The Legacy of Ion Keith-Falconer

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Within the field of missiology, particularly regarding mission to the Muslim world, the names of Raymund Lull (1235–1315),1 Henry Martyn (1781–1812),2 Karl Pfander (1803–65),3 Temple Gairdner (1873–1928),4 and Samuel Zwemer (1867–1952)5 are well known. But another early missionary-scholar and pioneer is often overlooked, though his life and ministry greatly impacted the development of early twentieth-century Christian mission to Islam: Ion Keith-Falconer (1856–87).

Keith-Falconer is certainly not Scotland’s most famous missionary (that distinction is held by David Livingstone) or Scotland’s most important developer of missionary policy (that would be Alexander Duff in India). In fact, Keith-Falconer’s name is hardly a household word even in contemporary Scottish missionary circles! His life and legacy, however, were greatly appreciated by the missionary community during the life and tenure of his Aden Mission (1886–1963) in Yemen, which affectionately called itself the “Keith-Falconer Mission.” The missionaries who took over the torch of Keith-Falconer’s vision in Yemen idealized their founding father,6 seeing in him all that was good and noble in Christian service.7 Keith-Falconer’s life stands out as one of the great stories in mission history, as a life that was tragically ended before he could fulfill his prodigious potential. His was a “career of exceptional promise” closed early.8

I will review here the life and legacy of Keith-Falconer, including his mission to Islam. I hope to raise some important issues regarding methods of Christian witness among Muslim communities. Was Keith-Falconer’s mission fruitful, or was it merely a noble but foolish nineteenth-century adventure in which the missiological terms “occupy” and “crusade” were still considered benevolent? Can his vision provide a valid method for ministry today in Muslim societies, in a world that has dramatically changed, not only since the days of the waning Ottoman Empire, but also after the events of September 11, 2001?

I would argue that Keith-Falconer’s work, although it never accomplished its main goal of establishing an Arabian church for Muslim converts, can be a very important model for thinking through contemporary ministry among Muslim communities. Keith-Falconer’s work prompted the further development of a method of mission work that has proven to be one of the most effective and faithful methods of witness to the Gospel and that, in the words of his first biographer, “will in due course produce wide-reaching results . . . much which does not shew [sic] on the surface.”9 Keith-Falconer’s experience demonstrates that even if Christian service among Muslims does not result in an active Christian community, it still may provide a crucially important witness to Christ in a contemporary Muslim world where the Gospel is associated with Western cultural or imperial domination.

Early Years of Preparation

Keith-Falconer came from a noble family whose ancestors had helped to defend Scotland against invading Vikings. “He had in his veins the blood of heroic men.”10 In addition to such heroism, his family was landed, and thus wealthy. Financial support was never an obstacle for Keith-Falconer in the pursuit of his dream to embark on a mission to Arabia. The Church of Scotland in this period was facing financial difficulties; Keith-Falconer thus committed to underwrite the whole mission project and eventually to turn all of the assets over to the church.

Keith-Falconer was a striking man with great physical prowess. He stood six feet three inches (1.9 meters) tall and was an accomplished athlete. During his college years he was a champion cyclist, winning many competitions and holding several cycling records. By some estimations he was the best cyclist in Britain!

In addition to his athletic ability, Keith-Falconer was gifted with a great intellect. He had a passion for learning, primarily languages. During his studies at Cambridge he won prizes for his examinations in Greek and Hebrew. In order to undertake research he taught himself Danish, German, Italian, and Syriac. He also studied Arabic, both in Germany and in Egypt.

Keith-Falconer’s academic abilities were recognized by the academic community at Cambridge. He was appointed Hebrew lecturer at Clare College and examiner for the Semitic language exam. In the summer of 1886, in between his first and second visits to Aden, he was appointed professor of Arabic at Cambridge. One of Keith-Falconer’s most important academic achievements was his translation in 1882 of the Syriac Kalilah and Dīminah: The Fables of Bidpait (subsequently published in 1885). The orientalist scholar Theodor Noldeke commented at the event of its publication: “We will look forward with hope to meet the young Orientalist who has so early stepped forward as a Master.”11 Unfortunately, the academic world would be disappointed.

