

## Brief Biography of Samuel Zwemer

BY ROGER S. GREENWAY

"No one through all the centuries of Christian missions to Moslems has deserved better than Samuel Zwemer the designation of Apostle to Islam." So wrote the great mission historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, in the introduction to J. Christy Wilson's biography of Zwemer, published in 1952...

Samuel Marinus Zwemer was born on April



12, 1867, in the parsonage of the Reformed church in Vriesland, Michigan. His parents had immigrated to America from the Netherlands, and Samuel was the

thirteenth of their fifteen children. The Zwemers were a close-knit family, with deep religious convictions and moral values. All six of Samuel's sisters became schoolteachers, and four of his brothers entered the Christian ministry. One of the brothers died in mission service in Arabia.

Zwemer professed his personal faith in Jesus Christ on March 9, 1884, and he soon became active in the campus mission group at Hope College, the school he attended in Holland, Michigan. In 1887, Robert Wilder visited Hope College as representative of the Student Volunteer Movement, and Zwemer responded to Wilder's appeal for missionaries. It was not until years later that Zwemer learned that when he was still an infant, his mother had dedicated him to missionary service. After completing his undergraduate work at Hope College, Zwemer went to New Brunswick Seminary in New Jersey for theological studies. Like Hope College, New Brunswick was (and is) owned by the Reformed Church in America. While at seminary, Zwemer joined with two other students, James Cantine and Philip T. Phelps, and a professor of Old Testament

who had been a missionary in Egypt, John G. Lansing, to plan a mission to Muslims. The Lord led them to focus on Arabia, the center of the Muslim world and the most difficult place to conduct Christian missions.

In view of the general hostility of Muslims toward Christianity and the difficulties involved in a place like Arabia, it was not surprising that they could not find a mission agency that would sponsor them. So in 1888, while still in school, they decided to form a new agency, which they called the Arabian Mission, under which they could be sent. Zwemer was heard to say, "If God calls you and no board will send you, bore a hole through the board and go anyway" An entrepreneurial spirit, coupled with enormous faith, vision, and energy, characterized Zwemer throughout his life.

In 1890, having finished his seminary education and being ordained, Zwemer sailed to the Middle East, where he joined Cantine in Beirut for the study of the Arabic language. Phelps stayed in the United States as treasurer and fundraiser of the mission. From Beirut, Zwemer and Cantine went to Cairo, Egypt, where they joined Professor Lansing and laid plans for the exploration of Arabia and nearby countries for mission openings. After extensive investigation they settled on Basrah, sixty miles above the Persian Gulf on the combined waterways of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.



Mrs. Zwemer.

They worked in Basrah for six years, and then a happy event occurred in Zwemer's life. He and Cantine had been asked to meet two young women missionaries who were coming to Basrah from Australia. The Australian mission did not allow single ladies to see male friends, but Zwemer managed to get a job teaching them Arabic. One of the two women was Amy Wilkes, a trained nurse, and she and Zwemer fell in love. In 1896,

they were married at the British Consulate in Baghdad. But marriage did not come cheaply for Zwemer, because his bride's mission insisted that he reimburse them for Amy's travel expenses to the field. That led to the report that in good Arab fashion, Zwemer had purchased his wife.

“Mohammed's mission, whatever else it may have been or done, was a blindfolding of Jesus, an eclipse of the Sun of righteousness by the moon of Mecca.”

Zwemer, *The Glory of the Cross*, 42

Some time later Zwemer and his wife moved to Bahrain, a British-held island in the Persian Gulf, where they set up a mission station. In Bahrain, Zwemer combined street preaching and literature colportage work on behalf of the American Bible Society with simple medical care. While still in America, Zwemer had done some study of medicine and had worked as a volunteer at a mission clinic in New York City. Now he had Amy, a nurse, to help him, and together they began to practice rudimentary medicine. In 1892, Zwemer's younger brother, Peter, joined them in the mission and opened a substation in Muscat. In 1894 the Arabian Mission was adopted by the board of the Reformed Church and became one of their regular fields.

Zwemer wrote his first book in Bahrain. In the sweltering heat, he wrapped a towel around his hand to keep the perspiration from blotting the ink on the paper. The book, *Arabia: the Cradle of Islam*, went through four editions between 1900 and 1912. The second book written in Bahrain was *Raymond Lull, First Missionary to Moslems*, and this short missionary biography was translated and published in Arabic, Spanish, German, Chinese, and Dutch.

Death touched the Arabian Mission as Peter. Zwemer, Samuel's brother, died in 1898.

Two daughters born to Samuel and Amy succumbed to dysentery in July 1904. On the tomb that marks their graves on the island of Bahrain appear the words, "Worthy is the Lamb to receive riches."

Zwemer was a powerful speaker as well as a writer. It became known in church and mission circles that Zwemer

possessed gifts that enabled him to raise money and recruit new workers. It was not surprising, therefore, that in 1905, while the Zwemers were on furlough in America, Zwemer received two appointments, one to serve as field secretary of the Reformed Board of Foreign Missions, and the second to be the traveling representative for recruitment of the Student Volunteer Movement. He accepted them both. In the latter role, Zwemer worked closely with Robert E. Speer, and the two of them influenced many young men and women to go into overseas missionary service.

