The Apostle to Islam: The Legacy of Samuel Zwemer

by J. Christy Wilson, Jr.

In the judgment of historian Kenneth Scott Latourette, “No one through all the centuries of Christian missions to the Muslims has deserved better than Dr. Zwemer the designation of Apostle to Islam.”

Samuel Marinus Zwemer was born in Vriesland, Michigan in 1867, the thirteenth child in a Reformed Church minister’s family. Many years later when he shared with his mother that he believed God was calling him to the foreign field, she told him that she had dedicated him to the Lord’s service and placed him in the cradle with the prayer that he might grow up to be a missionary.

There was Bible reading at every meal and the family went through the whole of the Scripture in this way together each year. With such a heritage, it is little wonder that Samuel felt he had accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior as far back in his boyhood as he could remember.

During Samuel Zwemer’s senior year at Hope College, Robert Wilder, a pioneer of the Student Volunteer Movement, visited the campus. While he was presenting the needs of missions, he had a map of India on display with a metronome in front of it. It was set so that each time it ticked back and forth one person in the Indian subcontinent died who had never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. This so affected Samuel Zwemer that at the end of the message he rushed forward and signed the decision card, which stated: “God helping me, I purpose to be a foreign missionary.”

Call and Preparation

The call of Zwemer to the ministry was reinforced by this pledge to go overseas as a missionary. On September 19, 1887, he entered the theological seminary of the Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He also served with the Throop Avenue Mission of that city in evangelism and visitation of the poor, since he was vitally interested in social work, he did all that he could to help people in the slums out of their poverty and degradation. He urged those whom he visited to find a new outlook on life as committed Christians, but regardless of their response, he helped them with such personal problems from finding work to getting needed medical attention. During the first year of his theological course, Zwemer set aside the hour from twelve noon to one o’clock as a special time for prayer and devotions. He later developed the habit in his quiet time of reading the Scriptures in a different language every day of the week to keep up his knowledge of these languages.

Zwemer also began to acquire a knowledge of medicine, which he hoped would be a help in his missionary career. He carefully read Gray’s Anatomy, a manual of therapeutics, and other medical texts. At a later period in his course of studies, he went on weekends to New York and worked in a clinic with a young doctor who later was knighted, Sir William Wanless, one of the best-known missionary physicians and surgeons in India. Dr. Wanless gave him lessons in medicine, and Zwemer acted as assistant and pharmacist. His custom of the Bleecker Street Mission Clinic in New York City was always to paste a Scripture verse along with the label on each medicine bottle. One time this caused a good deal of consternation. A patient returned much perturbed, since he had read on the bottle the Bible verse, “Prepare to meet thy God”!

Zwemer preached his first sermon on March 11, 1888, to a congregation of black people in a small New Brunswick, New Jersey church. In this and his home visitation, Zwemer was getting early training in ethnic relations. Throughout his life he was free from racial bias or prejudice.

During the first year of his study at New Brunswick Seminary (1887-88), Zwemer had a talk with James Cantine, who as a middler was a year ahead of him. Samuel said, “You know, we must get something definite under way. I propose that you and I offer ourselves to go to some needy field and possibly start a new work.” Cantine replied that he had been thinking along the same lines, so they shook hands and joined in prayer that they might be used in this way.

Professor John G. Lansing, who taught Hebrew at the seminary and who had spent a number of years in Egypt, became their adviser and close friend in preparing for their missionary activity. As their plans took shape, Zwemer and Cantine envisaged the possible opening of a new mission, and they selected Arabia, the homeland of Islam, as the most difficult field they could find. The Muslim religion was the only one that had met and conquered Christianity on a large scale and thus was the great rival of the Christian faith. They adopted as the motto of their organization the prayer of Abraham recorded in Genesis 17:18, “Oh that Ish-
Cantine and Zwemer approached different societies about being sent to Arabia as missionaries, but none would sponsor them, stating that it was foolish for them to want to go to such a fanatical people. Samuel’s subsequent comment was, “If God calls you and no board will send you, bore a hole through the board and go anyway.” He then visited churches to help raise Cantine’s support while the latter went to other congregations helping to get funds for Zwemer’s support. Thus the Arabian Mission was born.

