



Abdul Masih (1776-1827): Henry Martyn's convert, CMS evangelist and the second ordained Indian anglican. This watercolour by an unknown hand hangs in the office of the Director of the Henry Martyn Centre, Canon Graham Kings, where it is on permanent loan from Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

Abdul Masih: Icon of Indian Indigeneity

*Graham Kings**

Who is this seated Indian so serene and calm? What is he reading, with concentrated meditation, that is so evidently precious? What are those books and bottles in the background? Why was he celebrated with such a commissioned portrait? Who is this man who spans the centuries, speaks to us in his silence, and draws us into studying what he himself is reading?

There is no written clue on the front of the painting, but on turning it over the words can be seen in ink: "The Revd. Abdul Maseeh. Henry Martyn's one convert - ordained by Bishop Heber. Revd. G. E. Corrie, Jesus Coll: Cambridge. Luggage Train."

I first saw this portrait in 1993. Graham Cray, the principal of Ridley Hall, the evangelical Anglican theological college in Cambridge, discovered it in a cupboard in the principal's lodge. Next to it he also found framed prints of Charles Simeon and Henry Martyn. I had previously seen the magnificent oil painting of Abdul Masih^[1] in the headquarters of the Church Mission Society^[2] in London and recognized his face in this fading watercolor, which is set in a walnut frame with gilt edgings. Bishop Heber I knew to have been the second Anglican bishop of Calcutta and great hymnwriter.^[3] G. E. Corrie was new to me, and I assumed that he must have been related to Daniel Corrie, Martyn's friend, who had encouraged Abdul Masih as a new disciple and evangelist.

The portrait, kindly on loan from Ridley Hall, now hangs above the mantelpiece in my study at the Henry Martyn Centre in Cambridge. It is a watercolor and (opaque) body color over graphite on medium-weight, wove paper;^[4] its painter, date, provenance, history, and acquisition by Ridley Hall are all currently fascinating mysteries.^[5] Next to it hangs the print of his spiritual father, Martyn, and opposite is the print of Martyn's father-in-God, Simeon.^[6] It is a continual inspiration to me because students and visitors regularly ask questions about it and its subject.^[7] This famous, early, dignified convert from Islam became a medical missionary and evangelist among his own people. He was the first Indian to be employed as a catechist (evangelist) by the Church Missionary Society and in 1825 became the second Indian ordained Anglican clergyman.^[8] The portrait directs attention to the particular items that relate to Masih's significance as an icon of Indian indigeneity: his turban, his open Scriptures, his books, and his medicine bottles.

The Turban: A Muslim Convert

Shaikh Salih chose the name Abdul Masih, Servant of the Messiah, at his baptism in the Old Church, Calcutta, on the day of Pentecost, 1811. He was converted to Christ

through the preaching and life of Henry Martyn (1781D1812) at Cawnpore (Kanpur) in northern India. In a fascinating critical study, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*, Avril A. Powell comments: "He is significant to this study because he became the agent, in turn, for the conversions, though in many cases very short-lived, of some fifty Muslims and Hindus living in the vicinity of Agra, and because of the steps he took, although largely unsuccessful in his own lifetime, to engage the attention of Muslim scholars in both Delhi and Lucknow." [9]

Salih was born in Delhi about the year 1776 into a well-respected Muslim family, became zealous in devotion, and was recognized as a scholarly religious teacher in Lucknow. When working for an officer of the East India Company, he even induced a Hindu servant to become a Muslim. [10] In considering Salih for ordination in 1825, Bishop Heber remarked: "His rank, previously to his conversion, was rather elevated, since he was Master of the Jewels to the Court of Oude, an appointment of higher estimation in Eastern Palaces than in those of Europe, and the holder of which has always a high salary." [11]

In 1810 Salih was at Cawnpore, where he heard Martyn preach to the poor who assembled at his door on Sunday afternoons to receive alms. [12] Salih, in his own words, went "to see the sport." He was struck by Martyn's exposition of the Ten Commandments and wanted to hear more. In the end he was engaged to work with Martyn's cantankerous and erratic assistant, Sabat, as copyist of the Persian New Testament translation.

