

“I Have Left My Heart in Syria”: Cornelius Van Dyck and the American Syria Mission

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Cornelius Van Alan Van Dyck (1818-1895) was one of the most prominent American missionaries sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to their mission in Ottoman Syria in the nineteenth century. In studies on Syria’s cultural awakening in the second half of the nineteenth century, the *nahḍa*, Van Dyck, or *al-ḥakīm* (the wise) as he was often called, is well remembered as a polymath, who contributed modern textbooks on different subjects to Syria’s new educational institutions. Above all he is known for completing the translation of the Bible into Arabic with its first edition published in 1865. Van Dyck’s remarkable achievements often overshadow the fact that he actually began as a missionary doctor in Syria, preaching the Gospel while curing the people’s diseases. This article will focus on his first thirty years in Syria, which can be marked as a period of transformation and change in his life. Van Dyck slowly distanced himself from the Syria Mission by embracing more liberal views and discovering his love for science and the Arabic language.

On August 13, 1818, Van Dyck was born in Kinderhook, New York, into a family of Dutch immigrants. He studied medicine at the Jefferson College in Philadelphia and took his first job as a teacher of chemistry in a girl’s school when he was eighteen years old.¹ Being a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, Van Dyck was sent by the ABCFM as missionary doctor² to Syria and

¹ Henry H. Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 2 vol. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 1:104–5.

² In the beginning of the nineteenth century “American medicine ...was hardly ‘scientific’; doctors still bled patients for all manner of ailments so that

reached Beirut on April 1, 1840.³ Before his departure, he neither received theological training nor any introduction into the Arabic vernacular—circumstances that were to change soon after his arrival in Syria.

The Syria Mission repeatedly asked for more missionaries to be sent to improve its efforts with the Syrian Christians and Muslims. The ABCFM, therefore, requested its two missionary doctors in Syria, Cornelius Van Dyck and Henry De Forest, to pursue additional theological training in order to work as preachers.⁴ Van Dyck's father, a country doctor, had wished to see his son in the ministry of the church.⁵ Realizing the possibility of having a second chance at fulfilling his father's wishes, Van Dyck began studying theological books. But in 1845 he expressed his doubts to Rufus Anderson, corresponding secretary of the ABCFM, saying that he was uncertain whether he should become a minister: "at present my whole heart is drawn towards the sacred office. But the required qualifications, the responsibilities, the magnitude of work are points which make me hesitate."⁶ Van Dyck finally received his ordination on January 14, 1846, in 'Abeih, southeast of Beirut, where the mission had

[they] had little edge over the native practitioner": Robert L. Daniel, "American Influences in the Near East Before 1860," *American Quarterly* 16/1 (Spring), 82.

³ *The Missionary Herald* 36 (1840), in Kamal Salibi and Yusuf K. Khoury (eds.), *The Missionary Herald: Reports from Ottoman Syria 1819–1870* (Beirut: Mediterranean Press, 1995), 3:222.

⁴ Anderson to the Syria Mission (On board the Turkish Steamer, April 23, 1844): archive of the ABCFM in Harvard University, Cambridge, MA) 16.8.1, vol. 8. (16.8.1. and 16.8.2. are microfilm sections, accessible in Lamont Library at the Harvard University, the volume number is often followed by an item number in brackets.) Hereafter the ABCFM archive is abbreviated as ABC.

⁵ Rufus Anderson, "Memorandum of Discussions with the Missionaries during my visit to the Levant in 1843–1844": ABC 30.10, vol. 3, 34 (located at Harvard Houghton Library, hereinafter abbreviated as HHL).

⁶ Van Dyck to Anderson (Beirut, October 30, 1845): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 3.1. (142).

established a school and a church.⁷ Only one year later Van Dyck wrote to Anderson that he was suffering from feeble health due to the amount of labour—not uncommon among the missionaries at that time.⁸ In addition to his sacred office Van Dyck and his friend Buṭrus al-Bustānī, who was employed as a “native assistant” by the mission, were commissioned to establish the new mission seminary in ‘Abeih in 1846.⁹ Van Dyck taught geography and biblical studies, whereas Bustānī taught arithmetic, Arab grammar and defining of words.¹⁰ Except for an Arabic grammar¹¹ and an introduction to arithmetic¹² the missionaries had no Arabic textbooks for the variety of subjects they offered in the mission schools. Only after establishing the American Mission Press in Beirut (AMP) in 1834 and employing

⁷ *The Missionary Herald* 42 (1846), in Salibi and Khoury, *Reports from Ottoman Syria*, 3:482. For more information on ‘Abeih see also: *The Missionary Herald* 40 (1844), in: *ibid.*, 388–89; Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1:107.

