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## Meeting at Middle Ground: American Quaker Women's Two Palestinian Encounters

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## Meeting at Middle Ground: American Quaker Women's Two Palestinian Encounters

Enaya Othman

Quaker mission school, c.1937.  
*Source: Library of Congress.*

### Introduction

In the late nineteenth century the Palestinian town of Ramallah began receiving American missionary women who embodied their middle-class ideology of womanhood and ventured to discourse on Arab women and culture. Their conviction of the American woman as the model for other “unfortunate” women prevented these missionaries from integrating in the Palestinian cultural context. Consequently, this Americentric belief led them to construct overwhelmingly negative views of Palestinian women as oppressed, living in ignorance and degraded conditions, and of Arab culture as backward and inept. However, American women missionaries after World War I grew in their cultural and linguistic understanding of Arab culture. This change in perspective came as a result of numerous social and cultural developments

in Palestine and the United States that prepared these women to establish an accommodative middle ground between them and the Palestinians, thus modifying their previous perceptions.<sup>1</sup> Among these developments were the increased secularization of the Quakers' curriculum, more cultural and linguistic training of American teachers, the significance of Palestine as the "Holy Land" in missionary imagination, and most importantly the emergence of the strategy of cooperation and devolution among the different Protestant missions in Syria and Palestine after World War I.

## Two Encounters

The encounter American Quaker missionary women had with Palestinians and their culture went through two stages before the 1940s. The first stage, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is marked by American missionary women's lack of understanding of Palestinian culture and norms. These women, mostly middle-class, were seeking roles that would give them personal fulfillment, a larger presence in the public sphere, and society's approval. Becoming missionaries abroad was the ideal way to project themselves as saviors, social progressives, and as women working for the betterment of other unfortunate women in distant lands. Moreover, opening schools and working as teachers would provide a service to Palestinian women and girls, who, as the missionaries emphasized to their American readers, were still living in ignorance and backwardness, and thus needed their help. Interacting with Palestinians and their culture with preconceived notions of the inferiority of the "other" culture barred American women from understanding Palestinian culture on its own terms and prevented them from constructing a middle ground. These preconceived notions made them condemn the Arab custom of arranged marriage, local eating habits, traditional clothing, and housekeeping.

However, during their second stage of interaction with Palestinians after World War I, American missionary women tended to adopt a more positive attitude. Various factors contributed to this change in perception, including the education and preparation American women missionaries received before arriving in Ramallah. Most of these women were college graduates, social activists and/or suffragettes, such as Eva Rae Marshal. Also, romanticizing Palestine as the land of the Bible, and their perennial search for contemporary Palestinians as living embodiments of the people that existed in the time of Jesus helped modify previous perceptions. Although this kind of romanticism "Orientalized" Palestine, it helped missionaries to understand the culture and thus enhanced their interaction with Palestinians. Also, the longer these missionary women spent among Palestinians, the better were the chances that their views would change.

Another important factor that contributed to their modified views was the emergence of the cooperation strategy among different Protestant missions in Syria and Palestine after World War I. This policy called for cooperation among the missions and for more cultural and linguistic preparedness for missionaries so they could find

ways to improve their work and its outcome. It also called for cooperation with local nationalists who were mainly a product of missionary schools. An important component of this policy was called “devolution,” which meant the process of transference of the mission abroad to local Palestinian nationalists. Ramallah’s mission implemented a “devolution” policy that evidenced the missionaries’ modified perceptions after World War I.



FGS archival collection, Ramallah, Palestine.

## Historiography

The new women’s historiography that focuses on the encounter between missionaries and indigenous women is recent and very limited. The valuable literature on the topic agrees that missionary schools modernized the lifestyle of these indigenous girls, especially among middle-class women.

L. A. Flemming researched the educational endeavor of American Presbyterian women missionaries in North India. She argues that missionary education “provided women with opportunities for lifestyles significantly different from women’s traditional lifestyle.”<sup>22</sup>

Scholarship on American women missionaries’ role among the female population in Greater Syria (this includes Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) has been pioneered by writers such as Ellen Fleischmann.. She examines the impact of the American Presbyterian mission on Syrian women through schools and “speculates on what young Arab women took from their mission education’s ideas of gender, modernization and deculturization in order to shape their destinies and to create their sense of identity.”<sup>23</sup> Fleischmann also argues that American Protestant women in Ottoman Syria were only accountable to modernize “the domestic dimension of the Middle East women’s identity.”<sup>24</sup> This scholar’s landmark work on the Palestinian women’s movement during the British Mandate is hopefully the beginning of more scholarship on Palestinian women. Her work covers the historical, social and educational development among middle-class urban Palestinian women.<sup>5</sup>

The American Quaker Mission in Ramallah is also an under-researched topic. One pioneering first-hand account, written in Arabic by one of the Friends Girls School’s former students, Anisa Ma‘luf, provides a history of the Mission from its



FGS 1909. Taken from unpublished autobiography in the position of Joy Hilden, Eva’s daughter

establishment in 1889 until 1939.<sup>6</sup> Other accounts are mainly missionaries' memoirs of their years of service in Palestine, such those by Nancy McDowell and Christina Jones.<sup>7</sup> These accounts give historical information about the Ramallah Mission, as well as missionary perceptions of Palestinian students and local culture. A doctoral dissertation in Hebrew by Jamal Adawi studies the Ramallah Mission, focusing on the Friends Boys School. It is mainly a history of the school, tracing the careers of some graduates.<sup>8</sup> There is need for more investigation of this important early American contact with the region.

## **American Missions in Ramallah**

American Protestant missionaries' attempts to establish colonies or missions in Palestine began in the early nineteenth century as a result of the evangelical religious revivals in the United States. While these attempts were mainly unsuccessful they give a clear indication of the meaning Palestine held in the imaginations of these different religious groups. It was into this historical, missionary stage that the early New England Quakers arrived in the late 1860s and established a mission in the Palestinian Christian town called Ramallah. The American Quaker Ramallah Mission is the only American missionary endeavor that has survived in Palestine to the present day because they concentrated on education and adapted to changing conditions. Their flexibility in changing their missionary strategies from direct to indirect conversion contributed greatly to their survival.