The Open New Testament

When Martyn had finished his Hindustani New Testament translation, the book was given to Salih to bind. [13] In the words of the Missionary Papers: "This he considered as a fine opportunity; nor did he let it slip. On reading the Word of God, he discovered his state, and perceived therein a true description of his own heart. He soon decided in favour of the Christian religion." [14]

It is probably an edition of Martyn's Hindustani New Testament that is being held so reverently by Masih in the portrait and that forms its, and his, ultimate focus. Masih is not looking out at us (as in the oil painting in Partnership House), but down at the Scriptures that convicted him, translated by the man who convinced him. Our eyes are also drawn to that point, as we perceive ourselves to be witnesses of the biblical devotion of one bound to Christ, and so ultimately Christ-bound, by his binding of the Scriptures. He seems to have

taken to heart the words of the Anglican collect for the second Sunday in Advent - to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Holy Scriptures. However, disappointment was lurking in the timing of his baptism. When Martyn was about to leave Cawnpore for his health's sake, Salih openly declared his faith and asked for baptism. Martyn hesitated but agreed that Salih could go with him to Calcutta together with Sabat. Even there, Martyn was not yet convinced of his change of heart. It seems to me that in this hesitancy he was probably influenced by the volatility and instability of Sabat's conversion experience.[15] Martyn left for Persia, Arabia, and eventually an untimely death in Tokat, never being sure of his convert's conversion.[16] He handed him over to two friends and fellow Cambridge missionaries in Calcutta. David Brown baptized him five months later, and Daniel Corrie (who later became the first bishop of Madras) taught him the faith and, toward the end of 1812, engaged him as a catechist of the Church Missionary Society at Agra.[17]

The Books and Bottles

Corrie and Masih became great friends and enjoyed each other's company and Bible study; perhaps Martyn's convert became the friend Corrie lost in Martyn. Such cross-cultural companionship and love seems to me to be the hidden testimony of the painting itself. I have found no record of who commissioned it, but since the writing on the back refers to George Corrie (Daniel's youngest brother and biographer),[18] it seems very likely that Masih's colleague in the Great Commission and translator of his journals for the CMS supporters was also the commissioner of this portrait. If this is indeed the case, then perhaps in this image we can imagine Masih as Corrie saw him - a faithful partner in the Gospel, able to reach many more than he ever could. Is there here a reflection of nonpatronizing partnership between West and East? Corrie is not in the portrait but may be outside it, present during a sitting? It is difficult to tell. Corrie recorded in his journal this description of a journey up the Ganges with Masih: "He has several native children in the boat with him, whom he teaches, as we go along, to read, and to learn passages of the Scripture by heart: and when the Natives argue with him about Caste, he sometimes asks the Children if they remember any passage of Scripture in answer; which one or other of them usually does, to the admiration of the poor ignorant people. He has composed many Hymns to Native measures, which he sings with the Christian Children and Servants, after we come-to for the night; and often,

during the darkness and stillness of the evening, he and his little Church in the boat make these sandy plains and lonely wilds echo with the Beloved Name."[19]

In Agra with Corrie, Masih wrote commentaries on Matthew's gospel, Romans, and Hebrews, and many copies in manuscript form were sought by Christians in North India. During the years 1813-14 their joint work led to the baptism of about fifty adults, half of them Muslim, among whom "six were Mahomedans of the first respectability." [20] Avril Powell has perceptively shown that although none of them made any long-term impact, and two key converts had returned to Islam by 1816, nevertheless "this first and short lived conversion phenomenon opens up the early interface between Muslims and evangelical Christians in this region." [21] Masih became a focus of curiosity, partly from the respectability of his own family. His journals give evidence that Martyn's Hindustani New Testament (and particularly Matthew's gospel) was being requested and studied by leading Muslims in the Gangetic core region. The departure of Corrie in 1814 meant Masih was alone in Agra, and no new baptisms from among the "respectable" class of Muslims were recorded. Masih has also been described as a pioneer medical missionary of the CMS, [22] and the bottles in the background may symbolize this concurrent calling. On his own responsibility, and with a limited knowledge of medicine, he set up a dispensary at Agra on which he spent a considerable amount of his own money. Soon he was attracting large numbers of patients and became known as the Christian doctor.