⁸ Van Dyck to Anderson (‘Abeih, October 5, 1847): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 5 (314).

⁹ *The Missionary Herald* 43 (1847), in Salibi and Khoury, *Reports from Ottoman Syria*, 4:2–4. The former Mission Seminary founded in 1837 in Beirut had to close its doors due to the enticement of students by local and foreign merchants and diplomats: William M. Thomson, “The Committee in the results of the Seminary submit[s] the following report” (April 6, 1844): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 1 (23).

¹⁰ Van Dyck to Anderson (‘Abeih, November 9, 1846): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 5 (315).

¹¹ The grammar was written by the famous poet and scholar Nāṣif al-Yāzījī (*Kitāb faṣḥ al-ḥiṭāb fī uṣūl luġāt al-a-rāb*). It was the first secular book published by the American Mission Press in 1836: Dagmar Glaß and Geoffrey Roper, “Arabic Book and Newspaper Printing in the Arab World, Part I: The Printing of Arabic Books in the Arab World,” in *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution: A Cross-Cultural Encounter*, ed. Eva Hanebutt-Benz and others (Mainz: WVA-Verlag Skulima, 2002), 190–91.

¹² *Kitāb dalīl al-ṣawāb fī uṣūl al-ḥisāb* was a small book written by the native helper Riẓq Allah al-Barbārī. It was printed by the American Mission Press in 1837 and used in the Beirut Mission Seminary: Smith, “Report of Works Printed at the Missionary Press in Beirut” (1844): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 1 (28).

competent Syrian helpers were the Americans able to start printing new school material.

Within a few years Van Dyck had acquired such Arabic fluency that he was able to write textbooks on geography, algebra, geometry, logarithm, trigonometry, and natural philosophy for the 'Abeih seminary.¹³ He and Bustānī would sit together for nights on end creating suitable material for their classes.¹⁴ It was a long process, which required a lot of additional studies of the two men "to ensure the necessary accuracy in thus composing text books for [the] future"¹⁵

In 1851 the ABCFM assigned a new task to Van Dyck. After his colleague Simeon Calhoun was installed as head of the 'Abeih seminary, Van Dyck, William M. Thomson,¹⁶ and the native preacher John Wortabet were sent to Sidon to establish a new mission station and a native church in Ḥāṣḥbeyā, seventy kilometers from Sidon. Van Dyck enjoyed his "pleasant residence" and the "interesting field" in Sidon, but after six successful years as a minister and physician he had to move back to Beirut.¹⁷ Eli Smith, head of the AMP and mission library, had since 1848 been translating the Bible into Arabic with his assistants, Buṭrus al-Bustānī and Nāṣīf al-Yāzījī. When he died in 1857, the project was unfinished. In 1851 the mission had already

¹³ Most of these books were compositions of modern American or European and classical Arabic literature. The missionary Henry Harris Jessup later wrote about Van Dyck's book on geography (*Kitāb al-mir'āt al-waḍīya fi l-kurat al-arḍīya*, first edition in 1852): "His geography of Turkey, Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine, is a thesaurus of graphic description, and full of apt quotations in poetry and prose from the old Arab geographers and travellers. The people delight in it and quote it with admiration. I found it to be one of the best possible reading books in acquiring a knowledge of the Arabic vocabulary." Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1:107.

¹⁴ Jūrjī Zaydān, *Tarāğim mašāhīr aš-šarq fi l-qarn at-tāsi 'ašar, al-juz' at-tānī 2: Fī riğāl al-'ilm wa l-adab wa l-ši'ir* (Cairo: Maṭba'a al-Ḥilāl, 1903), 30.

¹⁵ Van Dyck to Anderson ('Abeih, November 9, 1846): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 5 (315).

¹⁶ Thomson was also Van Dyck's father in law: Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, 1:107.

