

## LDS Missionary Work in the Middle East: The Deaths of Emil J. Huber and Joseph W. Booth in Aleppo, Syria

*James A. Toronto*

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, five LDS missionaries passed away and were buried in the Middle East: Edgar D. Simmons (from Salt Lake City, Utah, died in 1890 of smallpox, buried in Aintab, Turkey); Adolf Haag (born in Stuttgart, Germany, died in 1892 of typhus, buried in Haifa, Palestine, now Israel); John A. Clark (born in Farmington, Utah, died in 1895 of smallpox, buried in Haifa, Palestine, now Israel); Emil J. Huber (from Zurich, Switzerland, died in 1908 of typhus, buried in Aleppo, Syria); and Joseph W. Booth (from Alpine, Utah, died in 1928 of cardiac arrest, buried in Aleppo, Syria). The Huber and Booth graves are located on the northwestern outskirts of Aleppo under a small grove of trees in the northeastern corner of the Armenian Evangelical cemetery (adjacent to the Syrian Orthodox and Jewish cemeteries). This article provides background on LDS missionary work in the Middle East and on the life and service of these two missionaries, describes the origins and nature of a project to refurbish their gravesites in Aleppo, and discusses the significance of the site and the renovation project in the broader context of recent LDS Church involvement in the region.

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## **LDS Missionary Work in the Middle East**

The first missionary efforts of the Church in the modern Middle East were initiated in Turkey, the heartland of the Ottoman Empire. On December 31, 1884, Elder Jacob Spori, the first full-time missionary in the Middle East arrived in Constantinople to open the Turkish Mission. He had been sent from the European Mission in response to a letter written by an Armenian man, Hagop Vartooguan, who suggested that LDS missionaries would find a fertile field in Turkey. Less than a week later, on January 4, 1885, Spori baptized Vartooguan and his family, the first converts in the new mission. In subsequent years, finding little success among Turkish Muslims or European Christians in the capital city, the missionaries decided to move inland and began to gradually establish branches of the Church in Armenian areas of central Turkey and northern Syria—more specifically, Zara, Sivas, Marash, Aintab, and Aleppo.

One of the early stalwart missionaries was President Ferdinand F. Hintze, who worked for many years to preach the gospel and to solidify the Church's presence among the Armenian people, arguably the oldest Christian community in the Middle East. Aintab eventually became the largest branch in the mission until 1907 when the mission headquarters was moved to Aleppo, Syria, a center of Church activity and administration. The membership of the Turkish Mission, which never exceeded two hundred members, comprised mainly Armenians from central Turkey and northern Syria but also a few European and Arab converts in other parts of the mission which included Palestine, Greece, Egypt, and Lebanon.

In 1909 the mission was closed due to increasing political turmoil in Turkey. Church members remained without outside leadership and assistance for twelve years until after the end of World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. In 1921 the mission was reopened by Joseph W. Booth, who served a second time as president of the mission, which was renamed the Armenian Mission, with headquarters in Aleppo, Syria. For the next seven years, President Booth, joined by his wife Reba in 1924, sought primarily to deal with the aftermath of a devastating war, helping to alleviate the suffering of Church members and rebuild their lives. In December 1928, Booth died suddenly while working with the members in Aleppo. With Booth's death the mission was closed and not reopened until 1933, when Badwagan Piranian and his wife, Berta, arrived to preside over the newly named Palestine-Syrian Mission. It was closed again in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II, reopened by the Piranians in 1947 after the end of the war, and renamed the Near East Mission in 1950. The mission was discontinued in January 1951,

although some missionaries served in Lebanon between 1964 and 1975 as part of the Swiss Mission.

### **Emil J. Huber**

Emil Julius Huber, of Swiss ancestry, was born in Paris, France, on March 7, 1885.<sup>1</sup> His parents, Emil Kaspar Huber and Maris Moor Huber, moved the family to Zurich, Switzerland, where at age sixteen, Huber joined the LDS Church on September 27, 1901. Four years later he emigrated to Utah, and with a degree from a technical school in Winterthur, Switzerland, found work in Salt Lake City in the city's engineer office. Not long after arriving he met and became engaged to Martha Gunther, a native of Leipzig, Germany. On July 23, 1907 Huber, age twenty-two, was set apart to serve as a missionary in the Turkish Mission. On his way to the Middle East, he passed through LDS Church headquarters in Liverpool and stopped to visit his family in Zurich before proceeding to Alexandria, Egypt, where he arrived in September. He spent the winter months with two other missionaries, Elders Shepherd and Thorup. Together they worked among the Egyptians and the international community, passing out religious tracts, studying Turkish and Arabic, and associating with a small group of Mormon converts (including the Kezerians and Khojaguzians) who had moved there from Zara, Turkey. Early in March 1908 the two missionaries left Egypt and traveled to Syria, arriving at the mission headquarters in Aleppo on March 14.

Emil J. Huber, LDS missionary in the Turkish Mission who died on May 16, 1908, in Aleppo, Syria. Photograph originally published in the *Improvement Era* 12, no. 11 (September 1909): 902.



On March 26, Elder Shepherd and Elder Phelps left the mission home to work in Aintab, about sixty miles to the north, while Elder Huber remained in Aleppo to assist President and Sister Booth. He worked closely with Booth, visiting and instructing Church members, calling on government officials and other dignitaries, and speaking to audiences about Mormonism. Booth recorded the words uttered by Huber on one such occasion: "During the last Sunday services which he attended, Elder Huber arose, and with a voice trembling under the power of the Holy Spirit, bore his last testimony, and among other things, he said: 'I know the Gospel is true, and you cannot deny it, having heard it preached by a humble servant of the Lord.'"<sup>2</sup> At least once he had the opportunity to perform the ordinance of confirmation after the baptism of four new members in the river north of Aleppo. When Booth departed on April 14 to visit the members and missionaries in Aintab, he felt confident enough in Huber's abilities and integrity to leave him in charge of providing financial assistance to Armenian Church members suffering from poverty.

