

The Great Miracle

The Story of Prophet Jesus
(Peace be upon him)



UK ISLAMIC ACADEMY

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Foreword

In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

The Great Miracle is one of a series of stories on the lives of the great Prophets, upon whom be peace, intended for children of 8 to 12 years.

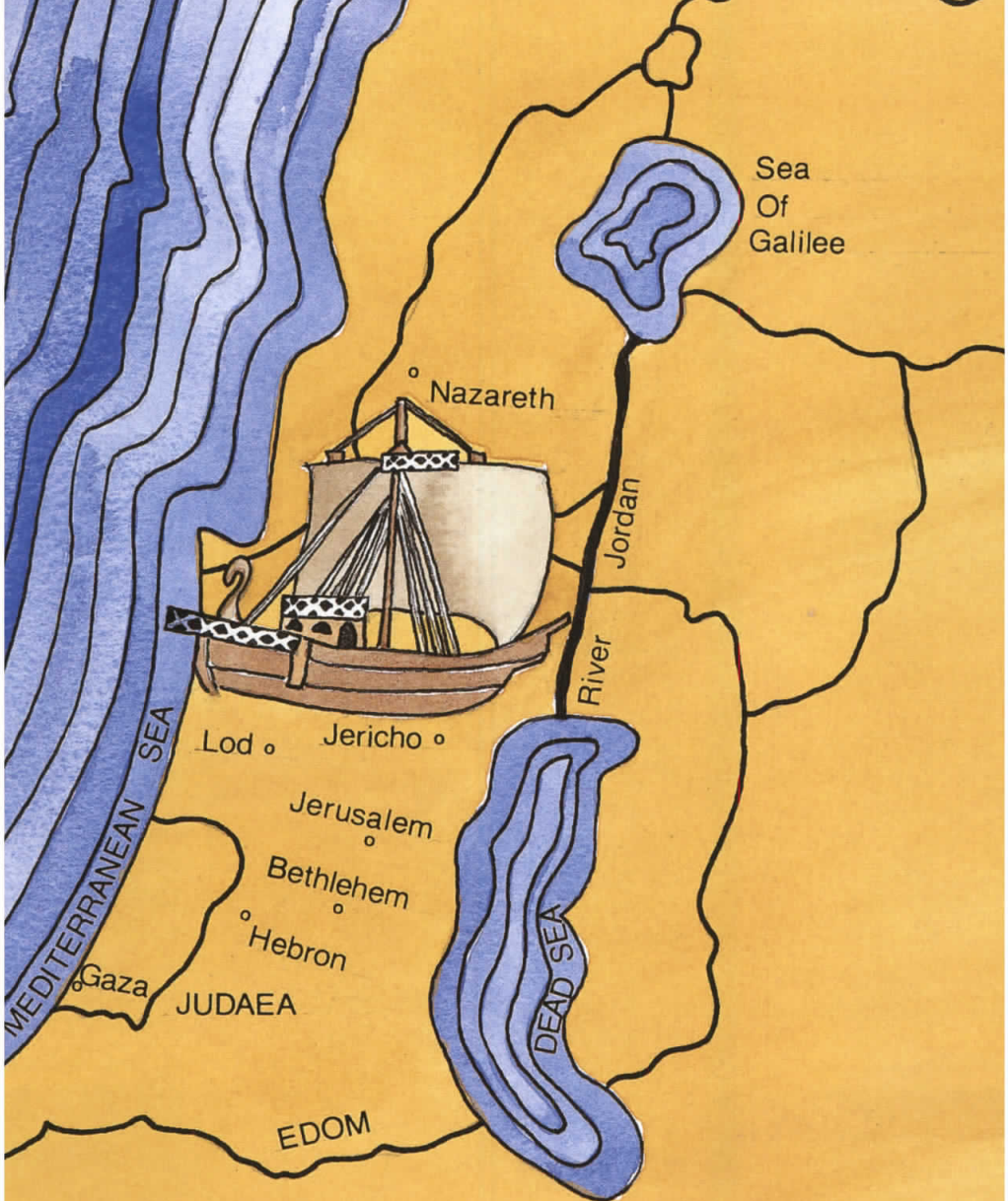
From the moment God created the world He started to reveal His guidance for mankind through His Prophets. These books relate the Prophets' experiences as they struggled to persuade the erring peoples of their day to obey and worship the one and only God. Much that is of relevance today can be learnt from the way these men, specially chosen by God for their task, taught, guided and trained the miscreants.

The Great Miracle, in the English language, has been written for Muslim children growing up in an English-speaking country. This Prophet has been given the name he is known by in English, rather than his original Arabic name to avoid confusion. Parents and teachers, however, should ensure that the traditional Qur'anic name is also known.

Children living in a non-Muslim society are often denied their traditional Islamic family background where stories from the Holy Qur'an were frequently heard. Parents and teachers have a duty to make up for the shortcomings of living outside an Islamic environment. *The Great Miracle* is intended to help them in their task by strengthening children's awareness of the guidance provided by God's Prophets who all bore the same message for mankind: that there is no god but the One, True God.

My thanks are due to Bro. Jamil Qureshi, Sis. Maryam Davies, my daughter Shifa' and my other children for their help in producing this book. May God bless them all and accept this humble effort and make it beneficial to all.

Iqbal Ahmad Azami



Sea
Of
Galilee

° Nazareth

Jordan

River

Lod ° Jericho °

Jerusalem

Bethlehem

° Hebron

° Gaza

JUDAEA

DEAD SEA

EDOM

NABATAEANS

1

Zachariah asks his Lord for a son

The mother of Prophet Jesus* ('Isa, peace and blessings be upon him), was named Mary. Her father, 'Imran, was descended from the father of two other great Prophets, Moses and Aaron whose name was also 'Imran. This family of Prophets included Zachariah and his wife. God chose Zachariah to be responsible for Mary's upbringing. All his life he had been an excellent servant of God, carrying out God's Will with strength and devotion. But now he was very old: his hair was shining grey, the bones inside his body were frail. His wife too was very old, and they had no children to support them in their old age. Zachariah had no heir, no son, to carry on his work. For the sake of that work, he longed for a son. In the quiet of his cell in the temple, he prayed to God to help him.

It is certain that God listens to the prayers of His faithful servants, and certain that He answers them in the best way. Zachariah's prayers were heard and they were answered better than he could ever have hoped, and in a way he could never have expected.

When Mary's mother, a close relative of Zachariah's, first knew she was expecting a baby she was overjoyed.

*Muslims are required to invoke Allah's blessings and peace upon the Prophets whenever their name is mentioned.

She made a promise to God that when the child was grown up, she would send him into the service of the temple. The child would grow up under the care of the people of the temple and become a true servant of God the All-Merciful. She said: 'O Lord, receive this from me. You hear and You know.'

When the child was born, she exclaimed in surprise: 'O Lord, I have given birth to her, a girl!' She thought she would have a boy. But God knew what she had given birth to. God knew what the future held for this girl. The mother did not know, but she kept the promise she had made. When the child was old enough, she brought her to the temple. At the moment of parting she embraced her daughter and kissed her forehead. Then, she prayed to God: 'I have named her Mary, and I put her in Your care, as well as her children to be; and I ask You to protect her from the accursed Satan.'

God did protect Mary and favoured her with beauty and excellence in faith. In the temple they drew lots to decide who should be her guardian. As God willed, the lot fell on Zachariah, who watched over her studies and prayers. He marvelled at her understanding and her purity of faith. His heart overflowed because of the goodness of God, and he too wished that he had such a child.

Zachariah noticed that whenever he came to visit Mary, she was always provided with fruit. One day,

he asked her: 'Mary, how do you come by this?' She told him: 'It comes from God. Truly, He gives to whoever He wills. There is no limit to His giving.'

