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How Rohani Met Isa

Anonymous, as told to Jamie Winship

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Rohani, which means ‘filled with God’s spirit,’ introduces herself to me one morning as I enter the classroom.

Despite the ravages of her life in Baghdad and a tumultuous journey across the desert into this refugee camp in Jordan, she has a deep, resolute beauty.

‘I am Muslim,’ she informs me. She straightens her elfin form in a show of dignity that rises above the reality of her life and the loss of everything she has ever loved. My heart is stirred by her strength and determination and then breaks at her lostness, both physically and spiritually.

‘I’m a true believer,’ I say as other students come into the room and take their seats. Palestinians and Iraqis, they sit and stare from vacuous eyes sunken within hollow faces. Expressions of hopelessness track my every movement.

‘What is a true believer?’ Rohani demands.

‘You need to learn many things,’ I say. ‘After the class we can talk about this, but first you need English and computer skills.’

‘Belief is first,’ she answers confidently. ‘Everything else is secondary.’

She is a young woman by American standards, 28 perhaps, yet nearly an old maid in her culture. Her violet head covering hangs loosely about her bronzed face. Her eyes are fierce and dark. I shudder at the things they have witnessed. And yet she speaks of the importance of belief.

I put off her challenge until the class is finished. When she refuses to leave as the room empties, I acquiesce. ‘What is a true believer in your religion?’ I ask.

‘Someone who believes in the signs of God,’ she answers.

I’m surprised. I was expecting the standard answer about prayer and good works.

‘Signs?’ I ask. ‘What signs?’

‘Signs,’ she repeats, as if frustrated by my ignorance. ‘God gives us signs to understand Him. Like the sign of the Ark of Nuh.’

I’m now truly amazed. ‘And what does the ark of Noah tell you about God?’

She drops her eyes and shakes her head. ‘I don’t really know. I can’t understand it. But whatever it means, I believe it.’ How tenaciously she holds on to her belief, yet it is incomplete, empty.

We agree to meet the following day to talk further. I ask her to write down all the signs of God she knows so we can discuss them.

Reading the Signs

The next day we sit at a small plastic table in the center of the refugee camp. It is the only place that allows us to meet and talk under supervision and without reprisal.

'Here is my list,' she says pushing a folded piece of paper toward me, careful not to touch my hand.

As I read a list written in beautiful Arabic script of 10 signs of God within Islam, I am awestruck. I write down a quick rearrangement of the signs, placing the seven most significant of them in the order that they appear in the Bible. I slide the paper back to her. 'Read this aloud to me.'

She studies my rearranged list and smiles. 'The first sign is the covering of righteousness that God promises to Adam through the coming of God's Word and God's Mercy. The second is the sign of the ark of Noah.' She looks at me as if searching for the meaning and then continues. 'The third sign is the sign of khitan (circumcision) given to Abraham, and the fourth is the sign of the protection and deliverance of Moses out of Egypt. The fifth sign is the Zabbur (the psalms of David).'

'Do you understand any of these signs, Rohani?' I ask.

'No,' she says, looking embarrassed.

'Read the final two signs.'

'The sixth sign is the sign of Yunus (Jonah) and the final sign is Isa (Jesus).'

I can't contain my excitement. 'To understand these special signs will bring you the greatest joy you will ever know in your life, Rohani. The greatest joy!'

She laughs at my enthusiasm and then turns serious. 'These signs have been in our culture for a thousand years but they haven't brought us any joy. I want to understand them—to understand joy.'

'If you allow it, I will show you the significance of these signs. They are each explained fully in the Bible.'

The following day we begin our study. The mere possibility of joy has brightened her countenance. She places a Qu'ran on the plastic table, and I lay out the Bible.

She avoids my attempts at polite conversation; she's eager to begin. 'Last night I read as much as I could about these seven signs, but the meaning is unclear. The Qu'ran just mentions them and says that all true believers will accept them and be changed by them. What does your Holy Book say?'

I begin with the story of Adam and show her the fall of humanity.

'Yes, we have this,' she says excitedly. 'Adam tries to cover his shame with leaves, but God does not accept this. Then God says He will provide a covering for the man and woman's shame, and that covering will be His righteousness. He says it will come through His Word and His Mercy. Who is this Word and Mercy, and how will it come?'

I struggle to keep up with her questions. I'm amazed that she knows so much. 'Does the Qu'ran tell you who this Word and Mercy is?' I ask.

‘Only Isa (Jesus) is called the Word and Mercy of God in the Qu’ran,’ she says. ‘But what does that mean?’

Redemption Unfolds

Over the next two months Rohani and I meet to study the signs of God. I marvel at how God woos her, and I grow in my appreciation of what God has placed in her culture to lead her to Him.

I explain to her that the sign of God covering Adam—and all fallen people—with His righteousness is a promise of what God will do for humanity. The sign of the ark is another picture of God providing a way of escape from destruction. All this is through His mercy and grace.

The signs of circumcision, the protection and deliverance of Moses, and the psalms of David are pictures of how God will accomplish this task. It will be done through the descendants of Abraham, with the blood of sacrifice, through the specific ancestry of the line of David.

And the final two signs explain through whom God will accomplish this task of covering us with His righteousness. The sign of Jonah demonstrates that He who comes as the Righteous One will spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth. All this culminates in the final sign of Jesus, the Word and Mercy of God.

Rohani is stunned. ‘Does this mean that God has covered my sins and the sins of my people with the death and resurrection of Al-Massiah (the Messiah)?’

‘Yes. But you must accept this sign, this gift from God. As you have said, a

true believer accepts the signs of God and is changed by them.’

‘I want to be a true believer,’ she says, but she is sad.

‘This is so much to think about. This means that the Christ needed to die because of me.’ She begins to cry. ‘I need time to think about this. I don’t think my life deserves such sacrifice.’

Before I can say any more, she gathers her things and leaves.

The following week, Rohani is transferred to another camp in the north of Jordan near the Syrian border. I cannot go there, and I know of no believers working there.

True Believers

Nearly a year passes, and I too move on to another place. In this new place I receive a letter. It is from Rohani, delivered to me by an American who met her.

The letter is a single paragraph talking mostly about her upcoming marriage to a wonderful man:

He is Iraqi, and I love him very much. You will be happy to know that both of us have accepted the sign of the Christ and are now covered in His righteousness. He speaks to our hearts, and we read the Bible each day together. Thank you for teaching me these things. I hope to help many of my people understand and accept the Christ.

Best regards, Rohani: the Spirit-filled one

Redemption is the purchase back of something that has been lost by the payment of a ransom. God paid Rohani’s way back into life and joy with the ransom of Isa, and one day she will stand with Him in eternity.