

Nowfel, Shukri Melhem (1888–1976)

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Henry Habib Melki, Ph.D. (Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.) began his career in 1953, working for the Middle East Union. By 1962, he had earned a B.A. in Education from Middle East College (MEC), a B.A. in Arabic from American University in Beirut and a certificate in Business Management from BMC. He taught at MEC, the Lebanese University, Notre Dame University, Balamand University, Jenan University, and Holy Spirit University of Kaslik until he retired in 2015. Henry also played a key role in publishing 15 textbooks in spoken Arabic for Saudi Aramco and the Trilingual Dictionary. A devoted Ameen Rihani scholar, Henry has translated several of the author's books into Arabic and has edited and discussed over 5,000 essays and theses.

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Nowfel in Syria, reading letters to the illiterate villagers from their relatives abroad. Syrian policemen seen around, c. 1936-1940.

Photo courtesy of Henri Melki.

Shukri Melhem Nowfel () was a pioneering home missionary, pastor, editor, Biblical and Qur'anic scholar, and educator serving the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine for over 50 years.

Early Life and Education

Shukri Nowfel was born on July 18, 1888 to a conservative Catholic family in the small Lebanese village of Ainab (district of Aley, Mount Lebanon). His parents Melhem Nowfel and Mariam Najem Nehme came to Ainab from Deir al-Qamar and were married in 1887. Melhem died in Argentina in 1919, and Mariam passed away in Beirut on March 11, 1935. Shukri was the eldest among five children: Nabaha, Nasri, Jamil, and Matilda.¹ He spent his early years (1888-1907) mostly in Ainab and attended high school at the International School of Choueifat. Upon completing his education there, he began teaching at the Church of Scotland Boys' School at Souk El Gharb.²

When Nowfel was 14 years old (1902) Elias Zurub, a Lebanese preacher from Alma ech Chaab in southern Lebanon, accepted the Adventist truth after reading a book that he had borrowed from a Lebanese immigrant who had just returned from the United States.³

Zurub asked John Krum, a German Adventist missionary in charge of the work in Palestine, to leave the work there in order to help him spread the message in Lebanon. Krum accepted the call and the two of them began colporteur work. They went from village to village, often on foot and sometimes with horses, distributing Arabic tracts that taught the Adventist doctrine of the Second Advent. Zurub wrote an Arabic tract on the "Law of God" that was printed and ready for distribution between 1904 and 1905. In 1906 Michael Deeb El-Ghafary (who later became one of the first colporteurs) was baptized. Ghafary's wife and Ibrahim Shaghoury followed shortly after in 1908.⁴

In the summer of 1907 Nowfel, who was now 19 years old, was visiting his sister and her husband in the village of Aramoun. He met Zurub on one of his afternoon outings and took a tract from him without knowing who he was. After reading about the Sabbath he became very upset. However, although he publicly disapproved of its content, the tract prompted him to seek the truth.⁵ Shortly after, he received an Arabic Bible (printed in Beirut in 1870) as an unexpected gift from his neighbor, Um Georges, which he later affectionately referred to as "his Bible." He did not know much about the Bible at that time but decided to read it.⁶

Walter Ising, a German Adventist pioneer missionary, had in the meanwhile come to Beirut in 1907. After spending a year studying the Arabic language, he began his public ministry in 1908. Ising had somehow learned of the disgruntled young man, Nowfel, and arranged to meet with him.

One very hot summer day, Ising walked 10 km from Aley to Ainab where Nowfel lived. They discussed many topics from the Bible and the day proved to be a turning point for Nowfel. In mid-October of 1908 Ising invited him to attend a two-week seminar that was to be held in his house in Beirut. Since Nowfel was teaching at the Church of Scotland Boys' School, it was dangerous for him to travel back and forth due to the hostile feelings that existed between the Christians and the Druze. However, he was anxious to be spiritually fed and ended up attending the whole seminar. Among the attendees were some Armenian refugees who had escaped from the Adana Massacres.⁷

