

Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East

Ussama Makdisi

London: Cornell University, 2008. 220 pages + endnotes + index

Series: The United States in the World

Review by Lloyd W. Rodgers, ICEL

Category: Protestant mission history, Middle East

Reading Level: Academic

Author: Associate Professor of History and Arab Studies at Rice University.

Who should read this book: Mission strategists serving among Arabs

Interest topics in this book: Puritan mission history; the beginnings of American missionary involvement in the Middle East; 19th century missionary biography, strategies, and attitudes; Protestant mission history in Lebanon; the roots of contemporary Middle Eastern cultural mores and worldviews.

Summary:

In the introduction, the author writes, "This story, at first glance, appears to be a simple missionary tale. At its center is a young man inspired by foreign missionaries to renew his faith in God. Though persecuted by his former coreligionists, he dies true to his new beliefs. Here is a reminder of the enduring power of faith, a narrative as old as Christianity itself. Yet at the same time it is a testament to the consequential involvement of America in the world."

Makdisi sets out in this book to trace the arrival of the first American Protestant missionaries to the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire (Lebanon). He tells of the death of one of the earliest Arab converts to Protestantism, As'ad Shidyaq. He describes the history behind these first missionary efforts to the Middle East and the cultural clashes that took place between Americans and Arabs. As'ad was not Muslim, but of the Eastern Christian minority Maronites. The missionaries came from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), who set out in 1819 to evangelize the Middle East. As'ad accepted missionary teachings in 1825 and proclaimed the gospel to his people. He was immediately persecuted by the Maronite Church, tortured, and died in confinement in 1830. He was proclaimed a martyr by the missionaries and celebrated in many mission 19th century publications.

Makdisi not only describes these events, but places them in the social and political context of late-18th and early-19th century American Protestant missionary attitudes, and how these attitudes clashed with Ottoman Arab orthodoxy. His overview of missionary efforts among American Indians helps the reader understand subsequent efforts among Arabs in the Middle East. He writes, "[American missionaries] regarded themselves as the true 'artillery of

heaven,' divinely inspired men and women who could unilaterally reshape the face of the world, confident of victory as time flew forward to its much-anticipated end."

What perhaps makes this book unique is its use of primary source Arab documents. The author does an excellent job helping the reader understand Arab reactions to American missionaries. It is an academic book, written with a very specific goal: "[This book] speaks not about a clash of cultures . . . so much as a cultural encounter that pitted *one* group of Americans against *one* group of Ottoman subjects in *a specific time and place*" (Makdisi's emphasis).

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