

“FOR ZION’S SAKE”:

THE PALESTINE MISSION OF PARSONS AND FISK

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Thomas Chalmers said of preaching: “A moderate sermon is like a winter’s day: short, clear, and cold. The brevity is good, the clarity is better, but the coldness is fatal.” Well, this isn’t a sermon, and I’m not a moderate, so there is no need for you to be nervous, but the ability to say a great deal with very few words *is* greatly appreciated. For example, Julius Caesar’s summary of the battle of Zela consisted of only three words: *veni, vidi, vici* (“I came, I saw, I conquered”). Sir Francis Drake sent a one word report of the defeat of the Spanish Armada. It was the Latin name of an aphrodisiac, *Cantharides* (“The Spanish fly”). British general Sir Charles James Napier’s report, in 1843, that he had taken control of the Indian province of Sindh consisted of the single Latin word, *Peccavi* (“I have sinned”).

While our theme, “For Zion’s sake,” cannot compete with these for either brevity or wit, it nevertheless summarizes one aspect of our motivation for Jewish evangelism. When you read the historical accounts of those who have gone before us, especially the early missionaries to Israel, those who have literally given their lives “for Zion’s sake,” this short phrase is filled with additional meaning.¹

It is altogether appropriate that, meeting in Boston on this occasion, we consider for a few minutes, the account of the first American mission to Israel—that of Levi Parsons and Pliny

¹A special word of thanks to our own, Dr. Kai Kjaer-Hansen for helping to bring their stories to light in order, in this regard.

Fisk. Just as our theme is relatively brief, so the mission of these two young men was also exceptionally brief, as they literally gave their lives as an offering to the Lord, “for Zion’s sake.”

From Boston, these two young men, both twenty-seven years old, were sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1819. They were deeply devout, seminary-trained, and gifted with linguistic ability. They grew up during the Second Great Awakening at a time when missionary enthusiasm was sweeping through the churches. William Carey was serving in India, and the famous “Haystack Prayer Meeting” had taken place in 1806—just thirteen years earlier, and it had sparked a movement among students to give themselves unreservedly to the cause of taking the Gospel to the nations.

Before leaving, Parsons and Fisk had traveled extensively, speaking and raising support for their missionary career. They had traveled also to Washington, D.C., where Secretary of State John Quincy Adams gave them letters of recommendation. The historian, Oliver Elsbree, said of Fisk and Parsons, “They sought to take the best America then had to offer to the heathen world.”² Certainly, they also took the best God had to offer to sinful man.

After their journey across the Atlantic, they sailed into the port at Malta, where they remained for two weeks, then to Smyrna, where they remained for about four months. They learned that the best language instructor, who was also an evangelical Christian, lived on the Greek island of Scio,³ so they studied with him for five months. Following this period of intense study, they decided to spend about a month in Turkey, visiting the sites of the seven churches of Revelation. When they returned to Smyrna, it was decided that Parsons would proceed to the

²As cited by Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 82.

³Also known as Chios.

Holy Land and Fisk would remain in Smyrna studying the languages.

Parsons left on December 5, 1820, and arrived in Cyprus on January 25, 1821. He then continued to Jaffa, where he discovered that the country was in a state of political turmoil. Nevertheless, he pressed on to Jerusalem, arriving there on February 12. He remained there for nearly three months, distributing Bibles and Scripture portions⁴ and exploring the feasibility of an established mission station. During this time, he also traveled throughout the country, visiting sites of biblical significance, witnessing as he had opportunity, and distributing literature.

Nevertheless, his principal interest was Jerusalem. Before he had left America, he had had an opportunity to preach to the Indians, after which he was given an elegant pocket lantern, apparently something like a metal box that would fold open to make a lantern with a candle holder and candle. Engraved on the bottom was this inscription: “This to illumine the streets of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is my chief joy.” Finally, with Jerusalem on his heart, he reached his decision. While there, in the City of the great King, he wrote his board:

As it respects gaining and imparting information, this is indeed the centre of the world. The station must not be relinquished. The door is already open. Difficulties must be expected; but the good resulting from a mission established here will be an infinite reward.⁵

In early May, Levi Parsons, the first American missionary to Israel, left Jerusalem for Jaffa and from there, he intended to rejoin Fisk in Smyrna. However, the journey was filled with danger and uncertainty as there was tremendous unrest throughout the region. The Greeks and the Turks were at each others’ throats, and the ship on which he was sailing zigzagged through the Mediterranean, trying to avoid hostilities from both sides. Finally, they landed at the Greek

⁴For an appraisal of his work as a “Bible-man,” cf., Kai Kjaer-Hansen, “First ‘Organized’ Bible-work in 19th Century Jerusalem (1816-1831), Part IV: Procopius, Parsons, and Tschoudy (1821),” *Mishkan* 48 (2006): 80-85.

