

J. W. Sweetman: Pioneer Missionary Scholar

by Shirley W. Madany

We have written a great deal about the late Samuel Zwemer, and have recently promoted the work of the late Harvey Staal whose life work on the ancient Codex 151 gave us such a thrilling glance back to the 9th century and to the first Arabic Bible. It is time to do homage to the late J. Woodrow Sweetman, surely a giant scholar of the last century whose work, again, as is so often the case, is rapidly gathering dust and being forgotten and yet remains a veritable treasure.

I have heard about J. W. Sweetman all my life for he is on par with Samuel Zwemer as far as great saints are concerned. When we were forced to return from Syria in 1955 Bassam secured a position in Winnipeg with the Canadian Bible Society. There he discovered amongst a series of booklets commissioned by the British and Foreign Bible Society, at the time of their third jubilee, one which was titled "The Bible in Islam". He was so impressed by its contents that he sought out all the writings he could find by its author, J. W. Sweetman. Later, when studying at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he was able to discover some of Sweetman's masterly works in the College Library and still later procured the two volumes of Part II of this man's life work.

A little more information about this English missionary. James Windrow Sweetman was Vice-Principal of the Henry Martyn School of Islamics at Aligarh, India (pre partition of India) and then Professor of Islamics at the Selly Oak College, Birmingham. He died in 1966 while the second volume of Part II of his masterly work on "Islam and Christian Theology" was going through the press. A colleague gave advice and assistance. One grieves to think of the rest of the manuscript never seeing publication but we can be thankful for what has been preserved of Dr. Sweetman's great history of Islam and Christianity. It consists of an historical survey covering the relation between the Eastern Christian Church and Islam, the Dark Ages in Europe and the era of the Crusades, the Preaching Orders of the Church versus Islam and the "polemical climax" personified in the champions of their respective faiths whose weapon was the pen, not the sword: Ricoldo of Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa on the Christian side, Ibn Hazm and Al Ghazzali for Islam.

Professor Sweetman shows that the modern dialogue between the two great faiths is not to be accomplished by easy, popular methods, but demands rigorous and dedicated intellects on both sides. His own contribution sets an example of the fine scholarship, which the Christian-Islam debate requires.

Rather than talk any more about this devoted scholar we would like to share certain portions from that important Bible Society booklet. We are confident that you will thrill to the reading of these passages.

Following are some choice paragraphs from the first chapter of that important booklet:

"Six hundred years had passed since Christ walked the earth and yet no one had put His words into the tongue of the Arab. . . .The characteristic name by which both Jews and Christians were known among the Arabs was "the people of the Book," which meant the people of the Bible. Yet that by which they were famous was kept as a hidden treasure, hoarded and not cast abroad like seed to bring forth fruit." Pp. 9,10 "Here is the tragedy of the Church at the time of the rise of Islam. All truth demanded that, when Muhammad's spirit was stirred with the needs of his people and when he was groping after Him who could save and unify, he should have had in his hands the true Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Instead it was left for him to learn by hearsay from the lips of uninstructed or imperfectly instructed Christians what those Scriptures contained. It seems quite evident to me that initially Muhammad considered that he was putting Biblical truth into language which could be understood by his own countrymen. It was to be an "Arabic Quran" to be recited in a familiar tongue. And if it had been a translation of the Christian Scripture he might have been like a Luther giving the living Word to the "raw Saxon" or a Tindale* who unlocked the treasures of Scripture for the man of common speech. P. 11

"What is important, and to our mind a tragedy, is that the translation of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments had to wait till more than a century at least after the experience of Muhammad on Mount Hira. The first was perhaps a translation from the Latin made in Spain by John of Seville in the early eighth century, and probably from the Vulgate. The second, if we are to believe the reporters, was by a Muslim who made his translation in the latter part of the same century at the command of the Caliph Harun Ar Rashid. Then the renowned translator of the Greek philosophers into Arabic, the Syrian Christian physician Hunayn son of Isaac, tried his hand in the ninth century. The earliest translation of the New Testament I have ever read and handled is one made in the eleventh century by a Christian of Baghdad, a piece of work marked by devotion and ability. But oh! The pity of this long delay."** P. 12

One of the first things that a Muslim friend might confront you with is the terrible amount of error in your Holy Book. That is how they see it. They base it on the glaring differences to be seen when comparison is made with their holy book. Sweetman in the following quote from Chapter III gives you a good idea how to answer such a claim.