The young girl's faith touched the old man's faith into new vigour. It was true that, whoever carried the fruit into the temple, it really came from God. With a fresh hope Zachariah again prayed to his Lord: 'O my Lord, my bones are weak inside me, and the hair on my head is shining grey. But when I have called on You, my Lord, I have not called in vain. I am troubled about my family after I am gone. My wife is unable to have children. So give me, from Yourself, a relation who will carry on from me, one who will carry on from the family of the Prophets. And Lord, make him well-pleasing.' It was not just for his own sake that Zachariah prayed but for the sake of the work of calling people to prayer and true religion. With all his heart, and believing that God gives without limit, he asked: 'O Lord, from Your goodness, grant me a child. Truly You are the One who hears prayer.'

While Zachariah was standing in prayer, angels from his Lord called to him: 'God sends you good news of a son, John, who will confirm a command from God. He will be a leader of men, and pure in his life, a Prophet and a righteous man.' Zachariah asked God for a sign to help him believe in the miracle that was promised to him. He was granted a sign. 'Your sign,' God said, 'is that you will not be able to speak to men for three days, except through signs. And remember

your Lord often, glorify Him at day's end and day's beginning.' So for three days Zachariah was tonguetied but his heart sang in thanks to his Lord.

God favoured John so that, even as a little child, he had great wisdom and judgement. He loved and honoured his elderly parents. Obeying God's command, he taught the truth about his Lord, with a burning passion. He told the people, as God had revealed to him, to expect the coming of an even greater Prophet. That Prophet was to be Mary's son, Jesus.

Peace be upon John the day of his birth, and the day of his death, and the day he is raised up alive!

2

The birth of Jesus

The angels called to Mary with a message from God: 'Mary, God has chosen you, and made you pure. He has preferred you above all women in creation. Be firm in your worship, bow down before God, bow yourself before Him with those who bow down.' Mary withdrew from her people to another place, and kept herself apart from them, so that she could pray with all her heart and mind undisturbed.

Then when her soul was prepared, God sent to Mary an angel with a spirit from Him. The angel appeared before her in the solid form of a man. Mary, not knowing his intentions, was startled. She said: 'I seek help in God, the All-Merciful, from you. If you fear God . . . ' The angel said: 'I am only a messenger from your Lord. Mary, God sends you good news of a command from Him, whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary. He will be greatly honoured in this world and the world to come, and he will be among those most near to God. He will speak even from the cradle, and when he is grown up, and he will be righteous.'

Mary asked: 'How will I have a son, when no man has ever touched me?' And she was told: 'It shall be so. God creates whatever He wills.' There is no limit to the power of God. If He wills a thing to be, He says to it: '*Be!*' and it is.

Mary travelled to a distant place, with the child inside her. When her time came, the birth-pains took her by surprise, as she was standing by the trunk of a palm-tree. The pains were fierce and she cried out. She was afraid that her people would make false accusations against her when she showed them the child. She wished she had died before this trial came, she wished she was long dead and buried, forgotten. But Mary's soul was in the care of God. The world she cried out to leave reached out, by God's command, to comfort her.

She said: 'O that I had died before this happened to me, and been a thing forgotten!'

A voice answered her cry: 'No, do not grieve. Look there where your Lord has set a small stream. Shake the palm-tree, and fresh, ripe dates will shower down to you. So eat, and drink, and be comforted. When you see anyone, indicate to them: "I have promised to God, the All-Merciful, to fast today by not speaking to anyone."''

Some time later, Mary came back to her people, carrying the child in her arms. As she had expected, they were shocked: 'O Mary, you have done a terrible thing! O daughter of the family of Aaron, your father was not a bad man, nor was your mother a bad woman!' But Mary kept silent and pointed to the child.

Her people said: 'How can we speak with a baby, still in the cradle?' But, by the will of God, clear speech



did come from the cradle. The infant knew the great burden and purpose of his life, and when he spoke of that, the accusations of the people were silenced. Jesus said: 'I am God's servant. God has given me the Book and made me a Prophet. He has made me blessed wherever I may be, and He has commanded me, as long as I may live, to pray and to give help to the poor and needy, and to honour and love my mother. God has not made me one of those who are proud and hard and who do not prosper. Peace be upon me the day of my birth, and the day of my death, and the day I am raised up alive!'

3

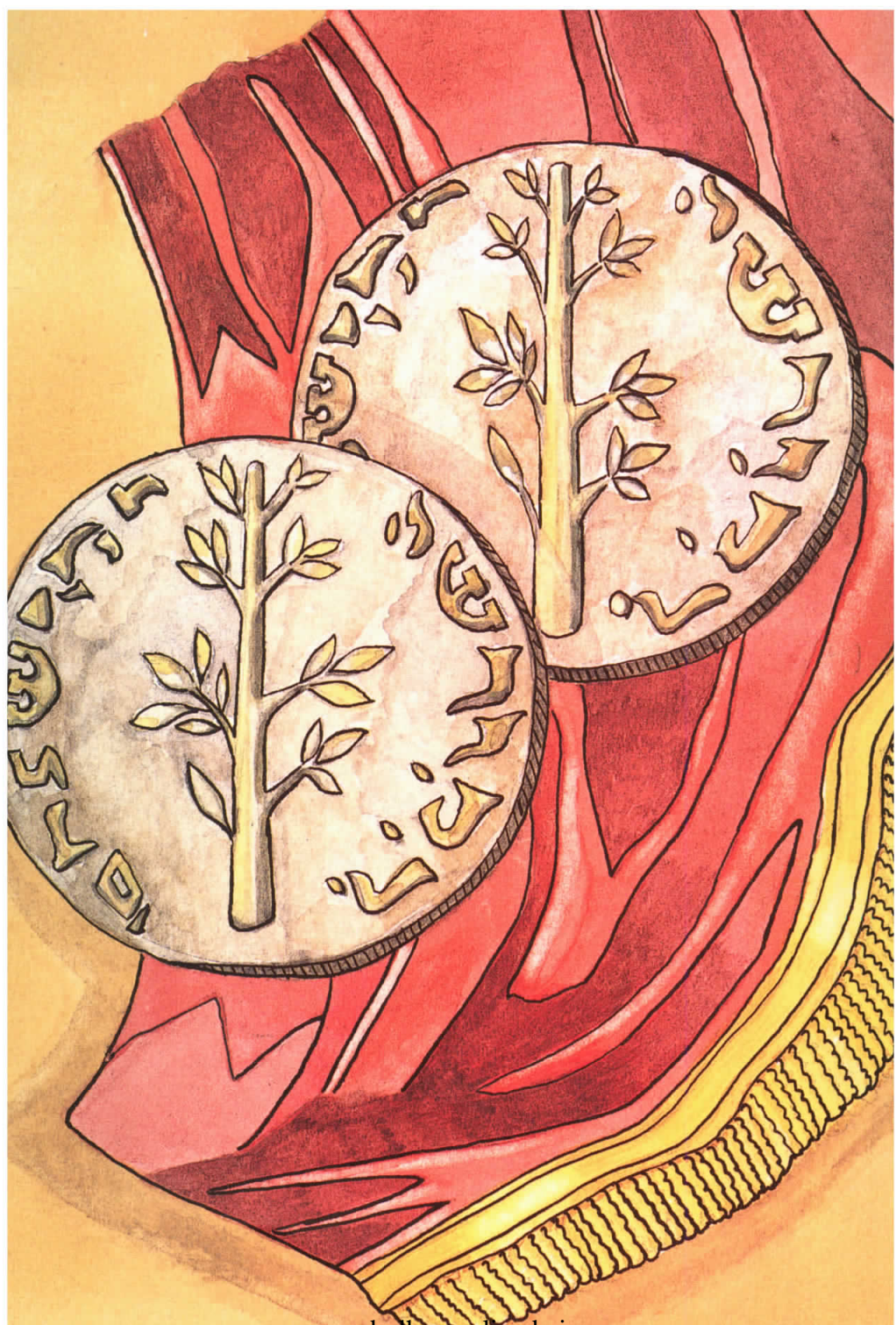
The people of Palestine and their Roman masters

The land where Jesus grew to manhood, and where he lived and preached, was Palestine. At this time it was governed by the Romans who were harsh rulers, and hated by the people they ruled. The Romans looked down on these people as backward. They were not interested in what they believed or how they lived. They cared only about keeping order in the land and collecting taxes. But, for all their strong army, the Romans could not keep order or collect taxes without help from some of the local people. So they had made a man from among the local people a king and given him a palace and let him keep a few soldiers. With his help, they picked spies and informers who watched and listened to what went on among the people.

