

THE STUDIES OF MISSIONARIES' KURDISH BIBLE AND ITS EFFETCS ON KURDISH NATIONALISM

**MİSYONERLERİN KÜRTÇE İNCİL ÇALIŞMALARI VE BUNUN KÜRT
MİLLİYETÇİLİĞİNE OLAN ETKİSİ¹**

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Abstract

The effect of missionary activities on societies, which have been maintained for centuries in the Middle East has continued not only politically and religiously but also culturally. Missionaries initially focused on regional Christian groups whom they see close to themselves, but in progressing times they were interested in Kurds in the region. Since they could speak Kurdish in order to communicate with regional groups like Armenians and Assyrians, they prepared a grammar book to edit a Kurdish Bible. Soon, these grammar studies became the basic to themselves for their works with Kurds. However, this Kurdish grammar studies prepared in Latin letters were accepted in following times by Kurds and these works made up the cultural basic for present day Latin alphabet and therefore the Kurdish nationalism.

Keywords: Missionary, Kurds, Bible, Grammar, Nationalism

Özet

Ortadoğu'da yüzyıllar boyunca sürdürülen misyonerlik faaliyetlerinin topluluklar üzerindeki etkisi siyasi ve dini olduğu kadar aynı zamanda kültürel olarak da sürmüştür. Misyonerler ilk başlarda kendilerine yakın gördükleri Hıristiyan yerel unsurlar üzerinde yoğunlaşırken ilerleyen zamanlarda bölgedeki Kürtler de dikkatini çekmiştir. Ermeniler, Süryaniler gibi yerel unsurlara ulaşabilmek için onların Kürtçe konuşmalarından dolayı İncillerini Kürtçe basmak için gramer hazırlamışlardır. Bu gramer çalışmaları ilerleyen dönemlerde Kürtlerle ilgili çalışmalarında kendilerine temel teşkil etmiştir. Ancak misyonerlerin bu Latin harfli Kürtçe gramer çalışmaları daha sonraki dönemlerde Kürtler tarafından kabul görerek bugünkü Kürt Latin alfabesinin ve dolayısıyla milliyetçiliğinin de kültürel temelini oluşturmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Misyoner, Kürt, İncil, Gramer, Milliyetçilik

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Kurdish Grammar Studies of Catholics

Today, although the studies about Kurdish Bible of missionaries or distribution of theirs have become the subject of newspapers in some time, it is not a new thing. The interest of Missionaries in Kurds is not a new phenomenon and its roots dates back the break up of Ottomans. Before the Protestants, the Catholics did missionary activities towards local churches such as Assyrians, Armenian and Rums in order to provide the association among Christians and eliminate the different point of views. During these contacts, they had a chance to find Yezidis who were described as Kurds in terms of their spoken language and took attention with their different lifestyles from the Muslim populations. The first contact was provided with P re Justinien de Neuvy-sur-Loire in 1668 who was initially aiming to reach the Armenians while he heard about Yezidis around Sincar Mountain. Yezidis started to send them warm messages since they regarded these foreign guests as savers. However, when Armenians corrupted the relation of missionaries with this nation who was doing robberies on their way and worshipping Satan, this contact ended(Kieser, 2007:46; Prichard, 1844:74). Despite this, towards the end of 18th century, Italian Dominican Priest, Maurizio Garzoni was sent by Vatican so as to convert this society having worshipped Satan and including some Christianity properties within themselves.

This person lived together with Yezidis and prepared a Kurdish grammar to use and make missionary and Bible activities for them³. With this preparation, it could be said that Garzoni played a pivotal role in transferring Q and X letters used in present Kurdish language. Because he used "x" to stand for the letters "ha, he, hi" used in Ottoman and Persian alphabets, and "k" and "q" to stand for the letters "ka" and "ke" (Garzoni, MDCCLXXXVII;14-16). His work led to Kurdish grammar studies afterwards and became the basic of Kurdish with Latin letters. In the grammar book Celadet Bedirhan and Roger Lescot prepared together, this situation was emphasized(Bedirhan and Lescot, 2012:III).