Keith-Falconer decided to travel to Egypt to immerse himself in a completely Arabic context. He traveled there in November 1881, lodging in a hotel in the Muski (the center of nineteenth-century Cairo). He then proceeded to visit the offices of the American Mission of the Presbyterian Church, where he met Dr. Andrew Watson, who agreed to help make arrangements for him to travel up to Assuit to study Arabic under the supervision of the long-term Scottish-American Presbyterian missionary, John Hogg. On November 20 he arrived in Assuit after a long and difficult train ride, which he described as follows in his journal: “The dust—I shall never forget it. I tried to read . . . but in a short time the book and I got so filthy with the dust that I became irritable and uncomfortable and could not read. After lunching on a dusty chicken, a dusty bit of cheese, dusty apples, dusty ham, dusty bread and some wine, I laid myself on the dusty seats and had a sleep for a couple of hours, and shortly arrived.”12

At the train station Keith-Falconer was met by one of the theology students, who took him to the home of John Hogg. Hogg, a completely Arabic context.
the hospitable missionary that he was, certainly saw something of promise in his fellow Scotsman who had such an intense love for and mastery of the Arabic language. With Hogg’s help Keith-Falconer set up house in the newly opened Assuit hotel and lodged there while employing a tutor to help him develop his colloquial Arabic.

Unfortunately, Keith-Falconer did not have a good experience in Assuit, nor did he find it to be a hospitable place. He wrote with little-disguised impatience:

Flies are a plague. One sees people lying asleep on the road-side, covered with flies, mouth, nostrils, ears, eyes, swarming with them—a disgusting sight.13

It is a vile place for catching cold. Buildings seem to be constructed with a view to as many draughts as possible.14

The town is truly and unspeakably disgusting. The streets are all filthy alleys, very crooked and winding, and not lighted at night. . . . I shall be very glad to get back to civilisation. I cannot call this a civilised place.15

In February 1882, after only three months in Egypt, Keith-Falconer fell ill and returned to England.

**A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical**

Like Henry Martyn, Keith-Falconer was a product of the Evangelical movement in England. Although he had close friendships with several missionaries and mission-minded organizations, most of his young religious life was spent promoting evangelistic meetings in the poor sections of Cambridge and the East End of London. Deeply pietistic and thoroughly evangelical, Keith-Falconer showed no signs, however, of being caught up in the debates between liberal thought, the development of modern biblical criticism, and biblical fundamentalism. For him, the issue of inerrancy versus inspiration of Scripture did not affect the call of Christ and his public witness. Writing from Germany, the heartland of nineteenth-century biblical studies, he stated: “Scholarship is a laborious and, to a great extent, mechanical way of getting at the original text. Scholarship assumes no doctrine, and denies none. . . . The more of a ‘scholar’ one becomes, the more one fathoms the depths of one’s ignorance, and estimates the measure of one’s dependence on God’s Spirit.” As a scholar of biblical languages, Keith-Falconer was fully versed in the contemporary arguments for and against inspiration and inerrancy. He wrote:

People forget that while the sacred writers were inspired penmen, yet they were penmen, and that each retained his individuality, yet without sin or error, and that consequently the style, diction, and habits of one writer differ from those of another. It is impertinent and impious to postulate that God must have laid aside the individuality and humanity—in itself first created and not sinful—of each writer, and used him as a passive, dead, inanimate, senseless, pen or instrument. . . . Inspiration lies apart from these considerations. All I know about inspiration is that it makes the writing free from all error and untruthfulness, and that every word is to be considered the word of God. Speaking very roughly, I refuse to believe that our English Bible, as we have it, preface to King James and all, fell down from Heaven.16

During his time as a student at Cambridge, Keith-Falconer showed himself to be a first-rate textual scholar. He would often compare the variant readings of the English translations of the Bible (both King James and the Douay), as well as the Septuagint, the Masoretic Text, and the Peshitta. He did not find variant readings and translations very troubling, only a grand puzzle to be reassembled, allowing the Holy Spirit freedom to move hearts.