Some of these spies reported to the Romans on how much farmers had gathered at harvest time, how big the shepherds' flocks were, how many fish the fishermen had managed to catch, how much carpenters and cloth-makers and other craftsmen had earned, and so on. In this way the Romans could work out how much tax to squeeze out of the people. The people could not save anything from what they earned and so could not plan for an easier life.

Other spies had a different job. Their work was to watch out for anybody who spoke out against the Romans. Naturally, most of the local people wanted to throw the Romans out of their land. The Romans were harsh rulers. Worse still, they prayed to many gods, to idols, some even prayed to their Emperor back in Rome. From time to time there were rebellions against the Romans, but the Romans' army was too strong and too well organized. They always crushed the rebellions and punished the people harshly.

Many local people, especially in the bigger towns, lost hope of getting rid of the Romans. They began to give up the ways of their religion and to copy the ways of their rulers, the Romans. There was a real danger that, sooner or later, under the influence of the Romans, they might slip into idol-worship. The danger was greatest among those who worked nearest to the Romans, those who collected taxes for them or who traded with them. Such people became rich and important in the land. They dressed and ate and talked like the Romans who had brought them their riches and their position. They thought themselves, like their Roman masters, superior and civilized, and looked down on others. Of course, they did not dare to say such things openly to the ordinary, working people. They kept their feelings hidden.



4

The people and their religious leaders

Thanks to the preaching of great men like Zachariah and his son John, the Children of Israel* still believed in the One God. But their faith had become very weak. They worried so much about their problems in this life, they hardly gave a thought to the life to come. It seems, their hearts became hard and they tended to stop thinking for themselves. The strong ones among them knew that they should help the weak. But they did not do so. The rich ones knew that they should help the poor and needy. But they rarely did so.

A believer has a duty to feed the hungry, to comfort the sick, to do for his neighbour what he would like his neighbour to do for him. But that is not how they acted with each other. Those who were healthy did not go out of their way to visit the sick. If they asked them on the street, they looked away, saying: 'It's not our fault they are sick.' Those who were well off never thought about sharing with the poor. If the poor turned up at their doors, they sent them away empty-handed,

* The Children of Israel were the descendants of Prophet Jacob, peace be upon him. He was also known as Israel which means 'servant of God', this was his title.

saying: 'It's not our fault you are poor and hungry. It's not our fault you have no shelter against the night.'

At this time, the priests and learned men of the Children-of Israel, their leaders, were of little help to the ordinary people. Most of them lived in the bigger towns in Palestine, or in the capital city, Jerusalem. It was their duty to show the people how to live as God wished them to live. But they did not set a good example. In their hearts too, faith had become weak. They did not go out of their way to be useful to the poor and needy. Rather the opposite. They collected money for their temples and for themselves, and became wealthy.

When they preached, it was nearly always about the Law. The words they used when they preached were not the words the villagers used amongst themselves, in their ordinary lives, and so it was very hard for them to understand.

The Law they preached was not the same Law God had revealed to the Prophet Moses. They had added many things to it, making it more and more complicated. They had little rules about everything. For example, they had rules not only about what things to eat, but also about when and in what order to eat them. As a result, life for ordinary people had become very difficult. They often had to send to their leaders to find out what they could or could not do.

In their answers the leaders were very quick to point out mistakes, and very slow to forgive. In this way, they made the Law a heavy burden on the people and a means of power over them. For that very reason there was not much love between the leaders and the people they were supposed to help.

Most of these people could not think of their religion in a hopeful, positive way. In public, their leaders complained a lot about the Romans. In secret, these same leaders admired the Romans for their power and riches. So they lived and believed half-heartedly.

That is why God sent Jesus to help them in their weakness. That is also why the task Jesus had was such a difficult one: the Romans, the rulers of the land, would be against him; the priests and other leaders of the people of the land would also be against him.



5

Jesus teaches through miracles

Jesus preached first in the villages in Palestine, to farmers and fishermen, cloth-makers and carpenters, ordinary working people. He spoke to them singly and in groups, during the working day and in the evening, outside their houses and in public places. He spoke about the greatest danger first, the danger of false worship. He said: 'Children of Israel, serve God, my Lord and your Lord. Whoever makes anyone or anything a partner with God, God will forbid him any way into Paradise. For that person, his resting-place will be the Fire. Those who do wrong will find no-one and nothing to help them.'

But the people did not want to listen to Jesus. They quickly became tired and bored. They said they already knew all that. They told him to go and teach the Romans, they were the ones who did not believe in God and worshipped idols. Jesus explained to them that God had sent him especially for them, the Children of Israel, and not the Romans.

Among those present were the spies of the Romans. They noted what Jesus said but did not think it worth reporting. They did not think they would be paid for information about a preacher nobody paid much attention to.



Jesus was patient with his people and went to them again and again. He explained to them how God created the world so that men and women could worship Him freely from within their hearts, and give thanks to Him. He talked to them about God's mercy, His kindness and forgiveness. He urged them to pray from within, and not just for show, for nobody can hide from God what is in his heart.

Then, Jesus told the people that it was not enough to call themselves believers. They must also try to live like believers. They should not just ignore the poor and the needy. They should not just leave the sick and the blind to support themselves. Rather, they should help those who needed help.

The people were used to being told about rules of dress and eating. They were not used to being told to, first, believe inside themselves, and then act outside themselves for the good of others. This was a message not heard amongst them since the time of Zachariah and John. But they did not want to change the way they lived. Jesus' words did not touch their hearts except to make them impatient with him, or angry. Some even mocked at the words of God's Messenger.

Jesus did not lose patience, or get angry. He realized that they did not understand. He prayed to God to help them understand. God answered his prayer by granting him many miracles to support his words, to encourage the people to take notice.

6

The liars are unmasked

When Jesus said to the people that they must feed the hungry and share whatever they had, much or little, with those who had less, some of them answered him with lies. They said: 'What? We hardly have anything to eat ourselves! Let alone feeding others, we have enough trouble feeding ourselves! What, do you think our houses are full of treasures? We have nothing to spare. We have nothing to give.'

Jesus gently reminded them that there are no secrets from God. God knows every person's innermost thought. Nothing can be hidden from the All-Seeing. Nothing can be hidden from the All-Hearing.

Those who had lied only repeated what they had said before. Now they added: 'Be off with you. Go to the Romans. Ask them to share with the poor. They're the ones who have plenty. Ask them. Teach them.'

Because they persisted in this way in untruth, Jesus exposed them by the leave of God. He had not watched them eat but, by the will of God, he was able to tell them everything they had eaten that day. He had never set foot inside their houses but, by the will of God, he was able to tell them how much they had stored up and exactly where they had hidden it.

Now those who were innocent of heart crowded near to Jesus, eager to hear him. But the others became angry because they had been shown up. 'Tricks!' they said. 'Clever tricks! That's all it is!' Then, a number of them began shouting: 'No! This is sorcery!' In their ignorance, they accused God's Messenger of practising forbidden magic.

The spies of the Romans kept to the back of the crowd, noting all that happened. Later, they reported to those who paid them for information. They, in turn, reported to their superiors. Eventually, news of this preacher who was able to do strange things reached the Roman governor of Palestine. He made a note about it. He was a busy man. He had, so he thought, more important things to think about.

7

Healing the sick

Another time, when the people gathered to listen to him, Jesus preached about how God, if He wills, forgives those of His servants who pray to be forgiven. Jesus saw the hope in the faces around him change into doubt. He saw fear in their eyes. They were nervous, uneasy.

