

Baharian, Zadour G. (d. 1915)

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Zadour G. Baharian was an Armenian Seventh-day Adventist evangelist and missionary who was known as the great apostle to the Levant (Eastern Mediterranean region of Western Asia) and had often been described as the “Second Paul.” Tirelessly and without fear he ranged throughout the heart of the Turkish Empire in Asia Minor and Armenia, sharing the Adventist message under difficult circumstances, persecution, death threats, and imprisonment, leading many souls to Christ.¹



Zadour Baharian, Pioneer of the Armenian Seventh-day Adventist movement.

Shared by Hyosu Jung. Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

Early Life, Baptism, and Education

Not much is known about Baharian’s childhood other than that he came from Adana in Cilicia, Turkey, and was a school teacher at some point there.^{2 3} While attending college in neighboring Ainteb (or Anteb, present day Gaziantep),⁴ he initially learned about the Adventist faith after receiving some tracts from his father in whose home Theodore Anthony, the first Seventh-day Adventist in Turkey, was staying.

When Baharian returned home for the summer holidays in 1890, he connected with Anthony, borrowing *Daniel and Revelation* (by Uriah Smith) and *History of the Sabbath* (by J. N. Andrews). Those two books, combined with Anthony’s clear explanation of Adventist beliefs, convinced him that the Seventh-day Adventists had the truth.⁵ The young Baharian was baptized that same year.⁶

When word reached Pastor H. P. Holser (president of the Central European Mission), he persuaded Baharian to go to Switzerland and attend the Chauxde-Fonds Adventist school in Basel. He had mastered the Turkish and

Armenian languages during his college years in Ainteb, and church leaders saw this as an opportunity to prepare him for literature work among the people of the Ottoman Empire.

Baharian arrived on September 16, 1890, and for the next eighteen months he studied the Adventist message in-depth in addition to translating numerous Bible readings into Turkish and Armenian. In a period of six months more than ten thousand pages were sent to 300 people in twelve cities in Asia Minor, generating a response of over fifty-nine letters of interest.^{7 8}

Early Development of the Adventist Work With Theodore Anthony

In March 1892 Baharian returned to Constantinople (Istanbul) where he promptly set about sharing his new-found faith, visiting with families who had read the tracts and asked for Bible studies and holding Bible prophecy readings in his home. He wrote: "It is my purpose to visit Asia Minor after passing the summer here (Constantinople). Would that the last church was established in the place where the first churches were established in the first century!"⁹

Teaming up with Theodore Anthony, the two workers secured a permit for printing and immediately submitted translated material to a printing press for publications. As significant amounts of literature began to get mailed all over the country, it did not take long before false accusations sent both men to prison, the first of many imprisonments to come. This time the Turkish government officials recognized that they had legal permits and set them free after four days.¹⁰ As the literature scattered the message all over Asia Minor, the two preachers soon had more requests for religious instruction than they were able to meet.¹¹

In 1892 Baharian and Anthony held the first evangelistic meetings in Constantinople, resulting in the first conversion of a Greek colporteur from the American Bible Society.¹² A few months later six additional converts joined the church, one of whom later became Baharian's wife.¹³ In 1893 more evangelistic meetings were held in Ovajuk, Bardizag (Bahçecik), Aleppo (now in Syria), and Alexandretta (Iskenderun), where the publications had aroused intense interest. As more conversions and baptisms took place, church groups were formed and Sabbath School lessons, tracts, and books held the new converts together.¹⁴

It was not without severe difficulty, however, that the work was carried forward. Opposition and persecution prevailed in every direction, and both were often arrested and imprisoned, only to get back on their feet and continue to preach after being released.¹⁵ When the message was first introduced in Ovajuk, the village created an uproar, twice driving away the workers and stoning the house where they lodged and conducted the meetings.¹⁶

In 1894 Zadour Baharian became the first national in the Middle East to be ordained to the Seventh-day Adventist ministry. Holser officiated at the ordination, after which he and Baharian made an extended tour of Asia Minor, organizing three churches in Constantinople, Ovajuk, and Bardizag, and a company in Alexandretta.