The relationship of Yezidis with the missionaries continued in the following times. While Yezidis saw the missionaries as the representatives who would provide support from outer regions, the missionaries regarded this society which could easily be made Christian (Adam, 1898:188-190)⁴.

Kurdish Grammar Studies of Protestants

Studies of The English

The first come across of Kurdish with the Protestants and deciding to prepare a grammar book happened thanks to a travel of an English missionary, James Barker in 1882 in order to study the overall situation of local Christians. During his travel, he came across with Kurds and started to make researches about them. The basic reason of missionaries' editing Kurdish Bible and distributing it was that ethnic Christians were speaking Kurdish and they had long been living in the regions where the missionaries were going to make Christianity activities rather than making Kurdish Christians. The missionaries thought that the ethnics would easily accept their sects thanks to Kurdish Bibles they prepared. The first attempt was practised in 1820s by Henry Leeves, a member of The British Bible Association, part of a missionary group. Leeves hoped to translate the Bible to Kurdish assuming Nestorians whom they

⁴ According to a Protestant missionary Adams, Yezidis have many names from the Bible like Isaac, Jacob, Peter and Paul. Vanished dramatically by Kurds in 1842 Yezidis had many Bibles in their homes. When the British ambassador visited Sheikh Adi in 1883, he found a golden cross in the temple. According to Adams this is the evident that the region once belonged to Christians or there were some churches in the region and the people having lived in the area were Christians and within years, they were assimilated. Ibid (Adam, 1898:188-190)

wanted to make Protestants talking Kurdish language and in this respect, he planned to publish one column of the book as Kurdish and the other column as Assyrian (Coakley, 1992:18; Badger, MDCCCLII⁵; *The Bible of Every Land*, 1848:68)⁵. Hence Leeves made some works among the Kurds and even found some assistants on these works. The prominent of these assistants is a Catholic bishop Jervis. Thanks to him, the British missionary prepared four Kurdish samples of the Bible, particularly Yuhanna and Matta (*The Bible of Every Land*, 1848:68).. However, When another British making researches in the region, Wolf expressed his ideas that the Bibles to be published in the press for the Nestorians should be Assyrian not Kurdish, Leeve's project was suspended (Coakley, 18-19). Instead the Committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society sent two German missionaries, named Hoernle and Shneider from Basle office in order them to review the notions and documents Leeves prepared and to prepare a more appropriate sample (Laurie, 1855:34; Pichard, 74). Both of these missionaries collected data about Kurdish travelling within the villages and tribes in Hakkari and Iran from 1834 till 1836. At the end of their works and studies, they concluded that the Kurdish Bible Jervis prepared was adequate for only Kurds in Hakkari territory, yet according to their observations, Kurds had various dialects apart from Hakkari dialect, thus if the Bible work were limited only for the dialect mentioned above, Kurdish Bibles couldn't reach to all people, so they advised that the project should be suspended. Despite all these negations, the British didn't quit preparing a Kurdish Bible. In 1856, with a reference to four Bibles prepared beforehand, with the help of the printing house in İstanbul of American missionaries, 3000 samples of Matta Bible were published and distributed. However, as pointed before, these Bibles couldn't be read or understood by Kurds since they didn't fix with their dialects exactly. In order to tackle the issue, a bible was required to be prepared by a local assistant, Stephan from Hineh (Bullen, 1857:4,11,327; Zwemer, 1908:94; *The Bible of Every Land*, 1848:69; *The Spirit of Mission*, 1838:140; *The Missionary Herald*, 1836:291). Since then, Kurdish bible studies have been maintained especially by American missionaries.