¹⁷ Van Dyck to Anderson (Beirut, October 31, 1857): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 5 (344).

considered the possibility of Van Dyck assisting in the translation of poetical parts of the Bible because of his great competency in the Arabic language.¹⁸ After Smith's death it was beyond question that Van Dyck was the only member of the mission able to finish the translation. But he was not at all eager to leave Sidon "for the whirl of the multitude, the case hardened and the dusty roads and lanes of Beirut."¹⁹ As a center of culture and trade, Beirut eventually offered plenty of opportunities for Van Dyck to become more than a missionary doctor.

First, he became the new head of the AMP, which the ABCFM had actually wanted to close since 1844. Rufus Anderson constantly demanded that the printing work should be kept "subservient to the pulpit" and that more efforts should be spent on preaching.²⁰ Like his predecessor Smith, Van Dyck now had to fight for the AMP's continuance, arguing that the new Arabic Bible had to be printed in Beirut to serve the final goal of the mission.²¹ Van Dyck was not hesitant to admit that the press was the "only point where [the] Mission stands ahead of all other missions in the great field."²² This was obviously a subtle critique of the mission's small success in the areas of preaching and converting. The budget of the AMP was constantly reduced, leaving the financial burden on European and American Bible societies.²³ Van Dyck did not agree with the policy that did not allow the AMP to spend earnings from its book sales on new publications or reprints. In a letter to Rufus Anderson, he argued

¹⁸ Anderson to the Syria Mission (Boston, July 17, 1851): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 8 (4).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rufus Anderson, *History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches*, (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1872), 1:263.

²¹ Van Dyck to Anderson (Beirut, June 14, 1862): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7.2 (498).

²² Ibid.

²³ Van Dyck to Clark (Beirut, January 25, 1868): ABC 16.8.1., vol. 7.2. (515): "The Board has given us the pittance of \$1000 perhaps sometimes much less . . . we have never had enough to keep alive anything more than a miserable one."

contentiously that none would have noticed if the AMP spent its income for urgently needed books. He therefore asked:

[W]ill the P[rudential] C[ommittee] give the permission asked and allow us to print one Hymn Book with clear consciences; or shall we have to do it without such permission and guilt our consciences as we best can?²⁴

Van Dyck pointed to the inevitable interconnectedness between the evangelistic and educational work of the mission, which depended on the printing of religious tracts and textbooks.

In 1865 he traveled to the U.S. in order to superintend the electrotyping of the recently finished Arabic Bible.²⁵ He resided in New York for two years and spent his time well by teaching Hebrew at Union Theological Seminary and using this salary to obtain additional training in ophthalmology²⁶ and a doctoral degree in theology at Rutgers College in New Jersey.²⁷ Van Dyck was eventually offered a chair at Union, but after a two-year absence from Syria, he replied: "I have left my heart in Syria and thither I must return."²⁸ His missionary colleagues felt relieved, for they had feared Van Dyck would accept a new position in New York. Due to its weak condition, the Syria Mission heavily relied on Van Dyck and his manifold skills.²⁹

After his return to Syria in 1867 Van Dyck discovered that the female boarding school, run by the Syrian Protestant Miḥā'il

²⁴ Van Dyck to Anderson (Beirut, August 30, 1864): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7.2 (501).

²⁵ Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1:77.

²⁶ Lutfi M. Sa'di, "Al-Hakîm Cornelius Van Allen Van Dyck (1818-1895)", *ISIS* 27 (May 1937), 29. In the early 1860s Van Dyck observed a high rate of eye diseases in Syria. He later wrote an unpublished treatise named *Amrād al-'ayn*.

²⁷ *Catalogue of the Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1836-1936* (New York, 1937). In 1890 he also obtained the degree L.H.D. from the Rutgers College and the degree of LL.D. from the University of Edinburgh in 1892: *ibid*.

²⁸ Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1:108.

²⁹ Clark to Van Dyck (Boston, August 15, 1866): ABC 2.1.1, vol. 31 (HHL).