Most of Ramallah's population were Greek Orthodox before 1856. In 1856, the Roman Catholic Church opened a boy's school. This was followed by the appearance of the Sisters of St. Joseph girls' school in 1873. By 1904, Ramallah's population reached four thousand.<sup>9</sup> The American Quaker Mission in Ramallah began as an initiative of the Quaker couple, Eli and Sybil Jones of Maine, who embarked on their missionary exploration to Palestine in 1869. The English Quakers, Alfred Lloyd Fox from Falmouth and Ellen Clare Miller from Edinburgh joined them with permission from the Yearly Meeting of Friends in London.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, neither the English Quakers nor the Joneses planned to establish a mission in Ramallah. But, at the end of their visit they had decided to establish a mission and entrust it to their native guide, Hishmeh.<sup>11</sup> However, the American Friends in New England were not yet ready to take on the full responsibility of the Ramallah mission, but helped English Quakers support the Ramallah and Brummana (in Lebanon) missions spiritually and financially. The English Quakers managed both missions until 1889, when the New England Quakers agreed to take full responsibility for the Ramallah Mission and opened the first boarding school for girls, the Girls Training Home (GTH) that same year.<sup>12</sup> Since the opening of the GTH, American Quaker missionary women began to arrive at Ramallah to work there, and hence their encounter with the Palestinians. This does not mean that English Quakers stopped supporting the Ramallah mission, since they with their American counterparts shared the same vision during this period. For example,



Ramallah Chorus. *Friendly Flashes Newsletter*, September 1941.

Henrietta Johnston, the English teacher who arrived in Ramallah in late 1889 was an evangelical who believed in her mission of transforming Palestinian girls to ideal Christian wives and mothers.<sup>13</sup>

During this first stage of interaction between missionary women and Palestinians, a clear patronizing attitude characterized the relationship between the two groups. The Quakers understood their mission as uplifting primitive Palestinian women. They viewed themselves as saviors, endowed with a superior progressive ideology among a sea of racial and cultural inferiors. Social Darwinism played a major role in the missionaries' views of their supremacy over other races, as did related eugenics beliefs of the period.<sup>14</sup> The construction of this self-oriented discourse enabled the missionary women to enhance their sense of self-worth and to fulfill, with missionary zeal, their goal of rescuing and civilizing the unfortunate "Other."<sup>15</sup> They measured Palestinian women against an American middle-class standard of womanhood.<sup>16</sup> This often led them to denigrate Palestinian women as incompetent wives, mothers, and daughters, and Arab culture as generally backward and oppressive to women.<sup>17</sup> By describing other women's degraded positions, missionaries initially maintained a social and cultural distance from Palestinian women while at the same time validating their own presence in the region as educators and pious Christians.

During late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Quaker missionaries' only knowledge about Palestine was drawn from the Bible or the writings of earlier missionaries and travelers. These writings portrayed the condition of Palestinian females in the most negative light. The passage below typifies the impression male missionaries held of Palestinian women in the early and mid-nineteenth century that later Quaker women missionaries in Ramallah would inherit and act upon. Published by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' monthly Journal, the *Missionary Herald* describes the impressions of two early American missionaries in 1836:

It is the custom, say Messrs, Bird and Goodell, of this country that a woman must never be seen eating, or walking, or in company with her husband. When she walks abroad, she must wrap herself up in a large white sheet, and look like a ghost; . . . Throughout the whole of Palestine they are slaves; and their character is that disgusting compound of childish ignorance, foolish superstition, impertinence, and vulgarity, which is commonly the product of such degradation. . . Female schools are therefore indispensable. . . It was deeply affecting to see them . . . with heavy loads of wood upon their heads, and bending under burdens which their weaker frames would ill sustain.<sup>18</sup>

As seen above, missionaries pitied Palestinian women in their perceived child-like and degraded state. They also used the dress code as a cultural marker. Missionaries judged the way women dressed as more than unfashionable and outdated. The phrase “wrap herself up in a large white sheet” reflect the frustration of their inability to see the female figure. In this period, Westerners typically desired to know more about women in the “Orient,” who were viewed as taboo to foreigners.<sup>19</sup> Strongly held Palestinian tradition barred early male missionaries from the private female sphere. The consequent lack of knowledge about Palestinian women led to Western misconceptions of them as mysterious, exotic, and oppressed.

The writings of women Quakers at the Ramallah Mission echoed the language of these early male missionaries. Shortly after their arrival at Ramallah, Quaker women portrayed their Arab counterparts as slaves to their husbands and being “overshadowed by ignorance, superstition and sin.” Moreover, they viewed the people of Ramallah as living in “primitive darkness” until the American Friends missionaries established their mission there. The town prospered as its children’s “hearts and minds” were “trained together.”<sup>20</sup> It was in the context of the general degradation of women and the uncivilized and exotic nature of Palestinian society that the American Quaker female missionaries understood that the main reason for opening a girls’ school in Ramallah was “to educate and uplift the womanhood of the land.” The missionary Rosa Lee went further, acknowledging that the Quakers “had long since realized that there is not much hope for a nation if its women are kept in ignorance and degradation.”<sup>21</sup> Etta Johnson, another Quaker missionary, declared in 1892 that as a result of Quaker education “twenty girls in the Training Home have made excellent progress in their studies, housework, knitting and sewing.”<sup>22</sup> Here education was seen as the key to the emancipation of Palestinian women. Missionaries’ views of Palestinian women’s degraded conditions were related to American readers through publications such as the *Ramallah Messenger* and *Friends Missionary Advocate*. These writings revealed the cultural differences missionaries sought to stress between themselves and Palestinians. They insisted that Ramallah folk, even though they were Christians, had become spiritually and culturally desecrated because they had lived under Muslim rule for centuries. Therefore, the Quakers’ educational and religious enterprises were justifiable and needed.