The Studies of The Americans

The American missionaries are one of the most intensely working groups who are mostly protestants and made lots of works about Kurds. One of these, Samuel Rhea is an American protestant missionary who works for ABCFM and study the Kurdish grammar. The Kurdish grammar which was got Samuel to prepared by ABCFM was written to make activities without any problem by making good contacts with them while activities were being practised among the minority groups in the region rather than targeting the Kurds and it was prepared for reaching Kurdish speaking groups such as Yezidis, Assyrians and Nestorians (Rhea, 1869:188-155; Wheeler, 1868:21-22). For this purpose, Samuel Rhea who stayed in Yüksekova for seven years stated that a significant Persian effect existed in Kurdish structure and the dialect used in Harput-Urmiye and Van showed some differences from Amediye and other provinces as it was hard to understand (Journal of the American Oriental Society, 1880:XLII). During the same dates, four Kurdish bibles with Armenian letters was prepared by William Goodell with parallel to this study (Wheeler, 1868:21-22). Because the missionaries thought through the Kurdish Bibles they could more easily reach Kurdish speaking Armenians who live in the back regions of Erzurum (Benjamin, 1860:120; Wilson, 1896:326). This situation lasted its validity through the whole 19th centuries. Hence, even in 1890s, the Russian counsellor Mayevsky who did some

⁵ According to missionaries, the Christians living with Kurds had nearly the same clothes as them. Badger stated that Assyrians and Kurds in Mardin dressed in the same way. Ibid p. 55. According to Badger, the Arabian Tay tribe in Nusaybin spoke Kurdish like their native language (*The Bible of Every Land*, 1848:67).

studies in the region stated that many Armenian villages especially in East Anatolia spoke Kurdish (Mayevsky, 2007:187).

On the other hand, the Ottoman State prevented them from publishing in İstanbul since it was disturbed by such activities of the missionaries. Despite all these preventions, the American missionaries secretly continued to publish Kurdish Bibles and in spite of the censor in İstanbul, 660 Kurdish chant books were prepared (Bliss, 1896:319; Bliss, 1891:549). In 1896, the missionaries in Iran and Ottoman State worked together with American Bible Society and American Tract Society and wanted to use the new-testament in missionary activities by translating it into Kurdish (*The Fifty-Ninth Annual Report, 1896:194*). Because towards the end of the 19th century, the Bible works which were initially prepared to reach the minority groups started to be prepared to reach the Kurds directly. However, they couldn't do what they want due to the prevention of Abdulhamit II. And in 1900s, an American missionary Alpeus N. Andrus translated the Bible into Kurdish in Mardin In Anatolia, but he couldn't copy enough (Kieser, 2005:207). Thus this attempt failed too.

The Reasons of the Failure of Missionaries in XIX. Century

The Kurds were not the first factor in translating the Bible into Kurdish, but the fact that the main intention of this preparation was to reach the minority groups who spoke Kurdish contributed to the failure of missionaries (Kieser, 89). Besides, the attitudes and behaviours of the missionaries in earlier stages made the Kurds suspect and their protective treats towards the minority groups by taking foreign support caused to grow a negative attitude against the missionaries. This case brought a hard conflict between two sides and sometimes led the missionaries to be wounded, die and their buildings to be damaged.

Although Ottomans and Iran saw no problem when the missionaries made activities for other minority groups, they objected their activities within the Kurds who have Muslim identity, forbade the activities so that they could prevent the Kurds to be Christian and even opposed to any Kurdish publishing. In 1991, a Nestorian priest would complain to Blincoe in Zaho about why they protected the Kurds from the attacks of Saddam. According to him, if the allies hadn't saved the Kurds, they would have got rid of them forever (Blinco, 189-190,193-195)⁶. The situation was also the same as in XIX. Century. When a few Turkish and Kurdish students were accepted in the missionary school opened around Elazığ, some rich Armenians who financed the school objected to the event and they stated that if they were accepted, they would quit financial support for the school. Assyrians also experienced a similar situation (Blincoe, 196-197). As one can see, Christians, Kurds, Jews and Yezidis do not like each other and have negative attitudes against each other and this prevented the missionaries from reaching their targets (Blincoe, 163).

