

# The Arabian Mission

## TRUSTEES

Rev. Henry E. Cobb, D.D., *President*,  
 Rev. J. P. Searle, D.D., *Vice-Pres.*, Rev. J. H. Whitehead,  
 Rev. Lewis Francis, D.D., Mr. John Bingham,  
 Rev. T. H. Mackenzie, D.D., Mr. E. E. Olcott.

## HONORARY TRUSTEES

W. A. Buchanan, Esq., London, England.  
 Dean V. C. Vaughan, M.D., Ann Arbor, Mich.  
 Rev. James Cantine, D.D., Basrah, P. G.  
 Rev. S. M. Zwemer, D.D., Cairo, Egypt.

## OFFICERS

Rev. W. I. Chamberlain, Ph.D., *Foreign Sec.*, 25 East 22d Street, N. Y.  
 Rev. L. J. Shafer, *Acting Home Sec.*, 25 East 22d Street, N. Y.  
 Rev. W. J. Van Kersen, *District Sec.*, Holland, Mich.  
 Mr. Howell S. Bennet, *Treasurer*, 25 East 22d Street, N. Y.

## MISSIONARIES

|                                |                         |                        |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Rev. and Mrs. James Cantine,   | Basrah, P. G.           | Evangelistic Work.     |
| Rev. and Mrs. S. M. Zwemer,    | Cairo, Egypt.           | Literary Work.         |
| Rev. and Mrs. Fred J. Barny,   | New Brunswick,<br>N. J. | On Furlough.           |
| Rev. Jas. E. Moerdyk,          | Basrah, P. G.           | Educational Work.      |
| Rev. and Mrs. J. Van Ess,      | Chicago, Ill.           | On Furlough.           |
| Miss J. A. Scardefield,        | Bahrein.                | Evang. & Medical Work. |
| Miss Fanny Lutton,             | Maskat, Arabia.         | Evangelistic Work.     |
| Rev. and Mrs. D. Dykstra,      | Bahrein.                | Educational Work.      |
| Dr. and Mrs. C. S. G. Mylrea,  | Kuweit, P. G.           | Medical Work.          |
| Rev. Gerrit J. Pennings,       | Bahrein.                | Evangelistic Work.     |
| Rev. and Mrs. E. E. Calverley, | Kuweit, P. G.           | Evang. & Medical Work. |
| Dr. and Mrs. P. W. Harrison,   | Bahrein, P. G.          | Medical Work.          |
| Rev. & Mrs. G. D. Van Peurse,  | Maskat, Arabia.         | Evan. & Medical Work.  |
| Miss Sarah L. Hosmon, M.D.     | Maskat, Arabia.         | Women's Medical Work.  |
| Miss Gertrud Schafheitlin,     | Kuweit, P. G.           | Women's Evan. Work.    |
| Miss Charlotte B. Kellien,     | Bahrein.                | Educational Work.      |
| Rev. and Mrs. H. A. Bilkert,   | Bahrein.                | Language Study.        |
| Miss M. C. Van Pelt,           | Bahrein.                | Language Study.        |

Address all letters to Missionaries in the field, Via Bombay.

The Arabian Mission depends for its support and the extension of its work, not on the treasury of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America, though under its care and administration, but upon contributions specifically made for this purpose. The churches, societies and individuals subscribing are not confined to the Reformed Church. Members of other denominations are among its supporters and its missionaries. Regular gifts and special donations are invited from all who are interested in Mission work in Arabia. Regular contributors will receive quarterly letters and annual reports, without application. All contributions, or applications for literature or information, should be sent to "THE ARABIAN MISSION," 25 East 22d Street, New York.

# Neglected Arabia

Missionary News and Letters

Published Quarterly

for private circulation among the friends of

THE ARABIAN MISSION

---

## Basrah, City of Sinbad

PROF. J. C. ARCHER

This article was sent us by Dr. James Cantine, from Prof. J. C. Archer of the Department of Missions of Yale. Prof. Archer is spending a year in Y. M. C. A. work among the troops in Mesopotamia. Dr. Cantine came in contact with Prof. Archer through his speaking in the Y. M. C. A. "huts."

