

THE SEVENFOLD COMMISSION OF THE CROSS AND THE MARSH ARABS

by Brother Samuel

(Available online: www.marsharabs.synthasite.com, 106 pages)

Wilfred Thesiger's classic book entitled *The Marsh Arabs* fascinated me as a young man and any related article still attracts my attention. I met Brother Samuel, the author of *The Sevenfold Commission of the Cross & The Marsh Arabs*, a few years ago when I was the speaker at a mission's conference in Africa. Brother Samuel shared with me his vision for this unreached people group. In this work he brings together what he describes as two streams; the traditional last seven words of Christ on the cross as expounded at many Good Friday services, and the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq. The Biblical framework becomes the scaffold for theological reflection, ethnological information, and missiological application. For those of us more familiar with mainstream Sunni Islam, we are given insights into Shi'a Islam. However, this is not intended in any way to be a study of Shi'a doctrine.

The list of Contents sets the scene for what follows with single-word chapter titles and the related Biblical texts, which are frustratingly omitted in the actual chapter headings. Brother Samuel quotes extensively from a broad range of revered divines, from John Calvin to John Piper. Baby-boomers will enjoy the ever-insightful comments of FF Bruce, J Stott, L Morris, and WW Wiersbe.

The introduction and first two chapters entitled 'Ignorance' and 'Paradise' challenge the reader to take the Great Commission seriously, especially in the context of the Marsh Arabs to whom there is no known outreach. This people group is introduced along with some information about Shi'a Islam. Chapter two contains a valuable comparison between paradise in the Bible and in the Qur'an (Djanna/Jannah). Brother Samuel quotes repeatedly from Mufti Zubair Bayat's book entitled *Maidens of Paradise* and then asks, 'Do "good" Marsh Arabs go to paradise?' (p. 24) Using the 'great balances' (Mizan) image for judgement in the Qur'an we are reminded that they are indeed in desperate need of Christ. He writes, 'Their paradisiacal chimera promises plenty but Mizan reduces to penury' (p. 25). As the dying criminal is promised paradise by the crucified Jesus, so the proclamation of the Gospel gives hope to the Marsh Arabs.

I found chapter three, 'Family', the most interesting. Brother Samuel draws our attention to Jesus' concern for the welfare of his mother. The primacy of the family, especially the extended family, and the relationship between sons and

their mothers characterize all ‘collective’ societies, not least the Arab world. There is a helpful aside regarding the use of the term ‘woman’ rather than ‘mother’ in the dialogue between Jesus and Mary (p. 31). He also touches on the suffering of Mary, a theme to which he returns several times. The application to the daily experience of Marsh Arab women, especially in the context of their people’s near genocide under Saddam Hussein’s hegemony, is excellent. For example, this quote from Deborah Meroff sums up the position of women in post-war Iraq, ‘This country’s population is 60 percent women, and as many as 300,000 are war widows’ (p. 35). The Calvary application of the filial respect Jesus shows to his mother and her suffering transfer easily to the Marsh Arab milieu. The classical Qur’anic denial of the death of Jesus on the cross averts our eyes from the foot of the cross. We should pay more attention to the Golgotha tableau. On a visit to the Philippines, a Christian brother told me of a believer from a Muslim background who had come to faith in Christ as a result of contemplating Mary at the cross. In a Muslim society who knows their son the best? His mother. If Jesus had been substituted by another, his mother would have known.

Chapters four (Forsaken) and five (Thirst) address the two hard sayings of Jesus from the cross. They raise the question for the Muslim that if Jesus was divine how could he insult God. Brother Samuel quotes one Muslim commentator, ‘Further, it is incredible that such words should come from a Prophet of Allah because Allah never breaks His Promise and His Prophets never complained against His Promise’ (p. 42). The argument follows that the Scriptures must therefore be corrupted. Brother Samuel reviews the Christian explanations of the ‘forsaken’ words, drawing on Stott and Bruce. He concludes that the cry of Jesus expresses the profound agony of a ‘very special death’ (p. 47) of the only sacrificial Lamb of God who could take away the sin of the world. The application of such suffering to the Marsh Arab context is transparent. Brother Samuel provides six quotations that vividly portray the terrible suffering that these people have endured. A brief foray into the Shi’a doctrine of martyrdom follows. This doctrine can become a means of delivering the Gospel meaningfully to a Shi’a Muslims and, in my observation, often sustains Christians from Shi’a Muslim backgrounds during persecution. (Chapter 6 expands this theme.) Brother Samuel writes, ‘The massacre of Husayn on the plains of Karbala has created the sad opportunity to repeatedly reiterate the refrain of suffering.’ (p. 52) I am not going to elaborate on the theme of water, either from Scripture or the Marsh Arabs’ dependency upon it. Life-giving water for those who thirst physically and spiritually needs no further amplification.

In Chapter six (Completion) the author expands the theme of martyrdom and the special role of Husayn. He writes, ‘Husayn is more than a striking memory—to the Shi’ites he is a ransom for his people. He is the intercessor

before God.’ (p. 74) Brother Samuel brings the doctrine of martyrdom into the 21st Century with Khomeini himself who ‘enjoined martyrdom for Islam as a religious duty’. (p. 75) ‘It is finished’ is the great victory cry from the cross. Shi’ites need no longer perpetuate the barbarity of the Ashura; salvation has been secured in Jesus.

Chapter seven (Destination) summarizes the previous six words of Christ on the cross, and as Brother Samuel describes, ‘their glorious crescendo cascades out in the seventh’. (p. 83) This chapter concentrates on the person of the Father into whose hands Jesus confidently entrusts himself. He writes, ‘*Father* is foreign to Islam’ (p. 84). We are introduced to one distinguishing Shi’ite doctrine best defined in a quotation to be found in the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* in the section on the Shi’a, ‘The Qur’an is neither creator nor created; it is the word of a creator.’¹ This fine distinction distances Marsh Arabs from God even further than the Sunni doctrine of the uncreated word which is equal to God. Using this apologetic, Brother Samuel seeks to build up the picture of the immense separation between God and humanity for this people group. He develops this argument in discussing the one name of the 99 attributes of God that implies love—Al-Wadood. The Most Loving. He writes, ‘No glimpse in Al-Wadood of preceding, pre-eminent grace and love . . .’ (p. 87). He then applies the truth of the Fatherhood of God to the Marsh Arabs by way of judgment.

The final chapter is entitled ‘Further Thoughts’. Among several helpful comments I found this to be the most interesting. Brother Samuel writes, ‘I want to see more of Scripture in missionary correspondence. I want to understand your work in the framework of Scripture. I want to enter your world on the supreme authority of Scripture’ (p. 94). The writer prefaces a selection of cross-centred quotations with this sentence, ‘There is no more eloquent call to the Marsh Arabs to embrace the Crucified Saviour than His cross’ (p. 96).

This book is a model of how to present the Great Commission mandate to the Christian community using the great themes of Scripture through an unreached people group in order to reach them with the Gospel. I encourage people to access it, read it and apply it in their own situations.

Reviewed by Keith Fraser-Smith

¹ Gibb, H.A.R and Kramers J.H., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, E.J. Brill 1991, p. 536