In 1910, Zwemer took part in the great World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. During the conference, plans were made to begin a quarterly publication to be called *The Moslem World*. The journal first appeared in January 1911, with Zwemer as the editor. Despite his enormous travel schedule, leadership in numerous conferences, and many other involvements, Zwemer continued as editor without remuneration for thirty-seven years, and he never missed an issue.

With good reason Speer once wrote about Zwemer, "In this century, not many men have lived who had the talent and drive of Samuel Zwemer. He exercised a tremendous influence on the Christian mission to Islam and on the advance of the church and the gospel worldwide."

In the years that followed, Zwemer moved back and forth from Egypt, where he taught at the Presbyterian Seminary, to the Persian Gulf, where he spoke to Muslims and promoted literature distribution and writing. He traveled to the United States, where he spoke hundreds of times to student groups, churches, and missionary conferences. He went country by country across North Africa, then to South Africa at the invitation of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, where he spoke in English and Dutch to Christian congregations and in Arabic to gatherings of Muslims. He went on to Indonesia, where he challenged Christians in Java and Sumatra to increase their mission work among Muslims. Then he was in Baghdad for a conference with missionaries from Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. He went to India, where he spoke at conferences from one side of the country to the other. He made visits to China, where there are millions of Muslims, and in several Chinese cities he was invited to speak in mosques because of his knowledge of Arabic and Islam.

Zwemer was ready to travel anywhere Muslims could be found. He was passionate about the importance of personal evangelism, and he followed a familiar pattern. He would address Muslims with the gospel by whatever available means, he would promote the publication and circulation of tracts, and he would challenge Christians to be more active in witnessing to Muslims, particularly through Bibles and other Christian literature. Alongside everything else, he kept reading, editing *The Moslem World*, and working on his next book manuscript. Amy once remarked, "Samuel never stops writing."

In 1929, Zwemer accepted the appointment to become professor of missions in Princeton Theological Seminary. He saw this as an opportunity to influence a continual stream of young men who were entering the ministry at home and abroad and to challenge them to consider missions. He remained at Princeton until his retirement at the age of seventy-one. Amy, who had shared so many of the burdens of his active life, died suddenly in 1937. A few years later his old colleague, James Cantine, introduced him to Margaret Clarke, and they were married in 1940.

Throughout his lifetime Zwemer's theology remained biblical and conservative, in the Calvinist tradition. He spoke and wrote against liberal theologies that questioned the deity of Christ and the importance of the atonement. Over and over he insisted that to be a missionary to Muslims required a strong Christology and an overpowering emphasis on the unique work of Christ in the atonement and the resurrection.



After retiring from Princeton, Zwemer taught courses at the Missionary Training Institute of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Nyack, New York, and at Biblical Seminary in New York City. By that time, interest in missions was waning in the mainline denominations, but among conservative and evangelical churches it was gaining momentum. In his later years Zwemer was most often invited to churches and conferences that represented his evangelical convictions. On the one hand Zwemer was open to Christians of all denominational stripes, and he accepted invitations from a broad spectrum of

Christian groups. But on the fundamentals of the faith he was unflinching, and no listener was ever left in doubt about Zwemer's convictions.

Shortly after Christmas in 1946, he was a keynote speaker at the first Inter-Varsity Student Foreign Missions Fellowship Convention, held in Toronto. This was the successor of the Student Volunteer conventions, in which Zwemer had played important roles earlier in his life, and the first of the now famous Urbana Conventions sponsored by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship and held on the campus of the University of Illinois in Urbana.

When Zwemer was eighty-three, the mission of which he was a founder celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, and Zwemer and Margaret, his second wife, were invited to attend the celebration to be held in Kuwait on the Arabian coast. After the meetings the Zwemers went to Bahrain, where Samuel and his first wife, Amy, had opened a mission station many years before. After visiting the graves of the two Zwemer daughters, Samuel said, "If we should hold our peace, these very stones would cry out for the evangelization of Arabia!"

Margaret became ill shortly after their return from Arabia and died in 1950. Two years later, after delivering three addresses in one day at a meeting of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in New York, Zwemer suffered a heart attack. On Wednesday, April 2, 1952, the heart that beat so long and hard for missions took its rest.

After a memorial service in the First Presbyterian Church in New York City, Zwemer's body was transported to Holland, Michigan, where it was buried in the only piece of ground Zwemer ever owned, the family burial plot at the Pilgrim Home cemetery, which he inherited from his father.

Samuel Zwemer was a man of deep religious piety. Of the many books he wrote, he regarded as his favorites those that in their titles praised the Lord: *The Glory of the Incarnation*, *The Glory of the Cross*, and *The Glory of the Empty Tomb*.

Zwemer's knowledge of Islam had few equals. But above all, he loved the Muslim people and longed to see them gathered to Christ. Therein lay the passion of his life and writing—that God be glorified in the winning of the Muslim world to Christ.

“Our love for them is only increased by our intolerance of their rejection of the Christ; we cannot bear it, it pains us; and the day is coming when many will confess Him in the words of a Moslem convert to a Bible-woman who was visiting her: *‘I see now that the very center of your religion is Christ, and I want to love and serve Him.’*”

Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, 173

Roger S. Greenway; taken from the Introduction of *Islam and the Cross*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002, xi-xviii.