When people do something they know is wrong, they should ask God to pardon them, and decide never to do it again. But sometimes people do not find this easy to do. They do wrong, sometimes the same thing, over and over again. After a time, they become so ashamed and so weak they start to believe they cannot help themselves. In the end, they no longer believe that things can ever be put right again. They no longer believe that they can be forgiven. When that happens, wrong-doing becomes a kind of sickness of the heart, a sickness which grows worse and worse.

Jesus saw this and wanted to help the people recover. He wanted to give them hope, to heal their hearts and minds, to make it possible for them to pray to God for forgiveness. So, by the will of God, Jesus called to a man who had been blind from birth and gave him sight. Those who witnessed this, and had the desire to understand, understood that God can make light where there was only darkness before. Their hearts were lightened.

After that, Jesus went out of the town to where some lepers lived as best they could, unhelped. The people who went with Jesus were afraid of catching the disease and watched from a distance. Jesus was not afraid. He walked in amongst the lepers and, by the will of God, healed them so that their skins were sound and clean again, and they could move their limbs freely. Those who witnessed this, and had the desire to understand, understood that the help of God can set free those who have become trapped in the pains of this life. They glorified God and praised Him. Now they desired in their hearts to pray for God's forgiveness and His help in the life to come.

But there were others present who had no desire to understand. They mocked Jesus as before, only with greater anger. They told the people that Jesus was a sorcerer, one who practised forbidden arts. As a result, some of those whose hearts had softened and who were inclined to believe in Jesus, turned away, doubting.

The spies of the Romans mixed with the crowd, saying nothing, noting everything. They were puzzled. Who were these people who spoke to Jesus with such hate? Why did they mock him? Why were they the enemies of a man who spoke so kindly, even to them, and did so much good?



8

The Law

News of the miracles that Jesus did spread among the villages and small towns. Many were now able to recognize in Jesus the authority of a Messenger of God. Now the people would come forward and gather to hear him, without being called first. This change was noticeable in the way they listened to Jesus.

Some wanted to learn and make their faith stronger. They listened whole-heartedly with a growing love in their faces for what they heard. Others did not want to learn and thought themselves already good, righteous people. They listened half-heartedly with a growing hate in their hearts for what they heard.

Jesus spoke to them about the Law. He explained how it had been changed and added to. The wisdom and knowledge Jesus had in these matters was from God. He spoke therefore with proper authority. He made lawful certain things that had been forbidden to them before. Jesus explained things in the language of the people themselves, using words and ideas they themselves used in their everyday lives.

He said many times that it was of the greatest importance to act according to the Law. But true believers must try to do more than follow the rules outwardly. They must try to be pure of heart and mind also. That

was the only way to make the Law firm and sure, to make the Law really work for the benefit of mankind.

The ordinary working people among those who listened had no difficulty understanding. They now realized that God gave mankind the Law to help keep their lives decent and orderly, not to make their lives complicated just for the sake of it. For them, it was as if a heavy burden that they were carrying had suddenly been lightened. They understood that if a person earns his living lawfully and eats lawful food, that is right and good. But if he does these things in the right spirit, with the right intention, then he will have more: he will have the heart to share with others what he lawfully earns, he will have the heart to share with others what he lawfully eats.

Those who had mocked Jesus before did not understand at all. No burden was lightened for them. They did not feel relieved. Rather the opposite. They felt threatened. They spoke with a burning hate. They accused Jesus with a terrible violence in their eyes and their voices. They shook their fists at the Messenger. They said that Jesus was a rebel against the Law and wanted to destroy it. Yet Jesus had explained in the plainest words that he wanted to make the Law stronger and firmer. The enemies of God's Messenger, and every one of His Messengers had enemies, had no mind to understand.

Jesus' patience never wavered in the face of his enemies' hardness of heart. He never answered their

abuse with abuse, or their anger with anger. He answered instead with forgiveness. He forgave them the personal insults they threw at him and prayed for them to be guided. But their hatred for him only grew stronger.

The spies of the Romans knew now who these enemies of the Messenger were. They were among the well-off, friends and agents of the priests and other leaders in Jerusalem. The spies reported what had happened, and warned the authorities to expect disorder and trouble.

Disorder in the land was the last thing the Roman governor wanted since it was his job to keep order. He paced up and down, undecided. He was not concerned about doing the right thing, he only wanted to have a quiet life. He wondered anxiously how the head priests and leaders of the Children of Israel would act. Of course, they would go against this new preacher, but how far would they go? And what should he do? He decided to wait and see.



9

The bird of clay

Their leaders believed that Jesus was becoming a threat to them and they decided to turn the people against him. They sent their friends and agents to the villages before Jesus reached them and spread lies about him. Like other enemies of God's Messengers in the past, they said that Jesus was a trouble-maker bent on destroying the ways of their fathers and forefathers. They told the people not to listen to anything Jesus might say. They told them to have nothing to do with him.

But not all the people, simple villagers though they were, believed the lies about Jesus. They wanted to see for themselves. They wanted to hear for themselves.

When Jesus came to them, instead of hurrying away, they hurried toward him. Some wanted to be healed of their sickness. Some wanted to be healed of their ignorance. They recognized in Jesus the gentlest of men who had, as well as his gentleness, wisdom from God. They looked to him to guide them on the Straight Path. Jesus did not ask them to give him money, or ask to have power over them. He did not use words they did not understand.

The people were eager to be near him and talk to him about their problems. All spoke about one problem in

particular, the Romans. They said they hated the Romans. But perhaps the truth was they feared the Romans. Indeed, they feared the Romans and were in awe of them in the way that they should be in fear and awe of God. They said: 'The Romans are all-powerful. They are truly the masters of the whole world. No-one can stand against them. We will never be rid of them.'

Jesus told them that only God is All-Powerful. He grants power in the land to whoever He wills, for a certain time, not for ever. In that way God tests the believers, to see how they manage their affairs. In that way God hurls the truth against falsehood, and the lasting victory is with those who hold to the truth, however difficult or easy their life is.

The people heard the words but without understanding. The words did not reach their hearts. The glory and majesty of God's creation was all around them, but they had grown used to it. They were alive in God's world, they worked and rested in it, they knew one another and shared thoughts and feelings. But they had grown so used to these and other blessings, they did not think about them any more. They were not thankful to God.

Jesus wanted to open their hearts so that they would understand that God has power to make and change all things. Jesus took some clay in his hands. With water he formed the clay into the shape of a bird.

Then, he breathed into that shape and, by the will of God, it flew away from his hands like a living creature.

All those who witnessed this were amazed. For those among them who were inclined to faith, the bird was a vision, a sign, of freedom. They understood that, as God willed, the humble stuff of their lives could be made anew, their souls set free of their troubles and sorrows. They praised God with a mighty shout and glorified Him, and their faces were lightened with understanding.

For those whose hearts were not inclined to faith, the opposite happened. Their faces darkened with hate as a result of what they saw. They accused Jesus of having done an evil thing, the fruit of black magic. To show that they never wanted to see any such thing again, they covered their eyes with their hands, they put their fingers in their ears, and they howled rudely at the Messenger. They called Jesus the most insulting names. So terrible was their hate, they even said vile things about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Jesus answered them with patience and a prayer that they find guidance. His gentleness had no charm for his enemies. They moved away from the gathering, whispering to one another, plotting.

Jesus sensed the violence they intended against him and asked of those near him: 'Who will be my helpers to God?' Amongst those ordinary working people whose hearts had been enlightened, there were a few

not afraid of the hardships and greatness of the task Jesus asked them to share. These few stepped forward. They said:

‘We will be helpers of God. We believe in God. Witness that we submit ourselves to Him. O Lord, we believe in what You have sent down, and we follow the Messenger. Write our names therefore with the names of those who bear witness.’

The plotters realized that, encouraged by this new band of disciples, the other people around Jesus would not permit them to harm him. They decided to slip away, and wait for another time, another opportunity.