Zwemer had grown to a height of six feet. His 160 pounds were spread evenly over his frame, so he appeared somewhat thin in his loose-fitting but carefully tended suits, usually of dark gray. His face caught attention, and his eyes seemed always sparkling with fun. The prominent Dutch features would break into a friendly smile at the slightest provocation. He thought deeply on theological questions and became an evangelist, with a belief founded upon the Bible as God’s written Word and the revelation of a divine Christ who gave His life in atonement on the cross and rose again. He came to know the Scriptures thoroughly. He often quoted them with unusual apt application and presented truth with a dash of his marvelous sense of humor.

James Cantine graduated from seminary in 1889, a year before Zwemer, and went on to Beirut to study Arabic. Before he left, the students presented him with a pair of binoculars, which Samuel said were appropriate, as he was going “to spy out the land.” Zwemer completed his seminary work and graduated with honors, receiving his B.D. degree and going on to be ordained in the Reformed Church of America on May 29, 1890.

Scouting out the Land

Zwemer left America as a missionary for Arabia in June 1890. His father and his older brother Frederick sailed with him to Europe to speed him on his way. They went first to the Netherlands, and from there Samuel visited Scotland to make contact with the Scottish Presbyterian Mission, the only society that then had work in Arabia. He also wanted to meet the titled family of the brilliant young Scotsman, Ian Keith Falconer, who had given his life as a martyr in the city of Aden of the Yemen in 1887. While passing through London, Zwemer purchased the two-volume work Travels in Arabia Deserts by Charles M. Doughty. These texts became his constant companions until he sold them years later to T.E. Lawrence—better known as “Lawrence of Arabia.”

In Beirut, Zwemer and Cantine studied with national teachers and were privileged to sit at the feet of the prince of Arabic scholars, Dr. Cornelius Van Dyck. He was the translator of the Bible into Arabic and cautioned the young students, “The learning of Arabic is a seven-day-a-week job.”

Before the close of 1890, Zwemer and Cantine left Beirut for Cairo. There they met their old seminary friend and instructor, Dr. Lansing. As the three men pored over maps together (Arabia is about the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River), Cantine finally suggested, “Sam, you survey the Red Sea side of this great peninsula and possibly the southeast coast, and I will plan to examine the locations to the East and on the Persian Gulf.”

After some months in Cairo, Cantine took a direct steamer for Aden, while Zwemer later boarded a coastal vessel down the Red Sea, making stops at several ports. Zwemer was privileged to have as a fellow passenger Anglican Bishop T. Valpy French, of the Church Missionary Society, who had spent many years working with Muslims in what is now Pakistan. Their first stop was in Jidda, the port of Mecca. At once Bishop French went to a coffee shop, and opening a large Arabic Bible, began to read to the men seated there.

Although Zwemer had been fearful that direct preaching might lead to violence, the patrons of the coffee shop listened intently as Bishop French expounded the Scriptures in high classic Arabic.

The travelers reached Aden fifteen days after leaving Suez. There they met Cantine, who had rented rooms for them. With him was Kamil Abdul Messiah, a convert from Islam who had come from Syria to work with them and join in the search for a permanent location. In Aden they suffered attacks of malarial fever and their finances were at an all-time low. Long overdue salaries providentially arrived in the nick of time, and they were able to go on with their plans. Bishop French decided to locate in Muscat, while Cantine went up the Persian Gulf to the east and north, and Zwemer took Kamil Abdul Messiah with him to visit the southern coast as far as Mukalla, the seaport for the interior provinces of Arabia.

