

The Missiology of Kamil Abdul Messiah *A Syrian Convert from Islam to Christianity*

By Rev. Bassam M. Madany

Middle East Resources
www.unashamedofthegospel.org

1 KAMIL'S CONVERSION

One of the most moving stories of missions among Muslims was preserved for us by Dr. Henry H. Jessup, a Presbyterian missionary who labored in Beirut, Lebanon, for fifty- three years during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Kamil belonged to a prominent Muslim family in Beirut. He was well educated in Arabic and Turkish. As a seeker for the truth, he began reading the Arabic New Testament. That led him to meet Dr. Jessup, who helped him to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

After Kamil's conversion and having done some mission work among the Bedouin tribes in Syria, he joined the work of two missionaries, Rev. James Cantine of the Reformed Church Mission to Arabia, and his colleague, Rev. Samuel M. Zwemer.

"Kamil, a servant of the Messiah", developed a missionary approach to Arabic-speaking Muslims, based on his new-found faith and his intimate knowledge of Islam's authoritative texts, the Qur'an and Hadith. I would like to highlight some aspects of his "Missiology" by quoting from his biography. He offers us important

lessons in the presentation of the Gospel to the Muslims of today.

In telling the story of Kamil's conversion, Dr. Jessup wrote:

"Kamil listened intently to every word, and asked questions as if hungering and thirsting for the truth. Then he asked, 'How do you pray?' I told him we would engage in prayer, asking divine grace and help and the guidance of the Spirit. He knelt by my side and repeated every word after me. At the close he said, 'I never heard this kind of a prayer before. It is talking with God. We repeat words five times a day, but we have no such prayers as yours.'

"I then laid on the table the Bible, the Concordance, the Bible Handbook, and the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism with proof texts. I explained to him that this Catechism was in men's words, but was concise and would give him an idea of the system of Christian belief, but he need not accept a word of it unless he could find it supported by the Scriptures. I also urged him to ask divine aid and light whenever he read the Bible, and then I left him alone. On returning at noon I found that he had prepared a series of questions about various passages of Scripture

which he had been reading. These I explained to him.

“On the evening of the next day he called and remained two hours. He had committed to memory the first ten answers of the Catechism. With the fourth, fifth, and sixth he was delighted. The answer, ‘God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth,’ charmed him and the sixth answer, - There are three persons in the Godhead the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory,’ —he said, set his mind at rest. ‘We Mohammedans think that the Christians worship three Gods,’ said he ‘but you do not; for there is one God in three persons the Eternal Father, the Eternal Word, and the Eternal Spirit. That is all clear.’ Then we read the Bible together for two hours and he listened with astonishment and delight. He seized upon the great doctrine of the atoning sacrifice of Christ with such eagerness and satisfaction that he seemed to be taught of the divine Spirit from the very outset. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what we need. The Koran does not give us a way of salvation. It leaves us in doubt as to whether God will forgive our sins. It does not explain how he can do so and preserve his honor and justice. Here in the gospel it is plain. Christ bore our sins; he died in our stead; he died to save us from dying. This is beautiful; it is just what I want.’

“Up to this time he had been on probation, and it was thought better to give him time to

take the step deliberately. But now there seemed no reason for further delay. He was rooted and grounded in the faith of Jesus Christ, and he was baptized January 15th, rejoicing thus to take his stand decidedly for Christ, his Saviour.”

2 CALLED TO SERVICE

Before too long, the call came to serve in the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America. In the accounts taken from his biography, we find ourselves in the company of Kamil and listening to the way he engaged in missions to Muslims.

“In the closing months of 1890 Messrs. Cantine and Zwemer left Beirut for Aden, and soon wrote requesting Kamil to join them there so without delay he went. He was heartily welcomed by the missionaries and began his work at once among the Arabs. Aden is the seaport of southern Arabia, and caravans of Arabs from the mountains north toward Sanaa and east toward Hadramout are constantly coming in, bringing coffee, dates, spices, and wool, and buying European goods.

“It was to these caravans that the missionaries recommended Kamil to give his attention, and he did so day after day. He often had from fifty to one hundred Arabians seated around him listening to the word of God.

“Describing his work, Kamil wrote in his report to the mission:

“All who wanted books thronged around me, especially when I had proved to them from the

Koran that the Tourah and the Injeel (and New Testaments) are the books of God. They accepted the proofs and agreed that they were indeed from God, and in two days they had purchased thirty Bibles and Testaments.

“On Friday, April 3rd, two of them came to me and asked me to write out for them prayers for morning and evening and for use before eating. These prayers contained a petition that God would enlighten their hearts, that they might know him truly more and more, that he would send his Holy Spirit, his grace, and his word, and implant them in their hearts. I also wrote in them the Lord’s Prayer and various spiritual expressions, closing by asking an answer from God in honor of the Son of his love, the Lord Jesus Christ. These were written in a style which the Moslems admire, and when I read them to them they rejoiced exceedingly and thanked me for writing them. I then offered prayer to God, praising him for his mercies and for helping me in proclaiming the glad tidings of salvation.”

