



El-Khalil wearing the fez with his famous moustache.

Photo courtesy of Manoug Nazirian.

El-Khalil, Ibrahim (d. 1945)

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Ibrahim El-Khalil was a national pioneer and ordained minister who, for 32 years, made an invaluable contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist church in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine during its formative years.

Conversion

Khalil was a Kurdish Muslim residing in Turkey when he was first introduced to Christianity through a Protestant church. He was given a Bible and discovered the Sabbath teachings through his studies. Shortly after his conversion his parents discovered the Bible and threatened to kill him. Fearing for his life, he changed his name to Ibrahim El-Khalil and fled through woods and desert until he reached a village in the mountains of Lebanon.¹

While there he met Walter Ising, Adventist pioneer missionary to Lebanon in 1909 who had just been appointed as director of the Syrian-Egyptian Mission. Ising was taking a year to study Arabic before assuming his duties at the Mission headquarters in Beirut.² When Ising left the village, he rented a house near the Syrian Protestant college and had an active Bible study group with some of the students in his home. Desiring to understand the Bible better, El-Khalil joined the group. Two years later, in 1911, he was baptized in the Brook Cherith where the biblical Elijah was fed by ravens.³

Ministry

In 1913 El-Khalil entered denominational service as a minister. That same year Ising left for Iraq for nine months to establish the Adventist work there, leaving El-Khalil and two other nationals to take care of the work in Lebanon during his absence. Then, at the beginning of World War I in 1914, Ising was interned in Malta for five years, losing all contact with his members in Lebanon. Henry Erzberger, an Adventist Swiss missionary, arrived shortly after and continued to direct the affairs of the church in Lebanon until 1917 when he relocated to Palestine.⁴

After the war ended, Ising revisited Lebanon in 1920 only to discover that the church members he had baptized and who had been left without pastoral care for several years had remained loyal throughout the tragic war. El-Khalil and another early convert, Shukry Nowfel, had become leading national gospel ministers during his absence, caring for the few church members who remained in Lebanon. Their only contact had been with Zador Baharian, director of the Armenian Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Istanbul.⁵

During the 1920s and especially after 1923, Swiss missionary Niles Zerme arrived in Beirut to reorganize the church using the remaining few faithful members as the nucleus. In 1924 El-Khalil married one of his church

members by the name of Mary Meyer. She was a freed prisoner of war from Germany and settled in Palestine, where she became one of the earliest Adventist members. Relocating to Lebanon she attended the same church group where Khalil was pastor.

In time other missionaries arrived, including Wilhelm Lesovski and his wife, Charlotte, who joined the teaching faculty at the newly opened "Ecole Adventiste" in 1929. These missionaries, along with El-Khalil and Nowfel, carried on the work in Lebanon.

One of El-Khalil's earliest converts was a young carpenter by the name of Mansour Abujawdeh. El-Khalil met Mansour one summer in Bhamdoun, a famous Lebanese summer resort area. El-Khalil carried a Bible, which attracted Mansour's attention. In Mansour's denomination, only priests were permitted to read from the Bible. El-Khalil connected with Mansour and soon started giving him Bible studies leading to Mansour's baptism. Since there was no Adventist church in Bhamdoun at that time, Mansour began attending the Church of God. However, he never stopped believing in the Sabbath and contributed to the Adventist work as much as he could.⁶

In 1935 El-Khalil was ordained.⁷ When in 1936 Lesovski was asked to pioneer the work in Damascus, Syria, El-Khalil and Nowfel left the work in Lebanon for three years to team up with him.⁸ Returning to Beirut in 1939, El-Khalil retired from pastoral ministry and took a new position as an Arabic teacher at Middle East College, in addition to translating Adventist literature.

Ibrahim El-Khalil passed away on Thursday morning, November 15, 1945, at the American University Hospital, Beirut, Lebanon, after a lingering illness.

SOURCES

Nazirian, Manoug H. *The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Lebanon 1897-1997*. Beirut, Lebanon: East Mediterranean Field of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia. Second revised edition. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996. S.v. "Khalil, Ibrahim."

NOTES

1. Faiza Asmar, interview with George Asmar, Beirut, Lebanon, September 15, 2022. Faiza Asmar is the daughter of Mansour Abujawdi, one of the earlier converts of El-Khalil. She lives in Lebanon with her husband, Elias Asmar.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Khalil, Ibrahim."

3. Manoug H. Nazirian, *The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Lebanon 1897-1997* (Beirut, Lebanon: East Mediterranean Field of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999), 13.
4. On April 27, 1917, El-Khalil received a postcard from Henry Erzberger, written by him in Arabic, describing how he met El Hanbali Imam and Jamil al-Shatti of the Damascus Mosque while he was traveling from Damascus to Palestine. In the postcard, Erzberger was inquiring about a certain nun and whether she was successful in securing wheat. This was during the Great Famine of Mount Lebanon (1915-1918) when the Ottoman Turks deliberately barred crops from neighboring Syria from entering Mount Lebanon. (Ibid.)
5. Ibid., 14.
6. Faiza Asmar, interview with George Asmar, Beirut, Lebanon, September 15, 2022. Mansour was commissioned to craft the wooden doors and windows for the first Adventist church in Mouseitbeh. He also made the furniture for the office of the first president, George Arthur Keough, at Middle East College. The Heritage and Culture center keeps the two nicely made chairs and a beautiful cabinet at the Keough Library, where the collection of Mary Meyer books is also kept. (Ibid.)
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Khalil, Ibrahim."
8. Nazirian, 17.

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