

## EL KAREY, YOUHANNAH (1843/4 - 1907), missionary

**Name:** Youhannah El Karey  
**Date of birth:** 1843/4  
**Date of death:** 1907  
**Spouse:** Rachel El Karey (née Dawkins)  
**Spouse:** Alice Mary Maud El Karey (née Roper)  
**Child:** Betty El Karey  
**Child:** Gladys El Karey  
**Child:** Victor El Karey  
**Child:** Marian El Karey  
**Child:** Percy El Karey  
**Parent:** Saleh El Karey  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** missionary  
**Area of activity:** Religion  
**Author:** Genevieve Johnson-Smith

Youhannah El Karey was born in 1843/4 in Nablus, Palestine, the son of Saleh El Karey and an unknown mother. He received early education at the Greek Orthodox school in Nablus, before moving to Jerusalem at around the age of fourteen. Here, he met with a group of American Baptist missionaries and was baptised by one of them in 1859, after which he moved to Britain to further his education.

Under the patronage of Welsh Presbyterian minister **John Mills**, who had received the assistance of El Karey in reading Arabic when in Jerusalem, El Karey gained a theological education in Wales and England, funded by friends of Mills. He studied at the Baptist College in Pontypool in 1863-64, and at Regent's Park College in 1865. By the time El Karey was finishing his studies, Mills was setting up a Palestinian mission, of which El Karey was the first missionary. After being ordained at Regent's Park Chapel in July 1867, El Karey moved back to Nablus in October of that year, along with his first wife, an Englishwoman named Rachel Dawkins. There he began the missionary work which would occupy most of his life, preaching in both English and Arabic mostly amongst the Muslim population. He was purportedly the only Baptist missionary in Palestine during his lifetime. He also set up schools in Nablus at which he and his family taught. Though much of his income came from donations to the missionary cause from England and Wales, he appears to have been a wealthy man, possibly due to family inheritance. He owned extensive land and property in and around Nablus in Al Gazawi, Abd Al Nur, Al Tubaneh, Al Mansheyeh, Sebastiya and Al Yasmineh, where he built a large mansion called Al Barsh House.

El Karey returned to England and Wales several times throughout his life. His time at Pontypool clearly left a positive impression on him, and he undertook lecture tours in Wales in 1866 and 1882, travelling the length and breadth of the country. His lecturing locations included Dolgellau, Porthmadog, Caernarfon, Bangor, Conwy, Mostyn, Denbigh, Holywell, Llangollen, Narberth, Haverfordwest, Glynneath, Tredegar, Llanelli, Ebbw Vale, Merthyr Tydfil, and Aberdare. There are numerous contemporary newspaper articles documenting his lectures, which usually wrote about him with fascination and respect, and spoke of him as if he was well known to Welsh audiences. He spoke about his missionary work, his life in Palestine and entertained audiences with costumes and singing. His appearance was commented on several times, and other sources described him as 'a powerful man', well-built, tall and handsome with a long beard.

His first wife Rachel, who also carried out missionary work and with whom he had two children, Percy and Marian, died in 1881. In 1883 at the Bethany Baptist Chapel in Risca, Monmouthshire, El Karey married Alice Mary Maud Roper (b. 1853), a schoolteacher and daughter of the formerly enslaved freedom fighter Moses Roper (1815-1892), who had escaped from North Carolina to Britain in 1835 and lived and worked in Wales for a time. It may be that Roper, who is recorded as a 'Baptist Missionary' on the marriage certificate, was acquainted with El Karey during his earlier visits to Wales and other parts of Britain, however there is no evidence of them meeting. The couple moved to Nablus soon after, along with Alice's sister Ada Victoria Roper (b. 1850), also a schoolteacher. They had one son, Victor, and two daughters, Gladys and Betty.

The Roper women, Alice, Ada and one of the El Karey/Roper daughters - whether Gladys or Betty is unclear - played crucial roles in the Nablus mission. They worked with women and young people, taught in the Sunday school, visited the sick, worked as interpreters and stood in El Karey's stead whenever he was travelling.

El Karey's later life and that of his family was faced with several difficulties. He was repeatedly chronically ill with a stomach malady, often returning to England for medical treatment. In 1892, an epidemic fever raged in Nablus, claiming the life of El Karey's eldest son. Political and religious conflict also caused issues for the El Karey family in the late 1890s. El Karey wrote in his diary about conflict between Muslims and Christians in the Nablus area, claiming that he could not go to work without being attacked and of hearing cries of 'Death to Christians' in the streets. In 1899 this intensified, with El Karey noting that the government sent police to the mission schools, ordering all Muslims to leave and forbidding Muslims from attending Mothers Meetings held by Alice. This escalated as far as a judge ordering that El Karey be burned alive for allowing Muslims to attend Alice's meetings, a sentence he escaped by direct intervention from the British Foreign Office.

El Karey died of a heart attack in Nablus on 17 March 1907. His funeral, reportedly attended by many Muslims, Christians and foreigners, was held at Nablus Evangelical church, in whose cemetery he is buried. It is not known exactly what happened to his wife and children after his death, but presumably Alice remained in Palestine and continued her missionary work, as on his death she wrote:

'I am now left alone with five young children to bring up and educate, but God has promised to be a Husband to the widow and a Father to the fatherless... with God's help, I shall go on with the work, as it was his last wish I should do so.'

## Author

Genevieve Johnson-Smith

## Sources

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Thomas Jenner, *That goodly mountain & Lebanon* (London 1874)

[Welsh Newspapers Online](#)

Information from Professor Bruce Baker, Dr. Fionnghuala Sweeney, Bader Mansour and Ameen Abu-Baker

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