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The Poor Man, Moses, and the Mysterious Ways of Allah

Once long ago in another land, there was a poor, helpless man who would be hungry for two days in a row and rarely had enough to eat for five days. Sometimes he would have enough food for three days and then might be without adequate food for eight. Try as he would, he could not manage to earn enough to live comfortably, and he wondered always why life was like this. One day he decided to go to His Reverence Moses in order to secure advice from him, hoping in this way to improve his lot. He thought to himself, "Many who do not believe in Allah have a good life and have plenty. But here am I, a believer in Him and in Moses, and yet I have so little. Why is this so?"

The poor man went to Moses and said, "O, Your Reverence Moses, the matter is such-and-such."

Moses replied, "Well, that is your lot. What can we do to change it?"

"Well, if my lot is improved, that will be good. Otherwise I shall no longer believe in or respect either Him or you."

"When I go up to Mount Sinai," said Moses, "I shall speak to Allah about your situation, and I assure you that we shall gain the knowledge to understand your problem."

The poor man agreed to this proposal, and when Moses had ascended Mount Sinai, he spoke to Allah as follows: "O Allah, you know well that your creature at such-and-such a place has a complaint against and he threatens no longer to believe in you, your religion, or prophet [Moses]."

Allah said, "You tell that creature that I assigned the different levels of subsistence to my subjects 70,000 years before I created them. The subsistence of each has been decided, and no one can have more than he has been allotted, no matter whether he is a believer or not. Their accounts are my business to know. You tell that subject of mine that he should be grateful for what he has."

Moses reported to the man what Allah had told him. Not long after that, however, the poor man was again in a difficult situation, and so he decided to consult Moses again. "I am very serious about what I say this time," he said to Moses. "You tell me that I should be grateful for my condition, but it is not satisfactory."

The next time that Moses went to speak to Allah, he told Him that such-and-such a subject of his was still complaining.

"You tell him," said Allah, "that his subsistence has been determined, and that that is all he is to get."

Finally the man came to Moses for a third time. He requested Moses for help, and Moses conveyed his wishes to Allah.

Allah this time said to Moses, "You tell that man to take a trip. Travel will be good for him."

When Moses brought back Allah's directions, the man set forth on a journey. He finally reached a certain town in another country. While standing in the street in miserable condition, ignored by everyone, he heard a town crier calling out an announcement. That country recognized neither Moses, Jesus, nor Allah. It was a completely pagan nation, and no one gave any charity to another. When the man was lost in deep thought, he heard the town crier coming along. He was announcing that all of the property of a wealthy man who had just died without heir was to go on sale at such-and-such a place--in rubles or whatever kind of money was in use there--and that it would be sold to the highest bidder. The poor man thought, "Wealthy people have both property and money, and they will bid higher and higher. Well, I shall bid just one ruble" (which he did not even have!).

Someone asked him, "Do you think that you will have enough money to buy this property?"

"Who knows? Allah knows everything," he answered. "This is my bid."

"Do you have a place to stay for the night?" asked the town crier.

"No."

"Well, since you are the highest bidder," said the town crier, "come and stay in the mansion for sale as guest tonight. Then tomorrow you can take your money and go to get your property." The town crier wanted to take him home also in order to complete the formalities of the purchase.

"All right," said the poor man. To himself, the man thought, "I might as well go and spend one night in that mansion and be satisfied with that, for I have no real hope of ever living in such a place again."

He was taken to the mansion, and when he saw it, he admired it very much. While he was examining the basement of the mansion, his foot struck something hard. Looking carefully, he discovered that it was an iron trap-door in the floor. Wondering what was below, he lifted up the trap-door and saw that from it a ladder descended into an area of complete darkness. In those days they often made a fire by rubbing special kinds of sticks together. He had two of these sticks, and he began to rub them together as hard as he could. After a while, he produced a flame, and with it he lighted a stick to use as a torch. With this, he lighted his way down the ladder and into the dark room below. There he found another door, this one locked. Nearby, however, hung a huge key, so large that it weighed a kilo, and with this key he unlocked the door. Behind the door lay a complete treasure, all kinds of gold and silver money, rubies, topaz objects, and many other things. Among these riches was a large piece of paper with writing on it. It was not the kind of paper we have today but one made from some kind of animal skin.