On May 9, after an absence of almost a month, Booth returned to Aleppo to find Huber extremely ill from typhus, and his wife, Reba, exhausted from her vigil of caring for him. For the next week Joseph and Reba took turns around the clock ministering to Huber at his bedside. Local Church members also held special prayers and fasts in his behalf. The Booths were guardedly optimistic when Huber showed signs of improvement, but his strength gradually dissipated, and there was little that the doctors or the distraught mission president and his wife could do to help. President Booth's journal entries portray the poignancy of the events surrounding Huber's final hours:

May 15, 1908 (Friday)

Elder Huber was restless and delirious most all last night and his bowels very much relaxed. I feel that notwithstanding his weakness and fever and somewhat precarious condition he will yet be restored to health and permitted to accomplish his labors in the mission field. After noon he grew worse and we found his bowels swollen and his whole body trembling under the dreaded influence of the poisonous typhus in his blood. We called the Dr. again at night. He placed him in a cold towel bath for an hour and we changed his bed and saw that the fever was lower than before. Hagop Bezjian & Hovhannes Orulluian sat up with him and kept cool clothes with ice <around &> near his head. Until now Sister Booth or I have been with him most all the time, day & night.

May 16, 1908 (Saturday)

I arose early and found that Elder Huber was in a precarious condition. Our hopes began to die away as we looked at him and saw that each hour his strength was waning. Before noon we could see him sinking and we kneeled by his bed and offered prayers in his behalf. I had administered to him previously. After noon he gradually grew worse and his life—his mortal life only, declined with the day and as the sun set

to night the spirit of Elder Emil J Huber took its flight and the body only was left for us to look upon, but a multitude of memories sweet & sad remain with us and will not soon be forgotten. We were assisted by the saints and his body was soon laid out and packed in ice—a mighty contrast to the raging fever which had burned his life all day long.

May 18, 1908 (Monday)

We dressed the body and laid it in a nice silk covered coffin trimmed with gold.<sup>3</sup> His robes were ready as he brought his temple clothes with him<sup>4</sup> and O how lovely he appeared.

At 5 o'clock p.m. Services began and lasted for one hour. The corpse rested in a flower covered receptacle <on two chairs> in the court yard surrounded by many mourners and visitors. The court and the three rooms and the roof were all used by the audience. The German Consul's Dragoman<sup>5</sup> and Mr Poche, our [American] Consul, and a son of Albert Poche, with Cawaasses<sup>6</sup> from each Consulate honored us with their presence. Rev Stephan [blank] of the Protestant church spoke a while and showed his deep regards for the deceased though but slightly acquainted with him. Kevork Patukian read Alma chapt 40 & I and Reba occupied the remainder of the time. We sang "Ya Ukseh ve Jelil yer de" and "A Vatanum Yerushalem" and to close "Pedr Oghul Ruh el Kudsa." The coffin was opened for a few minutes to take a last look at the remains of our dear brother.

The procession headed by the two Cawaasses, then Reba & I, followed by several young ladies then six little children dressed in white, two young men, Dikran & Krikor Dimerjian bearing a large floral wreath, then the casket bourn by 6 pall bearers, and after the Saints, friends, spectators, etc. There must have been from 300 to 500 people and by the time the cemetery was reached the crowd was much augmented. We reached the grave, placed the coffin in an outer box, sang "Ne zeman Barce Seda ver if" and the earthy remains of a noble servant of God were lowered in their last resting place and the Grave and all its contents were dedicated to the Lord. It was just about sunset, 43 hours after his spirit left the body. All that could be done was executed with solemnity. We returned as we went, with aching hearts, thinking of one we loved so well.<sup>7</sup>

For several days after the funeral President and Sister Booth were busy with activities related to Elder Huber's passing. They spent an entire day cleaning house and washing everything, including clothes and vessels, in an effort to keep the typhus from spreading. By the end of May, life had settled back into a normal routine again, but the shock of Huber's death continued to weigh heavily on Booth's mind: "The month of May ended quietly with us. The death of our dear Brother Emil J Huber has thrown a pall over spring-time and cast a gloom over heart and home. Father, may the seeming loss be only as seed sown in rich soil to bring forth abundantly to thy praise in future months."<sup>8</sup>

Three months later, in response to questions Booth had posed about missionary work in Turkey, the First Presidency sent a letter that included a tribute to Huber and directions to prepare a headstone for his grave:

The death of our beloved brother Emil J. Huber was a shock to us all. All the good things you have said concerning him are in keeping with the sentiments & feelings of those who have personally known him here at home, but in his death there remains nothing for us to do but to acknowledge the hand of the Lord, and in our hearts congratulate him on the honorable release which our Heavenly Father has given him. By all means have a suitable headstone erected at the grave of our deceased brother, the cost of which, together with the expenses attending his sickness and death, it will be proper for the church to bear, and this of course will include remunerating you for the means you yourself advanced to him.

The letter was signed, “With Kind Love, Your Brother, Anthon H Lund, In behalf of First Presidency.”<sup>9</sup> Jenson’s *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia* includes this brief eulogy: “Bro. Huber was a gifted and energetic Elder and judging from all appearance would have become a star in the community, had his life been spared.”<sup>10</sup>

Booth received the First Presidency’s letter in Le Havre, France, where he was staying temporarily while assisting a group of Armenian LDS emigrants on their way to Utah. Several weeks later, on the return trip to Aleppo, he stopped at the headquarters of the Swiss mission in Zurich. After speaking in sacrament meeting he was pleased to meet the Huber family and give them a firsthand report about Emil. “Among the audience were Sister Huber & her two daughters Luise & Marie & their brother. We visited them after meeting and I told them of the death of their dear son & brother Emil J. at Haleb [Aleppo]. It has not been my lot for a long time to me[et] a sweeter, kinder, and more lovable family.”<sup>11</sup>

Emil J. Huber’s grave marker, Aleppo, Syria, circa 1908–1909. The marker was designed by Joseph W. Booth, president of the Turkish Mission, 1908. Photograph originally published in the *Improvement Era* 12, no. 11 (September 1909): 906.





