

Ihor OSTASH,
PhD in Philology,
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of Ukraine in the Lebanese Republic

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARAB CHRISTIAN BOOK PRINTING IN LEBANON AND SYRIA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 18th CENTURY

Abstract. The article deals with the history of the emergence of the Arab Renaissance in Lebanon and Syria at the turn of the 17th century and the commencement of Arab Christian book printing that became a driving force in this process. Based on the analysis of scientific, historical, and religious literature, the article reveals the figure of one of the first book printers in the Middle East, Abdallāh Zakher, who invented fonts used in the first Arab Christian books and was the founder of the first printing house in Lebanon, in the town of Chouweir, at the Monastery of St John the Baptist. The author also looks into the Ukrainian contribution to the development of Arab Christian book printing, particularly the release of two publications with support from Ivan Mazepa in Aleppo¹ in 1708, namely the titular Tetraevangelion with a foreword of Athanasius III Dabbās, Patriarch of Antioch, devoted to Ivan Mazepa, and the Gospel Book at the expense of Danylo Apostol, Myrhorod Colonel.

Keywords: Arab Renaissance Nahda, Arab Christian book printing, Abdallāh Zakher, Mazepa's Gospel, Danylo Apostol's titular Gospel Book.

In the Arabic language, the era of the 19th-century Arab Renaissance, which started in Egypt and subsequently spread to Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and other Arab countries, is referred to as *نهضة* (*nahda*), which can be translated as 'rise', 'awakening' (Krymsky, 1971). Proceeding from this notion, some researchers believe that the 17th and early 18th centuries in the history of the Greek Orthodox Church, which at that time united both the Maronites and the Melkites, were a prelude to this process, and thus use the term 'pre-nahda' (Walbiner, 2012).

According to other researchers, the Arab Renaissance commenced as early as the 18th century in Aleppo, Syria, a cosmopolitan metropolis, and was initiated by the clergy (Samir, 1997). An essential element of this process was the introduction of Arab book printing. As Iskandar Ma'lūf noted, it was the inception of book printing in Syria and Lebanon that had profound consequences for the national and literary revival of these peoples (Ma'lūf, 1911).

¹ It should be noted that in the translation of the introduction of Mazepa's Gospel, the name of the city was printed as 'Alepo'. The translation was made by Pavlo Loziiv and Tawfiq Kazma and approved by Ahatanhel Krymsky (Maslov, S. (1925). *Etiudy z istorii starodrukiv: I–VIII* [Sketches on the History of Old Prints]. Kyiv: Ukr. nauk. in-t knyhozn., pp. 69–78. [in Ukrainian]).

The issue of the development of Arab Christian book printing has become a subject of study for scholars all over the world. Specifically, the author of the present article relies on scientific writings of Ahatanhel Krymsky, Serhii Maslov, Ioana Feodorov, Vira Chentsova, Joseph Nasrallah, Athanasius Dabbās, Nahla Rashou, Dmytro Morozov, Constantin Volney, Georg Graf, Hilary Kilpatrick, etc.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the preconditions and peculiarities of the development of Arab Christian book printing in Lebanon and Syria in the first half of the 18th century as well as the significance of the Ukrainian contribution to supporting Arab book printing, which became a prerequisite for Arab Renaissance.

At the turn of the 17th century, Aleppo emerged as a centre of cultural and economic revival thanks to its close ties with European countries. Its significance gradually eclipsed that of Alexandria and Istanbul. All major goods transported from the Far East and the West, such as gems, silk, fabric, and paper, were traded here. Aleppo was so huge that in the 17th century one of Jesuit missionaries equated its beauty, location, robust economic development, and populace to that of Lyon in France (Dabbās & Rashou, n.d.).

The local cultural environment was growing rapidly, seeing the construction of new churches and mosques, schools and seminaries, the spread of literary and artistic life, and the appearance of new local novelists, poets, artists, and masters of creative crafts. This enabled Aleppo to compete with the most prominent scholars and masters of arts from different countries and regions (Dabbās & Rashou, n.d.).

