A Short Biography Samuel Zwemer 1867-1952

Apostle to Islam



In the judgement of the great missionary historian K. S. Latourette,

"No one through all the centuries of Christian missions to 'neighbours' has deserved the title 'Apostle to Islam' more than Zwemer."

In the first half of the 20th century Zwemer was widely acknowledged as the world's foremost authority in all matters relating to Christian witness to Islam.

His Family

Samuel Marinus Zwemer was born to Dutch immigrant parents in Kriesland, Michigan on April 12, 1867. Samuel's father was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church and he was the thirteenth of fifteen children! Theirs was a strong Christian family with a great protestant tradition. The Zwemers were originally French Huguenots who had fled to Holland. Four of the five brothers were involved in fulltime ministry either as ministers or as missionaries. One sister, Nellie, spent 40 years as a missionary in Amoy, China. When Samuel told his mother he believed God was calling him to the mission field, she told him she had dedicated him to the Lord's service and placed him in his cradle with the prayer that he might grow up to be a missionary.

In the Zwemer household there was Bible reading and prayer at every meal. Each year the family read through the whole Bible together. With such a heritage it is no surprise that Samuel felt he had accepted Jesus as his Lord as far back in his boyhood as he could remember.

His Call

Samuel went to Hope College in Michigan. During his senior year Robert Wilder, a pioneer of the great Student Volunteer Missionary Movement that had recently started, visited the campus. As 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 forward another person in the Indian subcontinent died without ever hearing the Gospel. This so affected Samuel that he rushed forward and signed the decision card that stated, **"God helping me, I propose to be a foreign missionary"**.

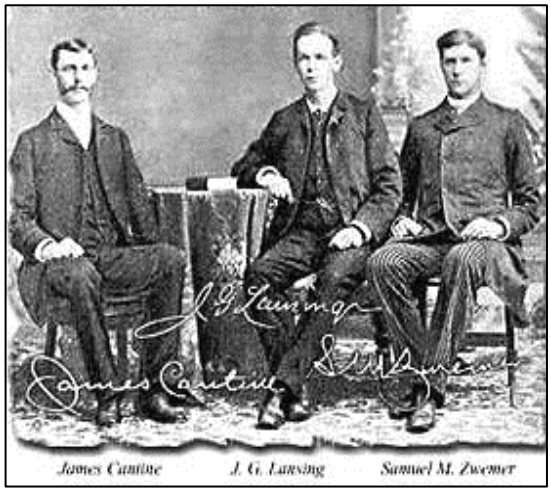
His Preparation

After Hope College, Samuel went on to study theology and mission at New Brunswick College, New Jersey. His course began on September 19, 1887. At the same time he worked with the Troop Avenue Mission in New York doing evangelism and social work among the poor. He was vitally interested in social work. He did whatever he could to help people in the slums out of their degradation. He urged all he visited to find the power to change by becoming committed Christians. Regardless of their response, he helped them with many personal problems from finding work to getting medical attention.

During his first year in New York, Samuel began to set aside the hour from midday to 1300 for a special time of prayer and devotions. Later he developed the discipline of reading Scripture in a different language for every day of the week. He began to study medicine in an informal way. He carefully studied Gray's Anatomy as well as books on physiology and therapeutics. A year later he began to help out in a clinic run by a young doctor called William Wanless who later became one of the best known missionary surgeons in India. William gave him lessons in medicine and Samuel acted as his assistant and pharmacist. Samuel always pasted a verse of Scripture along with the label on each bottle of medicine. One time this caused a great deal of worry. A patient returned to the clinic greatly distressed as he had read on the bottle, "Prepare to meet your God".

Samuel preached his first sermon on March 11, 1888 to a small church of black people in New Jersey. It was here that he began to learn the principles of cross-cultural communication. He loved visiting the homes of these folks.

Development of an interest in the Arab World



During his first year in New Brunswick Samuel met James Cantine who was a year ahead of him. Professor John G. Lansing, who taught Hebrew at the seminary and had spent a number of years in Egypt, became their advisor and close friend. As they prayed and discussed together a passionate interest in the Arab World was born. From this time on their unswerving and determined purpose was to give their lives for Arabic-speaking peoples.