Shortly after arriving back in Aleppo, President Booth applied his creative energy to designing a headstone for Huber's grave. "Drew up a plan for Monument for Elder Hubers grave—Emil J Huber who died here May 16 last. A base of about 2 x 3 1/2 ft., second stone 1 1/2 x 2 1/2, third stone 1 by 1, mounded by a globe representing his birth place Zurich, his home in Zion where he received his call by the temple, and his death and burial at Aleppo."<sup>12</sup> For the price of seven Ottoman lira, he commissioned a local stone mason to construct the monument using locally quarried sandstone. More than two months were required to complete the laborious process of laying the foundation, cutting and chiseling the four main sections of stone, engraving the inscriptions and decorative motifs, and assembling the pieces into a finished unit. On December 23, Booth wrote a description and assessment of the newly completed grave marker:

After reading accumulated mail I went with Elder Dunkley to the cemetery and saw the almost completed monument of Elder Emil J Huber. It stands about 7 ft 4 in high and is different from my design of Oct. 2. [On the foundation] lies an oval stone . . . around the edge of which is written Elder Huber's last testimony. "I know the gospel is true, and you cannot deny it, having heard it preached by a humble servant of the Lord." On this second stone rests another. On the east face is written artistically, "In memory of Emil J Huber. Missionary of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." The west face bares the following data. Born in Paris Mar 7, 1885. Set apart at Salt lake City, July 23, 1907. Died at Aleppo May 16, 1908. The Bible & Book of Mormon are represented on the other two sides. Mounted on this third stone is a shaft tapering slightly and crowned by a ball designed to represent the world but the workmanship is imperfect. The monument as a whole looks fairly well among the others of less height and attraction in that part of the grave yard.<sup>13</sup>

In the ensuing months and years, the Booths displayed continual concern for preserving the memory of their deceased missionary and maintaining contact with his family. While living in Aleppo, President and Sister Booth made regular visits with other Church members to the Huber gravesite (especially on the anniversary of his funeral, May 18) to leave flowers, take pictures, and pay their respects. After political turmoil in Turkey forced the closure of the mission in 1909, the Booths returned to Utah, where they were able to become better acquainted with the Huber family (who had emigrated to Utah). After giving a lecture on Palestine in Barrett Hall to the students of the L.D.S.U. (Latter-day Saint University), Booth also had the opportunity to meet and talk with Martha Gunther, the young lady Elder Huber was engaged to at the time he left on his mission.<sup>14</sup>

In 1921, the First Presidency called Joseph W. Booth and his wife to return to Aleppo to preside a second time over the new "Armenian Mission." In Aleppo, the Booths visited Huber's grave several times each year, and

Joseph W. Booth, president of the Turkish Mission, his wife Reba Booth and an unidentified LDS missionary (in the background) visiting Emil J. Huber's gravesite, Aleppo, Syria, circa 1909.

Photograph courtesy James A. Toronto.



toward the end of this (his third) mission, Booth arranged for “the new painting of the letters” on Huber’s headstone; nearly twenty years of weathering had reduced the legibility of the stone inscriptions.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that the current site of Huber’s grave is not the original burial site. In fact, the location of the cemetery where Huber was buried in 1908 is not mentioned in any of the primary source materials; hence the precise location of the original site remains unknown. But several clues lead to the conclusion that Huber’s grave marker, if not his body, was moved to the current site from another burial plot, presumably the one where he was first interred.<sup>16</sup> The Aleppo Branch record book and Booth’s journal provide the names of Church members who were buried in the vicinity of Huber’s grave, and most of these individuals are not currently buried next to Huber and Booth.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, a comparison of the configuration of the Huber monument (before the renovation project) to Booth’s description and photographs of the original show that the stone sections were at some point dismantled and then reassembled incorrectly. The journal of John A. Widtsoe, who visited the Aleppo Branch in 1933, sheds some light on this mystery: “Went to Armenian cemetery and there held a service and dedicated grave and monument to J. Wilford Booth. Call at another cemetery & visited grave of Emil J. Huber.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, in 1933 the Booth and Huber graves were not yet side-by-



side but in separate cemeteries, so the Huber grave was moved to its present location next to Booth sometime after that year, probably in 1938.

Mission records indicate that Joseph Jacobs, an LDS emigrant from Aleppo who became president of the Palestine-Syrian Mission in 1937, was informed in 1938 that the grave marker had been moved to another location. He and two missionaries were also allowed to move Huber's remains, which they were able to identify positively because pieces of his temple clothing were still in place:

While at Aleppo in November [1938], I took advantage of an official order to move the dead from an abandoned cemetery. We moved the remains of Elder Emil J. Huber who died in this land in 1906, to the new cemetery. His head stone was moved some years ago to the new cemetery, without moving however his remains, for what purpose I do not know. But we moved the remains and placed them under the headstone in a small casket. Positive identification was made by seeing pieces of the Temple apron and the design on same.<sup>19</sup>

### **Joseph W. Booth**

Joseph Wilford Booth was born in Alpine, Utah, on August 14, 1866, the ninth of ten children born to Richard and Elsie Booth.<sup>20</sup> Though raised in a rough rural environment, and without benefit of formal schooling themselves, the Booths emphasized the importance of education, and although all the children were heavily engaged in farm labor and other jobs to help meet family needs, all were literate and learned to relish the life of the mind. Wilford, as he was called in his youth, spent his early years tending the fields and animals on the farm, going to school and church activities, and earning money for his family and educational expenses by plying his expertise as a blacksmith and sheep shearer.

His early journals reflect a fascinating mix of the drudgery of manual labor, characteristic of life in late nineteenth century rural Utah, and his delight in more cerebral interests. He was a cowboy poet of sorts, a rustic intellectual with an endlessly eager mind who wrote a prodigious number of poems and songs and newspaper articles, gave many public speeches, read voraciously, played chess, engaged in rough-and-tumble politics, and often out of curiosity attended non-LDS church services. During the long summer evenings while tending animals high in the Wasatch mountains, he studied the stars, organized debates on current issues, and devised number games and math problems to challenge his mind. Two entries from his journal reflect this interplay of rugged frontiersmanship and relentless inquisitiveness. July 22, 1889, after shearing sheep all day: "At night we had a debate in the tent. Subject: Resolved the Negro has more cause of complaint than the Indian.