Among the primary driving forces behind the fledgling book printing process in Aleppo, several figures are worth mentioning. The first is Meletius Karma, Metropolitan of Aleppo (1612–1634), later Patriarch of Antioch, named Euthymius II (1634–1635), who worked extensively on examining biblical texts and even proposed a draft Arabic translation of the Bible to the Vatican. He prepared it for printing but failed to gain support in Rome (Walbiner, 2012).

The second figure is Macarios III Zaim, Patriarch of Antioch in 1647–1672, a well-known theological thinker, and Arab Orthodox writer (Kilpatrick, 2014). He travelled a lot across Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, and his journeys were described by his son, Paul of Aleppo. During one of the trips in 1654 and 1656, Patriarch Macarios had two meetings with Ukrainian Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytskyi (Rybalkin, 2015).

However, it was only Athanasius III Dabbās who translated into reality the unfulfilled aspirations of his two predecessors. Enthroned as Patriarch of Antioch twice in 1685–1694 and 1720–1724, he enabled the appearance of a book printing office in Aleppo, whose experience later spread to many countries in the Middle East. This, however, was preceded by the advent of Arabic language printing in Eastern Europe. The first two religious books in the Arabic language were printed

in Romania (Snagov and Bucharest) with support from Constantin Brancoveanu, Prince of Wallachia. Here, again, Patriarch Athanasius III Dabbās, then Alepo Metropolitan, was the driving force behind the process.

Among the figures involved in the history of Arab book printing, particularly noticeable is Abdallāh Zakher, who is believed to be one of the first book printers in the Middle East. The beauty of his Arab fonts is still considered unsurpassed. It is now fair to say that it was he who worked on book printing in the first Levantine printing offices in Alepo (1706–1711) and Chouweir (Khenchara) at St John's Monastery (1732–1748)².

Discussions on A. Zakher's birthday continue unabated. For instance, J. Nasrallah said that the father of printing was born in the city of Hama in 1680, whereas Joakim Mutran (1696–1766), a disciple of A. Zakher, claimed that the latter was born in Alepo in 1684 (Nasrallah, 1949). Boulos Nazha, a modern researcher of the printer's legacy, provides the most historically well-grounded date of his birth, 1684 (Nazha, 1998).

Abdallāh al-Halabi as-Sa'ih (Zakher) was born into a famous family of Alepo jewelers. His father was a gold master by the name of Zacharia, while his grandfather Ion al-Hamavi was a priest. Interestingly, Abdallah's name went down in history not in its initial form but as a moniker 'az-Zakher' ((أخ زللا), which metaphorically means a very well-educated person and which the printer earned for his bright and various talents. In 1701, he took up the Arabic language and philosophy in Alepo at Sheikh Suleiman an-Nahavi's. He also studied religious and theological sciences at Revd John Bajaa's (*photo 1 – self-portrait of A. Zakher (St John's Monastery in Chouweir)*) (Nazha, 1998).

The printer's biography was described at length by C. Volney in 1783–1785 (Volney, 1787), who stayed at St John's Monastery in Chouweir for quite a long time. He also provided a list of publications of the Chouweiri printing office and an outline of the daily life at the monastery. Many additional thumbnail sketches about A. Zakher were collected by C. Schnurrer, as reflected in his detailed account of every Chouweiri publication called *Bibliotheca arabica* in chapters 'Christiana' and 'Biblica' (Krymsky, 1971).

As A. Krymsky noted, recalling the commencement of work of the Arab Catholic printing office at the Chouweiri St John's (Mar Yoḥannan) Uniate Monastery, 'It occurred in 1732–1733. The printing house was set up by... Alepian Abdallāh (ibn) Zakher, brother of Hegumen Mykola Saiha. This same printer also invented a new sophisticated type of Arab printing font. As partly hinted by the surname 'as-Sa'ih' ('a goldsmith'), the Saiha family had long preserved the tradition of skillful gold foundry men. And indeed, Abdallāh Zakher as-Sa'ih (born in the 1690s) was a proficient jeweler, foundry man, and deft metal carver' (Krymsky, 1971).