Samuel and James approached different agencies about going to Arabia. None would sponsor either of them stating it was foolish to want to go to such a fanatical people. Later Samuel commented, **"If God calls you and no board will send you, bore a hole through the board and go anyway!"**

As their plans took shape they saw the possible opening of a new mission agency in Arabia – the cradle of Islam and the most difficult field they could find! With the blessing of Dr. Lansing, Samuel and James founded the **Arabian Mission** in November 1988. Samuel made it his business to know everything there was to know about this type of mission from Raymond Lull to Temple Gairdner in Cairo. He was also fired by the example of the Scot, Ion Keith Falconer, who had died in 1887 in southern Arabia. As the motto of their agency they adopted Abraham's prayer in Genesis 17:18, ***"O that Ishmael might live before you!"***

James Cantine graduated from seminary a year before Samuel Zwemer. In January 1889 Samuel visited churches to help raise James' financial support. James went to other churches to raise Samuel's support. In late 1889 James left for Beirut to study Arabic. Before he left the seminary the students presented him with a pair of binoculars. Samuel said it was appropriate as he was going to 'spy out the land'.

To the Arab World

Samuel graduated with an Honours BD. In May 1890 he was ordained in the Reformed Church of America. He left for Arabia in June 1890. His father and older brother Fredrick sailed to Europe with him. They first went to Holland from where Samuel went to visit the Scottish Presbyterian Mission that was the only agency working in Arabia at that time. He also took the opportunity to make a visit to the aristocratic family of Ion Keith Falconer to learn from them whatever he could about their brilliant son.

On his way through London Samuel bought the two-volume book **Travels in Arabia Deserta** by Charles Doughty (pub. 1888). The author had spent several years travelling as a bedouin in Arabia returning in 1879. These books became Samuel's constant companions He later sold them to T. E. Lawrence of Arabia!

He travelled to Beirut, joined James and began to study Arabic. They both had local Christian teachers, but they also met often with Dr. Cornelius van Dyck – the chief translator of the Bible into Arabic. Van Dyck warned Samuel that '**The learning of Arabic is a seven-days-a-week job**'.

Surveying Arabia

After a few months in Beirut James and Samuel went to Cairo and met Dr. Lansing. There the three of them poured over maps of Arabia. They prayed and they planned. Eventually Samuel was assigned to the west and south west of Arabia while James took on the east – the Gulf and Oman. After a few months in Cairo James got a ship to Aden. From there he went to Muscat and finally to Basra.

Samuel got a small coastal trader that was making several stops in the Red Sea. As a companion, he had the great Thomas Valpy French who had spent many years working in what is now Pakistan. In his old age, he wanted to tackle Arabia! Their first stop was Jeddah! Valpy French and Samuel went into a coffee shop in Jeddah and opened a large Arabic Bible and began to read it to the men seated there. Samuel was afraid and expected violence! But Valpy French expounded the Scriptures in beautiful high, classical Arabic. The listeners were amazed and welcomed them. Many listened intently.

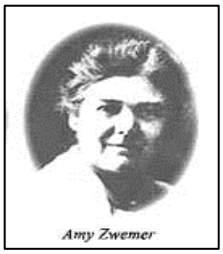
Eventually the boat reached Aden. There they met Kamal Abdul Messiah (a Muslim background believer from Syria) who had joined the Arabian Mission and had come to work with Samuel. In Aden they suffered from severe bouts of malaria and their finances were at an all time low. They had great difficulty trying to transfer funds from USA to Aden. When the money finally arrived they were able to proceed. Valpy French decided to go to Muscat and begin there. Sadly, he died there after a few months and is buried in a sandy cove near Muscat.

In June and July of 1891 Samuel decided to try to visit Sana'a in present day Yemen. At that time it was completely closed to foreigners. He took a boat from Aden to Hodeida and then travelled six days by mule up the mountains of Sana'a. Once he arrived he had a good deal of freedom to witness. On his return to Aden he was nominated as a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society for this feat. For the rest of his life he was entitled to put the letters F.R.G.S. after his name.