There were 4 on a side. The result was 7 to 6 in favor of the affirmative. I was on the losing side.” Nov. 14, 1890: On the way home, “had a horse race with an Indian . . . and at night made a lot of bullets for my rifle. And a few hours were spent in the study of astronomy & theology.”

On October 15, 1887, at the age of twenty-one, Booth began attending Brigham Young Academy in Provo. He loved his studies, once writing that the education offered at BYA was “more precious than Rubies.” His instructors included Abraham O. Smoot, Karl G. Maeser, and the brilliant young English scientist James E. Talmage, who later married May Booth, Wilford’s younger sister. His journals during this period reveal his enthusiasm for learning but also his painful awareness of being a farm boy who, lacking polish, often doubted whether he belonged there and wondered if he could succeed. Majoring in pedagogy, he was a diligent, eager student who made many friends, developing along the way a reputation as an orator and comedian.

At the time he started attending BYA, Joseph was courting Mary Rebecca Moyle, also from Alpine. Joseph had often worked for her father, Henry Moyle. Reba, as she was called, and Joseph corresponded while he attended school, and they often traveled back and forth from Provo to Alpine to visit each other. After obtaining a marriage license for two dollars, Joseph and Reba were married on May 28, 1890, in the Logan Temple. For the next five years Wilford and Reba lived and worked in Utah County, mostly farming and teaching school and struggling like most young couples to make ends meet. Eventually they built a small brick home and settled in their hometown of Alpine. Two years after his graduation from BYA, Wilford received a letter from the First Presidency calling him to serve in the Turkish Mission.

Booth served a total of seventeen years during his three missions to the Middle East—from 1898–1902 as a proselytizing elder, and from 1903–1909 and again from 1921–1928 as president of the mission. His wife, Reba, served for ten years with her husband (1903–1909 and 1924–1928). The Booths’ mission experiences following World War I are particularly noteworthy because of the exceptionally adverse conditions they encountered and their valiant efforts to preserve the lives of members and to reestablish the Church.

In 1921, three years after the end of the war, President Heber J. Grant called Booth for a second time to serve as president of the newly named Armenian Mission and gave him the charge “to go to Turkey to carry help to the Saints there.”<sup>21</sup> When President Booth arrived in the Middle East in November 1921, he found the mission in total disarray and ravaged by war. The number of Church members had been depleted by death, emigration, and deportation, and those who remained were scattered, lonely, and

President Joseph W. Booth of the Armenian Mission, circa 1925. Booth served as president of the Turkish Mission from 1907–1909, and president of the Armenian Mission from 1921–1928. Photograph courtesy James A. Toronto.



suffering from disease and starvation. As a result, rather than pursuing normal ecclesiastical and missionary activities, Booth focused his efforts on dealing with problems of disease, poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment among Church members.

After gathering the members to Aleppo and establishing a communal home for them at Khan Jebria, President Booth sought tirelessly for the next seven years to alleviate the Saints' suffering and improve their lives, which included teaching them new skills like reading, writing, sewing, hat making, and carpentry; playing musical instruments, organizing cooperatives to produce rugs and other goods and market them overseas (primarily in Utah); regularly visiting and taking money, clothing, and food to member and nonmember families living in the squalid refugee camps in Aleppo; soliciting clothing and food donations from Church members in Utah; and dealing with the myriad complaints and quarrels that inevitably arose among the Saints as they experimented with their Middle East version of the United Order.

Reba Booth arrived in January 1924 to serve again with her husband, and her testimony and skills were a great strength to the mission. In particular, her presence helped the missionaries deal more effectively with one of their most complicated problems—how to help members overcome traditional Middle Eastern attitudes that severely limited women's status in public life. Contrary to accepted cultural practices of the time, the Booths insisted that the Armenian sisters participate fully and give talks in Church meetings and actively take part in the Relief Society and Young Women's organizations, to provide them leadership and educational opportunities. They also encouraged

LDS families not to arrange marriages at a young age for their daughters, but to send them to school.<sup>22</sup>

These years of communal life with the Armenian members were both extremely trying and deeply gratifying for the Booths. They were constantly confronted by relentless poverty, political tension, health problems, and the fickle behavior of some of the Church members. Booth, with his characteristic dry wit, commented on the difficulty of maintaining harmony among the Saints while living in close quarters: “We challenge the world to produce a more patient and excellent set of peace-makers than our members here. They excel simply because they have such unlimited opportunities for practice among this quarrelsome people.”<sup>23</sup> But there were many reasons to rejoice and find satisfaction in the fruits of their labors. Booth’s journal often records his pleasure in seeing the success and progress of the Saints, including this humorous example of the LDS branch’s acting company which based a play on a familiar Book of Mormon story but featured a clever cultural twist:

All day the young people were busy with preparing for the drama tonight. . . . Attended the drama at night in the big Oriental Theater. We had about 400 present nearly half of which were complimentary including all the Saints who wished to go. There was a disturbance more or less by the rowdy populace, but the young amateurs did splendid. The name of the drama was changed from “Nephi” to one they thought would be more suitable for the public here and the handbills read, “The Death of a Drunkard and Five Marriages in One Night” and took up the events in the life of Lehi and Nephi to the joining of the family of the fleeing prophet with that of Ishmael at the tents in the wilderness.<sup>24</sup>

Another entry sums up Booth’s feelings toward the Armenian members with whom he served so long and so well: “While [the Saints] are generally of a poor and uneducated class yet many of them are dear, good, faithful souls and I love them as brethren and sisters in the Gospel.”<sup>25</sup>

Over time the Booths’ patient tutelage and compassionate service paid rich dividends in terms of blessing the lives of the members. Elder David O. McKay, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve who toured the mission with President Booth in 1921, offered this assessment of the Booths’ contributions and the progress of the Armenian Saints after a second visit to Syria in 1924:

The greatest results of the past two years’ devoted service are seen not in material things, but in the development of the members of the branch. To one who saw them in their discouragement and distress in 1921, the change wrought is wonderful. . . . In the joy of association in surroundings of safety, in the assurance of proper care and skill in times of sickness; in opportunity for mutual helpfulness, and for spiritual growth and enlightenment, the change is little short of a transformation. . . . Two years ago, very few of the Saints could muster courage to speak in meeting—very few could take part on the program. Today every member responds not only willingly, but intelligently. They sing, they pray, they bear testimony, give addresses, and participate

in all appropriate exercises most enthusiastically. . . . Truly, a mighty work has been accomplished.<sup>26</sup>