After eight years of employment as a catechist, it seemed appropriate that Masih should be ordained. Unfortunately the first bishop of Calcutta, Thomas Middleton (1769-1822), a strong High Churchman, did not license CMS-ordained missionaries in his diocese, nor was he willing to ordain "native" clergymen because he was convinced that his letters patent did not give him such authority. Masih was therefore ordained as a Lutheran by the Lutheran missionaries of the CMS. He continued to do some traveling around the upper provinces, but frequent illnesses prevented much journeying. The *Missionary Register* excelled itself with a delicate description, which has some backing

from the portrait itself: "latterly, an unnatural tendency to corpulency rendered long journeys irksome." [23]

When Bishop Reginald Heber succeeded Middleton, he did agree to Masih's Anglican ordination, though without asking him to renounce his Lutheran orders. [24] Masih was introduced to him during the bishop's stay at Agra, in January 1825. The bishop remarked of him: "Abdool Messeeh's present appointments, as Christian Missionary, are 60 rupees a month, and of this he gives away at least half! Who can dare to say that this man changed his faith from any interested motive? He is a most sincere Christian, quite free, so far as I can observe, from all conceit or enthusiasm." He continued with a fine description, which also captures the character in this portrait: "His long eastern dress, his long grey beard, and his calm resigned countenance give him already the air of an Apostle." [25]

On November 30, 1825, in Calcutta, Heber thus ordained deacon the second Anglican Indian clergyman and ordained him priest the following month, on December 21, in the presence of Daniel Corrie, then archdeacon of Calcutta. [26] Perhaps this is a clue to the mystery of provenance - was it an ordination portrait, commissioned by Corrie? Masih's age and Heber's description would match such a suggestion.

Masih then moved on to Lucknow to set up a permanent mission there. Reasons for this were that his aged mother (who remained a Muslim) and family were there, it was a center of Muslim scholarship, and just prior to his ordination he had had an encouraging encounter and dialogue with a leading local scholar, Subhan Ali Khan. [27] Sadly, this promised new phase of activity was cut short when Masih suddenly fell ill. He died on March 4, 1827, aged fifty-one.

As mentioned above, no trace of the portrait has yet been found in the official histories and archives of Ridley Hall or of the CMS, nor is it mentioned in the various biographies related to the life of Masih. Its provenance and history remain a mystery. [28] However, in the archives of Ridley Hall, soon after the discovery of this portrait, I did find an old piece of paper with a hymn on it; it had a note added at the bottom: "Translation of a hymn in Hindoostanee composed by Rev. Abdool Meeseeh, and sung by him just before he expired.

Thos Thomason[29] 5 June /28." The hymn by Masih matches the iconic portrait in manifesting the profound evangelical devotion and trust of this elderly Indian saint:

Beloved Saviour, let not me
In thy kind heart forgotten be.
Of all the plants that deck the bower,[30]
Thou art the fairest, sweetest flower.
Youth's morn has fled - old age come on,
But sin distracts my soul alone.
Beloved Saviour, let not me
In thy kind heart forgotten be.