Samuel and Kamal Abdul Messiah visited Mukalla – the seaport for the Hadramaut. James sent a message to Samuel to meet him in Basra as he thought that was the ideal place to start. Both men started work in Basra but after a while Samuel left to do itinerant evangelism in the Gulf. Both men worked as distributors for the Bible Society. They opened a shop in the Suq in Basra to sell Bibles. It wasn't long before opposition developed together with hostility from the Ottoman Government. The Bible shop was shut. A 'guard' was placed on the house where James and Samuel lived. Sadly Kamal Abdul Messiah died. He was almost certainly poisoned. After that the opposition died down a bit.

In 1892 Samuel visited Bahrain and began the work there. Samuel's younger brother Peter was a doctor. In 1892 he opened a small hospital in Muscat. Now the Arabian Mission had three bases – Basra, Bahrain and Muscat.

Marriage


Amy Zwemer

Early in their time in Basra James and Samuel were asked by the CMS to meet two young women recruits coming from Australia and to escort them to Baghdad. One of these recruits was a nurse called Miss Amy Wilkes. Samuel fell in love after he was the cause of her dropping a laden tea tray at his feet her first day ashore! To cut a great story short, they were married in the British Consulate in Baghdad on May 18, 1896. CMS didn't let her go easily! They required Samuel to pay the cost of her journey from Australia! Samuel later joked that he had purchased a wife in accordance with true Arab custom!

First period of ministry: Nine years in Bahrain 1896-1905

The Arabian Mission now had its first woman member. Samuel took Amy to Bahrain in June 1896. She was a nurse and immediately began helping him in his rudimentary medical clinic. The summers were extremely hot and humid and the work was very demanding.

Samuel used the evenings and early mornings for Arabic and Islamic studies. He always sought to see Islam through the eyes of its best advocates. He studied the Qur'an and the Hadith along with several orthodox commentaries (Beidawi and Zamakshari) in Arabic.

During these years in Bahrain he wrote three books:

- **Arabia – the Cradle of Islam** (1900)

  This is a great book for those working in the Arabian Peninsula with a detailed picture of the situation as it was over a hundred years ago. Amazing changes have taken place! It is really a book to motivate workers.

- **Raymond Lull: First Missionary to the Muslims** (1902)

- **The Muslim Doctrine of God** (1905)

  This is probably Samuel's most enduring book. In it he highlights the fundamental differences between Islamic and Biblical theologies. He notes that Islam wholly understates both the holiness of God and the offensiveness of sin. Regarding holiness, he says, **"Everything put forward in the Qur'an concerning the unapproachable purity and holiness of Him who is represented as thrice holy in the Bible could be applied to any respectable man."**

On sin, he notes that the Qur'an's failure to diagnose the seriousness of sin or offer any effective remedy for it is, "***Sure evidence of the hand of Satan***".

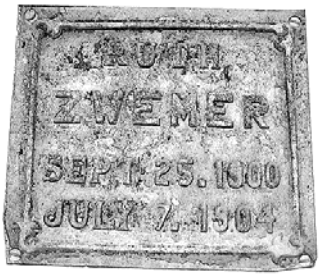
This radical analysis of the theological inadequacies of Islam's doctrines of God and sin proved foundational to all Zwemer's subsequent writings. In late 1898, after Samuel's brother Peter was murdered by poisoning in Muscat. Two doctors supported by the University of Michigan replaced him in the hospital.

Six years later two of Samuel's daughters died in Bahrain of dysentery. Samuel and Amy inscribed on their graves the words: ***"Worthy is the Lamb to receive our riches."***

The graves are still there but the inscription has been chipped off. They also had a son, Raymond after Raymond Lull, and a daughter, Elizabeth, who married Dr Claude Perkins and served among Muslims in China.



Christian Cemetery Bahrain



Second Period of Ministry: Return to the USA 1905-1911

In March 1905 the family returned to the USA for what became an extended period. This was partly because Samuel had developed a serious eye disease that needed specialist treatment and partly because he received two calls to ministry at the same time. By this time (1894) the Arabian Mission had been adopted by the Reformed Church of America's Foreign Mission Board and it became one of their Fields.

The Reformed Church asked Samuel to become their Field Director and at the same time the Student Volunteer Movement asked him to become a travelling representative for recruitment. After much prayer and consultation Samuel couldn't decide which call to accept, so he accepted both!