**The Origin of a Missionary Vocation**

In 1885 General F. T. Haig, an Evangelical Christian British officer and supporter of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), requested to the CMS that it begin work in the Arabian Peninsula. He felt strongly that the CMS work in Egypt should expand itself into *jazirat al-`Arab*, the Arabian Peninsula.17 Haig argued that Aden, on the southwest coast of the peninsula, was an important site for future mission work. It was a historic site situated along the trade routes that came from the east and went up the coast toward Mecca. A mission post there would thus give mission workers access to a wide variety of people from all over the region who themselves were traveling in the “heartland of Islam.” In addition, Haig argued that setting up a post in Aden would be relatively easy, as it had been under British occupation since 1839. Aden served as a coal-fueling port for the British navy. This fact would aid the setup, as ships could bring in supplies. It also meant that the missionaries could claim the protection of the British Crown, if necessary.

Keith-Falconer, who was fascinated by Semitic languages and by 1885 was well versed in Arabic, was thoroughly convinced by Haig’s arguments. In response to Haig’s plea for the church to stand up and respond to the challenge of Islam, Keith-Falconer’s “whole soul answered, ‘Here am I, send me.’”18 Having long had an evangelical mind-set toward the Gospel, he met with General Haig, and by the summer of 1885 he was making preparations to travel to Aden in order to test the waters as to the feasibility of locating a mission post there.

**Aden (1885–86)**

Ion Keith-Falconer and his wife, Gwendolyn, arrived in Aden on October 28, 1885. They spent six weeks in a hotel before moving across the bay to a house that they rented. Their days were spent studying and interacting with people in the town. Every morning Keith-Falconer would give an Arabic lesson to his wife, who

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found the language extremely difficult. He once wrote: “Arabic grammars should be strongly bound, because learners are so often found to dash them frantically on the ground.”19 After the Arabic lesson he would spend the day reading Arabic texts until 4:00 p.m. He would then take tea and walk into the village to talk with the local people. On occasion he would sit in a garden in the village and read aloud portions of the Gospel of Luke. From this time onward he became known as the “sahib who spoke Arabic like a book.”20
In early March 1886 Keith-Falconer returned to England. During his four-month residence in Aden he had solidified his vision for a mission post and pledged to return in the fall. In preparation he purchased some land in the village of Sheikh Othman, about six miles (ten km.) north of Aden. When he returned, they would be able to begin building the mission station.

Keith-Falconer’s first trip to Aden had led him to several conclusions: first, that Aden was a good place to begin a mission post; second, that the focus of the mission should rest upon medical and educational work. James Robson relates how Keith-Falconer “realised that medicine is one of the most efficient means of approach, besides being a valuable boon in itself; therefore he intended to have a fully qualified medical man to work along with him.” He also believed that focusing on the education of children was another way to prove the genuineness of Christian concern for the local people. Elizabeth G. K. Hewat states that Keith-Falconer found children “far more hopeful than adults.”

As a third conclusion, Keith-Falconer recognized that in order for a medical-educational mission to work, he needed to move out of the port area and into a completely Arab context. For this purpose he felt that the village of Sheikh Othman would be the best choice. Here, in this village that stood at the apex of several caravan routes into the interior, he would be removed from associations with the British establishment, and—in his own words—it would afford “an opportunity of getting into touch with people from many parts of Arabia to which the missionary cannot go himself.” His idea of withdrawing from the British presence in Aden related to the most important obstacle to mission to Islam at the time. In the contemporary Muslim mind, Christian missionaries were in collusion with the imperialists, and as we will see, Keith-Falconer’s intention was to steer clear of association with the British establishment. Yet by virtue of his citizenship, and that of succeeding missionaries (both Scottish and Danish), his mission was never ultimately able to do so.