⁵“Palestine Mission: Extracts From the Journal of Mr. Parsons,” in *The Missionary Herald for the Year 1822* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1822), 19.

island of Syros, which was under French control at the time and was therefore a safe haven.

For about two and a half months, although somewhat weakened by the voyage, Parsons was distributing gospel literature daily. But he became seriously ill and was not well enough for travel until mid-November. He finally made it to Smyrna, almost seven months after leaving Israel.

Nevertheless, Parsons' health was seriously weakened, and his doctor advised him, for medical reasons, to go to Egypt. This would seem to have been very poor advice. At any rate, Fisk was not willing that his friend and colleague should make the trip alone, so they both went to Alexandria, Egypt.⁶ One month later, Parsons was dead, at twenty-nine years of age.

Fisk remained in Alexandria for about three weeks. He then traveled to Cairo. Since it was April, and he had been advised that it was dangerous to one's health to be in the Holy Land in the summer months, he decided to go to Malta, where he could consult with more senior missionaries and decide what his next move should be. He was there for about nine months, before he took advantage of sailing with Rev. Jonas King and Joseph Wolff to Egypt. They spent about three months traveling in Egypt, visiting Alexandria, Rosetta, Cairo, and Thebes. Now, again in Egypt in April (!), they started for Jerusalem. Apparently, neither King nor Wolff had any problem going to Jerusalem in April. Fisk traveled throughout the Land and, as summer neared, he went by way of Tyre, Sidon, and Beirut to Mt. Lebanon for the summer of 1823. Then, he returned to Jerusalem in the fall of 1823 for about eight months, until the spring of 1824. He returned to Beirut for the summer of 1824, following which, he returned to Jaffa and Jerusalem for the cooler seasons of 1824 and '25. As summer approached in 1825, he returned to

⁶For an account of Parson's decline and death, along with his final correspondence, cf., Kai Kjaer-Hansen, "Stories About Disease and Death," *Mishkan* 52 (2007): 11-18.

Beirut, where he was engaged with language study and occasional missionary travels until October, when he became sick and later died on October 23, 1825, at 33 years of age.⁷

Levy Parsons' missionary career lasted only the brief span of two years and three months. Pliny Fisk's lasted less than three years and nine months longer. But they were the pioneers.⁸ On February 3, 1820, they wrote, "We have cast our eyes on a vast missionary field, but have heard of few labourers. In all the Turkish empire, containing perhaps 20,000,000 of souls, [there is] not one missionary station permanently occupied, and [there is] but a single missionary beside ourselves."⁹ Everywhere they went they were distributing Bibles and evangelistic literature.

For example, in the five months that Fisk was on the island of Scio, he distributed 37,000 tracts and 41 copies of the Bible. As they sailed with people from any number of different countries, they were sharing their literature and their verbal witness. They distributed tremendous quantities of both tracts and Bibles in Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon, as well.

It is also interesting to note that, though their careers were cut short, they made tremendous progress with a number of languages and made a point of trying to acculturate, adapting local customs and dress. For example, not long before Fisk's death, he wrote his young niece: "If we were to meet now, and I should be surprised to see how much you have [grown], you would be not less surprised to see me with a long black beard, with a large white turban on

⁷Ibid., Cf. also, Kai Kjaer-Hansen, "Missionaries and Death in the 19th Century," paper presented at the 7th International LCJE Conference, Helsinki, Finland, 8 August 2003.

⁸Re the further work of Fisk, together with Joseph Wolff and Jonas King, cf., Kai Kjaer-Hansen, "First 'Organized' Bible-work in 19th Century Jerusalem, Part VI: Wolff, Fisk and King in Jerusalem (1823)," *Mishkan* 54 (2008): 64-79.