During June and July of 1891, Zwemer decided to try to visit the city of San’a, which had long been closed to foreigners. He went by ship from Aden to Hodeida and then six days on mule back. In the city of San’a, he was given a good deal of freedom to witness. On the boat returning to Aden, there were several British officers who were going to India. When Zwemer described his journey to San’a, they at first did not believe that he had been there. When they were finally convinced, two of these officers nominated him to become a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He was elected for life and thus after his name he could write “F.R.G.S.”.

In the meantime, Cantine made the trip to the east of the Arabian peninsula and up the Persian Gulf in search of a location. On his arrival at Muscat, he learned that Bishop French had died there and was buried in a sandy cove nearby.
Cantine went on from Muscat to the island of Bahrain and then across to Bushire on the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf. From there he traveled to Basra. He had not been there long before he was convinced that this would be an ideal place to begin their operations. He wrote for Zwemer to come right away.

Both men were made agents for the British and Foreign Bible Society and were able to open a shop for the sale of Scriptures in the bazaar. It was not long, however, before opposition developed. Zwemer wrote: “The mission passed through a period of determined opposition and open hostility from the Turkish authorities. The Bible shop was sealed up and a guard placed at the door of the house occupied by the mission. Fortunately, the opposition was short lived.” The new mission, however, was to suffer something worse than government opposition. Kamil Abdul Messiah died after a short illness. He had been working with Muslims and most likely was poisoned.

In 1892, Zwemer visited the island of Bahrain, halfway down the coast, and was able to open a work there. Later in the same year, Peter Zwemer, a younger brother of Samuel, joined the mission and opened a substation at Muscat. In 1894 the Arabian Mission was adopted by the Reformed Church and became one of their regular fields.

Word came from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) asking Cantine and Zwemer to meet two new women recruits coming from Australia and to assist them on their way. One of these was Amy Wilkes, a charming young nurse with whom Samuel Zwemer fell in love. They were married at the British Consulate in Baghdad on May 18, 1896. The Church Missionary Society, however, did not surrender its prize easily. They required that Amy pay the cost of her journey to the field. It was necessary for Zwemer to meet this obligation, so it was said that he had purchased his wife in accordance with true Arab custom.

The Arabian Mission

The Arabian Mission had now acquired its first woman member. Samuel Zwemer took his wife to the island of Bahrain. She, as a trained nurse, began at once to help Samuel in his rudimentary medicine. The work was demanding, and among the hardships to be endured were days and nights of fearful heat. When Zwemer wrote his first book in Bahrain, he wrapped a towel around his hand to keep the perspiration from blotting the paper. The book, Arabia: The Cradle of Islam, went through four editions from 1900 to 1912. The second book he wrote in Bahrain was Raymond Lull, First Missionary to Moslems. This short biography of the great missionary was translated and published in Arabic, Spanish, German, Chinese, and Dutch. Other additions to the Arabian Mission were two doctors supported by the University of Michigan.

In spite of better medical care, Peter Zwemer, Samuel’s brother, died of illness late in 1898. Six years later, in July 1904, two daughters of Samuel and Amy Zwemer succumbed to dysentery in Bahrain. The sorrowing parents inscribed on the tomb that marks their graves on the island of Bahrain, WORTHY IS THE LAMB TO RECEIVE RICHES.

They also had a son, whom they named Raymond after the great Spanish missionary to North Africa, Raymond Lull. Another daughter, Elizabeth, married Dr. Claude Pickens, who served as missionaries to Muslims in China.

After Samuel Zwemer and his wife returned to the United States for a furlough in 1905, he received two calls to ministry at about the same time. The Reformed Board of Foreign Missions asked him to become their field secretary. The Student Volunteer Movement also called him to work for three years as traveling representative for recruitment. Due to the fact, that even after much prayer, he could not decide between the two calls, he accepted both!