Moreover, first generation women missionaries in Ramallah disapproved of

Palestinian women's ways of doing housework and their relation to men within the domestic sphere. The missionaries assumed that the hard work of washing clothes, carrying water from the spring to their homes, grinding wheat, and other errands associated with the everyday running of a household, made Palestinian women servants to their husbands. Hence, Quakers viewed this kind of work as a type of domestic oppression.<sup>23</sup> They saw Arab women as powerless victims and thought that Arab men, in general, did not have much love for their wives. For example, Alice Jones, a missionary teacher at the GTH, who came to Ramallah in 1906, commented that "One day she [I] saw a little wife doing her washing, she was very small, and was probably not more than twelve or fourteen years old. Her life of hard work for the man who bought her (husband), who probably has no love for her and whom she will probably never love."<sup>24</sup> A sense of Western cultural supremacy is apparent, as Jones presumes that just by looking at a woman whom she did not know or speak to, she instantly understands that the woman's husband does not love her.<sup>25</sup> Another Quaker missionary at GTH, Ruth S. Murray, mentioned that a married woman was "not the cherished wife, but the household drudge; never considered companions, but only servants of their husbands, and despised by their sons." This condition made women "appeal largely to our (mission's) sympathy and aid."<sup>26</sup> Murray also gave her readers hope that change was "taking place, and the true position of women is beginning to be understood." She exclaimed that "fathers ask for places in the schools for their daughters, and the light is dawning."<sup>27</sup> But Murray and her fellow Quakers fundamentally misread the cultural practices of Palestinians in Ramallah especially those that concerned women.

However, During British rule in Palestine (1917-1948) and after decades of working among Palestinians, American women appeared to modify their views of Palestinians and their culture. This change in perception came as part of the process of forging a middle ground where American missionaries recognized aspects of their students' culture and



Annice Carter taught at the FGS in 1929-1932, 1935-1941. She also served as the principal of FGS from 1963-1966. This picture is taken from a monthly newsletter called *Friendly Flashes* issued by American Friends Board of Foreign Missions, February 1942.



Eva Marshal with FGS girls 1928. Photo in the possession of Joy Hilden.



customs. A myriad cultural and social developments in both Palestine and America encouraged this tendency.

It is important to note as well that American missionaries' educational and social messages in Ramallah during the British rule were also influenced by the developments taking place in American society regarding women's roles and status. The concept of the "new women" had spread in American society in the late nineteenth century and an increasing number of middle-class women entered colleges and universities and began assuming more public roles.<sup>28</sup> American teachers at the FGS were a product of this environment. For example, Eva Rae Marshall was an active suffragist. Marshall served as the Secretary of a Women's Suffrage League that she helped organized in 1917 in William Penn College where she graduated.

As part of these cultural transformations and the alteration of the Quaker educational program to meet the new standards, the new Friends Girls School's curriculum became well equipped to influence the students, especially city girls who were more likely to pursue careers or higher education.<sup>29</sup> Women's new social roles prompted missionaries to adjust and broaden their agendas, even as they maintained their propagation of women's basic roles as good mothers and wives. Access to professions for women was encouraged, especially in jobs like teaching that would not contradict women's perceived giving and caring nature. This kind of work was attuned to the cultural and religious norms of Palestine which maintained "gender-segregation through women's work with other women in segregated women environments."<sup>30</sup>

The American missionaries responded to the social and cultural changes including the increasing expansion of education, media (movies, newspapers, magazines), and the emergence of a local educated class that had been happening since the early period of the British Mandate. These transformations were giving women increased social and cultural choices. In the matrix of these changes, women's conception of their roles and the world also changed, through the availability of women's magazines, movies, and other forms of cultural entertainment.

Missionaries began to look at the culture on its own terms, because they had spent a long period of time at the Mission in Ramallah interacting with Palestinians. Their own religious interest also caused them to look at Palestine as a biblical landscape giving them greater sensitivity to the meaning of Palestinian culture.

## **Finding the middle ground**

The ability to forge the middle ground became possible in the aftermath of the movement to rediscover the Holy Land. This Movement was led by a group of biblical scholars who were interested in establishing a fuller, historical context for the Bible, and embarked on archaeological and archival studies of biblical life and times. Interest in the Holy Land was also fueled by romantic narratives and biblical stories that were popular in the United States.<sup>31</sup> The net result of these many intellectual currents created a general curiosity about the life and times of the Bible, especially the time

of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> Not all missionaries were deep biblical or historical scholars, but many became curious about the land of Palestine “on its own terms” rather than through the prism of western preconceptions. Romanticism of the Holy Land and its local population surged in the missionaries’ views and accounts. Quaker missionary Eva Marshal wrote to her family that she was trying to read and acquire knowledge about “the history and atmosphere of the Near East. There are so much of romance and thrill about it” because of its connection to the Bible and Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> Another Quaker teacher, Mary Minnick, reported to the American Friends Board of Foreign Missions (AFBFM) in Richmond, Indiana that her experience working in the “Holy Land” where she would pass the areas where Jesus traveled made her “lose my [her] breath.”<sup>34</sup> Other missionary women’s accounts mixed pity with genuine admiration. The “natives” were still untouched by modernity and stuck in historical amber that fed Quaker pity. For example, Nancy Parker McDowell, FGS Quaker teacher, described a trip from Haifa to Ramallah, saying that “Camel trains and laden donkeys are more common than cars. Most of the people dress just as they did in biblical times, living in the same houses and the same way.” McDowell continued to describe Palestine’s “Oriental atmosphere” where she observed Palestinian “Women in beautifully embroidered dress and head shawls walk around with huge jugs or baskets on their heads.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Quaker missionaries understood modern Palestinian women’s hospitality and clothing as a continuation of Jesus’ mother Mary’s culture. Sara Hadley, a FGS teacher, commented on the look and hospitality of a mother of one of her students as being “lovely” with her “native dress,” and that she was “just the kind of hostess that Mary of Nazareth would have been two thousand years ago.”<sup>36</sup> Missionaries appreciated the local women’s dress and hospitality when they placed them in biblical context, unlike the first generation’s remarks that emphasized the primitiveness of the people and customs that needed to be improved and modernized.