The spies of the Romans also slipped away to make their report. When the Roman governor heard that Jesus now had some followers, he was certain that there would be trouble between them and the leaders of the Children of Israel in Jerusalem. But he made no effort to discover the truth of the matter. He made no effort to support what was right. He was concerned only about his own peace and quiet, and for his job. He thought for a long time and took the advice of some of his captains. They decided that it was still the best policy to wait and see, to do nothing. ‘It’s none of our business,’ they said.

10

The table from heaven

The leaders of the Children of Israel, had already warned the people not to listen to Jesus, but most had ignored them. They now decided to turn to threats and bullying. They had friends among the rich, among the landlords and tax-collectors. So, they let it be known that whoever gave any help to Jesus or his followers would suffer for it. He would lose the use of his house or his boat or his bit of land.

The enemies of God's Messenger acted as people like them had acted in the past. It was not enough for them that they did not themselves listen to the Message from God. They also tried to stop others doing so. They put obstacles and hardships in the way of religion.

The ordinary working people had no savings to fall back on. They were afraid for their livelihoods. Now, when Jesus and his disciples came to their villages or towns, they dared not welcome them openly. They dared not invite them to their houses.

Often therefore, Jesus and the disciples wandered hungry and thirsty, a long way from food and shelter. On one such occasion, the disciples turned to Jesus and asked: 'O Jesus, son of Mary, would it be possible for your Lord to send down on us a table from heaven?'

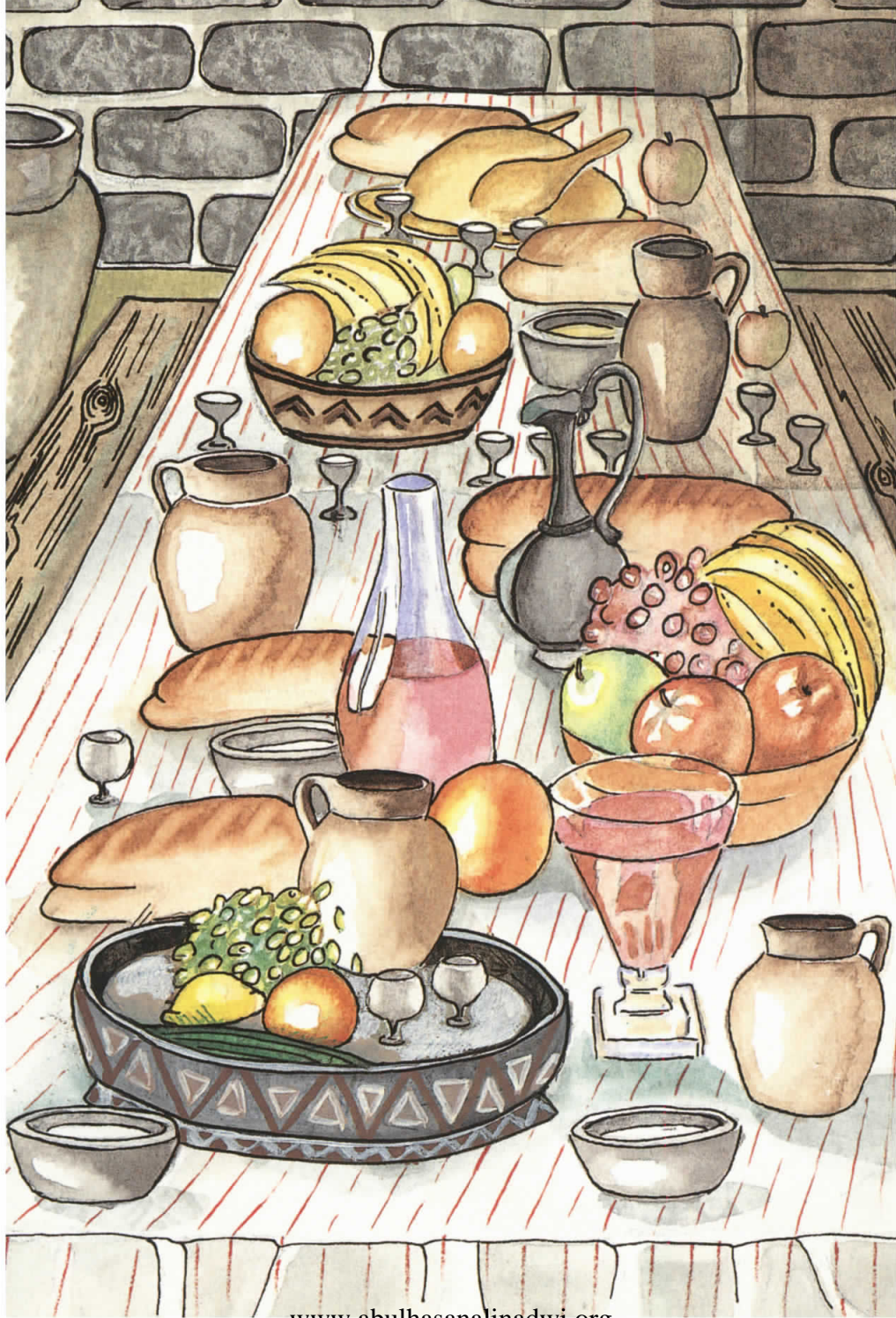
Believers should not question God in such a manner. Hardships are a test from Him, a way of perfecting faith. Jesus spoke sternly to the disciples. He said: 'Fear God, if you are believers!'

The disciples were good and honest men. They told Jesus everything that was in their hearts, holding nothing back, hiding nothing. They said they were hungry for food to satisfy their bodies, but also hungry for faith to satisfy their souls: 'We wish that we might eat from it and our hearts be at peace. Also we wish that we might be assured of the truth you have spoken to us, and that we might be among the witnesses of that truth.'

When Jesus saw that the disciples were asking for faith, he prayed to God to provide for them: 'O God, our Lord, send down on us a table out of heaven. It will be a remembrance and a celebration for the first of us and the last of us, a sign from You. Give to us, You are the best of givers.'

God said: 'Truly, I do send provision down to you. Whoever of you disbelieves after this, I shall punish with a punishment as for no other being.'

The disciples were granted a special miracle to fix faith in their hearts. From that time on, as never before, they thanked God for their daily bread.



11

His enemies plot to kill the Messenger

Refreshed in body and soul, the disciples went among the people. They urged them to overcome their fears and listen to the preaching of Jesus: their well-being in the life to come depended on it. The disciples arranged, as best they could, safe meeting places. Little by little, the people began to come forward. As before, Jesus moved them with his gentle way of teaching, and opened their hearts to faith through the signs that God permitted him to show them.

After a time Jesus and the disciples went to the bigger towns and preached there openly. Their enemies were in greater numbers in such places. Men of wealth and position, learned men and senior priests, all those who were afraid that, in the eyes of the people, their power and authority would be lessened, came to hear Jesus. They did not come to learn from the Messenger but to mock and insult him.

In spite of all their efforts, Jesus' following grew. The hate of his enemies overflowed. They decided that the time had come to be rid of him. They hired some men to mix with the crowd, to draw Jesus away with some excuse and then, when they were alone with him, to kill him.

But, the men they hired came back with a strange story. They had done as planned, and had arranged to take Jesus to the house of a sick woman. They had stood in the crowd and mixed with them, waiting for Jesus to come toward them. When he was near they would ask him to accompany them to the sick woman's house, they knew he would not refuse to help. They saw Jesus make his way through the crowd, they watched his every step as he came nearer. Then suddenly, just as they were going to call to him, they could no longer see him. Jesus passed by them unseen.

The plotting of Jesus' enemies came to nothing. They tried many times, but each time with the same result. They had no power over Jesus. Were they not blind to the Message that Jesus brought? Blind to his gentleness? Blind even to the signs and miracles that God granted him?

For that reason, God made them blind to the very presence of His Messenger. Perhaps now they would reflect and think clearly. Perhaps now they would see the evil that was in their hearts and minds. But they would not. They had an overpowering hate for Jesus. They could find no fault in themselves. Instead, they found fault in Jesus. They said, spluttering vainly in their hate, 'This is plain sorcery!'