Mission Conventions

A great part of Zwemer’s time for the next five years was spent speaking at conventions. He was largely responsible for the first General Conference of Missionaries to the World of Islam, held in Cairo in April 1906. This was sponsored by mission boards with work in Muslim countries. His effectiveness was never more evident than at the quadrennial conferences of the Student Volunteer Movement. Robert E. Speer wrote, “Dr. Zwemer hung a great map of Islam before us and, with a sweep of his hand across all those darkened areas, said: ‘Thou Oh Christ art all I want and Thou Oh Christ art all they want. What Christ can do for any man, He can do for every man.’”

Speer and Zwemer probably influenced more young men and women to go into missionary service than any two individuals in all of Christian history.

Zwemer was eager to get back to the field in Arabia, but John R. Mott urged him to stay over for the 1910 Student Volunteer Convention in Rochester, New York. It was at this meeting that Zwemer, in a telling address, used the words that have often been quoted since: “His kingdom is without frontiers.” In 1910 the great World Missionary Conference also was held in Edinburgh, Scotland. Zwemer was on the Organizing Committee on Occupation of the Field and took a leading part in the conference, which drew representatives from most of the world. During the conference, a committee met to lay plans for a quarterly publication called The Moslem World. The magazine was born with the January 1911 issue, with Zwemer as editor. His habit of darting from the Persian Gulf to Egypt or some other part of the world made the difficulties of editing and publishing for-
midable. However, he managed to put out this scholarly publication every quarter for thirty-seven years without interruption.

Just as he had been the leader in organizing the Cairo Conference in 1906 on work for Muslims, Zwemer became the moving spirit behind a second Christian consultation on work for Islam, which was held in Lucknow, India, in the latter part of January 1911. He had by this time become known as a leading authority on Christian work for Islam. It was therefore not surprising that a call came to him in 1912 to move to Cairo, the center of Islamic thought and in many ways the key city to Muslims of Africa as well as of Egypt. Canon W.H.T. Gairdner of Cairo called Zwemer “a steam engine in breeches.” While he was in America on a visit in 1914, Zwemer gave 151 addresses in 113 days, ten of them at the Kansas City Student Volunteer Convention. “In this century,” wrote Robert E. Speer, “not many men have lived who had the talent and drive of Samuel Zwemer. During his lifetime he exerted a tremendous influence on the Christian mission to Islam, as well as the worldwide advance of the Church and the Gospel.”

Throughout Zwemer’s ministry in Egypt from 1912 on he was always a zealous distributor of tracts. Once in Al-Azhar University in Cairo—the leading theological school of the Islamic world—he was asked for some leaflets and gave them to the students. Later a fanatical professor got hold of the tracts and the matter was reported to officials and taken to the British government, which at that time was in control of Egypt. Zwemer was ordered to leave the country. He took a steamer to Cyprus and returned to Egypt two weeks later on the same boat. The matter ended there, but one of the Muslim theological students of Al-Azhar later became an earnest Christian.

He gave main addresses on several occasions at the Keswick Conventions in England. It was there in 1915 that he had spoken with power on Peter’s words in Luke 5:5: “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at Thy word, I will let down the net.” He related this to work in Muslim lands. Yet, he said by faith as we obey our Lord’s commission, the time will come when Muslims will be brought to Christ in such numbers that the boats (or churches) will not be able to hold them. The audience was so affected by the message that they asked what they could do? Dr. Zwemer said, “Pray.” From this was born the Fellowship of Faith for Muslims, which continues to this day as a prayer ministry in various countries. He appeared time and time again at the Northfield mission conferences, which had been started by Dwight L. Moody in 1886.

A missionary journey through North Africa was made by Zwemer in May and June of 1922. Conferences were held in Algiers, Tunis, and Sousse. In these consultations, Zwemer led the devotional services each day and also gave addresses on “Islam as a Missionary Problem.” He recalled the church fathers who had been there—Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine—when North Africa was one of the greatest centers of the Christian church. At that time, it had large churches, libraries, and a Christian population numbering in the millions. Then came the tidal wave of the Muslim conquest in the seventh century. The libraries were burned and the churches were either made into mosques or destroyed. Populations were blotted out and North Africa became “The Land of the Vanished Church.”