Missions, Conventions and Recruitment

Much of the next five years in the States Samuel organised conferences and worked on building partnerships and co-operation between workers among Muslims. This period in the States saw the emergence of Samuel's heart – the vision for a worldwide strategic advance of the Gospel to Muslims. This was a vision that was transferred to many leaders. These conferences included:

- Cairo – April 1906 – the first General Conference of Missionaries to the World of Islam
- Conferences of the Student Volunteer Movement. Robert Speer wrote of Samuel, "***Zwemer hung a great map of Islam before us and with a sweep of his hand across the crescent of the Muslim World, said, 'Thou O Christ art all I want and thou, O Christ, art all they want. What Christ can to for any man He can do for every man.' "***

  Speer and Zwemer probably influenced more young men and women to go into missions than any other individuals in all Christian history. At one meeting in a powerful address Samuel used the words that have often been quoted, "***His Kingdom without frontiers***".
- The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland 1910
- Samuel was on the organising committee for 'Occupation of Fields' – i.e. the difficult places – the unreached. At this conference a committee of workers from the Muslim World asked Samuel to start a journal linking workers among Muslims. A quarterly publication was born called **The Muslim World** with Samuel as the editor. The first publication date was January 1911. Samuel managed to put out this scholarly publication every quarter for 37 years without interruption until his death in 1952.

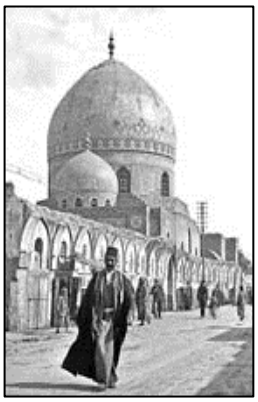
During this period Samuel wrote three more books:

- **The Mohammedan World Today** (1906) a sort of early 'Operation World' for the Muslim World and now very dated
- **Islam – a Challenge to Faith** (1907)

- **The Muslim Christ** (1912) reprinted by WEC Press, Fort Washington, PA (1984). This book draws out the stark contrast between the emasculated portrayal in Islamic sources and the Divine Lord Jesus of the Bible. This book is still worth studying.

The final conference Samuel organised at this time was the Second Consultation on work among Muslims. The first was held in Cairo in 1906. This second took place in Lucknow, India in January 1911. By this time Samuel was known as a leading authority on missions to Muslims.

Third Period of Ministry: based in Cairo – worldwide ministry 1912-1928



Samuel and his family moved to Cairo as a result of a call by the Nile Mission Press (later called Clarion Publications) based in Cairo. The job enabled him to continue working with the Arabian Mission. He had a two-fold brief:

1. The production of literature suitable for Muslim Evangelism
2. The promotion of effective ministry among Muslims worldwide

Cairo had been and still was the major city of the Muslim World in Africa, the Middle East and the rest of Asia both in size and in influence. This period based in Cairo became the most active period in Samuel's life. It involved travel to literally every country with a significant Muslim population as well as running training and consultation conferences.

Temple Gairdner in Cairo called Samuel, '***a steam engine in breeches (trousers)***'. While on a visit to the USA in 1914, Samuel gave 151 addresses in 113 days, Robert Speer wrote, "***In this century not many men have lived who had the talent and drive of Samuel Zwemer. During his lifetime he exerted a tremendous influence on Christian mission to Islam.***"

Throughout Samuel's ministry in Egypt he was a zealous distributor of booklets, Gospels and books. He was often found in the Al-Azhar University in Cairo judicially – i.e. carefully and quietly – giving out booklets as he earnestly discussed issues with both students and faculty. One professor made a huge protest about this. The matter was officially reported and taken to the British government who controlled Egypt at the time. Samuel was ordered to leave the country. He took a ship to Cyprus and returned to Egypt two weeks later in the same ship! The matter ended there, but one of those students from Al-Azhar later became a courageous Muslim background believer.



Despite his adversarial critique of Islam, Samuel invariably commanded respect from his opponents for his command of classical Arabic and his profound knowledge of Islam.

