

# American Bible Society – Colporteur Documents Collection (1895–1912)

## A Primary Source Archive on the Ottoman Empire, the Levant, and the Middle East

### Overview of the Collection

This collection comprises over 1,000 original documents detailing the activities of the American Bible Society (ABS) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These records document missionary and distribution work across the Levant, various provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Jerusalem, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, and Greece.

With its scope, geographic diversity, and linguistic richness, the archive offers a comprehensive panorama of the socio-cultural fabric of the Middle East and Near East in the early 20th century.

### Historical Background and the Colporteur System

ABS began operating in Ottoman territories in 1822 and established its regional administrative headquarters with the construction of the Bible House in Eminönü, Istanbul, in 1856. In 1897, it opened its first sales office in Pera, later relocating to Taksim Square in 1926, where it continued operations for many years.

Colporteurs—travelling book vendors—were ABS's most effective field representatives. Equipped with copies of the Bible “without notes or commentaries,” they traveled from city to city and village to village, recording not only sales figures but also travel expenses, lodging, distribution strategies, and their interactions with local communities.

### Geographic Scope

The documents cover a broad operational network:

- Ottoman Empire: Anatolia, Rumelia, Thrace, Black Sea coast
- Levant: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine
- Egypt and the Nile Delta
- Jerusalem and other holy cities
- Arabian Peninsula: the Hijaz and surrounding areas
- The Caucasus
- Greece and the Aegean islands

This geographic reach demonstrates that ABS's activities extended far beyond the Ottoman heartland to encompass the entire Middle East and Near East.

## Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

The collection reflects the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Ottoman world through documents in:

- Rumca (Greek dialects used by Ottoman Greeks)
- Modern and Classical Greek
- Turkish (Ottoman and modern)
- Arabic
- Syriac
- Karamanlīca (Turkish texts written in Greek letters)
- Armenian
- Cyrillic-script materials from the Balkans and Caucasus

This linguistic variety makes the archive invaluable not only for the study of missionary history but also for linguistics, paleography, ethnology, and cultural history. My proficiency in Rumca, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Syriac, and Karamanlīca has enabled me to analyze these documents in both their textual and historical contexts.

## Types of Documents

The collection includes a wide range of materials documenting ABS's field operations:

- Monthly and annual activity reports: visited towns and villages, community interactions
- Sales lists and catalogues: book sizes, editions, and pricing
- Financial records: travel, lodging, postal expenses, commissions
- Local observations: social responses, relations with religious authorities
- Records of damaged or freely distributed books
- Personal accounts: meetings with officials, religious debates

For example, reports by Evangelos K. Lukas in Trabzon detail legal proceedings with local authorities, while those of Yannis Deliyannidis in Ordu record tensions with religious authorities.

## Condition and Significance

The documents are exceptionally well preserved. Their paper quality, ink clarity, and legibility make them suitable for both scholarly research and exhibition.

The collection not only chronicles ABS's missionary work but also provides primary source insights into the cultural, religious, and social structure of the early 20th-century Middle East. With its geographic breadth, linguistic depth, and detailed field records, it represents an unparalleled resource for historians and cultural heritage scholars.

I believe these documents should be preserved in a suitable institution for the benefit of future generations. Selected examples can be presented physically for review and study.