² Levant is a term referring to countries of the Eastern Mediterranean; more narrowly, it includes Syria and Lebanon.

Back then, A. Krymsky supposedly did not have a reliable source on A. Zakher's birthday, which could have influenced his assessment of the latter's role in the Alepo printing house because, in the orientalist's perception, he was still very young, no older than 16. Nonetheless, A. Krymsky assumed his involvement in the activity of the Alepo printing office in the following way: 'In his native town of Haleb, at the outset of the 18th century, the first Orthodox Arab printing house was founded by Orthodox Patriarch Athanasius with material assistance from Wallachian Prince Brancoveanu and Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa, as noted in the first publication of the printing house, psalms and the Gospels. It is pretty safe to assume that Abdallāh ibn Zakher could have familiarised with the technique of this printing house in Haleb and its typefaces firsthand. He could also have been critical of its awkward Arab font' (Krymsky, 1971).

A. Krymsky noted that in 1724, when Orthodox Alepo Arabs, due to oppression from the high-ranking Greek clergy, massively expressed the desire to unify with Rome, Abdallāh Zakher, serving as a deacon, took an active part in fighting against Greeks. Owing to the deacon's polemic with the Orthodox Church, the Greek clergy were able to paint him to the Ottoman government as a politically subversive person and request that he be executed. Abdallāh Zakher was forced to flee precipitately from Alepo to safety in Lebanon, the Chouweiri St John's Monastery, where his brother Mykola was hegumen (Krymsky, 1971).

However, J. Nasrallah recorded that Abdallāh left Alepo in 1722 and spent the next years at monasteries in Chouweir, Zouk Mikael, and Aintoura in Keserwan District. In 1728, once again due to persecution, he returned to Zouk Mikael, where he started working on the establishment of a printing office. It was not until 1931 that Abdallah Zakher definitively settled with his first workshop in Lebanon for printing in Arab letters at the Chouweiri St John the Baptist's Monastery (Nasrallah, 1949).

A skillful metal carver and jeweler, the newly arrived deacon devoted his every talent to the printing cause, thus making the Chouweiri printing house the best in terms of the sophistication of fonts. A professional jeweler, Abdallah carved letters himself; all researchers note the exceptional finesse of the early Chouweiri font (Krymsky, 1971). In his creative endeavour, he cooperated with the best calligraphers of the era. His Chouweiri font was carved on the basis of letters written by a famous master, Jebayil Labbad of Alepo. Because of its beauty, it was named the 'Labbad font' (Nazha, 1998).

The printing house in Chouweir started operating between April and July 1733, and the first publication saw the light of day on 16 February 1734. That was the 362-page-long philosophical treatise *Mizan az-Zaman* written by the Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebio Niremberg. The Chouweiri printing office worked until 1899 and published 33 books, the last one being John Chrysostom's *Divine Liturgy* (Nazha, 1998).

There is disagreement with regard to the date of A. Zakher's death. C. Volney believes it was 1755 (Volney, 1787). However, Archimandrite Bulos Nazha says that A. Zakher passed away on 31 August 1748 and was buried at St John the Baptist's Monastery in Chouweir. Evidence thereof is the registry of the monastery's history (no. 1, p. 164). In his book that came out on the occasion of the 250th anniversary since A. Zakher's death (1748–1998), he also provides a list of his works and translations written in Syria (before 1722) and Lebanon (after 1722), which consists of 41 items (Nazha, 1998).

Just as his contemporary and colleague in printing Ibrahim Müteferrika, Abdallāh Zakher had to overcome difficulties, which would have been insurmountable for an ordinary person. Though having no specialised education, he mastered the complicated craft without teachers, using only several study manuals. His true significance, however, is that he was the first in the Middle East to print books in the Arabic language with a moveable type (Saudi Aramco World Magazine, 2008).