⁹"Palestine Mission," in *The Religious Intelligencer for the Year Ending May, 1824, Containing the Principal Transactions of the Various Bible and Missionary Societies, with Particular Accounts of Revivals of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Nathan Whiting, 1824), 314.

my head, and loose robes that come down to the ancles [sic].”¹⁰

Other missionaries were to follow. In fact, in 1823, William Goodell and Isaac Bird were sent out by the American Board of Commissioners to join Fisk in Jerusalem.¹¹ In 1831 and ’32, four more missionaries would be sent.¹² It would not be long before 8,000,000 pages of tracts would be published annually by the American missionaries for use throughout Armenia and what was then known as Syria (which included, of course, what we know as “Israel”).¹³

Having surveyed briefly their short careers, let’s return to their departure from this city in 1819. Both men already had connections with churches in Boston. They were both invited to preach in these churches. Fisk was invited to preach a sermon at the Old South Church on the Sunday before he set sail, and he preached from Acts 20:22—“And now, behold I go bound in the Spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there.” Historian Michael B. Oren says, “The parishioners left Old South Church, to the peals of a bell forged by Paul Revere, with their thoughts far from New England. They were thinking of a distant corner of the Ottoman Empire and of the monumental events soon to unfold there.”¹⁴

Parsons had ties to Park Street Church, for it had been there that Lyman Beecher, one of the primary leaders of the Second Great Awakening, had preached the sermon at his

¹⁰Alvan Bond, *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A. M., Late Missionary to Palestine* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1828; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 407.

¹¹“Mission to Palestine,” in *The Religious Intelligencer for the Year Ending May, 1824, Containing the Principal Transactions of the Various Bible and Missionary Societies, with Particular Accounts of Revivals of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Nathan Whiting, 1824), 11.

¹²Rev. Elias Riggs, Rev. Dr. Dwight, Rev. Bliss, and Rev. Cyrus Hamlin.

¹³Ohan Gaidzakian, *Illustrated Armenia and the Armenians* (Boston: B. H. Aznive, 1898), 166.

¹⁴Oren, 82-83.

ordination in 1817.¹⁵ So Parsons was later invited to preach there on that Sunday before his departure with Fisk the following Wednesday.¹⁶

In his sermon, Parsons foresaw the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. He said, “Destroy, then, the Ottoman Empire, and nothing but a miracle would prevent their [i.e., the Jewish people’s] immediate return from the four winds of heaven.” In his sermon, he urged the people to witness to the Jewish people, he exhorted them to pray for the Jewish people, and he invited them to give financial support for Jewish missions. He closed his message like this:

Many of you expect soon to enter into the joy of our Lord. As you enter the gates of the New Jerusalem, will you not be greeted by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; by Moses, and the Prophets; by Peter and Paul, and their fellow Disciples. And may you not hear the inquiry, where are our degenerate children? We toiled, and suffered for you, but our children have been left to famish for the bread of life. O my brethren, as you value the privileges of the Gospel, as you desire the universal diffusion of the word of life, let me entreat you to regard with compassion that people, beloved for the fathers’ sake. Carry back to them the blessings which, through their hands, have been so richly conferred upon you. Take them by the hand and lead them to Mount Calvary. For Zion’s sake let us not hold our peace, for Jerusalem’s sake let us not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.¹⁷

“For Zion’s sake.” “For Zion’s sake.” When we think of brevity, surely the most significant word ever uttered was the single word, *tetelestai* (“it is finished”), uttered by Yeshua as He established the New Covenant by shedding His blood as a substitute for us. As we consider the promise of Scripture that the Jewish people “will look on Him whom they have pierced,” and

¹⁵Lyman Beecher, *The Bible a Code of Laws, a Sermon, Delivered in Park Street Church, Boston, September 3, 1817, at the Ordination of Mr. Sereno Edwards Dwight, as Pastor of that Church; and of Mssrs. Elisha P. Swift, Allen Graves, John Nichols, Levi Parsons, & Daniel Buttrick, as Missionaries to the Heathen by . . . Pastor of a Church of Christ in Litchfield, Conn.* (Andover, MA: Flag and Gould. 1818).

¹⁶Levi Parsons, “The Dereliction and Restoration of the Jews. A Sermon Preached in Park-Street Church Boston, Sabbath, Oct. 31, 1819, Just Before the Departure of the Palestine Mission” (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1819, reprinted in *Holy Land Missions and Missionaries*, ed. Moshe Davis [New York: Arno Press, 1977]).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 19-20.

a nation will be re-born in a day,¹⁸ then the phrase, “For Zion’s sake,” is not only significant, but filled with passion and emotion. May God help us to finish the task He has given us with equal passion—“for Zion’s sake.”

Levi Parsons Morton (1824-1920) was the 22nd Vice President, who served under President Benjamin Harrison. He was named for his Uncle Levi.

¹⁸Isa 66:8.

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