On November 15, 1928, President and Sister Booth left the mission home in Haifa, Palestine, and drove by car to Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, Syria, visiting Church members along the way. For the next two weeks, as reported in his last letter to President John A. Widtsoe, president of the European Mission, the Booths were busy attending to mission activities and helping the Armenian members in Aleppo prepare for the coming winter. They administered relief to the poor, helped prepare handmade rugs for export to the United States, solved family disputes, received visitors at their apartment, and spoke in church meetings.<sup>27</sup> On December 2, the Booths stopped by the cemetery to visit the gravesite of Emil Huber, the missionary they had buried in 1908. Booth's final journal entry, dated December 3, 1928, reflects the energy, industry, and selflessness that had characterized his life of sixty-two years. It reads: "Was busy all day with checking, packing, and shipping the rugs." Just below, written in Sister Booth's hand, is this note: "My dear husband, Joseph Wilford Booth, passed away Dec. 5, 1928, at Aleppo, Syria."<sup>28</sup>

Details surrounding Booth's death were provided in mission reports and in speeches given during the memorial service held for him in the Provo Tabernacle the following summer. He passed away unexpectedly of heart



Members of the Aleppo, Syria, LDS branch gathered around the casket of President Joseph W. Booth, December 1928. Photograph courtesy James A. Toronto.

disease—“Angina Pectoris, aggravated by heart-strain & overwork,” in the words of the attending physician—but did not suffer long. He was ill and bed-ridden only one night. On the morning of his death he “quietly left this world just before he arrived, with his head resting on Sister Booth’s arm.” Under Sister Booth’s supervision, the Aleppo Relief Society sisters prepared temple clothing for her husband’s burial vestments. Non-Mormon friends stepped in to provide support to the grieving widow. Mr. Lorenzo Y. Manachy, former U.S. Vice-Consul at Aleppo, and Professor John E. Merrill, president of the Protestant high school, the Aleppo College, oversaw the funeral preparations and extended financial aid—a sign of the local community’s esteem and respect for the Booths after their many years of service in Aleppo.<sup>29</sup>

We know comparatively little about Booth’s funeral and burial because primary sources describing the event are lacking. From the report of his death written for the *Millennial Star* by President Widtsoe, we know that he was buried on December 8, and that Sister Booth left Aleppo shortly thereafter to return to the mission home in Haifa. There she was met by Elder R. V. Chisholm who had been dispatched from Liverpool by President Widtsoe to assist her in closing down the mission and to accompany her home.<sup>30</sup> After two months of consultations and inquiries, the question of the long-term disposition of Booth’s body was settled when it became clear that local law would not allow the body to be removed from the country for at least one year.<sup>31</sup> At that point, after consulting other family members, Reba Booth decided that her husband’s body would be permanently buried in the cemetery in Aleppo rather than shipped back to the United States for burial in Alpine. The Booth family’s rationale, as recorded by Widtsoe, was that “it would best to let the soldier lie permanently where he had fallen, among the people and places he had known so long, and where he had spent his life’s endeavors.”<sup>32</sup> No contemporary description or photograph of the original marker for Booth’s grave has been located yet, but later records indicate that it stayed in place for over three years before being replaced by the current granite monument.

On April 16, 1931, acting on a request by the First Presidency “to secure a suitable monument and have it erected over Brother Booth’s grave,” Elder Widtsoe met with Reba Booth and two other members of the Quorum of the Twelve in Salt Lake City—David O. McKay, who had toured the Armenian Mission twice with Booth, and James E. Talmage, Booth’s brother-in-law.<sup>33</sup> Apparently, it was decided at that meeting that Widtsoe would supervise the construction and shipping of the monument. Later in the year, having returned to Liverpool and after “much writing and telegraphing,” he finalized the necessary preparations with local merchants: “Called at Jos. Stubbs & Son & arranged for headstone monument for J. W. Booth. In afternoon saw Francis Boulton & Co. abt shipping monument.”<sup>34</sup> The monument was constructed of



“enduring granite,” and the inscriptions were made using a technique that required the artisan to trace letters, drill small holes in them, and then fill the holes with molten lead. When the lead hardened, the inscriptions were elegantly displayed on the granite backdrop. The inscription on the marker (no doubt agreed on after consultation between Church leaders and the Booth family) is as follows:

JOSEPH WILFORD BOOTH  
PRESIDENT  
OF THE ARMENIAN MISSION  
OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST  
OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS  
  
BORN AT ALPINE, UTAH, U.S.A.  
14TH AUGUST 1866  
DIED AT ALEPPO, SYRIA,  
5TH DECEMBER 1929 [*sic*]<sup>35</sup>  
  
FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS  
HE SERVED FAITHFULLY AS A MISSIONARY ELDER  
IN TURKEY, GREECE, SYRIA, AND PALESTINE  
  
THOUGH DEAD, HE LIVES IN THE HEARTS  
OF A HOST WHO HOLD HIM  
IN HONORABLE AND LOVING REMEMBRANCE  
  
“WHOSOEVER WILL LOSE HIS LIFE FOR MY SAKE  
SHALL FIND IT”

Following its completion sometime in 1932, the marker was placed in a crate and shipped by boat to Alexandretta, Syria, and by train to Aleppo, where it was “erected in place by native artisans.”<sup>36</sup>

From all photographic appearances and textual clues, it is safe to conclude that Booth was buried in the Armenian Christian Cemetery on the northwestern outskirts of Aleppo, the same site on which the monument is located today. In May 1933, Elder Widtsoe and his wife, Leah, left England and traveled to the Middle East to fulfill two assignments from the First Presidency: (1) to install Badwagan Piranian as president of the newly formed Palestine-Syrian Mission, and (2) to dedicate Booth’s grave. When Widtsoe arrived in Aleppo, he described the dedication ceremony and gave some details about the gravesite:

At length we reached Aleppo and the group of faithful saints there. Brother Booth’s monument stood prominently in the sand-surrounded cemetery some distance from