Sheikh Othman (1886-87)

Ion, Gwendolyn, and another colleague, a Dr. Cowen, arrived back in Aden in November 1886. A simple two-bedroom house was constructed, called “the shanty,” with an additional room to serve as a small dispensary. The local community was tentative about the foreigners at first. After a few successful medical cases, however, the fame of the foreigners began to spread. People soon were coming from as far as a hundred miles away to be treated by the mission.

During this time Keith-Falconer, as busy as he was with the patients, did not neglect his study of Arabic. He continued to spend four hours a day reading the language, in addition to his Bible study and prayer. By February 1887, however, only three months after his second arrival, he and his wife began suffering from fevers—most probably related to malaria. He suffered from long bouts of illness throughout April and May and by late May had become completely bedridden. On June 7, 1887, he succumbed to the fevers and passed away in his sleep.

Robson relates the conclusion of this missionary’s sojourn: “Dr. Cowen had left him sleeping peacefully at ten [p.m. on June 6], when he had gone to take a much-needed night’s rest; Mrs. Falconer, herself ill, was sleeping in the room next to her husband; and the nurse sat up during the night with him. He was sleeping more calmly than he had done for some time, so at 4 A.M. [on June 7] the nurse lay down beside his bed and fell asleep. About a quarter to six his wife came in to see him, and found him ‘lying on his back, with eyes half-open, and hands resting on the bed by his sides.’ . . . He died at just Henry Martyn’s age, like him devoting his life for the sake of winning the Muslim.”

An Appraisal

Ion Keith-Falconer is an important figure in nineteenth-century mission history, but aside from reviewing some interesting historical facts about his life and mission, what can we say or glean from his work? Keith-Falconer was certainly gifted for the work to which he was called, a true missionary-scholar to Islam in every sense. Did his vision for mission work, however, affect the church and its mission toward Islam? Does it have any impact on our own view of mission to Islam today, especially in a post-9/11 world? Three main issues emerge in considering the effects of his work.

First, we must recognize what a profound impact Keith-Falconer’s ideas had upon the Church Missionary Society, the Danish Mission, and the Reformed Church in America mission work for the next generation of missionaries. On their way to Arabia to begin their own mission, both James Cantine and Samuel Zwemer utilized the experience of the Scottish missionaries to inform their own methods of work. Cantine spent some time in Edinburgh consulting with the foreign missions committee of the Church of Scotland regarding its work in Aden. Zwemer stopped off in Scotland to confer both with the committee and with Gwendolyn Keith-Falconer. After their initial language training in Beirut, the two Reformed Church missionaries headed to Aden, again hoping to glean information from the Scottish missionaries. Cantine spent time traveling with the Scottish medical doctors. Keith-Falconer’s decision regarding the placement of a missionary post, as well as the medical work undertaken by the Scots, impacted the future thinking of Cantine and Zwemer and the direction of the Arabian Mission. Further success of the CMS doctor Marcus Eustace in Busrah (modern-day Basra in Iraq) would later reinforce the importance of medical work as “something like an article of faith” of Christian missions in the Middle East. One of Keith-Falconer’s successors in Aden reflected on the success of this method of medical missions:

Every village of any size at one time or another sends its representative to Baghdad, Busrah, Bahrein, Muscat or Aden, while from far in the interior sick ones are brought to the mission hospitals and dispensaries for treatment and so give the missionaries an opportunity of reaching places that they could never hope to visit in person.

[Thus], the missionaries are sure of a warm welcome wherever they go, and places that but a few years ago were closed are now open for the gospel.

From the very beginning, the Scottish Mission (and later the Danish Mission) had a fully qualified medical missionary on its
staff. Experience taught other societies the necessity of healing the sick as well as preaching the Gospel. This conclusion is borne out by several incidents in the experience of the Aden mission. The first was in 1937, when the king of Yemen petitioned the mission to send “a doctor, ‘a religious—holy one’ to the people of Beihan, in the far interior.” The king had recognized both the piety of the doctors and their desire to serve his people. The second incident occurred in 1946, when the mission was asked by the government to help train its medical workers, at the government’s expense. The health care workers were trained at the Sheikh Othman Hospital, which was originally set up by the Keith-Falconer Mission and then later turned over to the government. It was the mission doctors who handled the training and oversight. (This phenomenon of governments inviting missionaries to administer national institutions has been subsequently repeated in the Gulf with other Arabian mission posts.)