Missionaries after WWI were more prepared and able to develop a genuine understanding of Palestinian customs. This can be attributed to missionary women’s background, training and education. These missionaries such as Marshal came at a time when women in the United States were engaged in more professional education, social reforms, and in the suffragists’ movement.<sup>37</sup> Attending social events and communicating with locals became the missionaries’ direct source of information and contributed to modifying their attitudes. Marshal described her experience at a local wedding on her first day in the Palestinian coastal city of Jaffa. After witnessing this Greek Orthodox ceremony, she learned much about “the manners and customs of Bible lands,” and that her experience in Palestine was “only the beginning of many years of learning these colorful folkways, not to mention trying to understand and feel with the people all that they were feeling in their hearts. Little by little, Palestine began to get under my skin.”<sup>38</sup> These examples signify American Quaker missionaries’ appreciation of the rediscovery of Palestine’s “romantic” culture and atmosphere and their preparedness to learn through direct interaction with Palestinians.<sup>39</sup>

While missionaries from both generations wrote about Palestinian traditions and customs highlighting differences between American and Arab cultures, women

missionaries after WWI emphasized the timelessness of Arab culture, noting that it has admirable features as well. The words that had been used in earlier accounts describing the primitiveness of indigenous culture were modified considerably. Now, missionary women used words such as “beautiful” when remarking on Ramallah’s traditional dress; “lovely” when commenting on Ramallah’s folk dance; and “delicious” when mentioning food. Moreover, the American Mission staff members who spent considerable time in Palestine became more familiar with “native” customs and more cognizant of the importance of preparing new missionaries for these customs before sending them to Ramallah. One example is the case of Ellen A. Winslow, a missionary teacher for a one-year term at the FGS in 1925, who upon her arrival to Ramallah attended the “feast of the roof,” a local custom of celebrating after the roofing of a new building is completed. That day the celebration was for the roofing of the third floor of the FGS where the Mission performed this custom in the same manner as Palestinians did for their buildings. The major part of the celebration was to offer a meal that must be consumed without utensils. Winslow had been cautioned beforehand that no spoons or forks were to be used. She expressed appreciation for the meal, which she ate with her hands and also mentioned that the dish she ate, the “*mansef*,” was only shared by American Missionaries:

We sat down on the ground in groups under the pines and for each group there was a big wooden bowl heaping full. We ate with our fingers out of the common dish, first the rice mixed with the whole dark grains of wheat, each picking out also a big chunk of the mutton, then gradually digging down to the bread and gravy in the bottom. It was well cooked and seasoned and really very appetizing, for only Mission people were at our bowl. The native bread was very delicious.<sup>40</sup>

Winslow’s attitude toward the local dining etiquette differed from early accounts that had expressed disgust at this custom and emphasized its unhygienic qualities.<sup>41</sup> Marshal also showed her understanding of the rules for eating “*mansef*” when she described her attendance at the roofing celebration for the house of an Arab Quaker family. She writes that “the manner of eating *mansef*” was “to form balls of the rice, bread, broth and meat and throw it into the mouth.” Nevertheless American Quaker teachers were given spoons to use in this instance, and Marshal praised the food and the hospitality of the host family.<sup>42</sup> Marshal acknowledged the consideration and special treatment the Arab family gave to their American guests, the whole episode nonetheless demonstrated the missionaries’ change of attitude towards the local eating custom.

Missionaries also treated local marriage customs during this period of modification differently from the earlier generation. These missionaries compared marriage practices in America and Palestine and came to the conclusion that each society has its negative and positive aspects. Sara Hadley defended the arranged marriage to American readers. She challenged earlier perceptions that viewed this as a harsh treatment of women in Palestinian society. In a letter to American readers, she

reminded them of the high divorce rates in their own society.<sup>43</sup> Marshal also explained how arranged marriages remained the norm in Ramallah even after more than four decades of Quaker education. She did not try to judge the arranged marriage norm according to her own cultural values. She demonstrated greater cultural sensitivity than earlier missionary generations when she described marriage customs in Muslim and Christian Palestinian homes. Reporting her observations when attending a Muslim wedding in al-Bireh, a town neighboring Ramallah, Marshal wrote knowledgeably about Palestinian culture and customs, seeing them in their local historical context. She emphasized the positive aspects of the status of women in the Muslim household, where the accounts written by the first Quaker missionary generations had been very negative.<sup>44</sup> Marshal noted that the marriage she witnessed was arranged, but with the consent of the bride. Moreover, the groom promised “in the presence of the villagers to be loyal to her and to take her with him wherever he may dwell.”<sup>45</sup> When she described a Palestinian Greek Orthodox wedding she made similarly positive remarks, pointing to the similarity of marriage customs between Arab Christians and Muslims. She described how both weddings used similar songs, dances, and food. Both Muslim and Christian brides were veiled in the same manner.<sup>46</sup>

Missionary observations about Palestinian customs such as Marshal’s and Hadley’s were similar to those recorded by Elihu Grant, a Quaker missionary and Biblical scholar who evaluated Palestinian culture on its own merits. Grant also served as the superintendent of the Boy’s Training Home (known as the Friends Boys School after World War I) at Ramallah Mission during the early twentieth century and wrote extensively on Palestinian society. His knowledge of Arabic, his readings about Islam, and his observations of Palestinian customs and society evidence his intention to understand the culture in its own context instead of judging it in comparison with Western/American standards.<sup>47</sup> Grant influenced some of the Quaker missionary women’s attitudes toward Palestinian marriage customs. His writing helped missionary women modify and understand the local culture in its own context, an indication of engaging in a middle ground process.<sup>48</sup>

The views missionary teachers had of their students, especially those who came from Muslim families, also differed greatly from what they had been in the earlier period. The students were viewed as bright and talented. Hadley described one of the Muslim girls, Asam Abdul Haddie, as being a “most intelligent and capable person.



