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## *“The Greatest Hymn”*



*Bassam M. Madany*

It was during my three years at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh (1950–53,) that I discovered Samuel M. Zwemer’s book, *The Cross Above the Crescent*. The subtitle, *The Validity, Necessity and Urgency of Missions to Muslims*, was of special relevance to me, as I was preparing for a lifetime missionary career to Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Soon after I had finished reading the book, I wrote a letter to Dr. Zwemer and sent it in care of Zondervan Publishing House in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Before too long, I received a very warm letter from him. At the time, he was in his eighties and was living at the home of his daughter in Alexandria, Virginia. I still remember a paragraph in his letter where he made some pointed references to the great hymns of the church, especially those composed during the nineteenth century, “The Great Century of Missions.” In April 1952, Dr. Zwemer went to his eternal reward, a few days before he was to reach 85!

Lately, I have been looking over several of Zwemer’s works in my library. I began to reread, *Thinking Missions with Christ*, published in 1934. Chapter 7 has this title, “The Greatest Hymn.” The reference is to Reginald Heber’s *From Greenland’s Icy Mountains*. I would like to share with you some gems from this chapter and add a few comments.

Reginald Heber (1783–1826) became immortal through his missionary hymns, written before and after he went out as the second Anglican Bishop of Calcutta. Among his fifty-seven hymns, five are well known in the churches today: "Hosanna to the Living God"; "Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning"; "Holy, Holy, Holy"; "The Son of God Goes Forth to War"; and "From Greenland's Icy Mountains."

Dr. Eugene Stock characterized the last of those mentioned as the greatest of all missionary hymns. It has been very widely used and has been translated into the leading languages of Europe and into many other languages on the mission fields. Is the hymn, as some say, "too old-fashioned and conventional for present-day use"? One meets with strong prejudice against certain of its expressions, but closer study will reveal new elements of power and beauty. (73)

Dr. Zwemer goes on to mention the many gifts and qualities of Reginald Heber:

In 1815 he delivered the Bampton lectures, was made canon of St. Asaph in 1817 and soon after that was appointed Bishop of Calcutta, as successor to the first Bishop, Dr. Middleton. Bishop Heber is described as a brilliant scholar, a true poet, a devoted parish clergyman, a fascinating personality. . . . Four years before his consecration as Bishop, he wrote his great missionary hymn under circumstances that are most interesting.

Mr. Heber, then rector of Hodnet, was visiting Dean Shirley, dean of St. Asaph and vicar of Wrexham, his father-in-law, just before Whit-Sunday, 1819. A royal letter had been issued, calling for missionary offerings in aid of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, on that particular day. Mr. Heber had gone to hear the dean preach and to take his share of the Sunday evening lectures just established in that church. On the Saturday previous, he was asked to prepare some verses to be sung at the close of the morning service. Sitting at the window of the old vicarage, in a short time he produced this hymn—except the

lines, "Waft, waft ye winds, His story," which he wrote later. . . . This was the first of modern missionary hymns that speaks imperatively to the conscience and at the same time with persuasion and tenderness. It came as a trumpet call to duty.

A lady residing in Savannah, Georgia, had in some way become possessed of a copy of the words, sent to this country from England. She was arrested by the beauty of the poetry and its possibilities as a hymn. . . . She had been told of a young clerk in a bank, Lowell Mason by name, just a few doors away, down the street. It was said that he had the gift for making beautiful songs. She sent her son to this genius in music, and in a half-hour's time he returned with this composition. Like the hymn it voices, it was done at a stroke, but has lasted through the years. (74–76)

It seems that during the 1930s, some criticisms were leveled at Reginald Heber's missionary hymn. Perhaps its language was too harsh, or it belittled people of other lands. Dr. Zwemer came to the defense of the hymn and answered its critics by writing:

No one disputes that its language is chaste, its structure logical (once we grant the premises) and that it conforms in its imagery and rhythm to the laws of good hymnody. The fact is that this hymn offers a concise summary of the modern missionary enterprise as conceived by the men who laid its foundations. The first stanza proclaims the universality of the task; the second its necessity; the third its urgency; the fourth its certainty of accomplishment. One could hardly crowd an argument for the basis, the aim, the motive and the goal of missions into smaller compass than we have in these four verses of eight lines each.

"Chains of error still bind men and women and little children in Africa and India. . . ."

It was not the intention of Bishop Heber to assert that the inhabitants of Ceylon were sinners, vile above other men, but to point out, by one example of conditions in his day, the need

for a Saviour from sin in all its terrible forms in all the world and the tragedy of spiritual blindness in the worship of the creature rather than the Creator—whether on the Gold-coast of Chicago or of West Africa, man bows down to wood and stone. (77, 78)

Zwemer adds to his own defense of "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" the words of a British missionary who had spent twenty-one years in India. In a letter dated February 22, 1934, sent to *The British Weekly*, the retired missionary referred to the new Methodist Hymn Book that had omitted Heber's missionary hymn. He wrote:

Perhaps objection was taken to the final lines: "The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone." No one suggests that he bows down to wood and stone because he is enlightened; for in another hymn we sing, "And soon may the heathen . . . cast their idols all away." If it be said that he does not bow down to wood and stone, but to the gods for whom they stand, that will not help; that only makes things worse. (80)

Dr. Zwemer ended his chapter on "The Greatest Hymn" with these stirring words:

"Can we whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high" continue to discuss the spiritual values of higher Hinduism and deny to the masses of India the lamp of life? If we no longer feel the urgency of our message it is because we have lost the overwhelming sense of its necessity. He who knows what salvation is for himself must share the good news.

*Salvation! O Salvation!  
The joyful sound proclaim  
Till earth's remotest nation  
Has learned Messiah's name.*

There is no substitute for the missionary passion. To revive the spirit of evangelism, to restore the note of immediacy, to

convince the world that we have a message sufficient for all men, everywhere and always, we must go back to the Gospel as proclaimed by the apostles: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and rose again."

*Waft, waft, ye winds, His story,  
And you, ye waters roll,  
Till like a sea of glory  
It spreads from pole to pole.*

This missionary hymn does not need revision. It needs reiteration and revival. Africa and India, and we ourselves still need the old Gospel. (81)

Seventy-one years have passed since Samuel Zwemer, called by his biographer, J. Christy Wilson, "Apostle to Islam," wrote this stirring commentary on Reginald Heber's hymn. As I look over the contents of new and revised editions of several traditional Protestant hymnbooks, I discover the hymn is no longer there! I find this a sad and painful phenomenon. Should our children and grandchildren be deprived of the theology, appeal, and challenge of this great missionary hymn by its disappearance at the very time when all other major world religions are reviving and spreading?

#### *Author*

Rev. Bassam M. Madany has been a contributing editor for *Reformation & Revival Journal* for many years. He was the Arabic language broadcast minister of "The Back to God Hour," the radio ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, from 1958–94. His broadcasts are still aired daily to the Arabic-speaking world (North Africa and the Middle East) over international radio stations. A specialist in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, he also teaches at the college and seminary level. He is the author of *The Bible and Islam*, a helpful introduction to the subject. He has contributed to numerous theological publications. The ministry of Rev. Madany, Middle East Resources, can be accessed on the Web at: [www.Levant.info](http://www.Levant.info).