A second important legacy of Keith-Falconer was his practice of dissociation from the “powers that be.” Aden was a port for the British navy and an important protectorate for the British Empire. Any mission work there would suffer from the stigma of being associated with the behavior of the British servicemen. Keith-Falconer thus decided to remove his mission from the British presence. In 1886, when he chose to go inland to Sheikh Othman, he wrote in his journal: “Many [Arabs] imagine that Europeans are clever people who get drunk and have no religion to speak of.” In the words of Lyle L. VanderWerff, “A straight forward presentation of the Gospel was necessary to remove from the Arab mind misconceptions derived from the evil example set by so many Europeans who live in or pass through Aden.” Thus, during the “Age of Imperialism” the location of missions mattered.

This problem of association with foreign imperialism is the bane of the missionary. There is no escaping the fact that a missionary walks in two worlds and seeks to interpret both the sending and the receiving culture. Keith-Falconer purposely relocated his mission in order to be free from association with the British occupation and the trappings of Western lifestyles, which might negatively affect the possibilities of “winning” Muslims over. Yet by virtue of his citizenship and his inherent and implicit association with British culture, he and the Falconer Mission would never be completely free from suspicion. The mission and its hospital were thus subject to the problems of nationalization following World War II. Considered foreign holdings, they were seized by the government. The mission itself was directly affected by the changing world order. The Falconer Mission’s proximity to Aden and Britain’s waning power in the region doomed the mission post to being associated with an occupation whose time had ended. Ten years after his death, the Ion Keith-Falconer Memorial Church was commemorated in Aden as a chapel established to minister to British troops, and it was served by a chaplain from the Scottish mission. At the turn of the century the chapel “was filled every Sabbath with those who love to hear the old Gospel.” Thus, Keith-Falconer’s name had come to be associated with the British post, not with an indigenous Arab church!

Finally, we must assess the original missiological intention of the Keith-Falconer Mission. At first glance, one might judge that his was a failed mission by nineteenth-century standards, and perhaps even by early twentieth-century missiological expectations. Keith-Falconer did not live long enough to reap the benefits of his linguistic knowledge of Arabic and cultural awareness of Arab society by creating and supporting a thriving indigenous church, as did John Hogg in Egypt, nor did the Keith-Falconer Mission produce a significant indigenous Arab church. Certainly, throughout its existence the mission did see some Yemenis become Christians. Yet the Church of South Arabia in Yemen (officially formed January 8, 1961) could not be considered a thriving evangelical success story by nineteenth-century missiological standards. Unlike the American Presbyterian missionaries who engaged in “indirect evangelism” (that is, reforming the indigenous church to engage Muslims), Ion Keith-Falconer was the first Protestant missionary to intentionally focus upon Arabian Muslims. In the words of another missionary, “The real hope of winning Arabia lies in the creation of an indigenous native church.” Such a hope has, to this point, been clearly dashed. As noted by Elizabeth Hewat, “When all the encouragements and signs of progress are added together, the sum total is not as impressive or definite as the ardent Christian would wish.”

Although the Arab church has thrived outside the peninsula, the extreme social pressure among Arabian Muslims against conversion out of the faith certainly is a major factor. “Here in a nutshell was the problem of Arabia. The social-political environment did not permit Muslims of such sensitive perception to respond positively to the Gospel of Christ.”

If this was the case during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, how much more problematic must these “sensitivities” be in the post–9/11 era? Given the current climate in the Middle East, with the occupation of Iraq and Palestine; the touchy political environment with Islamist sympathies of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, Egypt and Algeria; government crackdowns on Islamic terrorist cells; and the American and British military presence in the Gulf (including Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and even Yemen’s Aden), will Western Christian workers receive a free hearing from Arab Muslim communities? Certainly the “Zionist-Crusader” conspiracy label will be attached to Christian missions, especially if—they the Keith-Falconer Mission—they are based in areas where there is a heavy Western presence.