Katie Gabriel with early FGS students. Gabriel is a Syrian who was trained in a Protestant missionary school in Mount Lebanon and played an important role in the early years of FGS. She was appointed as the head teacher for the Girls Training Home 1889-1906. This picture is taken from Rosa Lee's book, *The Story of the Ram Allah Mission*, (Manchester, NH: Board of Foreign Missions of the Yearly Meeting of Friends for New England, 1912) p. 27.



Students of the Girls Training Home, Ramallah, Palestine. *FGS archival collection.*

She recites both English and Arabic very well and had amazing self-control and poise for a girl in her age.”<sup>49</sup> Marshal also explained her experience when visiting the house of a Muslim household. She stated that one of her best students at the FGS, Subhia, invited her to spend a week in Nablus. Subhia’s mother had died, and the oldest sister, despite her blindness, headed the household and managed it capably. Subhia’s “second sister had married young, and had five children,” but got a divorce and finished her education at the FGS, returning to her husband and children after graduation.<sup>50</sup> Marshal said that Subhia’s “brothers and sister(s) created the most beautiful and close-knit family I have ever been introduced to. The week I spent with them in their gracious old home proved to me that Moslem homes are like other homes that I have

known. There was love, respect, cooperation, and feelings of great enjoyment of each other's companionship."<sup>51</sup> Hadley and Marshal's examples are a clear indication of how American missionaries' understanding and appreciation of Palestinians and their culture became important components in forging a middle ground.

## **Cooperation to Devolution**

Another factor contributing to the modification of missionary views was the emergence of the strategy of cooperation among the different Protestant missions in Syria and Palestine after World War I.<sup>52</sup> Cooperation also meant peaceful relations with local nationalists who were mostly educated in missionary schools. This was driven in part by the political and cultural transformations in Palestine during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which produced an educated national class looking for recognition and a leading role in altering their society. The American Quakers' Mission in Ramallah was an active participant in the formation and development of one of the agencies created in 1920 to promote cooperation, the United Missionary Council of Syria and Palestine (UMCSP). One important aspect of this cooperation policy was the insistence on better preparation for missionaries through introducing them to Arabic culture and language. This approach affected missionaries' views of Palestinians and their culture. The UMCSP stressed the degree to which the missionaries' knowledge of Arabic and Islam ensured the success of the cooperation strategy.<sup>53</sup> The Ramallah Mission in union with the American Friends Board of Foreign Missions (AFBFM) pioneered the discourse of missionaries' need to learn Arabic language and culture. Willis Beede, an American Friend, visited the Ramallah Mission and submitted a report to the Board in 1921 on the importance of missionaries learning Arabic in order to communicate effectively with their students and the local population. He proposed that American teachers must be given less school work in order to find enough time to study Arabic, and emphasized that the Friends' "work in Palestine has been greatly handicapped because the missionaries have not been given enough time to learn Arabic."<sup>54</sup> The Board sent Quaker missionaries to centers in Syria and Jerusalem to learn Arabic and provided a separate allowance for language study for American Missionaries. Those selected for the American Friends of the Ramallah Mission had to study at least one year of Arabic. Long-term missionaries, such as Mildred White and Rosa Lee, went to an English College in Jerusalem, a school opened mainly for missionaries, government employees and their wives, to learn Arabic during the summer months of the early 1920s. White had difficulty learning Arabic, but continued her study in a Presbyterians center in Suk-el-Gharb, in Mount Lebanon.<sup>55</sup>

Missionaries were prepared and eager to learn the language and petitioned the Board to send them to take Arabic classes in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Greater Syria. Marshal, for example, wanted to study Arabic upon her arrival. She confessed that Arabic was a hard language to learn through conversation because English was the language used in the school. She asked the Board to assign her to study Arabic full-time, stressing the importance of knowing the language in order to communicate

with and understand the people in the Ramallah community.<sup>56</sup> She enrolled in the Language School in Jerusalem and attended two lectures about “Mohammedanism” while learning Arabic. She explained that the topics of these lectures focused on the history of the caliphate and the problems that contemporary Islam was facing. She also managed to read newspaper articles written by Muslims. Marshal praised both lectures which she enjoyed and called Arabic “God’s language.”<sup>57</sup> Her efforts to learn the language and history helped negotiate a middle ground between Americans and Palestinians.<sup>58</sup>

Another aspect of cooperation occurred in 1927 through “devolution,” a new term used by foreign missions in Ramallah and elsewhere after World War I to describe “the emphasis of placing nationals in positions of responsibility, and replacing missionaries when possible.”<sup>59</sup> Quaker missionaries in Ramallah, with the Board’s agreement, decided to begin hiring Palestinian nationals such as Khalil Totah to run the Mission. Totah was a former student at the Friends Boys School and a Quaker.<sup>60</sup> He proved a capable Arab national who made various academic and financial innovations.<sup>61</sup> During Totah’s tenure as a principal between 1927 and 1944, missionaries became divided about Palestinian control over the Mission.<sup>62</sup> Ambiguity and irresoluteness of how “devolution” would be accomplished and the ramifications of transferring to nationals the propagation of the Quakers’ spiritual message were issues of concern to many missionaries. It was felt that as a Palestinian Christian national Totah enjoyed too much independence in the exercise of his educational and administrative powers, and that hinted at the undermining of the American Friends’ authority over the Ramallah Mission.<sup>63</sup>

Mildred White, who came to Ramallah to teach at the FGS in 1922, became the principal of the school in 1928 after the retirement of Alice Jones. White’s service at the Ramallah Mission, her interaction with Palestinians and knowledge of Arabic made her modify many of her first attitudes and reshape her views of the indigenous population and their culture. By the 1930s she had come to believe in transmitting the Mission to Palestinian nationals and encouraged “devolution.” In face of the fears expressed by many short-term missionaries about transferring the Ramallah Mission from American to Palestinian national leadership, she petitioned the Board to continue working toward “devolution.” She was one among several American Friends, Christina and Willard Jones in particular, who believed in the viability of such transformation.<sup>64</sup> White confirmed to the Board that the paternalistic relationship American missionaries held toward their students and Arab staff had become outdated and a new reconfiguration based on brotherhood and equal cooperation was desirable.<sup>65</sup> However, when steps were taken to centralize the Mission schools and to concentrate powers in the new Mission Director position Totah had invented, missionaries portrayed him as incompetent and tyrannical, using him to undermine arguments for national leadership.<sup>66</sup> In the early 1940s the strategy of devolution was given up and Totah was obliged to resign.

