room, and the dance, as though all were peace and security. While the countenance of many gathered blackness through fear, that of others exhibited only the expression of a thoughtless, ill-timed levity. (158-9)

It can be deduced from these commentaries of the editors that they shared a similar ideological background with the writers, especially in relation to their social and political environment. Moreover, they also revealed further details about their choices as editors, through which they reflected their agency in the text.

The atrocities that took place during the attempts of the central government to oppress the Greek revolts were known at the time when Parsons’ and Fisk’s works were being prepared for publication in the

The Making of an American Saint: Autohagiographies of Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, the First American Missionaries to the Middle East United States. For example, when the news of the Ottoman defeat reached New York on December 16, 1827, it was celebrated with church bells to express the American support for the Greek cause, and a town in Wisconsin was given the name “Navarino” to celebrate the Battle of Navarino that decided the fate of the war with the destruction of the Ottoman Navy (Finnie 57). While the news confirmed the Evangelical Millennialist sentiments with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire that forced them to retreat from the south of modern Greece, the war was viewed as a Christian struggle against an oppressing Muslim empire. Therefore, the editors worked on their materials during an era that was signified by the negative sentiments about Ottomans, and more specifically Turks, due to their inability to distinguish between the ethnic groups within the Muslim Ottoman population. For example, the admiral of the Ottoman fleet in Navarino, Ibrahim Pasha, directly through the lineage of his father Mustafa Pasha, was from a mixed ethnic and cultural background like most of the Ottoman elite in the nineteenth century (Fahmy 22-4), yet, such details were accessible to neither the editors nor the writers. This was an example of one of the limitations of their understanding of the Middle Eastern politics and history defined in their narratives. Consequently, the portrayal of the Ottoman Empire put forth by both the writers and the editors should be examined carefully considering the limitations and ideologies.

Additionally, the intended readers can also help to clarify how the editors used their authority in the texts. Parsons’ editor Morton refers to Nathaniel S. Prime, a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Cambridge, New York, as one of Parsons’ correspondents. Prime tells how his congregation, to whom he read one of Parsons’ letters, was deeply moved as “a flood of grief burst forth from every eye” (qtd. in Parsons 375). Thus, it can be assumed that the congregations of connected churches were among the intended readers of these works. Moreover, Morton referred to another group, namely the students at Middlebury College, one of whom read a poem at a meeting after reading Parsons’ writings in August 1822. Both of these reader groups were familiar with at least some of the major texts of the Awakenings considering the popularity of the works written by its leaders such as Edwards. Therefore, when the editors constructed their material after the model constituted by Brainerd as an image of self-denying missionary, they knew the emerging discourse would allow them to communicate with their intended readers. On this foundation, they constructed Parsons’ and Fisk’s life stories by foregrounding certain

images that were common in the Evangelical literature of the era such as the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization and the romantic image of the Orient with certain distorted aspects. They consoled the American anxieties through reaffirming the stories of their exceptional role in a providential interpretation of history that predicted the rise of Evangelism in the approaching millennium. To sum up, the Orient was constructed in the imagination and prejudices of the Orientalist writers and others involved such as Morton and Bond who would become more influential than the writers in the process of life writing, especially since Parsons' and Fisk's autohagiographies were published posthumously.

Conclusion

A cultural studies analysis based on the close reading of the literary features and the historical background of Parsons' and Fisk's autobiographical writings reveals a rich source to better understand both the American and the Ottoman context in which the missionaries functioned as transcultural subjects. First of all, the aspect of Orientalism during the Awakenings is often overlooked by the scholars of the American missions, yet it was one of the most determining factors in the experience of the earlier missions in particular. A discussion on the influence of the ideology of the Awakenings on Parsons' and Fisk's accounts also demonstrates that Orientalism does not consist of a Eurocentric point of view but also an American perception that has its roots in the religious discourses of the early settlers.

Such a discussion also provides a background to understand the American experience during the first half of the nineteenth century from a different perspective. This outlook is necessary in understanding the functions of religious organizations—in this case ABCFM—and considering their ideological and organizational role in a larger perspective. The parallels between *The Life of David Brainerd* and Parsons' and Fisk's life writings point to the intention of those organizations to define a common background to enable their American readers in forming their social identities based on shared values. On the other hand, the reconstruction of certain elements such as preordination, salvation, martyrdom, the role of the missionaries as religious role models, and creating American saints also indicate the emerging conventions of an American style of autohagiography that reflects the unique cultural and religious features of American religiosity compared to its European counterparts.

In conclusion, the popularity of the accounts like Parsons' and Fisk's life writings in nineteenth-century America invites reflections on their significance for their readers' understanding of themselves and the world around them. The treatment of the works in the light of methodologies of literary criticism and historiography draws attention to other related actors like the editors and the implications of the cultural context. Particularly American-Ottoman relations and the specific context of Parsons' and Fisk's autohagiographies suggest reading the history of American transnational and transcultural affairs from a different perspective that concentrates on the individuals functioning in an interactive network of affairs and ideas, rather than the macrocosm of wars, treaties, and politics.

Works Cited

- Ahlstrom, Sydney. *A Religious History of the American People*. Yale UP, 2004.
- Baxter, Richard. "The Reformed Pastor." *The Young Minister's Companion*, Samuel T. Armstrong, 1813.
- Chaney, Charles L. *Birth of Missions in America*. William Carey Library, 1976.
- Conforti, Joseph. "David Brainerd and the Nineteenth Century Missionary Movement." *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1985, pp. 309-29.
- . "The Invention of the Great Awakening, 1795-1842." *Early American Literature*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1991, pp. 99-118.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. Columbia UP, 1983.
- Fahmy, Khaled. *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*. American U in Cairo P, 2002.
- Finnie, David. H. *Pioneers East: The Early American Experience in the Middle East*. Harvard UP, 1967.
- Fisk, Pliny. *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A. M. Late Missionary to Palestine*. Edited by Alvan Bond, Crocker and Brewster, 1828.
- Heimert, Alan. "Puritanism, the Wilderness, and the Frontier." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1953, pp. 361-82.

- Heyrman, Christine Leigh. *American Apostles: When Evangelicals Entered the World of Islam*. Hill and Wang, 2015.
- Hopkins, Samuel. *A Treatise on the Millennium*. Brown and Danforth, 1824.
- Hutchison, William. *Errand to the World*. The U of Chicago P, 1993.
- Kieser, Hans-Lukas. *Nearest East: American Millennialism and Mission to the Middle East*. Temple UP, 2010.
- Kling, David W. "The New Divinity and the Origins of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions." *Church History*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2003, pp. 791-819.
- Makdisi, Ussama. "Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 3, 1997, pp. 680-713.
- . "After 1860: Debating Religion, Reform, and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2002, pp. 601-17.
- Mathews, Donald G. "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis." *American Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1969, pp. 23-43.
- Noll, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.
- . *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*. InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- . *Protestants in America*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Parsons, Levi. *Memoir of Rev. Levi Parsons, First Missionary to Palestine from the United States*. Edited by Daniel O. Morton, Cooke and Co., 1830.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- Winthrop, John. *A Model Christian Charity*. Hanover Historical Texts Collection, 1996.