Reports in the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* in April and May of 1894 related many exciting stories of the progress of the work. Writing about the Central European Mission Field, 20 years after J. N. Andrews brought the Advent message to Europe, Holser states: "Of all parts of the field, Turkey has been the most encouraging. The difficulties to be encountered there are the greatest; still there has been a constant interest and growth in our work. Brethren Baharian and Anthony have been in prison several times during the past year and forbidden to hold public meetings; brother Baharian has twice been attacked by mobs; yet, the Lord has wonderfully protected them, and they are still as active in holding meetings as are workers in a field where there are no such difficulties."¹⁸

Growth Amidst Hardships and Persecution

In 1895 Baharian lost his mentor and friend after Anthony became ill and passed away. Left alone with the growing membership, he valiantly carried on the evangelistic work across Asia Minor.¹⁹ In his frequent reports to the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* between 1893 and 1905, he detailed the progress of the work. By 1898 there were five full and part-time active workers in the field besides Baharian, leaving him to concentrate more on his work among the Armenians.²⁰

During this same time there was much unrest in the country due to the troubles with the Armenians and the Crete and Greco-Turkish War. The year before (1897) a law had been passed forbidding the preaching of any new religion. Government officials were afraid the Armenians might use this as a cloak under which to carry on their political agenda.

As a result, the Adventist work was greatly restricted. When Baharian held meetings in Adrianople (Edirne), close to the Turkish border with Greece and Bulgaria, over a hundred people attended. However, he was arrested on the charge of preaching a new religion and sent to await his trial in Constantinople, along with 200 others also awaiting their trials, some who had been waiting for over a year for their turn.

Although Mrs. Baharian did her best to secure her husband's release, he was held there for almost two months. Baharian used the opportunity to share his faith among the inmates. Many were interested to listen including one prisoner, the owner of a printing shop, who accepted the Adventist message. He gave up the use of tobacco and began to keep the Sabbath.

However, as had been the case throughout his ministry, Baharian faced persecution even in prison. Whenever he read from the Bible and prayed, one inmate would become agitated and at one point tried to kill him. Eventually Baharian was released when Holser from the church headquarters met with the authorities and pleaded his case.²¹

Because the Adventist church was still not recognized as a denomination, workers continually faced strong opposition from the government and other Christian bodies. Accused as disturbers of the peace, arrests and

imprisonment became part of the package of doing mission work. Workers were often banished to other localities.

Baharian had just completed a successful Bible school in Nicomedia, administered baptisms without interruptions, and traveled south to conduct another Bible school in Cilicia. He had scarcely begun before being arrested again. Even though the Protestant churches accused Baharian of collecting money to send to America, it was in reality the Sabbath issue that caused the opposition.²²

After defending himself to the ministers of Police and Interior in Constantinople, they offered him freedom if he would cease preaching about the Sabbath, saying: "You are free to preach the gospel, but you must not teach the Sabbatarian religion." He was threatened with banishment to Aintab if he did not comply. Baharian, of course, refused to compromise his faith preferring to "leave the matter in the hands of God." The minister had a change of heart and released him on the condition he would not leave Constantinople without his permission.²³

While retained in Constantinople and restricted from traveling, Baharian, like the apostle Paul, encouraged his fellow workers through letters. In 1904 he was finally exiled to his birthplace in Aintab. Arrested again, he was taken to Ourfu to await another trial. There he found three other Seventh-day Adventist preachers also being held.