As seen above, American women Quakers’ encounter with Palestinians went through two stages. The period of late and early twentieth centuries considered as the initial stage, where misunderstanding and misconception was the most prevalent.

American Quaker women were unable to place themselves in the Palestinian cultural context. Their focus on Palestinian women's degraded conditions led to their concern with improving these conditions according to American middle class Christian values and domestic ideals of good mothers, wives, and daughters. Elevating Arab women's positions through changing certain social and cultural norms gave justification to the missionary presence and work. Their writings not only showed disapproval and dismay of social customs concerning women's status, but also expressed the enthusiasm and confidence of their role as exemplary figures and instruments of social change through their Christian educational message. However, during the second stage after WWI, different developments and factors contributed to the creation of a middle ground. Among these were the increased implementation of secular education on the Quaker curriculum, more cultural and linguistic training of the American teachers, the meaning of Palestine as the "Holy Land" in missionary imagination, and most importantly the emergence of the strategy of cooperation and devolution among the different Protestant missions in Syria and Palestine after World War I. Nevertheless, the creation of this middle ground does not suggest a triumph of one group over the other, nor does it mean exclusively positive results. For example, while "devolution," a product of this middle ground, was not successful, the process itself and the willingness of missionaries to try to find ways to better their interactions and negotiations with Palestinians was an accomplishment. Mildred White summed up her experience with Palestinians after retirement saying that her "life with the Arabs was rich and satisfying. Their warmth and hospitality can never be described. Their kindness and eager sharing in the work for Palestinian youth was a joy that was far beyond my hopes."<sup>67</sup> These comments show that missionaries were more understanding than in an earlier period. However, this does not mean that misconceptions never surfaced.



A. Willard and Christina Jones. *Friendly Flashes*, October 1943.



Mildred E. White served as teacher at FGS between 1922-1927, she worked for a short period at FBS. Between 1949-1954 she served as the principal of FGS. *Friendly Flashes*, January 1948.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The term middle ground was originally was used by Richard White in *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991). In this work, White investigates the Native American interaction with Europeans, especially the French, between 1650 and 1815. He explains how a middle ground culture was created because of the inability of one culture to dominate the other. The middle ground would vanish after 1812 as the American culture became dominant and the Indian culture came to be seen as backward, exotic, and alien.
- 2 L. A. Flemming, "New Models, New Roles: U. S. Presbyterian Women Missionaries and Social Change in North India, 1870-1910," in *Women's Work or Women Missionaries and Social Change in Asia*, ed. L. A. Flemming (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989).
- 3 Ellen Fleischmann, "The Impact of American Protestant Mission in Lebanon on the Construction of Female Identity, 1860-1950," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 13 (2002): 411
- 4 Ellen Fleischmann, "Our Muslim Sisters: Women in Greater Syria in the Eyes of American Protestant Missionary Women," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 9 (1998): 319.
- 5 Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and its "New" Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement 1920-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- 6 Anisa Ma'luf, *Mu'asasat al-Asdeqa'al-Amrecan fi Falasteen men Sanat 1869-1939/ The Society of the American Friends in Palestine, from year 1869-1939* (Egypt: The Modern Press, 1939).
- 7 Nancy Parker McDowell, *Notes from Ramallah, 1939* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2002); Lois Harned Jordan, *Ramallah Teacher: The Life of Mildred White, Quaker Missionary* (Richmond, Indiana: Print Press, 1995); Christina H. Jones, *Friends in Palestine* (Richmond Indiana: Friends United Press, 1981). *The Untempered Wind: Forty Years in Palestine* (London: Longman Group, 1975).
- 8 Jamal Adawi, "The Activities of the American Quakers in Palestine, 1869-1948" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Haifa, 2001).
- 9 Abraheem Nyruz, *Ramallah, Goghrapia, Tarikh, Hadara/ Ramallah: Geography, History, Civilization* (Ramallah, Shurouq, 2004), 187; Naseeb Shaheen, *A Pictorial History of Ramallah* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1992), 11-31.
- 10 Ellen Clare Miller, *Eastern Sketches: Notes of Scenery, Schools, and Tent Life in Syria and Palestine* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Company, 1871), 3; Mustafa Murad Dabbagh, *Biladuna Filasteen: Fi Dyar Beit Al-Muqdas*, vol. 8 (Beirut: Dar al-Talyah Ltlybaha wa al-Nashr, 1974), 235, 236. See also Yusuf Jerjus Qudura, *Ramallah History*, 238-239; Emile Sahliyah, *In Search of Leadership: West Bank Politics Since 1967* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1988), 11.
- 11 Christina H. Jones, *American Friends in World Missions*, 8-10; Rufus Matthew Jones, *Eli and Sybil Jones: their life and work* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1889), 193. After Eli and Sybil finished their tour in Palestine, they went to Mount Lebanon and spent a week in various villages and cities including Jiffna, Nablus, Sebastia, Nazareth, and Damascus. After spending some time at the English mission in Brummana, they headed back to New England. Mariam Karam, a fifteen-year-old "native" girl, asked Sybil to open a school for girls which made the couple consider their options. Karam spoke some English and studied at the German Deaconess School in Jerusalem. She offered to be the teacher in the school. The American couple trusted some money to Hishmeh who became the director of the school. Shortly after, four day schools were opened in different sections of Ramallah. One of these, called, Hope School (August 1869), was attended by twenty girls. By 1873, there were fifty girls in the four schools. Evidently, Hishmeh administered the schools for seventeen years.
- 12 "Religious Life in Our Mission Field," *Excerpts from the Minutes and Proceedings of the Yearly Meeting of Friends* (Richmond, Indiana, AFBFM, 1948), 165; Christina Jones, *American Friends in World Missions*, 9, 10. The GTH was renamed after World War I as the FGS.
- 13 "Notes," *Ramallah Messenger* 3 (1906): 7-8.
- 14 For more on Social Darwinism see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); Robert C. Banister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).
- 15 For more information about this notion of civilizing the "other" see Samir Khalaf, *Cultural Resistance: Global and Local Encounters in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 116-127.
- 16 For more information see Frances Cogan, *All-*