In Constantine, Algeria, Zwemer was entertained by Dr. Percy Smith of the American Methodist Mission who brought together some eighty Muslim converts from several cities to meet with him. Next Zwemer went to Morocco. Meetings were held in Casablanca and a more extended conference at Marrakesh followed by a visit to Tangier.

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa issued an invitation in 1925 to Zwemer to take part in a crusade with special reference to awakening the churches to their duty toward Muslims. By being able to preach in English and Dutch to general congregations and in Arabic to Muslims, he was providentially prepared for such leadership. Even at that time, the race question was a burning issue for the churches. Zwemer had to tread cautiously while at the same time making clear his Christian position against discrimination and racism. After the crusade in Johannesburg, Zwemer boarded the train to Pretoria to take part in the General Conference of Students. For the first time in the history of South Africa there were two black African leaders on the platform. The subject of the meeting was “Christianity a Universal Religion—No Other Savior.” One student asked, “What can we do to work for the elimination of racial prejudice?” Zwemer replied, “You have already begun with these black leaders and the declaration that no race can be excluded if Christ is the universal Savior of all.” One of the chief results of Zwemer’s visit was to awaken churches of Europe and America to the extent of the Muslim presence in southern Africa.

Zwemer’s travels also took him to the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia). The invitation for the visit had come to Zwemer from the Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands. The purpose of the trip was to acquaint missions ministering in Java and Sumatra with literature for work among Muslims and to seek a greater comity and cooperation in work for Islam among the sixteen societies serving there.

John R. Mott was chairman of a gathering for Christian workers for Muslims held in Jerusalem in 1924. Dr. and Mrs. Zwemer were asked by John Mott to take the results of the conference to a meeting of missionaries from
Arabia, Iraq and Iran, to be held in Baghdad later in 1924. When they reached the Mande bridge over the Tigris at Baghdad, they were delighted to find James Cantine, the co-founder with Zwemer of the Arabian Mission, waiting for them. The conference took place at the Baghdad YMCA. The Zwemers then went to the station they had founded in Bahrain. The people vied with one another to show honors to those who had gained a foothold for Christian work there with such difficulty. Could the Zwemers ever forget Bahrain with the graves of their two little girls?

The Zwemers traveled on to Teheran in Iran. There a conference on literature was held. For “Exhibit A” Zwemer had gathered all the Christian publications produced in Iran over more than a generation. It made a rather small pile, and much of it was unattractive and out of date. The members of the conference were duly impressed and resolved to remedy this omission. The Christian Literature Committee was soon producing many new items.

The Zwemers then went on to India. The Sultan of Muscat was on the same ship so they gave him some Christian Arabic literature. When they arrived in Bombay, conferences had been planned over the length and breadth of India. Zwemer gave a series of lectures on the Christian approach to Islam and Mrs. Zwemer conducted meetings for women.

Zwemer also made very important visits to China. Since there were Muslims in every Chinese province and over forty million followers of the Arabian prophet in the entire country, Zwemer had long awaited an opportunity to visit that great land to encourage evangelism for Muslims and the distribution of Christian literature among them. He visited a number of the large Chinese cities where there were Muslim populations. He was even invited to speak in mosques because of his knowledge of Arabic and Islam.

As he traveled far and wide to contact Muslims wherever they could be found, Zwemer continued to write and publish books on Islam and Christian missions. The Glory of the Cross was published in London in 1928. This was the author’s favorite book among over fifty volumes that he wrote. It was also his best-selling publication. After his many journeys, he also published Across the World of Islam in 1929.