In 1909 Ising was appointed head of the Syrian-Egyptian Mission with headquarters in Beirut. He rented a home near the Syrian Protestant College (currently American University of Beirut) and would visit the campus often,

developing a rapport with the students and engaging them in religious discussions. He began a regular Bible study class about the prophecies in his home. The first study group consisted of five young men, including Bashir Hasso from Mosul (in what later became Iraq) and Nowfel.⁸

As Nowfel studied the Bible in depth, he gradually formed views different than those of his conservative Catholic family. During his Bible study with Ising he became convinced that the Sabbath was God's holy day. In 1911, he and the four other young men were baptized.⁹ Immediately following their baptism, however, persecution, hardship and difficulties arose. A fiery test awaited all of them. When they later looked back at those trying times, they understood that those tests had contained a great blessing.¹⁰

At this time there was a small constituency of seven or eight Seventh-day Adventists who were meeting together but were not yet organized into a church.¹¹ Two newly baptized members, Tigran Zachary (Armenian) and Michael Ghafary (Lebanese) continued the work as colporteurs.

Career and Ministry

When World War I broke out in 1914 the Adventist Church in Lebanon consisted of around ten members. However, as the war continued, most of the Lebanese and Armenian members left Beirut for the mountains. The Arab members returned to their homes in Syria and Iraq and the missionaries left for their respective countries.¹²

Nowfel accepted a teaching job at the American Boarding School in Souk el Gharb.¹³ On July 4, 1920, he married Hnaine Madi from Deir el Qamar. They had five daughters and three sons: Emile, Camille, Minerva, Venice, Lily, Fouad, Violette, and Mona.¹⁴ Camille, who later immigrated to the United States, served as an official translator for five American presidents.¹⁵ Hnaine passed away on January 29, 1965 in Beirut, Lebanon.¹⁶

During the war Ising was put in 61-month confinement in Malta. When he was released in 1920, he returned to Germany where he became secretary of the Central European Seventh-day Adventist Mission. When the first opportunity arose in 1923, he returned to survey the situation in the Middle East. While visiting Lebanon, he discovered that the members he had baptized years ago were still worshipping together. Even though they had been without a pastor throughout the war years, they remained faithful under Nowfel's leadership.¹⁷ This group later became the nucleus when the church in Lebanon reorganized.¹⁸

After Ising returned to Europe, Nils Zerne, an Adventist missionary from Sweden, arrived in 1923 to assume the leadership in Lebanon and Syria. Zerne contacted Nowfel, who was then the director of the Lebanon Boys' College in Choueifat and the only indigenous Seventh-day Adventist in Lebanon. Zerne extended to him a call to officially join the work of the Adventist Church as a pastor.¹⁹

Nowfel responded to this call in the Autumn of 1925. He left teaching and entered into full-time work with Zerne, dedicating his life to the gospel ministry as the first Arabic-speaking Adventist minister in the Middle East.

His first assignment was to translate the Sabbath School lessons into Arabic. During his high-school years he had developed into a competent Arabic writer. After he taught in the Church of Scotland Boys' School his English language skills improved significantly, enabling him to also become a competent English writer. These two skills later proved invaluable in his work as a translator, pastor and educator.²⁰

Nowfel quickly established himself in the church as a valuable resource for the Arabic language. His extensive study of the Scripture and his command of the Arabic language produced sermons that inspired the young and old alike.²¹

At that time there was an Armenian constituency made up of 40 refugees who had escaped in a miraculous way from the Turkish genocide. Nowfel visited them on Sabbath in their wooden church cottage. They were desperately poor and lived in terrible conditions. Nowfel preached his first sermon in English entitled "God is Love," to which they responded enthusiastically. Many came to know Jesus as a result of Nowfel's care, and many others died in the hope of the resurrection.²²

In the winter of 1925, Nowfel participated in a public effort in the Mazraa district of Beirut that resulted in the baptisms of his wife Hnaine, Nazeera Khoury Dahir and Selim Nojeim.²³ In 1926, the Ghazal brothers – Chamoun, Melki, Ibrahim and Najib also joined the church. Two years later they were followed by their wives. The church began to grow as a result of the witness these converts gave to their friends and family. A church and Sabbath School were organized and it was not long before property was purchased in Zeydaniye, Mouseitbeh for a new church building.²⁴