- American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989).
- 17 This is evident when one analyzes the missionary newsletter *Ramallah Messenger*, the monthly journal *Friends Missionary Advocate*, and accounts by missionaries like Rosa Lee, Alice Jones, Etta Johnson and Ruth Murray.
  - 18 Kamal Salibi and Yusuf K. Khoury, ed., *The Missionary Herald: Reports from Ottoman Syria 1847-1860*, vol. 3 (Amman, Jordan: Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, 1995), 31-32.
  - 19 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Phaidon Press, 1992).
  - 20 "A Story," *Ramallah Messenger* 7 (1910): 7; Etta H. Johnston, "Eli and Sybil Jones Mission," *Report of the missionary work of Friends in the "Land of the Bible."* (Lynn, Mass: T.P. Nichols, 1892).
  - 21 Lee, "The Story of Ram Allah Mission," in *Holy Land Missions and Missionaries*, ed. Moshe Davis (New York: Arno Press, 1977) 10, 14.
  - 22 Etta H. Johnston, "Eli and Sybil Jones Mission," 9.
  - 23 Ironically, Alice Jones who viewed women's work as a kind of social oppression in the early twentieth century, would see these chores as positive and vigorous during the 1920s. The village women's engagement in outdoor chores such as bringing the water from springs, gathering the brush for the fires, and helping their men in the field were part of the village lifestyle in which these women participated actively and positively.
  - 24 Alice Jones, "Letter to the American Friends," *Ramallah Messenger* 4 (1907), 6.
  - 25 Alice Jones studied Arabic before she went to Ramallah in 1906, but there is no indication in the report of her proficiency in that language.
  - 26 Ruth Murray, *Friends Mission at Ramallah, Palestine* (Friends School, Ramallah, Palestine, 1890), Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 8.
  - 27 Ruth S. Murray, "Palestine," *Friends Missionary Advocate* 7 (1891): 67.
  - 28 Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 100.
  - 29 Najla Cook, personal interview, July 27, 2006; Aida Audi, personal interview, July 28, 2006. Most of the former students who were interviewed by the author stressed the fact that many of the Friends Girls School students came from the cities and were from well-to-do families. The number of female students coming from villages was small. This was due to the increase of Friends schools' tuition and that typically city girls were in a better financial position. Few village girls did attend the Friends Girls School on scholarships money provided by the American Friends.
  - 30 Nagat el-Sanabary, "Women and the Nursing Profession in Saudi Arabia," in *Arab Women between Defiance and Restraint*. ed., Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), 74.
  - 31 One example of these popular novels was Lew Wallace, *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880).
  - 32 Beshara B. Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing into History," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21 (1992): 7-8; Anthony O'Mahony, "The Christian Communities of Jerusalem and the Holy Land: A Historical and Political Survey," in *The Christian Communities of Jerusalem and the Holy Land: Studies in History, Religion and Politics* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 9. See also Nancy L. Stockdale, "Gender and Colonialism in Palestine 1800-1984: Encounters Among English Arab and Jewish Women," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2000), 56. Stockdale argued that English travelers and missionary accounts placed the contemporary Palestinian population in biblical time. This helped the English to imagine Palestine as a familiar place they could control. See Also Lester Groves Pittman, "Zion as Place and Past, An American Myth: Ottoman Palestine in the American Mind Perceived through Protestant Consciousness and Experience," (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1984), vi, 195; Robert T. Handy. *The Holy Land in the American Protestant Life 1800-1948: A Documentary History*, (New York: Arno Press, 1981), 143.
  - 33 Marshal Letter to her family, (November 4, 1928). Joy Hilden Personal Collection. These letters were written during Eva Rae Marshal's service in Palestine in the FGS and the Friends Boys School during 1927-1928. Eva Marshal worked her first year at the Ramallah Mission as a teacher at the FGS. The next year she moved to the Friends Boys School. She married Khalil Totah in 1928 after his first wife's death, and stayed in Ramallah until 1944.
  - 34 Mary Minnick Personal Report to the AFBFM, Part of Mary Minnick Scrapbook, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana.
  - 35 Nancy Parker McDowell, *Notes from*