Joseph Jacobs (right), president of the Palestine-Syrian Mission at the gravesites of Emil J. Huber, Joseph W. Booth, and other deceased Latter-day Saints in Aleppo, Syria, November 1938. The photograph was taken shortly after Jacobs and two missionaries, believed to be Elders William Clark and Woodrow Washburn (second row), with the help of several branch members had moved Huber's remains from a cemetery in the city and reinterred them under his grave marker next to the grave of Booth. Photograph courtesy James A. Toronto.

the town. On Sunday, June 18, 1933, the whole group standing by, the grave was dedicated, and a spiritual meeting was held there. The heart grew warm in love for these people, alone in their faith among so many unbelievers.<sup>37</sup>

Widtsoe's wife Leah noted that she placed on Booth's grave a pressed bouquet of flowers that Reba had sent from the Booth's home in Alpine, Utah. According to Leah, the Church members in Aleppo, many of whom kept Booth's photo on the walls of their homes next to the image of the Prophet Joseph, "had built a modest headstone and a large slab of concrete to cover the grave and to express their lasting gratitude for his devotion to their welfare." When the new granite monument had been installed, the smaller, original headstone of the members "was put back of the larger one, so that their expressed loyalty might be permanent also."<sup>38</sup> Photographs of Booth's monument and of the dedication ceremony, together with Widtsoe's record, indicate that there were no other graves in the near vicinity at that time. This fact leads to the conclusion that the grave markers of Huber and other Church

members that currently surround Booth's gravesite were relocated there from another cemetery in the years following the June 1933 dedication of the Booth monument.

After the dedication ceremony, Elder Widtsoe reflected on Booth's legacy: "President Booth is greatly beloved by the Armenian Saints. . . . His memory is cherished in their hearts. Undoubtedly he did much for them. He was not only a leader among them, but was a wise counselor with the spirit of a loving father. I am happy to know that his last resting place is in the land and among the people he loved so well."<sup>39</sup> Booth's own words, written in tribute to the four LDS missionaries who had previously died in the Middle East, apply now to him and make a fitting epitaph:

We do not complain that they are here, neither do I think their loved ones at home feel that any slight has been intended. It seems more like the ruling of a wise Providence to allow their bodies to rest here under the dew and the sod, "that their monuments might perpetuate their work in bearing witness of the truth." . . . Each one has gained a good name, better than precious ointment. Each died in honor and in the harness of the priesthood, and surely the rest of each will be a glorious one.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Aleppo Gravesite Renovation Project**

I became aware of the important but little known historic Mormon site in Aleppo while working and studying in the Middle East. In 1998, after completing a three-year assignment as director of the BYU/Church Center in Amman, Jordan, I returned to BYU intending to undertake a project to refurbish the Huber and Booth gravesites, which due to long years of neglect,

Entrance to the Armenian Evangelical Cemetery in Aleppo, Syria, circa 2002. The portal, the front wall, and other areas of the cemetery had recently been refurbished by the Armenian Church as part of a renovation project co-sponsored by the LDS Church. Photograph by James A. Toronto.





View from the Armenian Evangelical Cemetery looking west toward a suburb of Aleppo, Syria, 1997. Photograph by James A. Toronto.



Joseph W. Booth and Emil J. Huber grave markers showing the effects of neglect and vandalism over the years, 1997. Photograph by James A. Toronto.





Elder Charles A. Didier (third from left), a member of the presidency of the Seventy and president of the Europe East Area that included the Middle East, visiting the gravesites of Joseph W. Booth and Emil J. Huber in Aleppo, Syria, 1997. Pictured in the photograph are (l-r): David and Liz Charles (BYU students), Elder Didier, Lucie L. Didier, James A. Toronto (BYU professor), and Yusuf, the cemetery caretaker. Photograph by James A. Toronto.

had fallen into a deplorable state of disrepair. Later that year Elder Charles A. Didier of the Seventy, and president of the Europe East Area, who had visited the site with me in December 1997, granted permission and funding to carry out this project. To oversee the planning and execution of the restoration work, he appointed a committee consisting of Karim Assouad, president of the Beirut branch; Steve Zwahlen, president of the Damascus branch; Tom Kay, former legal counsel for the Church in the Middle East and president of the Amman branch; Tagg Hundrup, president of the Greece Athens Mission; and myself, Middle East Studies faculty member at BYU.

After consulting with the committee and agreeing on a general plan, between 1999 and 2001 I made five extended trips to Aleppo to work out details of the project. On the first visit in May 1999, I was accompanied by David Charles, my student research assistant from BYU. We spent several days photographing the site, making chalk rubbings on paper of the grave marker facades, gathering historical information, and conducting interviews with local experts. Our most important matter of business was obtaining



The first planning meeting at the gravesites of Joseph W. Booth and Emil J. Huber between members of the renovation project committee and local artisans, 1999. Pictured in the photograph are James A. Toronto (second from right), LDS missionaries Elder and Sister Kay (standing left of the Booth marker), and three unidentified workers. Photograph by James A. Toronto.



Stone masons and landscape engineers preparing the foundation for a wrought iron fence to surround the gravesites of Joseph W. Booth and Emil J. Huber, 2000. Photograph by James A. Toronto.





Joseph W. Booth and Emil J. Huber gravesite after the completion of the renovation project, circa 2002. Photograph by James A. Toronto.

permission for the project from the local church that owned the cemetery. (Cemeteries in Middle Eastern Arab countries are generally controlled by religious groups rather than government or municipal organizations.) The caretaker of the cemetery, Yusuf, told us that his boss was Reverend Harout Selimian of the Armenian Evangelical Church. At that point I feared that interfaith politics might derail plans for the project, but Reverend Selimian, a dynamic, compassionate pastor who works among the poor of all faiths in Aleppo, turned out to be supportive of our proposal from the moment we met. He immediately recognized the importance of honoring the dead by maintaining a clean and dignified setting in the cemetery, but lamented that his church budget did not allow for such expenses given other more pressing needs. The LDS Church offered to provide funds to help him refurbish the entire cemetery, and he gave approval for us to proceed with renovating the Booth and Huber gravesites at the same time. With this funding Reverend Selimian hired workers to remove piles of refuse and debris that had accumulated over the years and to construct a new rock wall at the front entrance to the cemetery.