3 KAMIL’S FATHER

Kamil carried on a regular correspondence with his father in Beirut. During those days, Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre were part of the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire. “Lebanon” was much smaller than today, and included the central part of the land, known as Jebel Lubnan, Mount Lebanon.

These samples taken from his letters give us a glimpse of his “Missiology.”

Kamil replied to his father as follows:

“I was honored by the receipt of the answer dated 24th Ramadan, 1308, to the four questions previously presented by your son.

“The purport of your reply is that ‘the reading of the Old and New Testaments is lawful, but to act in accordance with their teaching is wrong, inasmuch as the great book of God which he sent down to our lord Mohammed has abrogated the wisdom of all other laws also that the Tourah and Injeel are books of God, the Tourah being sent down to our lord Moses the Kaleem of God, and the Injeel upon our Lord Aiesa.’

“You also say that ‘it is unlawful to receive what is in them unless it be in accordance with our book, as the Ten Commandments. But such statements as that the prophets like Lot and David and Solomon sinned against God, we can not believe at all. Nor do we believe in the Trinity because there is the one only God who has no wife nor Son, and there are many texts to prove that he is One.’ You also say ‘that as the Old and New Testaments contain such things, it is plain that they have been changed and corrupted, and that they are not the Old and New Testaments sent down to Moses and Jesus and that we should not read them for any other object than the defense of our religion; and to preach from them and call God’s servants to believe in their falsehoods, is the greatest of crimes, and whosoever does it, if he be not an infidel is worse than the infidels.’

“Therefore, after asking your permission and requesting your favor and your fatherly prayers, I would say in reply to your excellency:

“For since you say it is lawful to read the books, I opened them and read the following precious treasures: Christ said, ‘Whatsoever ye will that men should do unto you, do ye also likewise unto them, for this is the law and the prophets.’ He also said, ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ ‘I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.’ He also said, ‘I am the vine, ye are the branches; he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit for without me ye can do nothing.’ ‘Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee ; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.’ ‘I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.’ Then I read this command of Christ, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.’ And God says in Isaiah: ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’ And so it is, my honored father, from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New; I

find verses like these which delight and refresh and quicken the heart and soften it; and when I wish to appropriate them with all my heart, and believe them, on account of the delight I have in reading them, then you call out to me, ‘Break not a loaf, touch not a dish ‘ (it is wrong to act according to them), and I become like those poor invited guests, or rather I become like the man of whom Christ said, ‘he built his house on the sand, and the wind and the storms came and destroyed it.’

“Now, as to the Koran having abrogated all previous laws, my dear father, I cannot find in the Koran a single verse showing that it has abrogated the Old and New Testaments, but the contrary. It says in the Surat el Anaam, ‘We gave Moses the book complete as to whatever is excellent and an explanation of every matter and a direction and a mercy, if haply they might believe in the meeting of their Lord.’ Then in Surat Hood, ‘And before him is the book of Moses a guide and a mercy. These have faith in it, but the partisans who believe not in it are menaced with the fire. Have thou no doubts about that book, for it is the very truth from thy Lord, but most men will not believe.’ And in Surat el Kosos: ‘And verily we gave Moses the book after that we had destroyed the former generations, an enlightenment unto mankind and a direction and a mercy, if haply they might be admonished.’ Also in Surat el Ma’edat: ‘And we caused Jesus, the Son of Mary, to follow in their footsteps, attesting the Scripture of the Tourah which preceded him: and we gave him the Gos-

pel wherein is guidance and light, which attests the Tourah that preceded it, and a direction and an admonition to the pious.’

“It is clear to me, my father, that the Old and New Testaments are complete and perfect in everything needed in religion: a guidance to mercy, an enlightenment to all men of all sects and faiths, lights to their hearts, by which they see truth and discriminate between truth and falsehood, and a guide to the laws which are the true way of God, and a mercy, for if we act according to them we will receive mercy from God, be his name praised and exalted!

“One of the insuperable difficulties in the way of changing and tampering with the text of the Bible is the multitude of versions and translations, and their wide distribution over the earth. To gather them all and change them all in the same way so that they would all agree in all the different languages would be simply impossible. If a few were changed, the rest would remain pure as a proof of the change, and thus the fraud would easily be detected. Another difficulty in the way of changing the Old Testament is the excessive care taken by the Jews to guard the purity of the Hebrew text. They counted the very letters in the Pentateuch and could tell the middle letter, and also the middle sentence, word and letter, in the rest of the Old Testament. They know how many times a letter of the alphabet occurs in the whole book. For instance, they found that the letter Aleph occurs 42,377 times, and Beth 32,318 times, etc. This grew out of their extraordinary care of the

text, and a change in the language while in their hands was utterly impossible.

“And so I can say that the Tourah and Injeel are the books of God, and no one would dare to stretch out his hand with evil intent against them, after reading the warning in the last chapter of the noble gospel which says, ‘If any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and from the things which are written in this book.’