‘Aramān,³⁰ had severe financial problems. Hence, the ABCFM wanted to transform it into an American boarding school with an American staff. But Van Dyck opposed an “Americanization” of the Syrian institution: “I call it a failure, and I’d rather shut it up or give the building to the Syrian Protestant College than to try to make an Americanized female boarding school of it.”³¹ He pointed to the ABCFM’s original aim to encourage indigenous Protestant institutions to become self-supporting.³² Van Dyck’s position on the matter was clear: He wanted the ABCFM to withdraw slowly from the mission field in Syria, in order to clear the way for an independent Syrian Protestant community. The ABCFM finally agreed to support the institution’s independence by organizing different funds. The female boarding school eventually became American after it had come under the auspices of the Presbyterian Women’s Board of Missions.³³

The aforementioned Syrian Protestant College (SPC), an American institution of higher education, was established under an independent Board of Managers in 1866. While still residing in New York, Van Dyck accepted the chair as medical professor and established the medical department with his former missionary colleague John Wortabet, a Syrian Protestant. When Van Dyck had to justify his new position before the ABCFM, he mentioned the low salaries of the missionaries of the Syria

³⁰ ‘Aramān replaced Bustānī in the Mission Seminary in ‘Abeih after 1850: *The Missionary Herald* 46 (1850), in Salibi and Houry, *Reports from Ottoman Syria*, 4:112.

³¹ Van Dyck to Clark (Beirut, January 15, 1868): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7.2 (515).

³² Since the 1840s Rufus Anderson propagated the “three-self-program”, which stood for a “self-governing”, “self-supporting” and “self-propagating” indigenous Protestant community: Rufus Anderson, *Foreign Missions: Their Relations and Claims* (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1869), cited in R. Pierce Beaver (ed.), *To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), 97.

³³ Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1:225–26. The female seminary later became the American School for Girls, now known as the Lebanese American University: Daniel Bliss, *Letters from a New Campus: Written to His Wife Abby and Their Four Children During Their Visit to Amherst, Massachusetts, 1873–1874* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1993), 237 (no. 16).

Mission, which compelled them to take additional jobs.³⁴ Even though he requested to receive a lower salary from the college than his colleagues, the ABCFM criticized Van Dyck's additional job at the SPC. Van Dyck replied that he would work more for the college if the ABCFM would be willing to reduce his salary, small as it was.³⁵

In 1870 the Syria Mission was transferred to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions because the ABCFM could no longer maintain all of its mission enterprises due to budgetary constraints. In spite of his discord with the ABCFM, Van Dyck wrote in a farewell letter to his former employer:

When requested a year or more since, to leave the mission and devote myself to work in the Syrian Protestant College, I replied: "No! I have served the Board thirty years, and the connection has been one in which I have enjoyed great happiness in my work, and I hope to die in its service."³⁶

Several farewell letters were printed in the sixty-sixth volume of the *Missionary Herald*, the periodical of the ABCFM. Interestingly the *Missionary Herald* omitted a phrase from Van Dyck's letter. It quoted "Now the tie is severed!..."³⁷ but did not add "and the question of remaining in connection with the Mission is an open one."³⁸

In 1870 Daniel Bliss, president of the SPC, announced in his annual report that Van Dyck would now be able to obtain a full professorship.³⁹ Van Dyck resigned from his position at the AMP

³⁴ Van Dyck to Clark (Beirut, 24 February 1869): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7.2 (519).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Van Dyck to Clark (Beirut, August 31, 1870): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7.2 (520).

³⁷ *The Missionary Herald* 66 (1870), in Salibi and Khoury, *Reports from Ottoman Syria*, 5:254.

³⁸ Van Dyck to Clark (Beirut, 31 August 1870): ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7.2 (520).

³⁹ Bliss to the Board of Managers (Beirut, June 24, 1870): ABC 16.8.2, vol. 2, 14.

in the early 1870s⁴⁰ but still remained in connection with the Syria Mission, preaching from time to time in the mission church.

In the meantime Van Dyck's popularity as a scholar and author in Ottoman Syria had developed independently from the missionary circle. On his fiftieth anniversary of residence in Syria the American missionaries were but one of many congratulants from different religious denominations and institutions. On November 13, 1895, the "Nestor, the veteran of fifty-five years," Cornelius Van Dyck died of typhoid. The American missionary Henry Harris Jessup later wrote: "The whole city felt his death as a personal bereavement, and his funeral was attended by men of all sects and nationalities."⁴¹ *Al-ḥakīm* Van Dyck, who "left his heart in Syria," achieved more than his former missionary colleagues and became widely regarded amongst the Syrians as one of them.⁴²

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⁴⁰ Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, *Centennial of the American Press, 1822–1922* (Beirut: American Press 1923), 39.

⁴¹ Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 2:613. Until today Van Dyck's grave can be visited at the Anglo-American cemetery in Beirut.

⁴² Jessup, *Fifty Three Years in Syria*, 1:107.