At this point, even an attempt to “go inland” in order to get away from Western presence and gain access to indigenous peoples will be in vain. Given present advances in information technology, physical locality is no longer the main issue. The mere fact of one’s citizenship affects the reception of one’s message. A Western Christian worker in the twenty-first century cannot assume that he or she is bringing the message of the Gospel as Paul did, for Paul was a Roman citizen, traversing the provinces of an empire in which his language, his ethnicity, and even his views were given a fair and legal hearing (e.g., as in Acts 22). He was free to travel and speak as he saw fit. The situation is different today for Western missionaries. There are already preconceptions about Christian missionaries and mission work among Arab Muslims, and most of these preconceptions are based on mere association with Western hegemony by citizenship. We are no longer in an apostolic age of mission; rather, we...
are in an era much like that of Tertullian in the second century, in which the church—in order to clearly and carefully respond to its detractors—must sift through many charges stemming from the predominant culture. For their part, the motivations of Western Christians will be viewed with a sense of suspicion at best, or, at worst, with animosity. For any response to be credible, it is imperative that the native Arab church (in all its varied forms) take the lead in a careful and concise apology articulated from within the confines of Arab culture.

Despite its apparent lack of success, Keith-Falconer’s missionological perspective and legacy offer foreign mission workers a positive model for encountering Islam. We can see here two important issues. First, a deep knowledge of, and scholarly interest in, Islamic tradition is crucial. Second, care and concern for the social setting of Muslim communities is a faithful way to bear witness to the light of the Gospel. Even if indigenous churches are not formed within Muslim communities, we must not lose sight of the value of such faithful work for the benefit of the Muslim community in and of itself. Such endeavors offer an important witness, especially in a post–9/11 world.

Notes
5. The standard biography for Zwemer is by J. Christy Wilson, Apostle to Islam (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952).
9. Ibid., p. ix.
11. Ibid., p. 63.
12. Ibid., p. 57.
16. Ibid., pp. 98, 99.
19. Robson, Ion Keith-Falconer, p. 82; Sinkers, Memorials, p. 156.
23. Robson, Ion Keith-Falconer, p. 87.
24. Ibid., pp. 158–59. After Keith-Falconer’s death his wife Gwendolyn returned to Scotland. She met with the Church of Scotland and arranged to continue to undertake the work of the mission.
28. Ibid., p. 158.
30. Scudder relates the importance of the doctor in Arab society. Quoting Stanley Mylrea, he writes: “The profession of medicine carries with it in Arabia, as in most countries, a certain distinction. There is an Arab proverb which places medicine above religion. The very word, doctor, becomes in the Arab’s mouth, Hakeem, the Wise Man. . . . Given the right personality, the Christian doctor’s potentiality for good in a country like Arabia is almost limitless” (The Arabian Mission’s Story, p. 256, n. 1).
32. Robson, Ion Keith-Falconer, p. 91.
34. The same issue occurred in 1965 when the Danish Mission was forced to leave Aden. V. Tranholm-Mikkelsen, part of the Danish Mission in Aden in the 1960s, recalled how even though the missionaries were “respected and received with great hospitality except the last year or two because of the political tensions . . . they were identified with the British colonialists” (correspondence with V. Tranholm-Mikkelsen in possession of the author). The same happened with the Reformed Church’s Arabian Mission (see Scudder, The Arabian Mission’s Story, p. 310).
37. See The Church Is There: In Two Moslem Lands, South Arabia and West Pakistan (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland Overseas Council, 1964).
38. Scudder, The Arabian Mission’s Story, p. 145. The only other Protestants who were interested in working directly with Muslims were the Moravians in the eighteenth century. At this point we are making a distinction between Arabian Muslims (from the peninsula) and Egyptian or Arab Muslims in general. See Julius Richter, A History of the Protestant Missions in the Near East (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), 92.