The four of them decided to conduct a Bible School and an English language course in jail. They were in possession of their Bibles, and one of them, Brother Buzugherian, also had an English New Testament, an English grammar book, and an English dictionary. Baharian wrote:

God was with us and blessed us. For many years we had been planning such a school, but never had succeeded. We thanked God that he gave us such a school in jail. We studied the letters to the Galatians, Hebrews, the first epistle of Peter, the books of Daniel and Revelation, the four books of the Kings, and Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and others. We studied the principles of church and state; so, we were ready for our trial. We also prepared several lessons, which we sent to the churches.²⁴

After their ninth trial and about nine months in prison, they were eventually released.²⁵ Later that year, in 1905, a Bible Institute was held at Baharian's home in Aintab with Pastor W. H. Wakeham, president of the Oriental Mission.²⁶

On July 25, 1908, a new Turkish constitution was proclaimed, granting freedom of press and speech. For the first time the believers in Turkey met to sing, preach, and pray without restrictions while plans were made to advance the three angels' message. But even then the persecution did not stop entirely. The work was often opposed by both Armenian Christians and Turks.²⁷ Baharian and two other workers from the Turkish Mission used this freedom to attend a general meeting of the new Levant Union Mission in Beirut, Syria.²⁸

In 1909 Baharian and his family moved back to Istanbul (formerly Constantinople);²⁹ where he became part of the leadership for the Turkish Mission of the Levant Union Mission. His family did not see much of him. Like the

apostle Paul, he traveled from city to city in Asia Minor building up the churches, baptizing new members, and strengthening the believers.³⁰ In 1911 he was elected director for the new Armenian Mission.³¹ He held this position while working tirelessly to add more souls to the church and train the younger workers.

A prolonged conflict between the Armenians, Turks, and Kurds was fueled by the Ottoman Empire entering World War I in October 1914, which resulted in the Armenian genocide and the decimation of the Adventist Church. When Baharian was on his way to Istanbul, he was apprehended outside Sivas and paid the ultimate price with a bullet through his back after refusing to recant his Christian faith.³²

Legacy

Zadour G. Baharian left a legacy of tremendous faith and courage in the face of stiff opposition. He followed in the steps of Theodore Anthony to help establish the Adventist church in Asia Minor under some of the most difficult circumstances. He was admired and respected by his peers for his unselfish and dedicated service. Born not far from the apostle Paul's hometown in Tarsus, Baharian stands out to this day as a modern-day Paul in this ancient biblical land.

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NOTES

1. "Baharian, Zadour G.," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (SDAE), second rev. ed., 1996, 751; A. W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1869), 87.
2. H. P. Holser, "Cilicia," *ARH*, May 15, 1894, 308.
3. We are reminded that the apostle Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia, not from Adana. See Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3.
4. C. D. AcMoody, "The Turkish Mission, Past History," *ARH*, August 12, 1909, 17.
5. Emma Howell Cooper, *The Great Advent Movement*, revised and enlarged 1968 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1849), 207.
6. "Turkey," SDAE, 6,519.
7. Z. G. Baharian, "The Third Angel's Message in Constantinople," *ARH*, June 21, 1892, 390.
8. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1892, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/Forms/AllItems.aspx>, 67.
9. Baharian, 390.
10. Baldur E. Pfeiffer, *The European Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Middle East 1879-1939*, European University Studies, Series XXII 161 (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 1996), 28.

11. "Turkey," SDAE.
12. Cooper, 207.
13. W. H. Wakeham, "The Progress of the Truth in Turkey," *ARH*, January 18, 1906, 12. Very little is known about Baharian's wife, not even her name or the year of their wedding. We learn that when her husband was put in jail and awaiting trial for an extended period of time, Mrs. Baharian would help with interpretation for the visiting brethren when they travelled throughout the mission. Also, the Baharians had an open home for visitors and meetings, and she would be there to entertain the guests. In 1905 Pastor and Mrs. Baharian are pictured at a meeting in Aintab with their two children, a boy and a girl.
14. "Turkey," SDAE.
15. Cooper, 207.
16. H. P. Holster, "Turkey," *ARH*, July 20, 1897, 457.
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25. Z. G. Baharian, "News from Haran - 9," *ARH*, January 11, 1906, 14.
26. Wakeham, 12.
27. A. W. Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1849), 208.
28. AcMoody, 18.
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