It would take too much time to review the full impact of Samuel's extensive travels. Here is just a sample:

- **In the summer of 1922**
  Conferences with workers were held in Tunis, Sousse, Constantine, Algiers, Casablanca, Marrakech and Tangier. The Constantine visit included a conference of believers from a Muslim background – about 80 attended from Algeria.

- **In July 1915**
  Samuel spoke at the Keswick Convention in England. He spoke on the words in Luke 5:5,

  "Master we have toiled all night and have taken nothing, still at Your word I will let down the net."

  He related this to the Muslim World and did a brief survey of the situation. By faith he said that as we obey our Lord's commission the time will come when Muslims will come to Jesus in such numbers that the 'boats' (churches) won't be able to hold them. The audience was moved by the message and asked what they could do. Samuel's answer was simple, **"Pray"**. Out of this the **Fellowship of Faith for Muslims** was born as a prayer movement. It still continues today and many workers are members.

- **In 1924** a conference was held in Jerusalem for workers among Muslims. Samuel and Amy Zwemer were commissioned to take news of the results to others. In 1924 in the YMCA in Baghdad a conference was held for all workers in Arabia, Iraq and Iran. There was a great reunion with James Cantine.
- **In 1925** Samuel was invited to South Africa. He could speak in Dutch to the Afrikaners, in English and in Arabic to the Muslims. He managed to defuse tensions between Christians and Muslims simply by taking afternoon tea with a local Muslim leader and engaging in an animated conversation in classical Arabic. The incident was reported favourably in the Muslim press and the Muslim community felt that due respect had been shown to them.
- **He visited the Netherlands East Indies** (Indonesia) and a conference was convened for 16 agencies that worked among Muslims. Co-operative literature production came out of this conference.
- **The Zwemers travelled to Teheran**
  Samuel showed a very small pile of the only Farsi evangelistic books that had been produced. Following the conference workers resolved to remedy the situation. The Christian Literature Committee was born.
- **The Zwemers travelled to India**
  The Sultan of Oman was on the ship. This Sultan was the present Sultan's grandfather. Samuel had a good time talking with him and then left him with some books. On arrival in India, many conferences had been planned around British India (i.e. including Pakistan and Bangladesh). Samuel spoke on Muslim evangelism and Amy spoke on reaching Muslim women.
- **After India they went to China** to encourage the outreach among Muslims including the distribution of Christian literature. Samuel was often invited to speak in mosques because of his knowledge of Arabic and Islam. During this period Samuel continued to write books: (* = out of print)

1915 Mohammad and Christ*

Childhood in the Muslim World*

1916 The Disintegration of Islam*

1921 The Influence of Animism on Islam* *(A book on Folk Islam)*

A Muslim Seeker after God *(A biography of Al-Ghazali)*

1922 The Law of Apostasy in Islam

1928 The Glory of the Cross Reprinted by Baker in 1982

This last was Samuel's favourite of all his books. It was also the best seller.

The long period of extraordinary worldwide ministry eventually wore down even a man of Zwemer's great energy. When the offer of a professorship at Princeton that he had refused in 1918 was made again, he responded positively. By this time Samuel was 61 and he and Amy both agreed that they needed a period of much greater stability to allow time for more reflection and writing more books.

Fourth period of ministry: a Professor of Missions (1929-1938)

Samuel became the Professor and Chair of the History of Religion and Christian Mission at Princeton Theological Seminary. He taught a number of courses. He continued to write and he still travelled extensively. His books include:

1929 Across the Muslim World

1934 Thinking Missions with Christ*
This is a great book. It contains a section on missionary motives:

- *The Plight of the Lost*
- *Obedience to the Great Commission*
- *The Constraint of Christ's Love*

After noting the importance and proper role of each of these, he comes to the conclusion that God's own ultimate move – His own glory – is the one that sustains all others. To Samuel it was the view presented in

Scripture of the essential Glory of God that provided the ultimate 'raison d'être' for mission. This was a theme later expounded by John Piper!

As Samuel put it, **"It is the only motive that can comprehend within the same eternal purpose both the great success attending Peter's preaching at Pentecost and the stoning to death of Stephen."**

Samuel notes the many references to God's glory in John 17. Since the context is the Crucifixion, he draws the conclusion that what sustained Jesus in His ultimate 'missionary act' was a concern for God's glory.