On subsequent trips to Aleppo, I worked with Reverend Selimian and several members of his congregation to identify rock masons, welders, and gardeners to clean and repair the monuments, build a fence around the site, and provide some simple landscaping. Time had taken its toll on the two stone

monuments, which had been heavily marred by weathering, algae, paint, scratches, and animal droppings. The ground around them had been used to keep chickens and dogs by an impoverished family of squatters living in a tin hut a few yards away. Much of the lead lettering on Booth's granite monument had been removed. A major challenge was replacing the tapered shaft crowned with a ball that, according to early photographs, had sat atop Huber's original grave marker but was now missing. The local architect supervising the project, Raj Balabanjian, had to design a replica properly proportioned to fit with the other two pieces of the monument and find a rock quarry that could provide the same color and quality of local sandstone that masons had used a century earlier. We also could see from the photographs that Huber's grave marker, sometime after being moved to its present location next to Booth, had been reassembled incorrectly, with the middle panel inserted backwards. By the fall of 2001, however, these issues had been addressed and the project brought to a successful conclusion.<sup>41</sup> A serendipitous development was the discovery in 2002 of the original granite capstone to the Booth monument, which the cemetery caretaker found in a pile of rubble. During the past fifteen years the gravesites have attracted increasing numbers of LDS pilgrims. Relatives of Booth, Huber, and the Aleppo Saints buried near them, students from BYU's Study Abroad programs in the Middle East, missionary couples, and local members in Syria have come to visit this historic Mormon site to hold devotional services and pay their respects, often taking time to do some cleanup and maintenance of the grounds around the grave markers.

### **The Aleppo Project: Catalyst for LDS Scholarship and Outreach in the Middle East**

Though only about sixty missionaries served in the Turkish/Armenian missions—and there were never more than two hundred members on the Church records at any one time—the efforts and sacrifices of the members and missionaries yielded important results, and over time assisted in the growth and development of the Church, both in the Middle East and in Utah. The Aleppo gravesite renovation project has helped preserve and build on that legacy in recent years.

Research associated with the gravesite restoration has produced several scholarly publications, including a number of articles on Mormon missiology in the Middle East and the forthcoming multi-volume publication of Booth's missionary journals. The effort to publish them has fostered a number of scholarly writing projects and academic contacts. Several historical essays based on the Booth archival material, housed in BYU's L. Tom Perry Special Collections, have appeared in various scholarly forums and journals, including



Meeting to discuss interfaith and humanitarian cooperation in Aleppo, Syria, circa 2002. L-r: Reverend Harout Selimian of the Armenian Evangelical Church, James A. Toronto from BYU, Sheikh Ahmad Hassoun, Mufti of Aleppo, and an unidentified participant. Photograph by James A. Toronto.

the annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium at BYU, *Mormon Historical Studies*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and *BYU Studies*. It has also led to contacts and collaboration with faculty from the University of Aleppo, the University of Damascus, and the University of Gaziantep in Turkey.

The publications have also produced information and heightened interest in learning about individuals and families among whom Huber and Booth served. Many of the original converts emigrated to the United States from Syria, Turkey, and Palestine—families such as Grau, Kezerian, Sherinian, Vizerian, Orullian, Hindoian, Piranian, Ouzounian, and Hagopian—and have enriched the Church and the communities in which they settled. They have added their skills and native perspectives to the rich tapestry of LDS experience.

Another benefit of the Aleppo project has been the opening of doors between BYU, the LDS Church, and various Christian and Muslim religious organizations in the Middle East. As noted, the successful completion of the gravesite renovation was due to the cooperation of Reverend Harout Selimian of the Armenian Evangelical Church. Since then the LDS Church has collaborated with him to support several of his church's humanitarian projects, including a school for handicapped children. He has hosted and

lectured to BYU Study Abroad students in Syria and visited the BYU campus twice to participate in the World Family Policy Forum. The reverend has become a friend and advocate for the Church in both Christian and Muslim circles in Syria and Lebanon. This is crucial, because it is mostly the historic Christian churches that oppose the presence of new churches, like the LDS, in Middle Eastern countries. On one trip to Aleppo he took me to the largest mosque in the city and introduced me to his good friend the mufti of Aleppo, the highest ranking Muslim official in northern Syria. The mufti later hosted LDS officials at a dinner in Damascus, and one of his colleagues, the distinguished Islamic scholar Dr. Saeed Ramadan Al-Bouti, visited Utah in July 2000 as a guest of BYU and the Church.

The publications and relationships fostered by the restoration project have helped illuminate a time and a place in LDS Church history that are little known and deserve greater attention. They will continue to play an important role beyond academic circles, as a source of information and inspiration to the descendants of the Middle Eastern Saints and the missionaries, like Booth and Huber, who served among them. But perhaps the most impressive contribution will be the manner in which they shed light on the quiet but remarkable lives of the anonymous foot soldiers of the Church.

### Notes

1. Biographical data on Emil J. Huber is drawn from the following sources: Missionary Registers, CR 301, series 22, vol. 4, entry 381, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah; Joseph Wilford Booth, Journals, 1898–1928, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Interviews by the author conducted with Milton Weilenmann (Huber’s nephew), Diane Weilenmann (Milton Weilenmann’s wife), and Jeffrey L. Anderson (Huber’s great-nephew), January 20, 2000, Salt Lake City, Utah; Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901–1936), 3:651–52; and David P. Charles, “European LDS Missionaries in the Middle East, 1884–1909,” Honor’s thesis, Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, Brigham Young University, 2001.

2. Joseph Wilford Booth, “Four Heroes Far Away,” *Improvement Era* 12, no. 11 (September 1909): 907.

3. Huber’s body was “placed in a beautiful white and gold coffin, which was afterwards enclosed in a strong, wooden casket.” William A. Morton, “Death of Elder Emil J. Huber,” *Millennial Star* 70, no. 24 (June 11, 1908): 373–74.