*The Editor.*

It was "Balsora" when we were boys, the port from which Sindbad the Sailor set out on his marvellous voyages in the days of "the good Harun ar-Rashid." But so strange were the adventures of the Baghdad merchant, I am sure we must have thought his port of sailing as much a fiction as the whale-island or the gigantic Roc.

Later we came to know it as "Bussorah," a real city, a Turkish port and an outpost of the English East India Company. In 1639 two agents of the Company came up from Surat and established a "factory" for the sale of pepper, rice, and Manchester cloth. Now it is Basrah,—as in reality it has always been—a city of the British Empire and the seaport of what is potentially a very valuable area. There have been already here in Mesopotamia large investments in irrigation works and lines of communication, and with a continuance of British control we may expect a development the area deserves, and Basrah will flourish.

The present Basrah is not Sindbad's city; that lay several miles further west, out in the desert. It is rather a pair of towns: Ashar, on the Shatt al-Arab, sixty-five miles from the Persian Gulf, and Basrah City, two miles west of Ashar and connected with it by dirt roads and Ashar Creek. With British occupation the City is rapidly becoming merely a suburb of the busier river-town.

Old Basrah was ten miles from the Shatt—called then the Blind Tigris—but connected with it by two great parallel canals, the Ma'gil to the north, and the Obollo to the south, the latter running into the Tigris by the site of an ancient Roman town named Obollo. Though so far back in the desert, the city's water-way to the sea was shorter than that of Ashar today, for the Gulf coast was then at Abadan which is now twenty-five miles inland. It was built as a garrison city rather than as a port; Arabia then had neither navy nor merchant marine. It was founded in 638 A.D. by order of the Arab Caliph Omar, the second

successor to Mohammed. His armies had wrested Mesopotamia with its delta-paradise from decadent Persia, and were yet to cross the Zagros Mountains and crush Persia herself. And so Basrah—along with Kufa to the northwest, whose foundations were laid the same year—became an outpost of the fast-spreading Arab empire.

It was laid out in plots. In the spacious market-place in the center of the city stood the great mosque, unrivalled in all Irac for its size and its beauty. The principal streets were straight and wide, and there were gardens in various parts of the city. Public baths were established. Soon there was brisk trade in fish and dates. Meat and



**BASRAH DRAWBRIDGE**

vegetables were plentiful in the markets. But the usual oriental odors abounded, and the people were generally turbulent.

Besides the soldiers, whom Omar denied the right to acquire property, the population of the new city was chiefly Meccans,—less orthodox Moslems than the Medinese who settled Kufa,—and Arabs from the desert round about. The city grew steadily and from the ninth century was, in size and renown, no inconsiderable rival of Baghdad (founded in 762), until the glory of both began to fade after another two centuries.

Old Basrah is now for the most part a mass of low-lying, sand-covered ruins in the midst of the wide desert, barren and yellow until the south wind moistens the desolate scene with rain and patches of green appear where men have scattered seed. It was a brick-built city

whose inhabitants abandoned it long ago to decay and the windblown sand, and, aside from a half-dozen widely separated structures and a small town on its site, it might be quite level today were it not for mounds men have thrown up everywhere in their digging for bricks from the buried walls. Little else is unearthed with the bricks,—coins now and then, bits of glazed pottery, water-jars, copper vessels, and odd trinkets—for the city declined slowly. The town is Zubeir, a community of some ten thousand souls living within the upper section of old Basrah. The buildings which are still standing deserve in themselves no more than brief mention; it is the history they recall which is of great interest to us. They may not be nearly as old as the city, yet their character might explain their preservation from its earliest days.