1935 The Origin of Religion

1938 Studies in Popular Islam *(Another book on Folk Islam)*

1939 Dynamic Christianity and the World Today

On January 25, 1937, Samuel's beloved wife Amy died suddenly. Amy had been his constant inspiration and co-worker for more than 40 years. After her death Samuel felt a great loneliness in his life. But he always kept his sense of humour! In 1938 he retired from Princeton at the age of 71 because he said he wanted to return to active service!

Fifth Period of Ministry: Re-married! (1839-1950)

In 1939 Samuel moved from New Jersey into New York City. His dear friend from New Brunswick days and colleague in Arabia, James Cantine, introduced him to a lady named Margaret Clarke. Friendship grew into romance and they were married on March 12, 1940.

Margaret had worked as a secretary and began to help Samuel in his research and sorting out his papers. They lived in an apartment on Fifth Avenue that they were able to rent at half price because it was on the 13th floor!

Samuel continued preaching, teaching and travelling. He taught missions courses at the C&MA College in Nyack, NY and in other places. He was the main speaker at the IVCF missionary convention held at the University of Toronto in 1946. Later this convention moved to the University of Illinois in Urbana.

He continued to write books.

1940 The Art of Listening to God

1941 The Cross above the Crescent

1943 Into all the World

1944 Evangelism Today

1945 Heirs of the Prophets - A Factual Survey of the Muslim World

1947 The Glory of the Empty Tomb

1948 How Rich the Harvest

1949 Sons of Adam

In 1949 when Samuel was 83 the Arabian Mission celebrated its 60th anniversary in Kuwait. Samuel and Margaret were invited to attend. They sailed to Beirut and drove by car to Baghdad. They flew to Bahrain where they visited the graves of Samuel's two little daughters and other workers who had died. Looking at the graves, Samuel said: **"If we should hold our peace, these very stones would cry out for the evangelisation of Arabia!"**

Margaret fell ill soon after their return from Arabia. She died in a New York hospital on February 21, 1950.

Journey's End (1952)

Two years later on February 16, 1952 Samuel, aged 85, was asked to speak to an evening meeting of the IVCF in New York. As usual he was there early. Since the afternoon speaker didn't arrive, Samuel spoke twice. He poured out his heart with compassion for the Muslim World. The next day at midnight he suffered a heart attack. He was taken to the Presbyterian Hospital in New York. After several weeks of recuperation he was considered well enough to go to a convalescent home at Port Chester, New York.

On Wednesday April 2, 1952, quietly and suddenly, his tired, compassionate heart simply ceased to beat. A memorial service was held in the First Presbyterian Church in New York. At this service president Mackay of Princeton called Samuel, **"The prince among missionaries and an apostle to Muslims."**

In attempting to assess the influence of a man like Samuel Zwemer we could tell more of his exploits in Arabia, list the various mission agencies that were born out of his vision, review his scholarship in the books and in the Muslim World.

But if a person is best measured by his/her view of God, then it is Samuel's exalted view of the holiness and the glory of God and his radical view of the fallenness of man that hold our attention. His combination of a theologically incisive critique of Islam with a very deep compassion for individual Muslims is the true legacy of this great man of God.

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See below the opening paragraphs from **The Glory of the Impossible.**
To read the whole work go to: www.arabicbible.com/christian/missions/zwemer

The Glory of the Impossible by Samuel M. Zwemer

"The challenge of the unoccupied fields of the world is one to great faith and therefore to great sacrifice. Our willingness to sacrifice for an enterprise is always in proportion to our faith in that enterprise. Faith has the genius of transforming the barely possible into actuality.

Once men are dominated by the conviction that a thing must be done, they will stop at nothing until it is accomplished.

We have our "marching orders," as the Iron Duke *(Arthur Wesley, Duke of Wellington*) said, and because our Commander-in-Chief is not absent, but with us, the impossible becomes not only practical but imperative.

Charles Spurgeon, preaching from the text, ***"All power is given unto Me … Lo, I am with you always"***

used these words:

"You have a factor here that is absolutely infinite and what does it matter as to what other factors may be. 'I will do as much as I can', says one. Any fool can do that! He that believes in Christ does what he ***cannot*** *do. He attempts the impossible and performs it."*