12

In Jerusalem: proud men deny the miracles

God guided the path that Jesus took, and he followed that path without fear. The disciples followed where Jesus led them, their love for him overcoming their fear. They had reason to fear since their way was to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the seat of government for both the Romans and the Children of Israel. Here the power, and the hate, of the Messenger's enemies was concentrated. Those who lived in Jerusalem thought themselves better than those who did not. They mixed freely with merchants and travellers from abroad. They felt that they were a part of the wider world of the Roman Empire. Even ordinary working people in Jerusalem knew some words of Latin and Greek. The rich and powerful spoke these languages as if they were their own and liked doing so because it made them feel superior.

After Jesus had entered the city, he chose a place for the people to gather. He asked his helpers to invite the people to come there. The disciples went through the city, telling whoever they met that the Messenger of God had come to teach them faith. They spoke about the signs and miracles that God had granted to strengthen Jesus' words. Their voices showed the love they felt

for their teacher, and their faces shone with the light of his teaching. Many people from among the city's poorest and humblest workers promised to come and hear the Messenger.

But the disciples also met with a different sort of people, smartly dressed, clever, confident people. These were men who had travelled far on business or pleasure, who took a huge share of the goods of this world and felt that they deserved still more. It was from among such proud people that the leaders of the Jews chose their friends and supporters, and not from among the ordinary workers in the city. How different these proud men looked from the disciples who were all simple, humble men. They had only ever had a very small share in the goods of this world, and even that they had given up for the sake of faith.

When the disciples talked about what Jesus had said and done, the proud men answered with rude insults. The disciples told them how Jesus had, with God's leave, revealed to certain men what they had hidden in their houses. The proud ones answered: 'So? Most village people own much the same sort of things, and live in much the same sort of houses. It wouldn't be hard to guess what things they put where.' The disciples told them how Jesus had, with God's permission, healed the blind and the sick, curing them completely. The proud men answered: 'So? It's not unheard of for people to suddenly fall ill, then just as

suddenly get well again. Besides, there are famous healers all over the world, if you travelled as we do, you'd know.'

The disciples told them how Jesus had formed the bird of clay and how, with God's leave, it had flown from his hands like a living creature. The proud men burst out laughing. They said: 'O you country people, you will believe anything! In Rome and Alexandria there are conjurers who can change ropes into snakes before your very eyes! And they pull rabbits and doves out of thin air, or out of their cloaks! But we see that you are an ignorant lot!'

It was hard for the disciples to bear these insults with patience as Jesus had advised them, but they did so. They wondered how such clever, important people could themselves be so ignorant. They did not seem to know that conjurers do only tricks to deceive people or to amuse them. But the signs that God's Messengers bring are true and help men and women to faith. The disciples said: 'We have seen with our hearts and minds as well as with our eyes. Our bodies have been nourished by a miracle from God and our souls have also been nourished. We believe in the signs that Jesus, with God's leave, has shown us. But we have no wish to quarrel with you. Come and hear Jesus for yourselves: it may be, if God wills, you will be guided to the truth.'

The proud men realized their mocking had not shaken the disciples' faith at all. They scowled at the disciples and turned their backs on them.

The disciples left the proud men and returned to the meeting-place. They wondered how it was that, so often, those who had a high position in the world turned away when God's signs were made clear to them. Why did they try to explain everything away and make light of it? Why did they try so hard *not* to believe?

The reason is that such men use their riches and power only for their own benefit, not for the benefit of all. They fail to give thanks to God for their blessings, and so those blessings become a curse. They want more and more riches, and more and more power, and never find contentment.

Such men really believe only in things they can see and touch, and buy and sell, things that, in one way or another, they can control. But true miracles are something nobody can control, nobody can make happen, unless God wills.

That is why the proud men who turned their backs on the disciples did not believe in the miracles that were explained to them. Even if they had seen them for themselves, they would not have believed. They would have said: 'We have only seen a trick.'

More than that, these men did not want others to believe either. They cursed the disciples under their

breath after they had gone. They hated the disciples for reminding them of the true religion which teaches that we cannot take the things of this world into the life hereafter. The proud men loved their riches and their power so much, they preferred to believe that there is no life hereafter rather than change themselves and seek God's forgiveness.

Of course, they did not rush to see Jesus and hear his teaching. They rushed instead to report to their leaders and chief priests that Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem.

'This man has got to be stopped!' they said. 'If the people of Jerusalem become his followers, we will lose our position. They will not look up to us any more, nor do what we say.'

'We already know this,' answered their leaders impatiently. 'The trouble is he always escapes us. We don't know how. He is a cunning sorcerer! What can we do?'

'The Romans have the men and the power, he will not get away from them so easily. Let us get them to arrest him and put him to death,' said the others.

At first the leaders were not happy with this idea. 'But the people may turn against us. You know how they hate the Romans. If they find out we have been working with the Romans . . . '

'No. We will go to the Romans in secret. The people will not know anything until it is too late.'

'That may be possible. But what reason can we give the Romans to arrest Jesus? The Romans like to know everything that's going on, but they don't like to interfere in our affairs, unless they see some benefit in it for themselves.'

'Well, we must find a reason.'

All of them then discussed the matter and decided what they would tell the Romans. The leaders would go to see the governor. Meanwhile, the others, the proud ones who had scoffed at the helpers of God's Messenger, would go to the meeting-place to see for themselves what Jesus said and did.



13

The raising of the dead

When the proud men arrived at the meeting-place, they saw many people gathered around Jesus, listening intently. Their faces were still and soft, their eyes open wide, as if they were taking every word Jesus said straight to their heart. The faces of the proud men hardened when they saw this, their eyes narrowed with hate: they were angry that Jesus had such a hold on the attention of the people.

At that moment Jesus was speaking about the life hereafter. That life, which lasts for ever, is the true goal of a believer. The joys and sorrows of this life are only a trial, a testing, of the quality of our faith and the quality of our deeds. We must look to the life to come and make ready for it.

The proud men did not want to hear this. They did not believe in the life hereafter. They were thinking: How is it possible? When we die our bodies are buried, we rot and mix into the dust of the ground, and that's the end of it. How is it possible that we could be put together again? No, no, it's a thing impossible to believe. It's a fairy-tale that people used to believe in ancient times. We have never seen anything to make us believe anything different.

Jesus told the people to reflect. They were, each and every one of them, nothing until God gave them life.

It was no great matter for God who is All-Powerful, and All-Merciful, to bring them to life a second time. A believer must seek his treasure in the life hereafter; he must not prefer to seek his treasure in this world because, whatever he treasures in this world will leave him.

But the pride in the hearts of those who did not want to believe was too great for them to understand Jesus' words. They listened with a growing hate. If what Jesus said was true, then all the time and effort they had spent gathering goods and riches, and getting a high position, had been time and effort unwisely spent. They did not want to change.

After he had finished preaching, the people crowded round Jesus, asking him to heal them or help them in some way. One man asked if Jesus would come to his house where his daughter was lying very sick. Jesus went with this man, and the crowd of people followed.

When they got to the house, the sick girl's mother and all her relatives were crying and sobbing. They said it was too late, the girl was dead. But Jesus entered the house, praying to God inwardly. God answered Jesus' prayer. With God's leave Jesus called the girl back to life again, and she came out of the house as if she had been woken from a deep sleep. Her family were overjoyed and all the people were speechless at what had happened.

A man then spoke quietly to Jesus. Jesus went to this man's house, with all the people following him. The

man's brother had died, his body lay in the house, already prepared for burial. There were many in the crowd who knew that this was so. Jesus saw that the man who had spoken to him was in great need of faith, and he had loved his brother dearly. So Jesus prayed to God. Then he entered the man's house and called out his brother's name. With God's leave, Jesus called the man back to life. He too arose just as if he had awoken from a deep sleep.