Not only did Nowfel establish the nucleus of the Adventist church in Lebanon, but he is considered also the founding father of the Church in Syria. In April 1928 Nowfel was sent to Damascus, Syria for 18 months. When he returned to Beirut, he left a small nucleus of interested persons, two of them well known – an artist Faris Dow and a lawyer George Shaghoury. They were baptized in Beirut the following year.²⁵

Between 1928 and 1929, two churches were established in Beirut: the Arabic-speaking Seventh-day Adventist Church in Mouseitbeh (which was known as the mother church) and the Armenian Seventh-day Adventist Church. Nowfel was ordained to the gospel ministry in Ain Aanoub on September 20, 1930, 22 years after he accepted the Sabbath doctrine.²⁶

In 1936 Nowfel was sent back to Syria where he spent the next three years of his ministry. He joined Ibrahim El-Khalil (one of the original five students who was baptized by Ising in 1911) and Wilhelm Lesovsky (1901–1976) in Damascus. From there he took Hamad Obeid (a self-supporting Lebanese literature evangelist from Tripoli) and went to Tartous where they baptized Hanni Srou and her two sons, Chafic and Philip. A church and Sabbath School were established there in less than a year. Chafic would later become the pastor who was responsible for taking the message to Western Syria.²⁷

While in Tartous, Nowfel also met a young man named Towfic Issa, who had learned about the Adventist message from the Srours. He carried it to Bezag (modern Rawda), Syria, where the first Adventist church in western Syria was built. As new converts returned to their family homes, Nowfel's work in Tartous resulted in the word of God spreading to many of the neighboring villages.²⁸

Years After World War II

Upon returning to Lebanon in 1939, Nowfel became the first Arabic-speaking pastor for the Mouseitbeh Seventh-day Adventist church, where he served for the next 20 years. His loving and positive influence was felt among the church members as well as in the evangelical circles, leading many people to accept Christ and the Adventist message.²⁹ When the Adventist College of Beirut opened its doors in Mouseitbeh in 1939, Nowfel was asked to teach religion courses.³⁰

The subsequent years were busy as he instructed the first class of Theology graduates. He also presented many lectures at the College to which the public was invited. In 1944 a leaflet announced a lecture Nowfel was to deliver on Thursday, November 23, at 7:30 pm, entitled "This World Has a Beginning, Does It Have an End?"

After World War II in 1945, due to war time economic challenges, indigenous workers lived under a heavy financial burden. Nowfel had to sell land inherited from his father to pay for debts incurred by the daily expenses that arose from supporting his family.³¹

In 1946 Nowfel began studying the Bible with his widowed sister, Nabiha Nowfel Khoury. She was baptized and became the first Seventh-day Adventist in the village of Aramoun. Although she was illiterate and of very poor health, Nabiha at once began to share her newfound faith. Many in the village accepted the Bible truths and were baptized, resulting in the establishment of the Aramoun church. Nowfel supported his sister's work with regular visits.

With no children of her own, Nabiha nurtured some of the village children, bringing them into her home and teaching them about the love of God. Most of these children accepted the message and were baptized even though all were severely persecuted by their parents. As the families in the church continued to grow, an elementary school was established in Aramoun in 1947.³² In subsequent years Nowfel baptized many students from the school, including Yussif and Elias Khoury, Emile Tabanji, and George Khoury, who would later become a pastor that played a significant role in the development of the Adventist Church in Lebanon.³³

By 1948 the financial situation in Lebanon had deteriorated so that local wages were not keeping up with the staggering rate of inflation experienced in the country. Native workers were having a very difficult time coping with their expenses and requested that significant adjustments be made to their wages. Nowfel became an advocate on behalf of the workers in this desperate situation, writing letters of appeal to the Union leadership. He often felt his appeals did not receive the appropriate response.³⁴

Steps were not taken at this time to ease the financial difficulties, and this created an issue of conflict between the foreign leadership and the native employees. In a sermon preached on August 16, 1948, Nowfel warned of the potential downfall of the church if inequity was not addressed. It was not long after the Union administration took the decision to put him on sustentation at 60, even though he did not reach the legal age of retirement.³⁵