"Echoes are no substitute for the Voice. They are confusing, and those who hear them are often bewildered. When, as in the case of Islam, the dim echoes of Scriptures are mistaken for the real voice of it, the consequences are grievous. A new criterion of truth is set up. What does it matter that for long centuries the Christians, to whom the revelation of God came, have held all their solemn feasts and kept their fasts in memory of a death on Calvary? If the new version is accepted they are in error, and those who claim to have been guided by Christ are really misled and out of the way. "Now, after a lapse of time in which the Christian Scriptures has remained still unknown to them, Muslims came from a newly-fixed point of view to the Old Testament and the New Testament, placed in their hands by tardy Christians. It is at first a source of gratification to them, for the Quran commends the earlier Scripture. But when they come to examine the newly discovered book they find that it does not agree at all with that to which they have gradually become accustomed. "This Gospel tells how Jesus really died and so it cannot be the Injil which Muhammad commended. That was a revelation which God gave to Jesus, a book which marked His prophethood; but this consists of several books by disciples called Matthew,

Mark, Luke and John and letters written by Paul and John, James and Peter." And so they conclude that these writings are not the original Gospel but that the Jews and the Christians have corrupted the primitive revelation." Pp. 17 & 18

Sweetman advocated a loving approach to the Muslim. In chapter IV under the title "The Missions of Penitence and Love" he said:

"Should not therefore the missionary as the representative of the Church of Christ as well as the ambassador of Christ Himself be penitent when, through an initial fault, the Arabs were not given the Scripture in their own tongue? Can he not see that the long process of estrangement and misunderstanding might have been avoided? But more than this, he has to ask himself whether all of our relations with Islam have been of such a character as to show the followers of Jesus to be truly pressing on in the steps which He trod? Love was his name. But the story of our dealings with Islam can so often not be described as for love's sake.

"We stand under a cross, but is it the cross which was carried aloft in crusade over armed forces? Is it the cross which is formed by the hilt of a sword? Choice spirits in the Christian world have felt that it is necessary to speak to Islam in another way. Peter of Cluny wrote to them: "It may seem strange, and perhaps is so in fact that a man removed from you by great distance ... should write from the farthest West to men who live in Eastern lands ... that he attacks you not by arms, as the Christians have often done, but by word, not by force but by reason, not by hate but by love." Francis of Assisi went with the message of love into the armed camp of the Saracens, counting not his dear life dear unto him if only he might commend the love of Christ; and Raymond Lull, whose all absorbing theme was the Love of the Beloved, came at last to martyrdom for Christ's sake. These and many others sought victory for the love of Christ and tried to break down the barriers which centuries of estrangement and violence had strengthened; but it was given to Henry Martyn to dedicate all his great intellectual powers, the qualities of his loving and gentle spirit, the passion of his soul, to make restitution for what was withheld from Islam in the past, to see that the Word of God was not only translated but made into an instrument whereby the truth of Christ might speak to all who followed the Islamic path. P. 24

"So now the cross which is presented to the Muslim's gaze is the cross of sacrifice and passion. The story of Abdullah and Sabat seems to be prophetic. They had been friends and then Abdullah heard the voice of God and found peace in Christ. He fled from his native place but was recognized in the streets of Bukhara by Sabat, his one-time friend, who denounced him. He was mutilated and martyred by a mob, Sabat standing by the while and consenting to the deed, like Paul at the death of Stephen. Fiery-tempered and uncontrolled as he remained even to the very end, something came into the life of Sabat at that hour of his friend's death. He tells us himself, 'He looked at me...but not with anger. He looked at me...but it was with compassion and the countenance of forgiveness...and when he bowed his head to take the fatal stroke, it was as if all Bukhara exclaimed, 'What new thing is this?' Brought by God's hand and with the vision of the face of his dying friend, it was this fierce Sabat who joined with the gentle Martyn to give back the word of reconciling love to the Muslims of India and Persia. Henry Martyn himself died, with the sacrifice of all that he so richly was and with a most willing surrender of his loving heart to his task, in a lonely village in Asia Minor about the age when 'the young Prince of Glory died.'

"Such is the true way to commend the Gospel to Islam, the way of penitence and sacrifice. It was William Temple who said cogently: 'You can never say to men, 'Go

to the Cross'; you can only say 'Come!' We must stand under the shadow of the Cross where our tears of penitence flow when we beckon to our brothers in Islam to come and "see whether there was any sorrow like unto His sorrow." It is not to be done with violence, whether of arms of conceit and superiority, but with a sense of standing ourselves under judgment of a task undone, a task to which Christ's love would fain have constrained us, and of ourselves as sinners saved by the grace which we commend to men. " P. 25

In the last chapter titled The Living Word, J. W. Sweetman closes with these final words:

"Listen to a final testimony from the lips of an Arab, 'For by His Word He cleft the rock of my heart and opened it as a grave. So I see He does to the hearts of other men as evil and as wicked as I was. Verily it is His Word which makes of a wolf a meek and willing lamb, and of a ravenous beast a mild and docile creature! Thus was I led to Jesus Christ and to salvation.' P. 44

O that the world might taste and see
The riches of His grace,
The arms of love that compass me
Might all mankind embrace!"

*Commonly spelled Tyndale

** J.W. Sweetman was unaware of the 1953 discovery of MT. SINAI ARABIC CODEX 151. It is one of the oldest Arabic translations of the New Testament done by a Syrian Christian in the latter part of the ninth century. Most likely, due to the Mongolian invasion of the Middle East in the thirteenth century, the manuscript was smuggled to the safety of Saint Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai.

[Notes * & ** added by Bassam Madany.]

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