The proud men had witnessed what the others had witnessed. They had seen what the others had seen. But faith did not stir in their hearts. They would not bring their own souls out of the darkness of their pride and believe. They hurried to their leaders to make their report.

14

The Romans join in the plot

The proud men reported the miracles that they had seen. They wanted to explain it all away as they had before. But they could find no explanation. The leaders of the Jews could find no explanation either. They pretended therefore that it had not really happened. They said: 'As for the girl, she can't really have been dead. As for the man prepared for burial, that must have been a trick set up beforehand.' They preferred lies to truth. Armed with these and other lies, the leaders went to see the Roman governor. They said: 'Jesus is a trouble-maker. He is setting himself up as a leader. He wants to take power in the land away from you.'

But the Roman governor had been told by his own spies all that Jesus had said and done. He told them that he had heard nothing of the sort. He said he had no reason at all to arrest Jesus.

But the leaders insisted. They said: 'Do not be taken in. You think that because he speaks so gently, because he dresses so humbly, because he heals the sick and the blind, because he urges people to believe in God and

to be kind to one another, that there is no harm in the man. We tell you it is all tricks and sorcery to win the people to his side. When he has enough followers he will set himself up as a king and turn against you.'

The Roman governor hesitated. He was not concerned about doing the right thing. He knew that Jesus was becoming more and more popular. If he acted against Jesus, the people might rise up against him and disturb the peace. If he did not act against Jesus, the leaders of the Children of Israel would stir up trouble and so disturb the peace. Whose side should he take?

The governor knew that Jesus was innocent of any crime. He had broken no law. He had done nothing but good. The governor's own spies had told him so. Should he then just leave things as they were? He hesitated.

The leaders of the Children of Israel had expected this. They picked this moment to tell another lie. They reminded the governor of the sign Jesus had shown the people the day before. They said, of course, it had all been a trick, but what would be the reaction in the city when news of it spread about? When the governor was listening closely, they added: 'Of course, your soldiers cannot understand the words that Jesus speaks, but they can certainly understand his actions. Are you sure that your own men will not become his followers? What will

become of Rome if your own Roman soldiers become his followers?’

The governor was silent, so they went on: ‘You see we too, just like yourself, only want peace and quiet in the land. We have nothing to gain from this. We are your well-wishers and mean to do good.’

The governor made his decision. He decided against the truth. He chose falsehood. He ordered that Jesus should be arrested.

15

The arrest and trial of Jesus

One of Jesus' followers was bribed and betrayed his master. He led the Roman soldiers to where Jesus and his disciples were resting. The Messenger's enemies wondered if the Romans would be able to do what they had not been able to do. They were sure Jesus would not escape the power of Rome, blinded by their hate for Jesus, put their trust in the Romans.

They hoped that there would be some sort of fight in which Jesus could be got rid of, quietly, and their hate would be satisfied. But this was not what God willed. Jesus knew that time and again God had hidden him from the eyes of his enemies, and if God willed, He could have done it now also. So he commanded his helpers not to resist the soldiers. He went with the soldiers, comforting his disciples and urging them to patience and trust in God.

Jesus' trial before the Roman governor of Palestine was a sham. The governor knew Jesus was innocent but had already decided to pronounce him guilty. The

trial took place on a Friday, the day before the Jewish sabbath. Jesus was cruelly beaten and then made to stand for hours while his accusers heaped lies on his name and on his message. They tried to sound as if they were concerned for the peace and order of the province, and for the security of the Law. But inside, they burned with hate. They wanted Jesus to accuse them, to abuse them, to hate them in return. But Jesus would not allow himself even to feel such things, let alone utter them.

Only when he was accused of setting himself up before them for adoration or worship, did he speak sternly to them. He told them he was God's true and obedient servant, from first to last, and that he called the people also to become true and obedient servants of the One God. Is it possible, he asked them, after all that he had said and done and shown to make the people believe in the One True God, that he could ask the people to worship him, or even make him their king?

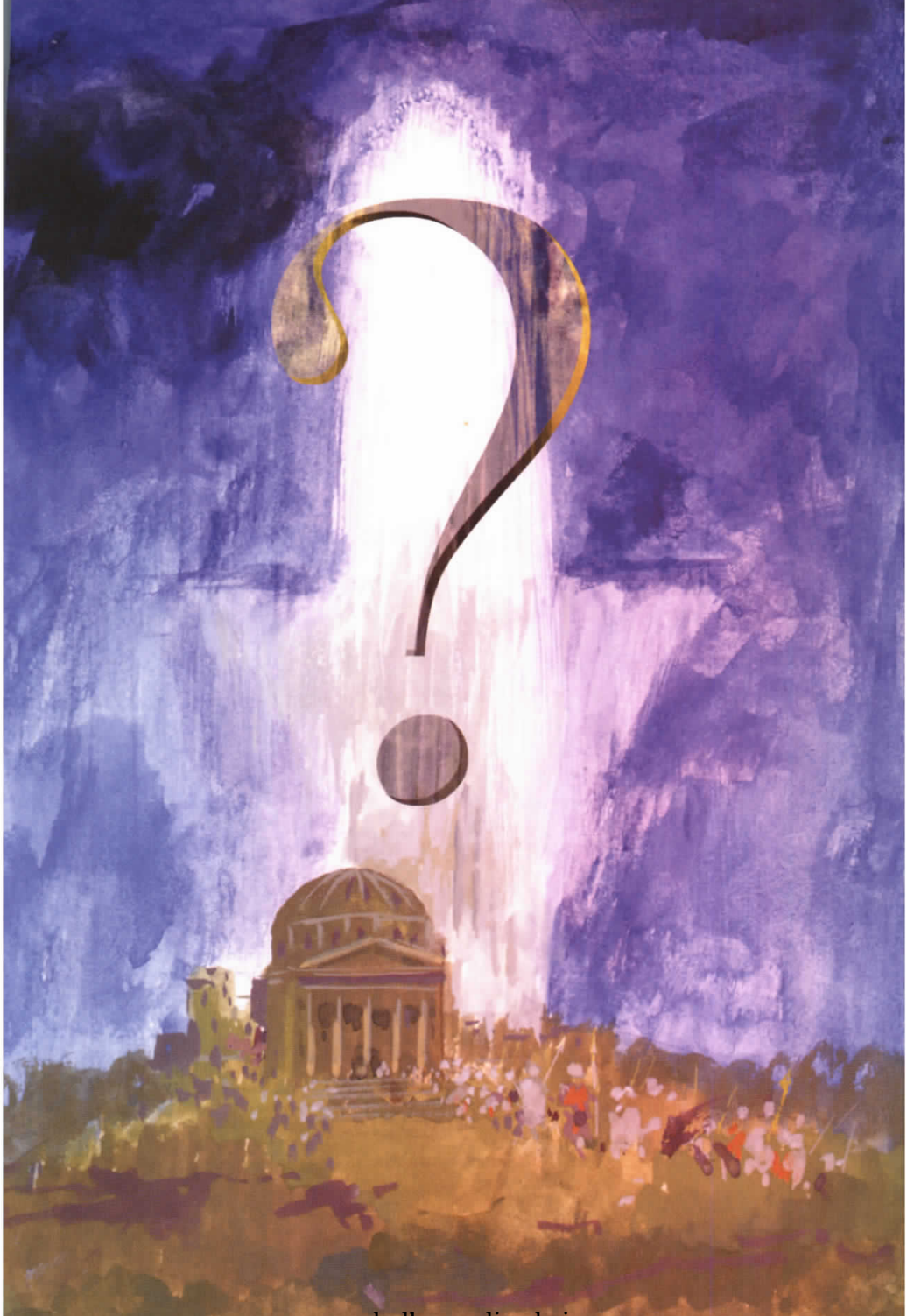
The Roman governor saw with his own eyes that Jesus was completely innocent. He saw that there was no false pride in him, nothing about him that suggested he was seeking power in the land. His accusers, were anxious to see the prisoner pleading for his life. But he did not. He was praying inwardly, instead, as they could see from his face and manner. He seemed when he looked at them to be hoping that they too might

change themselves and become deserving of God's forgiveness. But his enemies were having nothing to do with it.