According to I. Feodorov, in the project of the Alepo printing house C. Brancoveanu was 'a shield and financial support for Dabbās', and this mission was later taken up by Hetman Ivan Mazepa. Dabbās also enjoyed support from his former opponent and erstwhile Patriarch of Antioch Cyril V Zaim, who bore the cost of two publications, *The Noble Book of Prophecies (The Prophet)* and *Parakletike (Octoechos)*, as well as from Patriarch of Jerusalem Chrysanthus, who funded the publication of Patriarch Athanasius's *The Book of Sermons* in 1711 (Feodorov, 2018).

A. Dabbās and N. Rashou contend that, after receiving funds sent by Prince Brancoveanu for supporting Patriarch Dabbās in the carrying out of his project, Athanasius III also reached out to worshippers of his church to raise more money for the development of the workshop. The funds of the Romanian Prince were used to launch the printing house into operation, while the other financial support made it possible to continue the work until it stopped in 1711. There are original documents indicating that support was provided by members of the community. In the foreword to the last book printed in Alepo, A. Dabbās thanked everyone who had helped in funding the printing house: 'We did not intend to help Christians on a par with God by virtue of holiness; we helped by virtue of the Christians' mercy and thus worked persistently to print these sermons for saving the flesh and souls of Orthodox Christians, thanks to whom we have managed to print this book' (Dabbās & Rashou, 2008).

The Ukrainian contribution to the development of Arab printing was substantial and essential too. Ivan Mazepa and Danylo Apostol donated funds in 1707 at a challenging time for the printing house, as evidenced by the text of letters from Athanasius Dabbās, asking for help. This contribution enabled the Alepo workshop to continue printing books. However, this begs the question:

what publications came out thanks to the Ukrainian philanthropists' money? Above we have mentioned the titular editions of the Tetraevangelion and the Gospel Book devoted to two Ukrainian donators. Many researchers have noted the titular character of these publications. I. Feodorov says that the font of Mazepa's Gospel is identical to the first edition of 1706, the only divergence being in the foreword added as a token of respect to I. Mazepa (Feodorov, 2016). D. Morozov notes that, 'in the process of the comprehensive review of unidentified Oriental manuscripts and old printed books in Moscow depositaries, he was able to find a previously unrecorded version of the early printed 1706 Gospel. The collected material also allowed assuming the titular character of Mazepa's famous 1708 publication, which had therefore been printed, in large part, two years prior' (Morozov, 2010). According to V. Chentsova, 'the Syrian printing house also enjoyed the generosity of another philanthropist, Hetman of Zaporozhian Cossacks Ivan Mazepa (1639–1709). The first books – the Psalms, the Tetraevangelion, and the Gospel Book – came out in Alepo in 1706. In 1708, the second edition of the Tetraevangelion was published. However, this was none other than the 1706 copy, with the exception of the first few pages modified for the new edition. The new pages contained the date and the coat-of-arms of Hetman Mazepa, who provided funds for the book' (Tchentsova, 2013).

However, the sums donated by the Ukrainian philanthropists to support Arab book printing in Alepo in 1707 were substantial, which allows presuming that their usage was not limited solely to printing a small number of titular publications. In 1708, three more books were printed:

- 1) The Noble Book of Prophecies. The foreword to it was written by the erstwhile Patriarch of Antioch, Cyril V Zaim, who is mentioned as the publisher of the book;
- 2) The Noble Book of Pure Gospel (Gospel Book);
- 3) The Book of Epistles (Apostle), containing The Acts of the Apostles and The Pauline Epistles.

The latter two books do not include references to purported philanthropists. However, of particular interest to us is the Gospel Book, for its first edition of such a kind laid the groundwork for the titular Gospel dedicated to D. Apostol.