4. Interviews with Huber family members indicate that Emil’s mother, Maris Moor Huber, who was the Relief Society president in Zurich, had a strong premonition that her son would not return from his service in the Turkish Mission. When Elder Huber visited his family en route to the Middle East, Maris saw his temple clothes in his suitcase. As she ironed them, her tears moistened the robes as she realized he would not be coming back. At the time, she did not share her premonition with her son or any other family members, but

recounted it after his passing, and the story has been passed on as a cherished part of Huber family history. James A. Toronto and David P. Charles interview with Milton Weilenmann, Diane Weilenmann, and Jeffrey L. Anderson.

5. *Dragoman* is a word of Semitic origin that means interpreter or translator.

6. *Cawaas* is an Arabic loan word used in Turkish to refer to a police officer or security guard who worked for a foreign diplomatic mission in the Ottoman Empire.

7. Booth, Journal, May 15–18, 1908.

8. Booth, Journal, May 31, 1908.

9. Booth, Journal, August 10, 1908.

10. Jenson, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:652.

11. Booth, Journal, August 30, 1908.

12. Booth, Journal, October 2, 1908.

13. Booth, Journal, December 23, 1908.

14. Booth, Journal, December 2, 1909, and September 11, 1921.

15. Booth, Journal, April 10, 1927.

16. The author is conducting research to determine where the original Christian cemetery in Aleppo was located and why the graves located there were moved to the current site. Booth wrote that the residence of his friend Thomas Flack, the American Vice-Consul in Aleppo, was “opposite the <N.E.> corner of the grave yard in which Elder Emil Huber is burried.” Booth, Journal, August 1, 1922. This suggests that the cemetery in which Huber was interred in 1908 was located within the city limits and not, as is the case with the present burial plot, on the outskirts.

17. Aleppo Branch Record, 317, 335–37, Church History Library; and Booth, Journal, May 17, 1908, June 3, 1908, August 7, 1922, and November 13, 1927.

18. John A. Widstoe, Journal, June 18, 1933, John A. Widstoe Collection, Church History Library, copy in possession of the author. I am indebted to Alan K. Parrish, emeritus professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University, for providing references in this article from Widstoe’s journal and his description of the dedication.

19. Palestine-Syrian Mission Report, July–December 1938, 2–3, Turkish Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports, LR 14250–2, Church History Library.

20. Booth signed his name Joseph W. Booth and J. Wilford Booth, and descendants of his siblings refer to him as “Uncle Wilf.”

21. Booth, Journal, August 19, 1921. The name of the mission was changed from “Turkish” to “Armenian” out of respect for the feelings of the Church members, the vast majority of whom were Armenians who had suffered immensely at the hands of the Turkish government.

22. Booth’s journals contain many references to the missionaries’ efforts to elevate the status of women among the Armenian members. For more on Reba Booth’s contributions to the missionary work during her ten years of service, see Mary Rebecca Moyle Booth, Papers, 1904–1906, 1923–1933, Church History Library.

23. Joseph W. Booth, “The Armenian Mission,” *Improvement Era* 31, no. 12 (October 1928): 1051.

24. Booth, Journal, August 1, 1925; see also April 14–16, 1925.

25. Booth, Journal, August 1, 1922.

26. David O. McKay, “A Man Who Loves His Fellow-Men,” *Millennial Star* 86, no. 9 (February 28, 1924): 137–38.

27. John A. Widstoe, “Joseph Wilford Booth,” *Millennial Star* 90, no. 51 (December 20, 1928): 810; and Booth, Journal, November 15–December 3, 1928.

28. Booth, Journal, December 3, 1928.



29. Armenian Mission History, October–December 1928, Turkish Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports, LR 14250–2, Church History Library; Memorial Services for Elder Joseph W. Booth, Provo, Utah, July 20, 1929, and Ralph Chisholm to May Booth Talmage, MS 17388, Church History Library. President Heber J. Grant attended and spoke at Booth’s memorial service. They had known each other when Grant served as president of the European Mission.

30. Widtsoe, “Joseph Wilford Booth,” 810; Armenian Mission History; and Ralph Chisholm to May Booth Talmage gives the date of the burial as December 7.

31. John A. Widtsoe, Journal, February 19, 1929, Church History Library. Widtsoe states in his autobiography that “bodies could not be moved until two years after death.” John A. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1952), 204.

32. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land*, 204.

33. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land*, 204; and Widtsoe, Journal, April 16, 1931. See also Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 727, n31. David O. McKay toured the Armenian Mission with Booth in November 1921 with Booth, and the two leaders enjoyed some memorable experiences together. For a record of their remarkable meeting in the Haifa train station and the week they spent together traveling and visiting the Armenian members see, Booth, Journals, November 4–11, 1921. Booth and McKay maintained their friendship and correspondence when McKay became president of the European Missions in 1922 with headquarters in Liverpool. McKay visited the mission a second time when he and his wife Emma Rae accompanied Reba Booth to Aleppo to join her husband in January 1924. See Booth, Journal, January 18–25, 1924. James E. Talmage married Booth’s younger sister May. In October 1924, Talmage succeeded McKay as president of the European Mission and exchanged regular correspondence with Booth who reported to him.

34. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land*, 204; and Widtsoe, Journal, December 30, 1931.

35. Booth’s grave marker has the incorrect year of his death. It should be 1928, not 1929.

36. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land*, 204. The description of the inscription process has been deduced from close examination of the monument.

37. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land*, 210; see also John A. Widtsoe, “Exercises at the Grave of President J. W. Booth, June 18, 1933,” 1, typescript copy in possession of the author; and Leah D. Widtsoe, “Our Shrines in the Holy Land,” *Relief Society Magazine* 22, no. 6 (June 1935), 352–56.

38. Widtsoe, “Our Shrines in the Holy Land,” 353–54.

39. Widtsoe, “Exercises at the Grave of President J. W. Booth,” 1.

40. Booth, “Four Heroes Far Away,” 900.

41. The committee originally had approved the placement of metal plaques with information, in both Arabic and English, about the two missionaries and other LDS members buried at the site. This part of the project, for a variety of reasons, had to be postponed and will hopefully be carried out in the future. The civil war currently raging in Syria, however, will likely delay these plans for years to come. In addition, the heavy fighting and destruction of property that has taken place in and around Aleppo may also have degraded the city’s cemeteries.