Jesus was alone and, they thought, helpless in their power. But they saw no trace of fear in his face. They saw instead Jesus' patience and trust in God. Even now, when his enemies thought they had him in their power and so accused him even more angrily, Jesus looked at them with pity, not hate or anger. In this way the evil in the hearts of his enemies was made clear to them: they knew that Jesus was good but they remained against him just the same. His gentleness only made them more cruel. They clung with all their might to their wickedness, and started shrieking at the governor: 'Crucify him!'

The governor asked for water and washed his hands. After that he ordered that Jesus be taken with some other prisoners and put to death by crucifixion. It was an unjust decision at the end of an unjust trial. The soldiers removed Jesus, the Messiah, son of Mary, from the court.

Though it was only late in the afternoon, the sky fell dark, as if it had been night. Crowds gathered to witness the procession of prisoners, all along the route to the place of execution. They could scarcely see what was going on, let alone make out who was who. The



governor had given strict orders to his soldiers to keep the crowds well back.

Jesus' enemies could not see what was happening. But they had betrayed themselves and put their trust in the Romans. The Romans were powerful, they could get things done. The proud men went away, thinking they had crucified the Messenger. They began congratulating each other. They said: 'We have killed the Messiah! We have crucified him!' But they neither killed Jesus, nor crucified him.

In the darkness, only a likeness of Jesus was seen by his enemies; out of the darkness around them and the deeper darkness inside them, they convinced themselves of what they had guessed. They convinced themselves that their evil had triumphed over the mercy and forgiveness preached by the Messiah. But at the moment of their worst evil, Jesus did not flinch from their hatred but answered it with a promise of God's forgiveness and mercy. He did not answer evil with evil but with that which is better.

Suddenly, everything that Jesus' enemies had heard or known about him came rushing back to them: the miracle of his birth, his speaking from the cradle, his knowledge of things unseen, his healing the blind and the lepers, the miracle of the bird of clay, the miracle of the table from heaven, his raising the dead. Would

they now believe? Would they now turn to God and seek His forgiveness? All God's Messengers have said that the gate of forgiveness is always open to those who are true believers in the One God. Would they enter that gate? Even now, they might have, but they did not.

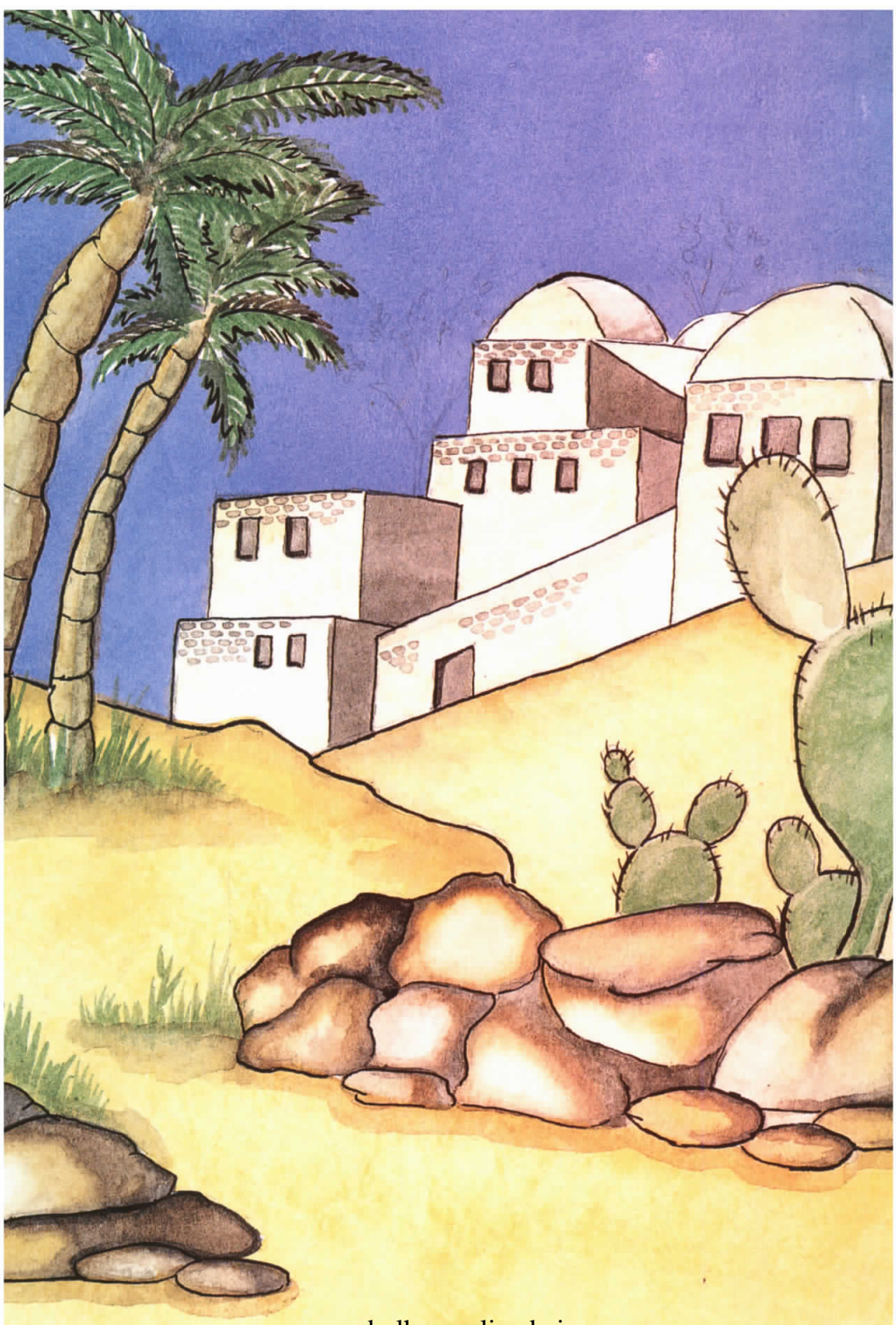
16

God raises Jesus to Himself

The evil had no power over the goodness of Jesus. The truth is, as God has spoken it, that He raised the Prophet Jesus to Himself and away from the power of those who sought to destroy him.

And because of their saying: 'We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, God's messenger' – They slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But God took him up unto Himself. God was Ever-Mighty, Wise. (Qur'an, 4: 1 57–8)

Jesus' work had been to teach the people one by one how to make themselves better servants of the One God. Before he left this earthly world, Jesus spoke to the disciples; he told them that they should continue to teach what he had taught them. He comforted them and said that, just as the Prophet John had confirmed his coming, so he now confirmed the coming of a Prophet more worthy of praise. This man 'more worthy of praise, the last of the Messengers of God, whose very names Ahmad and Muhammad upon him be peace mean the praised one. The work of this Messenger was to teach the people, not only one by one, but also as groups and nations, how to be better servants of the One God.



And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad." But when he came to them with Clear Signs, they said, "This is evident sorcery!" (Qur'an 61: 6)

The Prophet Muhammad is more worthy of praise because, as God willed he is the last of the Prophets; in him all the different excellences of the Prophets who went before him are combined and balanced. That is why those who know the life of the Prophet Muhammad recognize in it the strength and wisdom of the Prophet Moses as well as the tenderness and forgiveness of the Prophet Jesus. May God bless and grant them all peace!

Jesus will descend from heaven when God wills. He will establish the proof against those of the Jews and Christians who abandoned him or went to excess about him. He will assist the truth, defeat the people of falsehood and call people to Islam, as our Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, has informed us. There are many sound reports and *ahadith* about this matter. The Muslims of every age believe in it. God the Sublime spoke this truth:

'There is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in him before his death and on the Day of Rising he will be a witness against them.'
(Qur'an 4: 159)