Professor of Missions

Zwemer accepted an invitation from Princeton Theological Seminary late in the 1920s to be professor of the Chair of History of Religion and Christian Missions. His travels continued, however. He taught summer courses at Winona Lake, Indiana, and continued to take a leading part in the great Student Volunteer conventions held every four years.

However, on January 25, 1937, there was the sudden passing of his beloved wife, Amy Wilkes Zwemer, who had been his constant inspiration and co-worker for more than forty years. After she was gone there was a poignant loneliness. In spite of this, however, he kept his sense of humor and when he retired at seventy-one from his professorship at Princeton Seminary, he claimed it was in order to go into “active service.”

In 1939, Zwemer moved to New York City. His old colleague of the early days in Arabia, James Cantine, introduced him to a woman named Margaret Clarke. Their friendship grew into romance and they were married on March 12, 1940. Margaret had worked as a secretary and began at once to help in Zwemer’s literary work. They lived in an apartment on Fifth Avenue, which they were able to rent at half price since it was on the thirteenth floor.

In addition to his preaching and writing, Zwemer taught courses in missions at Biblical Seminary in New York City and at the Training Institute of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Nyack, New York. After Christmas in 1946, he was a keynote speaker at the first Inter-Varsity Student Foreign Missions Fellowship Convention, which was held at the University of Toronto in Canada. In subsequent years this convention was held on the campus of the University of Illinois in Urbana and became the successor of the great Student Volunteer conventions.

Journey’s End

In 1949, his eighty-third year, the mission of which Zwemer was a founder observed its sixtieth anniversary at the annual meeting in Kuwait on the Arabian coast. Zwemer and his wife, who had been invited to attend, sailed to Beirut, went on to Iraq by car, and by plain flew to Bahrain. After a visit to the graves of the missionaries and the children, Zwemer said, “If we should hold our peace, these very stones would cry out for the evangelization of Arabia!”

Margaret became ill soon after their return from Arabia and died in a New York hospital on February 21, 1950. Two years later, on February 16, 1952, Zwemer was asked to give an evening address at a meeting of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in New York. As usual, he was there early, and since another scheduled speaker had not arrived, Zwemer delivered an address in the afternoon also. The next day, at midnight, he suffered a heart attack, and was taken to Presbyterian Hospital.

As was always the case, he made friends immediately with doctors, nurses, and patients and brought to many of them a message of comfort and hope from the Great Physician. After several weeks of recuperation, Zwemer was deemed well enough to go to the Harkness Convalescent Home at Port Chester, New York. Then on Wednesday, April 2, 1952, quietly and rather suddenly the tired compassionate heart ceased to beat.
remembers their visit, since he was then a boy of six years of age. This was the beginning of a great friendship between Dr. Zwemer and the writer’s father, which not only resulted in his succeeding Zwemer on the Princeton seminary Faculty in the area of missions, but also in the writing of Zwemer’s biography, *Apostle to Islam*.

6. The Fellowship of Faith for Muslims, P. O. Box 221, Station J, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4J 4Y1. Days of prayer for Muslims are held in Toronto, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles.


**Books by Samuel Zwemer**


**End Notes**


2. The following account has been taken mainly from the biographies of Samuel Zwemer written by the present writer’s father, J. Christy Wilson, Sr., entitled *Apostle to Islam*, and *Flaming Prophet* (New York: Friendship Press, 1970). To keep the text from becoming overly cumbersome, quotation marks from the two sources have not been added. The present writer also includes incidents that came from knowing him personally.


4. Ibid., p. 79.

5. On this occasion Dr. and Mrs. Zwemer also visited Tabriz, the capital of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran. It was here that the present writer’s parents served as Presbyterian missionaries from 1919 to 1939. He vividly remembers their visit, since he was then a boy of six years of age. This was the beginning of a great friendship between Dr. Zwemer and the writer’s father, which not only resulted in his succeeding Zwemer on the Princeton seminary Faculty in the area of missions, but also in the writing of Zwemer’s biography, *Apostle to Islam*.

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