- Ramallah, 1939* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2002), 9-20.
- 36 Hadley to family and Friends, (August 24, 1947), 2. At a fund-raising party for the Ramallah Mission, sponsored by the American Consul's wife, Mrs. Heizer, the same impression of Mary the good hostess was staged. The Mission sent a group of FGS students to Jerusalem to serve the mainly British and American guests tea in their traditional costumes. Marshal described them as "very picturesque." Marshal to her family, (February 21, 1928).
- 37 Eva Rae Marshal's autobiography, unpublished, in the possession of Joy Hilden Eva Rae, Marshal's daughter, 23. 25
- 38 Eva Rae Marshal Autobiography, 37.
- 39 Sara Hadley Letter, (June 16, 1946), 5; Jordan, *Ramallah Teacher*, 109.
- 40 Ellen A. Winslow, "Palestine as I Saw It," 4. Winslow's travel account of her trip to Palestine in 1925, (no publisher, place of publication, or date). This account was given to the author Don Hutchison who works currently as a teacher in the Friends Boys School.
- 41 It is important to note that these feasting practices continue today, not only in Palestine but in most of the Arab world, especially on occasions such as marriage, roofing of houses and buildings, the return of relatives or loved ones from a long trip, and at wakes.
- 42 Eva Rae Marshal to her family, (November 13, 1927). Part of the Joy Hilden Personal Collection.
- 43 Hadley to family and friends, (June 16, 1946), 5.
- 44 Marshal to her family, (October 16 and 30, 1927). In both letters Marshal mentioned her intention to write the article about the Muslim wedding and send it to her father to give to the missionary society.
- 45 Eva Rae Marshal, "Wedding Customs in Palestine," (October, 1927), 1. This article was in the possession of Joy Hilden, Eva Rae Marshal's daughter.
- 46 Marshal to her family, (November 13, 1927).
- 47 Elihu Grant, *The People of Palestine* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1921), 48-49. Grant wrote other works about Palestine. He was the first principal of the Friends Boys School from 1901 to 1904. He published an earlier work called *The Peasantry of Palestine* in 1907. Grant seems to apply cultural relativism when studying Palestinian culture.
- 48 Joy Hilden in a telephone interview with author, September 10, 2008. Hilden is Marshal's daughter and confirmed her mother's familiarity with Grant's writings.
- 49 Hadley to family and friends, (March 29, 1946), 3. Hadley mentions that she still found it too hard to memorize her students' names.
- 50 Marshal autobiography, 41; Marshall to her family, (December 10, 1927).
- 51 Marshal autobiography, 41.
- 52 For more information about the new strategy of cooperation see Caroline Atwater Mason, *World Missions and World Peace: A Study of Christ's Conquest* (West Medford, Mass: The Central Committee on the United Study of Foreign Missions, 1916) and Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996). The first missionary writer with a Quaker background to evoke this idea of cooperation was Caroline Atwater Mason. She wrote a book in 1916 in response to World War I in which she called for foreign missions to use different approaches toward the "target nations." *The United Missionary Council of Syria and Palestine*, Eight Year, Proceedings of the Joint Meeting at Beirut (Beirut: American Press, May, 2-5, 1927), 4; Letter to the Member Missions of the United Missionary Council, (January 5, 1928).
- 53 The United Missionary Conference of Syria and Palestine, (May 5-7, 1920).
- 54 Willis Beede Report to the AFBFM, (1921), Palestine Reports, 1915-1966, Friend United Meeting Collection, Microfilm 54, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana.
- 55 Jordan, *Ramallah Teacher*, 81, 85-88.
- 56 Eva Rae Marshal's Personal Report to the AFBFM. Palestine Reports, 1915-1966. Friends United Meeting Collections, microfilm 54, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana.
- 57 Marshal to her family, (September 2, 1928 and September 10, 1928); Elizabeth Haviland Personal Report to the AFBFM, (September-December, 1936). Palestine Reports, 1915-1966, Friends United Meeting Collection, microfilm 54, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana; Marshal autobiography, 39.
- 58 Eva Rae Marshal to her family, (September 25, 1927).
- 59 Jones, *Friends in Palestine*, 79.
- 60 Minutes of Ramallah Mission, (December 1, 1926); Minutes of Ramallah Mission, (January 12 1927), Friends United Meeting Collection, Palestine Reports 1915-1966,

- microfilm 53, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana; Minutes of Ramallah Mission, (October 18, 1933); Rosenberger letter, (December 11, 1933), Friend United Meeting Collection, Palestine Reports 1915-1966, microfilm 53, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana. Mildred White recommended Victoria Hannush to be the principal of the FGS in 1935 especially after Totah was appointed as the Secretary of the Mission as he would be overwhelmed by the responsibility of serving as acting principal of the FGS.
- 61 Totah accepted his new post and returned to Palestine in 1927 after earning his PhD. in Education from Columbia University in New York in 1926. He had been one of the first students of the Friends Boys Training Home that was opened in 1901 in Ramallah and latter became known as the Friends Boys School. His strong Arab national identity was reflected in his writings, especially his doctoral dissertation titled "The Contribution of Arabs to Education" reflecting his belief in the Arabs' significant contributions to human civilization. Some of his other writings also highlight his interest of nationalizing the educational system under the British Mandate in Palestine. His emphasis on Arabic language and literature in the Friends schools' curriculum during his service at the Ramallah Mission was a clear indication of his nationalist objectives.
- 62 The criticism Totah received came mainly from short-term missionaries such as Katharine Haviland who asked the board to reduce Totah's responsibilities. Katharine Haviland to the Board, (January 20, 1935). Friends United Meeting Collection, Palestine Reports 1915-1966, microfilm 53, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana.
- 63 Letter to Edward Kelsey (from the Board?), (February 6, 1934), Friends United Meeting Collection, Richmond, Indiana; AFBFM letter, (May 10, 1934); James Sutton Letter to the Willis Beede, the Secretary of the AFBFM, (February 16, 1935), microfilm, Series 157, no. 17, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana; Katharine Haviland Letter to Board, (January 20, 1935). Friends United Meeting Collection, Palestine Reports 1915-1966, microfilm 53, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana.
- 64 Ramallah Mission Minutes, (July 14, 1937). Other figures who were long-term missionaries were Edward Kelsey and Willard Jones. However, by July of 1937, both friends suggested using more Arabic in the religious services, forming a pastoral committee "to cooperate with pastor of the Meeting," and preparing "native" pastor. Mildred White, "Palestine Survey," Annual Board Meeting, April 1936, Friend United Meeting Collections, Lily Library, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana
- 65 Elizabeth Haviland Personal Report to the AFBM, (September-December 1936).
- 66 Jordan, 221. The last year of Mildred White's service in Palestine was 1947.