Notes

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1. This is the accepted modern version of his name; other transliterations in missionary literature include Abdool Messeeh, Abdool Maseeh, and Abd al-Masih.
2. CMS, before its renaming in 1995, stood for the Church Missionary Society. The oil painting in Partnership House, London, shows Masih as a younger figure than this watercolor. It was commissioned by Thomas Thomason (an East India Company chaplain who translated the Old Testament into Hindustani), who sent it to his mentor in Cambridge, Charles Simeon, who sent it to the CMS. See Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men, and Its Work*, 3 vols. (London: CMS, 1899), 1:183. Rosemary Keen, former CMS archivist, was delighted to hear of the discovery of this portrait of the older Masih, unknown to the CMS.
3. Heber was the author of "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," "Brightest and Best are the Sons of the Morning," and "From Greenland's Icy Mountains." See George Smith, *Bishop Heber: Poet and Chief Missionary to the East, Second Lord Bishop of Calcutta, 1783-1826* (London: John Murray, 1895); M. A. Laird, ed., *Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971); and D. Hughes, *Bishop Sahib: A Life of Reginald Heber* (Worthing: Churchman, 1986).
4. I am very grateful to Celia Withycombe, paper conservator at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, for her generous advice and enthusiasm concerning the portrait.
5. F. W. B. Bullock's *History of Ridley Hall, Cambridge*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1941-53), made no mention of it, and archival research has not yet been fruitful. However, see n. 28 below.

6. For Simeon's relationship to Martyn (Simeon was involved in founding both the CMS and the Bible Society) and Martyn's legacy, see Graham Kings, ["Foundations for Mission and the Study of World Christianity: The Legacy of Henry Martyn B.D.,"](#) *Mission Studies* 14, nos. 1-2 (1997): 248-65.
7. Some of these questions led to a BBC Radio 4 program on the portrait, broadcast from my study in July 1997.
8. Eugene Stock, and some others following him, claimed him as the first ordained Indian. He pointed out, with perhaps a look over his shoulder at the SPG and SPCK, that Masih's was "the first Anglican ordination of a Native of *India*. But Heber had already ordained, *in India*, a Native of Ceylon, a student at Bishop's College, Calcutta, named Christian David" (Stock, *History*, 1:191). However, George Corrie, in his biography of his brother, clearly stated that David was a "native of Malabar" who had "for many years been engaged as a catechist in Ceylon" by the SPCK (G. E. Corrie and H. Corrie, *Memoirs of Daniel Corrie, LL.D., First Bishop of Madras* [London: Seeley, Burnside & Seeley, 1847], p. 363). David's Indian Tamil origin is corroborated by Laird (*Bishop Heber*, p. 27).
9. Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (London: Curzon Press, 1993), p. 111.
10. Biographical notices appeared in the CMS *Missionary Register* for July 1813 and an obituary in October 1827, both written by Daniel Corrie. These were summarized in *Missionary Papers for the use of the weekly and monthly contributors to the Church Missionary Society*, no. 62 (Midsummer 1831), and subsequently published in *The Quarterly Papers of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East from their Commencement in 1816 to Christmas 1848* (London: Seeleys, 1849). Corrie also translated Masih's journal over the years 1812-27 from Hindustani (Urdu) into English, and extended extracts from these were regularly published in the *Missionary Register*. A few manuscript translations for the years 1820-25 may be found in the CMS archives, University of Birmingham, together with letters from the same period. Powell also notes that "polemical tracts compiled by Muslims in the 1850s contain some references to discussions held with Abd al-Masih in the 1820s" (*Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 111 n. 32).
11. Heber's journal for January 12, 1825, cited in Laird, *Bishop Heber*, p. 246. In commenting that no Muslim accounts have been found to corroborate Masih's versions of his conversations and disputations, Avril Powell points out: "The one-sidedness of the extant accounts is important, because Evangelicals were always anxious, as in the case of Sabat [Martyn's assistant] to stress Abd al-Masih's ashraf [well-born, respectable] origins" (*Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 111).
12. It is significant that, just as the campaign to allow missionary work among the population of India was gathering strength in England with the renewal of the East India Company's charter in Parliament due in 1813, Martyn, a chaplain of the company, was in fact quietly, indirectly thus engaged. From this "good news to the poor" a strategic influential conversion resulted.
13. George Smith, in his otherwise fine biography of Martyn, erred in saying that this was the *Persian New Testament* (*Henry Martyn, Saint and Scholar: First Modern Missionary to the Mohammedans, 1781-1812* [London: Religious Tract Society, 1892], p. 286). *Missionary Papers* makes it clear that it was the

Hindustani translation, and Stock and Powell correctly followed the information given in *Missionary Papers*.