D. Morozov assumes that 'in 1706, the entire print run of the Gospel Book and the Tetraevangelion was printed, with respective parts of the text having possibly been typed one time and only rearranged for a second parallel edition (similar cases are known). A part of the print run of both publications was immediately released with the date 1706. In light of huge donations from Hetman Ivan Mazepa, there were printed additional pages with a coat-of-arms and poems in his honour as well as a new titular page with a new date, 1708. These were bound and released together with a certain amount of copies of the Tetraevangelion, simultaneously with a part of the print run of the Gospel Book and the same

new date. It was probably around this time that a few copies with D. Apostol's coat-of-arms and verses in his honour were bound' (Morozov, 1992).

We are inclined to endorse the point made by D. Morozov regarding the publication of the titular Gospels in 1708 but with one essential complement: In our judgement, it is possible that in 1708 the print run of the Gospel Book could be not only titular. Considering the availability of Ukrainian funds donated in 1707, it is an entirely realistic proposition that, together with titular copies, a complete print run of Gospel Book was made, without dedication and references to the source of funding, and that they can be regarded as part of a single project financed by the Ukrainian philanthropists. An argument in favour of this proposition can be a considerable number of the described 1708 publications and even a statement of G. Graf, who said that this edition was the first Gospel Book published. I. Feodorov holds a similar view, believing that the print run of the Gospel Book was released in 1708 (Feodorov, 2016).

Lastly, let us present two more important arguments in favour of this hypothesis, which we have discovered in Aleppo editions in Lebanon. In St John's Monastery in Chouweir and The Monastery of Our Lady of Balamand, we have recovered two Gospel Books but without dates of print due to the loss of the first and second pages. However, the first page that has been preserved in the original printing of the Chouweiri edition turned out to be the beginning of The Gospel according to John. It was this page that is depicted in D. Morozov's article about the titular Gospel. Comparison of both pages has showed that they were typed in different fonts (*photos 2 and 3 – a page from D. Apostol's titular Gospel Book (Morozov, Arabskoye Yevangeliye Daniila Apostola (K istorii pervoy arabskoy tipografii na Vostoke)) and the same page from the 1708 Gospel Book (archive of St John's Monastery in Chouweir)*). The first font of the 1706 Gospel Book (from D. Morozov's illustration) is rougher. Particularly conspicuous is a somewhat poorly typed line immediately following the name 'Easter Sunday' *حصفلا دح* *دي جملا*. Certain letters in this line literally fuse with the headline. On the other hand, the font of the page from the Gospel Book we have found in Chouweir is thinner and the first line after the same headline is far better positioned at a sufficient distance. And such details are found in large numbers. This difference between the fonts and the presence of several different sets of fonts was mentioned by J. Nasrallah (Nasrallah, 1949) as well as A. Dabbās and N. Rashou (Dabbās & Rashou, 2008).

In his list of Aleppo publications, J. Nasrallah includes two editions of Gospels – the Tetraevangelion of 1706 and the Gospel Book of 1708. In doing so, however, he notes that the Gospel Book of 1708 has the same foreword as the Tetraevangelion of 1706 and that the same publication date (1706) is mentioned at the beginning of the book. That said, the Gospel Book of 1708 was printed in a different font in the *naskh* style, used by Syrian rewriters of Christian manuscripts.

The same font was also used to print *The Book of Sermons of St Patriarch Athanasius, Parakletike (Octoechos)*, and *The Short Treatise* explaining the form of contrition and confession (Nasrallah, 1949). This fact of the presence of different fonts implies that there might have been a second edition of the Gospel Book in 1708 after D. Apostol's titular Gospel was published based on the print run of 1706.

The second proof of our hypothesis is premised on studying a copy of the 1706 Gospel Book we have found in the Eastern Library of Saint Joseph University in Beirut with a well-preserved last page containing technical data. Its important attribute is its format: It looks a bit more voluminous and its size coincides with that of the 1706 Tetraevangelion (size of the front page – 33,5x23 sm), with 25 lines in each page. This prompted us to compare this folio with two others copies of the Gospel Book found in Chouweir and Balamand. They turned out to be smaller (28x19 sm), with 21 lines in each page. This fact became a decisive argument for us in favour of the assumption about the second full-fledged edition of the 1708 Gospel Book.