“And now as to your claim that the preaching of the gospel and calling men to believe in the Scriptures is wrong, as you urge, and that it is ‘the greatest of crimes, and he who does it, if he be not an infidel, is worse than an infidel,’ etc., I would say, my honored father, that after the convincing proofs I have given you of the authenticity of the Old and New Testaments, the impossibility of their having been corrupted and changed, and that they are the very books ‘sent down’ to our lord Moses and to our Lord Jesus Christ, I read these books and preach them, and teach all that they contain, and invite my Moslem brethren to believe in them. I believe in all they say in word, deed, and thought. And I also invite your excellency and my brethren and my kindred and my friends to believe in these two noble books. Oh, my joy, my delight, would you but read them and believe what they contain of treasures and precious jewels I entreat you to read them if it be but once, and you would then see how your heart would cling to them. Then would you exclaim, ‘Yes, there is no doubt nor

question about their being the books of God!’ And every day, yea, every hour you would read them with joy and teach and preach and guide others to these precious jewels. Then you would say, ‘My son Kamil is right; the truth is with him, and he has attained the favor of God—be he praised and exalted !’

“The mystery of the Trinity is not greater than other mysteries of God—be he exalted! God has a right to reveal to us a truth without giving special reasons or particulars, and we are bound to receive such truth from him in humility and hearty faith, and we should receive the doctrine of the Trinity as we receive that of the Unity, without attempting to explain particularly its mode. I know that your excellency finds this point very difficult but when your heart has been illumined with divine light, you will understand this at once and readily. Do not say, ‘My son Kamil has become an infidel.’ God forbid! But say, ‘He knows the truth far more than before.’

4 EVALUATION OF KAMIL

Dr. Jessup summarized the devotion of Kamil to his Lord and Savior and to the work of missions among Muslims in these memorable words:

“Kamil’s history is a rebuke to our unbelief in God’s willingness and power to lead Mohammedans into a hearty acceptance of Christ and his atoning sacrifice.

“We are apt to be discouraged by the closely riveted and intense intellectual aversion of these

millions of Moslems to the doctrines of the Trinity and of the divinity of Jesus Christ. But Kamil’s intellectual difficulties about the Trinity vanished when he felt the need of a divine Saviour. He seemed taught by the Spirit of God from the first. He exclaimed frequently at the wonderful scheme of redemption through the atoning work of Christ.

“‘El fida, el fida,’ ‘redemption,’ he once said to me, ‘redemption, how wonderful! I now see how God can be just and justify the sinner. We have nothing of this in Islam. We talk of God’s mercy, but we can not see how his justice is to be satisfied’” What the Mohammedan needs above all things is a sense of sin, of personal sin, and of his need of a Saviour.

“But a sense of personal demerit, a conviction of sin before a just and holy God, reveals the emptiness of these outward works, and drives the sinner to seek a Saviour. Kamil felt this deeply and expressed it in his prayers and his conversation. Arguments on the divinity of Christ will avail little with a man who does not feel the need of a divine redeemer. And when he feels this need he does not need the arguments. ‘An incarnation in order to redemption’ is the foundation of Christian theology. If we feel our need of a redeemer, we can not be satisfied with any less person than God incarnate. Let us remember this in laboring for Mohammedans. They need to feel the enormity of sin against a just and holy God. They need no new gospel, but the old, old story, told in the old, old way.”

These words of Dr. Henry Jessup, aptly describe the “Missiology” of one of the first fruits of missions in the Middle East. It has been my own approach to missions during my thirty-six years of radio ministry to the Arabic-speaking world.

In my book, “The Bible and Islam: Sharing God’s Word with a Muslim,” I wrote the following:

“It is also my conviction that our greatest difference with Islam is not merely in the doctrines of God and Christ, but it is also in the area of the doctrine of man. Muslims are taught that man is not really sinful in the Biblical sense of the word, and thus needs no redemption. It is extremely important, therefore, that we keep on emphasizing this Biblical teaching that the Messiah came from God specifically to deal with the awful imperialism of sin.

“When we have succeeded, by the grace of God, to show a Muslim that he needs a Savior and that God has sent Jesus the Messiah to be this Savior, then the traditional difficulties with such doctrines as the Trinity and the Sonship of Jesus Christ tend to disappear.”

Kamil’s “Missiology” was firmly grounded in Holy Scripture and aided by his acquaintance with the Westminster Shorter Catechism, as well as other doctrinal books produced by the early missionaries, such as Dr. James Dennis’ book on Systematic Theology, known in Arabic as “Nidham al-Ta’leem fi ‘Ilm al-Lahoot al-Qaweem.”

As to his use of the Qur’an, it was “tactical.” By this term I mean that he quoted from it only what he saw it was fit and useful in his arguments with Muslims, thus granting the Qur’an a “provisionary” authority. For example, when the Qur’an speaks highly of the Tawrat, the Zaboor, and the Injeel, Kamil used those statements to vindicate their inspired nature, arguing that, coming from God, those Scriptures could not have been altered; thus their message was authoritative and infallible.

The study of Kamil’s life and ministry is very helpful to any Christian who seeks to bring the redeeming message of the Bible to Muslims, both in their homelands and in the West.