14. *Missionary Papers*, no. 62 (Midsummer 1831).
15. Jawad bin Sabat later reverted to Islam and provided "insider" information on Christianity, in his book *An Answer to Christians*, which was used by some of the disputing Muslim opponents of Masih (Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, pp. 114 and 116).
16. After the death of Martyn, Corrie wrote to Simeon in Cambridge on June 23, 1813, "Could he look from Heaven and see the Abdool Messee'h, with the translated New Testament in his hand, preaching to the listening throng, . . . it would add fresh delight to his holy soul" (Corrie and Corrie, *Daniel Corrie*, p. 250).
17. For Daniel Corrie (1777-1837) see also Angus D. I. J. Macnaughton, *Daniel Corrie, His Family and Friends* (London: Johnson, 1969).
18. George Elwes Corrie (1793-1885) was Norrisian Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, 1838-55, vice-chancellor, 1850-51, and master of Jesus College, Cambridge, 1849-85. As well as writing Daniel Corrie's biography, jointly with another brother, he wrote papers on English church history and edited works of Anglican theology. See M. Holroyd, ed., *Memorials of the Life of George Elwes Corrie* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1890).
19. *Missionary Papers*, no. 62 (Midsummer 1831).
20. Daniel Corrie, "Remarks on India," *Missionary Register*, January 1816, p. 23, cited by Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 113. See also Corrie and Corrie, *Daniel Corrie*, pp. 274-75.
21. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, pp. 113-15.
22. In the preparations for the 150th anniversary of the CMS in 1949, there was a series in the CMS newspaper called "Makers of C.M.S. History." The fifth in the series was on Masih, which, because it was St. Luke's tide (October 18), focused on his medical work. "The pioneer efforts of this first C.M.S. medical missionary were prophetic. Here was the spontaneous response of the man on the spot to the pressure of human need. And it took the accumulated experience of many such to convince the Committee at home, by slow degrees, of the need for organized medical missions." Masih is still a subject worthy of study in 1999, the bicentenary of the CMS.
23. *Missionary Papers*, no. 62 (Midsummer 1831).
24. Laird discusses the complicated question of the validity (or otherwise) of Lutheran orders in Anglican eyes (*Bishop Heber*, pp. 27-28).
25. Heber's journal for January 12, 1825, cited in Laird, *Bishop Heber*, pp. 246-47.
26. G. E. Corrie and H. Corrie cited a witness, "Nothing could equal the joy of Mr. Corrie: he appeared as if he could just then adopt the language of Simeon of old" (*Daniel Corrie*, p. 383).
27. For further fascinating details of the eventual setting up of a permanent mission at Lucknow after the 1857 uprisings, see Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, pp. 116ff.
28. If my suggestion above is plausible, that Corrie commissioned it as an ordination portrait, then there may be a double hint, somewhat far-fetched, of how it came to be at Ridley Hall. After Corrie's death, a chalice and paten, in his possession, were brought to George Corrie in Cambridge by Archdeacon

Harper on his return to England (Holroyd, *George Corrie*, p. 318). In 1885, the year that George Corrie died, William Carus, Simeon's biographer, presented his own memorabilia of Simeon to Ridley Hall, which included a miniature portrait of Martyn and another of Masih (Bullock, *Ridley Hall*, 1:221 and 2:252). Carus may have arranged for this large portrait also to be presented. In the writing of the history of Ridley Hall, this may have been confused with the smaller one.

29. See n. 2 above.

30. In the version printed in *Missionary Papers*, this line is translated "Of all that deck the field or bower."