The Recent Works for Kurdish Bible

In 1910, the Protestant missionaries having met in Edinburgh decided to assign the Lutherans for making Kurds Christian. Unlike the former missionaries, L.O Fossum, Dr. E. Edman and their friends who were assigned for this mission quit using Assyrians, Armenians and other Christian groups as agents in order to reach the Kurdish groups, instead they preferred to reach them directly (Pikkert, 2006:83-85; Erling, Access:12.05.2014). In accordance with this policy, Fossum who took the responsibility to make Kurds Christian started to make studies about Kurdish language and focused on the attempts to make it happen. As a result of these studies,

⁶. Though this understanding is effective, it would be wrong to say that local minority groups are completely opposed to making Kurds and Muslim people be Christian. Because it is a known fact that American missionaries used some local assistants for his. (*The Sixty-Ninth Annual Report, 1906: 306*).

he not only wrote a Kurdish grammar book for Mukri Kurds in Iran, he also translated four Bibles into Kurdish. He furthermore prepared a booklet including 100 chants, a catechism and a Kurdish English dictionary in order to use all of them for the missionary works (Pikkert, 83-85; Hasanpoor, 1999:55⁷. Fossum together with a doctor called Ed Edman and with two Lutheran nurses succeeded in making up a Kurdish-Christian community and opened an orphanage and a dispensary in the region until the first months of 1916 (Pikkert, 83-85). He started to educate the Kurdish orphans by setting up a theology academy within the Mukri Kurds in Iran. Subsequently, the schools in Hoy and Savuçbulak followed this practice.

The head of the missionary group, Fossum not only made publishing books and other works, but also prepared a magazine called "*The Kurdistan Missionary*" which told his activities in the region (Hasanpoor, 1999:55-56). As is stated in his other works, in this magazine Kurdish belonged to Persian language and numbers and even the question words were at the same format (Fossum, 1919:56-59, 74)⁸. As one can see, Transforming Kurdish language into Latin alphabet occurred in the 19th century (Zaken, 2007:2)⁹.

After the World War I., the British E.B. Soanne consolidated the missionaries' a century long grammar and language works with his own works providing the Kurds in Sulaymaniyah and Mosul with using their own language and writing down the notes into Latin during his assignment in Iraq. Soanne even obliged to use Kurdish in formal and governmental works, prepared Kurdish dictionaries and prepared a daily journal (Hay, 2005:46).

The Missionaries noticed that the increasing nationalistic wave among the Kurds created new opportunities to them towards the end of the 19th century. In this point, the Kurds' wish to make contacts with the Westerners through these missionaries played an important role. The first stage of this movement started with Sheik Ubeydullah and successively, this continued with Sheik Barzani. During the II. Constitutional Monarchy, one of the founders and prominent figures of Cemiyeta Tealiya Kurd, the grandson of Sheikh Ubeydullah, Sheikh Abdulkadir wanted American authorities to set up schools in Hakkari and other regions despite his religious identity and promised them to do his best for help. With his demand, the missionaries thought he wanted to stop despoil activities in the region and immediately decided to send two missionaries, McDowell and Allen to Aşita/Çığılı region of Hakkari. The biggest reason for this quick action was to open school before the government in the Kurd area and to prepare the first Kurdish books including texts from the Bible and other religious sources, so that they didn't want to miss the chance to make the Kurds in the area Christian through these first sources (*The Seventy-Fifth Annual Report, 1912:364*).

In 1913, Sheikh Abdulkadir and his four friends made Bohtan region a base for themselves and contacted with American missionaries and their assistants. They provided lots of help for them. This group who even promised to provide any religious freedom when they opened a school in the area made the missionaries' house centre for meeting and consulting things. Through their wish and attitude, the missionaries stated they had no trouble in making activities within the area. Although the missionaries opened three schools in accordance with the demand of the Kurdish

⁷ The first factor to translate Bible into Kurdish is not the Kurds themselves but to reach the minority groups who spoke Kurdish. (Kieser, 89) .