Shortly after, Nowfel was offered a job at Victor Trad High School, Choueifat as an administrator and worked there for two years from 1948 to 1950.³⁶ During this time he continued to be an advocate for the local workers and fought to alleviate their ongoing financial distress.³⁷ On June 1, 1949 he wrote a letter of appeal to the new Union administration.³⁸ Following this letter things began to change for the better for local employees. His issues with the Union were resolved and he was called back to work.³⁹

In 1950, Nowfel was appointed the representative of the Adventist Church to The Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon.⁴⁰ In the same year he was also made director of the Voice of Prophecy.⁴¹ In 1951 Elder George J. Appel sent Nowfel a letter asking him to prepare a synopsis of the history of the Seventh-day Adventists in Lebanon and Syria.⁴²

While Nowfel managed the Voice of Prophecy, he continued to make home visits and study the Bible with anyone who was interested. During the first year and a half of his leadership, he baptized twenty people. Among those were two brothers, Elias and Joseph Estephan (who later studied at Middle East College), and Elias Aoun from Kaitouly. Aoun endured much opposition from his parents and was expelled from school for refusing to study on Sabbath. He later went to the Adventist school in Mouseitbeh.⁴³ Nellie Nehme Haddad, the late wife of Dr. Anees Haddad was also among those baptized that year. She became the “hero” of the book *The Miracle Girl* that Haddad later wrote and that was published in Arabic and Armenian.⁴⁴

In 1952, Nowfel reported to the Middle East Union that he had written 800 letters to individuals who had asked difficult questions.⁴⁵ On January 24, 1956, he received a letter from Ahmad Mouhammad El-Kik, a high-ranking Muslim cleric, asking about the Old Testament text in comparison to the Qur'an. Nowfel responded in five handwritten pages. It represented his 1,480th letter and his last as manager of the Voice of Prophecy.⁴⁶ Nowfel joined the Middle East College staff as the college Arabic instructor in 1956.⁴⁷ On July 25, 1960 the Middle East Division Committee voted his retirement.⁴⁸

During his ministry Nowfel extensively wrote on a variety of subjects. Copies of his sermons, all written in Arabic are found in the archives of the Middle East and North Africa Union in Beirut, Lebanon.⁴⁹ The originals are currently (2020) uncatalogued with the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research at the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.⁵⁰

Distinctions

Nowfel received a certificate of ordination on September 20, 1930.⁵¹ In addition to serving as an ordained minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Nowfel received recognition for serving as the sole representative of the Church in Lebanon and Syria in 1950.⁵²

Retirement and Death

The last sermon Nowfel delivered was at an Adventist camp on August 28, 1964. However, there is evidence that indicates he was still active on November 1, 1965 when he wrote a letter soliciting a meeting with the president of the General Conference, R. R. Fighur.⁵³

He continued attending church in Mouseitbeh until 1972. Nowfel died on October 20, 1976 with Minerva, his eldest daughter, by his side. Because Lebanon was engulfed in civil war at the time, most of the family had moved abroad while she stayed to care for her ailing father. He was first buried at a Druze cemetery in Beirut, but following the war, his remains were moved to the Adventist cemetery on Sabtiyeh Hill.

Legacy

Nowfel was a pioneer for the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Middle East, dedicating almost half a century of his life to the Church, beginning at age 23 until age 76. He baptized more than fifty individuals during the difficult times in which he lived. As a native leader he was often an intermediary between native workers and church administration. As a pastor, theologian, administrator, and tireless worker he did much for the Adventist mission through total personal dedication.

Nowfel is considered by many as a heroic Adventist worker with lasting legacy for the Adventist Church in Lebanon and the Middle East. He was known to be a local national who spoke his mind without fear. His favorite Biblical quote was: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31, NKJV). By this motto he lived his adult life, truly believing that God was his support.