Summing up the foregoing, it can be assumed that the funds of the Ukrainian philanthropists in 1708 were used to print the second editions of the titular Tetraevangelion of I. Mazepa and the Gospel Book of D. Apostol as well as a full-fledged print run of the Gospel Book. The latter two publications look like a single project because this is, in fact, a titular edition of the Gospel Book based on 1706 and its reissue made over a short time span.

Although the Gospel Book dedicated to D. Apostol does not have a colophon regarding the date of printing, we also believe that both titular publications of I. Mazepa and D. Apostol were printed in late 1707 – early 1708, immediately after the donors provided funds to Athanasius Dabbās. Apparently, this was done to express gratitude to the philanthropists as soon as possible. That is why the main part of the different Gospels printed two years before was used.

In conclusion, we have to state that the absence of money is thought to be the primary version of why the Alepo printing house ended its activities. Even after the successful year of 1708 rich in publications, the two following years, 1709 and 1710, virtually were a quiet period in the life of the printing office. In 1709, only a re-edition of the 1706 Psalms was carried out. The year of 1711 became the last one in the history of the Alepo printing workshop.

According to I. Feodorov, 'in late 1711, Athanasius Dabbās failed to find money at home to continue the activities of the printing house. Mazepa passed away in 1709. The Muscovite Tsar refused to support Antiochian projects for political reasons to avoid discussions with the Sultan or other Christian communities in the Middle East, including Western missions. Romanian officials were concerned with their own problems. In 1714, C. Brancoveanu was brought to Constantinople, fettered in chains. On 15 August, he, his four sons, and a nephew were beheaded' (Feodorov, 2018).

Thus, the development of book printing in the Middle East fostered the national and cultural revival in the region, which started exactly in Aleppo. The recovered copies of the old printed books have once again reaffirmed the vital importance of circulating these publications among monasteries and religious communities of Syria and Lebanon. The Ukrainian and Romanian contributions were considerably helpful in the development of Arab book printing. Thanks to the financial support of Wallachian Prince C. Brancoveanu, Hetman of Zaporozhian Host I. Mazepa, as well as Myrhorod Colonel and future hetman D. Apostol, a sizeable part of publications were released in the Aleppo printing workshop in 1706–1711.

The research of the recovered publications indicates that the first editions of the Tetraevangelion and the Gospel Book were printed in 1706. In 1708, on the basis of the 1706 publications, titular re-editions of the Tetraevangelion and the Gospel Book were made, dedicated to Hetman I. Mazepa and D. Apostol, respectively. Besides, the second full-fledged edition of the Gospel Book saw the light of day in 1708.

The comparative analysis of the Romanian and Aleppo old printed books suggests that Abdallāh Zakher created new fonts specially for the Aleppo printing workshop. Several students worked together with him under the overall guidance of Athanasius Dabbās.

For many years, the Bucharest Gospel described by T. Rendiuk was believed to be the only preserved Mazepa's Gospel (Rendiuk, 2017). However, several years of searching for this relic in Lebanon have led us ... to Kyiv. In the National Library of Ukraine named after V. Vernadskyi, we have found a Kyiv copy of Mazepa's titular Tetraevangelion, described by the prominent Ukrainian researcher Serhii Maslov as early as 1925. The Kyiv copy was made for Hetman Ivan Mazepa himself. Contrary to other titular Gospels described, having leather frames with the image of the Crucifixion on the cover page and the Resurrection on the back page, its back page features the image of the Holy Virgin in a wreath sitting on the throne alongside with Antonius and Feodosius standing in front of her. Inscriptions on all images are made in Old Church Slavonic. Symbolically, this copy is now stored in Ukraine.

In cooperation with the National Library of Ukraine named after V. Vernadskyi and the Memorial Fund of His Beatitude Metropolitan Volodymyr, the Embassy of Ukraine in the Lebanese Republic has released a facsimile of Mazepa's Gospel on the occasion of the 30th anniversary since the restoration of Ukraine's independence.