Looking more closely at this piece of paper, he saw that it was a will made out by the former owner of the treasure. It said, "I earned all my property legally, for I am an advocate of legal ownership. I believe in Moses, and I am one of his followers. Although this country is almost entirely Christian,¹ I hope my property may be inherited in

¹Throughout this tale the narrator confuses the Hebraic, the Christian, and the Moslem. Thus Moses seems later in the tale to be a proponent of Islam. Here, in the time of Moses, is a country that is Christian. Such an anachronism is not uncommon in a folktale.

one who is a true believer, one who will use it in the cause of believers. I have so many charitable properties in many different places, fountains, wells, and other things. I hope that my successor to the treasure will put them to a good and useful purpose. I have built many orphanages and homes for the poor, places which I hope he will maintain. And let him spend the rest of the property for his own needs, and may he enjoy it!"

After reading the will, the poor man said to himself, "How could anything be more perfect than this? Here is the money with which I can carry out the terms of this will." He was very hungry and poorly clothed yet, however, and so he took some money and returned to his own land. Going home, he discovered that during his absence, his wife, pregnant when he left, had given birth to a son. Surprised, he said, "Allah has also given me a son. Let me go and buy some food for all of us and some clothes in which to wrap the baby." He bought these things and took them home, where they then ate and drank and went to bed.

In the morning he returned to the place where his new property lay. Taking some money from the basement treasury, he paid for the mansion, and thus he came to own it, along with its gardens and vineyards. Also attached to the property were four large wholesale stores which carried on trade with east and west, with India and Europe. Goods of all kinds kept coming and going. The original owner was now dead and the poor man had succeeded to all this business. All of the employees in the stores addressed him as "Our new master." By this time he had, of course, bathed himself and put on a new suit of clothes.

The man who had once been poor thought to himself, "There was a reason for Allah's recommending that I take a trip. I suffered poverty and hunger for a long time, but, thanks to Allah, wealth has come to me in the end." He lived in this prosperity for many years and after a while had several grown sons.

One day his attention was drawn to someone who was walking down the street. After watching him for some time, he realized that it was His Reverence Moses. He wondered what Moses was doing in this place. He

very infrequently to this town, for it was a place that did not recognize Allah and his prophet. The man called one of his sons and said, "Son, go and call that old man walking there."

The boy ran after Moses, caught up with him, and said, "Grandfather, my father wishes to see you."

"Oh, but I will not stay in this rebellious place," said Moses.

"But my father calls you," the son repeated. Then he returned to his father and reported, "Father he said such-and-such, and he would not come."

"Run and catch him again and say to him, 'For the sake of the religion of Moses, come back. My father wants you.'" The boy ran all the way back, caught up with Moses, and brought him back to his father.

After they had greeted each other, the man revealed his identity to Moses: "I am so-and-so of such-and-such a place. I applied to you three times to have you ask Allah to raise my subsistence. This failed to happen, but at last Allah directed me to travel, and, following this order, I set out on a journey. When I arrived here he arranged to have

this property become mine. Thanks to Allah, I am now well provided for here." His Reverence Moses looked very surprised when he heard this. The man then said to him, "You must stay this night and be my guest."

"All right," said Moses.

"But I must tell you that I have not revealed to anyone here that I have accepted Islam, the faith of Moses [sic]. My business flourishes here, however."

"I shall stay as your guest anyway," said Moses.

Moses was provided for very well that night, and he was pleased with the treatment he received. He was puzzled, however. Allah had told him that every man's subsistence had been determined and that this would never be either increased or decreased. "I wonder why he came to give this man so much?" He could not understand that action of Allah. During that night, however, he had a dream in which Allah spoke to him: "O Moses, that man is puzzled too, and, like you, he cannot understand his changed life. His subsistence is still the same. It has neither increased nor decreased. All this is the subsistence of the child which was born at the time that he first came to this place. I made this property available at the birth of that child. I gave it to the child through his father. His father's subsistence is still the same, and he will still be half hungry, half satisfied. He is living on the child's subsistence, just as many people live on the subsistence of someone else--a child, a wife, or even poor people or an orphan."

The next morning when His Reverence Moses told his host of this dream, the man was amazed at the revelation and said, "Ah, I see now

the true nature of what has happened to me."

This tale has been told by Sadık Erol.