SOURCES

Ahmad Mouhammed El-Kik to Shukri Nowfel, January 24, 1945, Letter. Currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

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Nowfel, "Voice of Prophecy Report," May 2, 1952. Currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

Nowfel and others to the Middle East Union Executive Committee, January 28, 1948, Letter (English and Arabic). Currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

NOTES

1. Shukri Nowfel's handwritten notes on the appendices of his Bible, Figure 2, 3 in the private collection of Henri Melki, son-in-law of Shukri Nowfel (Afsdik, Lebanon). See the image of Nowfel's Bible in "More Photos" in this article.
2. Henry Melki, personal knowledge as Shukri Nowfel's son-in-law.
3. Shukri Nowfel, "A Synopsis of the History of Seventh-day Adventism in Lebanon and Syria," a study requested by George J. Appel (president of Middle East Division of Seventh-day Adventists from 1951-1958), April 1951, private letter, page 1, currently not cataloged, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
4. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 1.
5. Ibid.

6. Nowfel's Bible, Figure 1 (see the image in "More Photos" in this article).
7. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 2.
8. Manoug H. Nazirian, *The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Lebanon: 1897-1997* (Beirut, Lebanon: East Mediterranean Field of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999), 13.
9. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 2.
10. Ibid.
11. Nazirian, 13.
12. Ibid., 48.
13. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 3.
14. Nowfel's Bible, Figure 2, 3.
15. Nazirian, 16-17.
16. Henry Melki, personal knowledge as Shukri Nowfel's son-in-law.
17. Nazirian, 14.
18. Ibid., 15.
19. Ibid.
20. Henry Melki, personal knowledge as Shukri Nowfel's son-in-law.
21. Ibid.
22. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 3.
23. Ibid.
24. Nazirian, 48-49.
25. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 3.

26. Walter Ising, "From our Lebanon Summer School," *ARH*, December 25, 1930, 21.
27. Nazirian, 18-19.
28. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 3.
29. Nazirian, 17.
30. Ibid.
31. Nowfel to the Middle East Union Executive Committee, June 1, 1949, Letter, page 1, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
32. Nazirian, 22-23.
33. Nowfel, "History of Adventism," 4.
34. Nowfel to Members of the Committee of the Middle East Union, February 17, 1948, Letter, page 1, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
35. Nowfel, Letter, June 1, 1949.
36. Najm Khoury, interview by Farid Khoury, February 23, 2020, in Sabtiyeh, Lebanon.
37. Nowfel and others to the Middle East Union Executive Committee, January 28, 1948, Letter (English and Arabic), currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
38. Nowfel, Letter, June 1, 1949.
39. Najm Khoury, interview by Farid Khoury, February 23, 2020, in Sabtiyeh, Lebanon.
40. Certificate issued by The Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon, February 2, 1950, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
41. Shukri Nowfel, "Voice of Prophecy Report," May 2, 1952, page 2, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
42. George J. Appel to Nowfel, April 5, 1951, Letter, page 1, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

43. Nowfel, "Voice of Prophecy Report."
44. Edmond Haddad, interview by Farid Khoury, October 27, 2020; Saydeh Abounasr, interview by Farid Khoury, September 9, 2020.
45. Nowfel, "Voice of Prophecy Report," 1.
46. Ahmad Mouhammed El-Kik to Shukri Nowfel, January 24, 1945, Letter, page 1, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.
47. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger* 5, No. 4 (Fourth Quarter 1965): 7.
48. Middle East Division Committee, July 25, 1960, 792, General Conference Archives, accessed November 12, 2020, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/MED/MED19600701.pdf>.
49. Personal knowledge of Farid Khoury, ESDA assistant editor for MENA.
50. Personal knowledge of Tibor Szilvasi, executive secretary of the Middle East and North Africa Union (2008-present) who delivered the letters and documents of Shukri Nowfel to the Archives of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.
51. Nowfel's Bible, Figure 4. See the image of Nowfel's Bible in "More Photos" in this article.
52. Nowfel's Bible, Figure 6. See the image of Nowfel's Bible in "More Photos" in this article.
53. Shukri Nowfel to R. R. Fighur, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, November 1, 1965, Letter, page 1, currently not catalogued, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.

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