There's a bulky minaret which rises some forty feet out of the sand, attached to and overlooking the remains of a once fair-sized "mosque of Ali." These ruins may be a monument to the Shiah heresy which sprang up within Islam under Persian influence and in the interest of the Caliph Ali and his sons. Just across the road is an old building, doubtless kept by repair, which serves both as mosque and caravanserai. The one tree of all the southern area stands beside it. A half-mile to the southwest is the solitary "tomb of Talha." He and Zubeir lost their lives in 656 at the Battle of the Camel, when Ayesha's ill-conceived expedition against the Caliph Ali came to naught not far beyond the walls of Basrah. (The site of the battle was known as Wadi as-Sabaa. Is Shaiba the same, where the British recently drove back the Turks after a severe engagement?) Ayesha, Mohammed's favorite, had nursed a bitter hatred of Ali from the time he publicly refused to believe her escape with the youthful Safwan was mere accident. Talha and Zubeir were nobles of Mecca who thought Ali should have given them important governorships.

Talha's huge brick-made grave rests in a room about twenty-five feet square, roofed over by an inner and an outer dome. The latter is badly broken, but the inner dome is intact and keeps the room comfortable for the pilgrims who come there to worship,—for the rebel Talha, in due course, has become a saint! The "tomb of Zubeir" stands beside the chief mosque in the town of Zubeir. His grave also has become a shrine.

The third important tomb on the site of old Basrah is that of "the saintly Basrite, Hasan." It is suggestive of religion rather than politics. It is the most conspicuous monument in the city of the dead just beyond the northern gates of Zubeir. The building itself is in the form of a stocky, short-sectioned telescope about forty feet high. There are a half-dozen sections, each with twenty sides and adorned with gargoyle-like ornaments at the angles on the upper rim.

Within a century of its founding Basrah became the intellectual capital of Islam, and though it yielded later to Baghdad, it continued to exercise a profound influence over the thought and life of the Moslem world. Here arose the school of "Grammarians," interpreters of the Koran, systematizers of the spiritual property of Islam, and saviors of the pre-Islamic poetry of Arabia, which otherwise would have been

lost to the world. Here was the home of Hariri the poet, who produced in his Assemblies a masterpiece which for eight centuries "has been esteemed as, next to the Koran, the chief treasure of the Arabic tongue, a work which, said Zamakhshari, was "worthy to have each line written in gold." Here the "Sincere Brethren" published tracts against orthodoxy and advocated the hellenization of Islam, the union of the Arabian religion with Greek philosophy. And here, too, the great scholastic theologian Ash'ari lived and taught. For years he proclaimed free-thought in the square of the great mosque, and then, with a change of heart, he became the leading exponent through all the centuries of Moslem faith supported by reason, of orthodoxy rationalized.

Let us return to Hasan al-Basri. In the early eighth century he was a familiar figure in public discussion in the mosque-square of Basrah. He was a great teacher of theology and a famous ascetic. The religion of Mohammed had germs of asceticism in it, but celibacy was explicitly condemned by him by both precept and example. However, the ascetic life was one of the inevitable expressions of Islamic faith. In the early movement in that direction, Hasan was a most conspicuous figure. The Koranic description of the Day of Judgment filled him with terror. "It seemed as though Hell-fire had been created for him alone," and so he renounced the world and determined to live solely for God. He preached fasting as an exercise which God had appointed for his servants "that they may race towards obedience to Him." His fame spread far and men of all faiths came much out of their way to see him and hear him.

He was at first, so they say, inclined to the doctrine of free-will, but gave it up afterwards and held that all except sin happens by fate. Before this change of view, however, he had sown among his pupils seed for the springing up of the significant school of "dissenters," the Mutazilites. Tradition says the movement began one day when a certain man came to Hasan with the question as to whether a Moslem who had committed a great sin was a believer or an unbeliever. While the master hesitated, his pupil Wasil offered the suggestion that the sinner was neither believer nor unbeliever but in a third or middle state. With that Wasil and others withdrew from Hasan's circle. Many other ideas were added to the one which occasioned the secession, and the Mutazilites are well-known to history as those who applied reason to the Koran, and declared it to be a created thing, who held that man has power over his own acts, that God is not the author of evil, and that he would not punish men for actions beyond their control. It was Ash'ari who successfully contradicted all these points and drove the Mutazilites to cover. And his system has had, since the tenth century, general acceptance within Islam. The wild oats of Hasan were gathered in by the faithful sickle of Ashari.