⁸ The British E.B. Soanna worked too hard to provide the Kurds in Sulaymaniyah and Mosul to use their own language and writing down his notes into Latin during his assignment in Iraq Soanne, Soanne even obliged to use Kurdish in formal and governmental works, prepared Kurdish dictionaries and prepared a daily journal (Hay, 2005:46)

⁹ The origin of Kurds language belongs to southwest and northwest parts of Iran. (Zaken, 2007:2)

nationalists, they couldn't launch a movement as expected. Because the nationalists tended to see the results of these new schools immediately (The Seventy-Seventh Annual Report, 1941:339,342). The missionaries appointed one of the assistants Kasha Daniel who knew Kurdish to prepare a Kurdish dictionary and a Bible. Though a dictionary was prepared, a Kurdish Bible couldn't be finished due to the start of the first World War and because Daniel was one of the victims of the war. His loss was a deep impact for the missionaries. Because Daniel was a very important person in education in Hakkari region (80th Annual Report, 1917:308). In spite of this, the missionaries continued to make their activities by translating the Bible into Kurmanji dialect and using other documents until 1920(83th Annual Report, 1920:328).

However, owing to the outcomes of the first World War, Lutheran mission had to be withdrawn from the region till 1924. In 1924, Lutherans decided to send again their missionaries to the region. Onto this decision, Herman Schalk from Germany was assigned in order to lead a group consisting of three single women, Miss Augusta Gudhard, Miss Alma Fossum and Miss Hanna C. Schood. In 1927, another missionary Samuel Zwemer was added to the group. Through this person, a book called Kurdish Bible History was written (Blincoe, 150). In Syria, at the end of the first World War, thanks to a doctor named Bedirhan who was baptized in 1930s, the bible was translated into Kurdish(Blincoe, 119-170). In Iran, thanks to help of Allahyar who was desolated after the first World War and made Christian among the orphan boys, the missionaries prepared a bible in Sorani language (Blincoe, 171-175). However, 1979 revolution caused a deterioration for missionary activities. Recently, the establishments of aid and calling for Christianity have been collecting donations in order to distribute Bible for the Kurds in Southeast Anatolia, Syrian and Iraq and to build new churches in the region and to distribute Bibles in the streets by organizing online campaigns. A bible education centre was founded so as to make activities and bring up missionaries especially for Iraq. Every month, these groups distribute 10000 bible on average (www.christianaid.org. Access: 12.06.2016) and with the donations coming from abroad, they give the Kurds in the region bibles, medicines, gifts and other kind of stuff (<http://www.worthynews.com/182-iraq-evangelical-churches-grow-between-death-and-destruction-report>, Access: 25.03.2014).

In Turkey, the relationship between Diyarbakır Protestant church and their friends in Iraq continuously keep on although it sometimes slows down due to fighting of the government against PKK (Cames, 24.05.2014). In addition to all these works, CDs, brochures and Kurdish Bibles started to be distributed by the missionaries. It was observed that the distribution of these kind of electronic voice recordings has increased especially since 2009 (www.nationsforjesus.org/donate/sponsorships.php, Access: 25.03.2014).

Today, the main alphabet used in Kurdish publishing in Turkey and Europe is the Latin alphabet. This situation shows that the Kurds have started to appreciate the cultural movement which the missionaries carry out. Through this alphabet, it is possible to make cultural contact with the Western world.

Result

Since the main objective and target of the missionaries is the Christian minority groups and they don't approve the propaganda activities of the governments for Muslims in the region, the missionary interest in Kurds are in secondary plan. The reason why the interest remains secondary compared with the minority groups is that the Christian minority groups feel disturbed about the missionaries' dialogues with the Kurds who in the past oppressed these groups. Another obstacle about Kurdish Bible and grammar is that the Kurds live in different regions and have different dialects according to where they live. Finally, the most important obstacle due to

which missionaries couldn't readily edit and publish Kurdish Bible, thus they couldn't distribute the Bible freely was the Ottoman state. The state didn't bother the works of missionaries within themselves but forbade their works against Muslims. Therefore, the missionaries couldn't boldly maintain the works about the Kurds for long.

The bible and Grammar book which the missionaries prepared for and used to call Kurds to their religions were soon regarded as a basic source by the Kurdish nationalists and they prepared Kurdish Latin alphabet. With this alphabet, some important events were experienced in some of Kurdish nationalistic movements in Europe and Turkey. As it is clearly seen, the missionaries are the owner of the literature which they dealt with for years and this does not result from the Kurds. The same missionaries made an important work showing Kurdish comes from Iran language family and Kurdish belongs to Persian language in terms of numbers and structural properties.

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