

## THE VIRGIN MARY IN ISLAM AND THE APOCRYPHA \*

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**T**HE Virgin enjoys, like her Son, a position of unique pre-eminence in Islamic legend in general and the Koran in particular. Many of the traits with which the story of her life is embellished derive from apocryphal sources, but are nevertheless of the utmost interest in filling in the gaps in the canonical narrative of the Blessed Virgin's life.

In the Koranic version of the angel's salutation, the superiority of Mary (Arabic, 'Mariam'), whom God had 'chosen and purified, over all the women of mankind' (3, 42) is proclaimed. She is even made to share with her Son the singular distinction of being a 'divine sign unto the generations' (21, 91). In popular legend, however, this pre-eminent position of the Virgin is sometimes disputed and so she is made to share this honour with four other women, who include the two favourite wives of Muhammad and his dearest daughter, Fatimah, from whom the 'noble House of the Prophet' descends.

But despite this popular bias which runs counter to the explicit teaching of the Koran, the Virgin (Al-'Adhra')<sup>1</sup> is universally revered by Muslims as the consummate model of purity, in much the same way as her Son is revered as

\* We publish this article in *THE LIFE* because, like the article by the same author in the preceding issue (April, 'Christ in the Koran'), it shows not only the influence of Christianity on Islam and consequently the need to understand this in an apostolic approach to Mohammedanism, but also the contrast between the simplicity of Islamic religion and the complexity of the legendary and apocryphal groundwork of that religion. The true Christian mystic has always been fed on the simplicity of the Gospel narrative; the Muslim who approaches so often his Christian counterpart in phrase and expression has a very different background. Yet, it should be noted, the doctrines clothed by these legends often approximate to the Christian doctrine—in particular in what relates to our Lady.—EDITOR.

<sup>1</sup> Commonly used as a proper noun in Arabic.

the perfect model of holiness. In fact, not only the chastity of the Virgin is recognized by Islam, but her Immaculate Conception as well. Both in the Koran and the 'semi-revealed Sayings of Muhammad', Jesus and his mother are stated to be the only two humans to have been guarded against the impure 'touch' of Satan.<sup>2</sup> Islamic legend has preserved a beautiful account of the miraculous conception of Anna, the mother of the Virgin. One day, it is related, as she sat under a shady tree, she heard the cheerful chirps of a bird feeding its offspring. Being barren and advanced in years, this episode moved her greatly and so she yearned for an offspring of her own, vowing that should God grant her a child she would dedicate it to his service.

A record of this incident is found in the apocryphal *Protevangelion*, ascribed to James, brother of Christ, from which the Islamic legend probably originated.<sup>3</sup> This work is of great antiquity and is alluded to by many of the early Fathers, who draw upon it in their controversies concerning Joseph's age, his relation to the Virgin, and so on.

The Koran, however, makes no mention of Joseph, who is replaced by Zacharias as the guardian of the Virgin. It tells us nevertheless that St Anne, upon giving birth to the Virgin, took her to the Temple in fulfilment of her vow (3, 36-37)—some commentators of the Koran say, when she was still in swaddling clothes. The rabbis, however, so prized the privilege of the little Mary's guardianship that a dispute arose as to who should take charge of her. At length it was resolved to settle the matter by casting lots. Twenty-seven of the rabbis cast their pens (or arrows, according to another theory) into the river. Only the pen of Zacharias floated over the water and consequently he was adjudged the winner (3, 44).

It might not be without interest to compare this account with the parallel account in the *Protevangelion*, which is far richer in detail regarding the childhood of the Virgin. At the age of three, the *Protevangelion* says, the little Mary

<sup>2</sup> K. 3, 36. The saying of Muhammad, on the other hand, reads: 'Every child is touched (or stung) by Satan, save Mary and her Son'. Muslim theologians, however, interpret this as referring to impeccability only.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ch. III, 1f. and IV, 2. Ed. W. Hone, London, 1820.

was taken, at Joachim's instance, to the Temple and was entrusted to the care of the high priest. Even at this age Mary distinguished herself with her piety and devotion and the high priest foretold that through her the redemption of Israel would be wrought (Ch. VIII, 3-4).

When she was twelve years of age—or, according to another apocryphal account, fourteen<sup>4</sup>—the priests consulted among themselves as to what should be done with her, fearing that she might now be the occasion of defiling the Temple. Zacharias, the high priest, invoking God's guidance, was directed by the angel to summon all the widowers among the people.<sup>5</sup> When they had all foregathered, each with his staff, they stood awaiting a sign from God, and 'Behold, a dove proceeded out of the rod (of Joseph) and flew upon his head' (VIII, 11). Joseph, however, being a widower and father of several children (Ib. 13 and XII, 2), demurred at first, but reminded of God's inexorable judgment upon those who disobey him, he consented at length to take the little Mary to his house. There, bidding her farewell, the narrative continues, he went off to attend to his building. According to another apocryphal account, Joseph became betrothed to the Virgin;<sup>6</sup> but the usual ceremony over, Mary returned to her parents' house in Galilee, while Joseph departed to his own city, Bethlehem in Judaea. It was during this interval, according to this account, that the Angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin and announced to her the conception of the Lord (Ch. VII, 1f.).

But before we turn to this most central episode in the life of our Lady, let us glean whatever further information the Koran or the Apocrypha provide concerning the Virgin's period of preparation and devotion in the Temple. The Koran, for instance, relates how God favoured the Virgin miraculously with daily provisions, in recognition of her great piety and devotion (3, 37). The *Gospel of the Birth of Mary*, however, states that the angels not only ministered to her material needs, but also conversed with her

<sup>4</sup> That of the *Gospel of the Birth of Mary*. Cf. Ch. V, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gospel of the Birth of Mary* confines the summons to the widowers of the House of David. Cf. Ch. V, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Birth of Mary*, Ch. VI, 5f.

daily and that she was favoured with daily visions from God.<sup>7</sup> Another favour which fell miraculously to her lot during this period was the privilege of weaving the true purple of the Temple (*Prot.* IX, 4). But of this miraculous assignment the Koran has kept no record.

The greatest favour which God had in store for the Virgin was yet to come. The manner of the Virgin's conception is graphically described in the Koran. Having gone out eastward (to draw water, as both the commentators of the Koran and the *Protevangelion* tell us), the Angel Gabriel appeared to her in the form of a 'well-shaped man'. The Virgin was greatly disturbed at this unexpected apparition, but the Angel bade her set her mind at ease, disclosing to her the nature of his mission. On hearing this the Virgin, still apprehensive, enquired: 'But how can I have a child when I have not known any man and have not been an unchaste woman?'—to which the Angel replied: 'Thus says your Lord: "It is indeed an easy matter with me"' (19, 21). For 'he creates what he wishes . . . by bidding it "be" and it becomes' (3, 47).

The manner of Mary's conception, upon which the commentators dwell at some length, is alternately described in the Koran as a 'breathing' (21, 19; 66, 12) or a 'casting forth' (4, 171) of God's Word or Spirit into the Virgin. The Angel Gabriel is stated to have been instrumental in this process; but this need not raise any difficulty, from a Christian point of view, since the Angel Gabriel is identified in the Koran with the Spirit of God or the Holy Ghost.

Mary's response to the Angel's Annunciation is reported in the *Birth of Mary* in almost identical terms. 'How can this be?' the Virgin enquires, 'For seeing, according to my vow, I have never known any man, how can I bear a child without the addition of a man's seed?'<sup>8</sup> Whereupon, the Angel allayed her fears and assured her that her virginity was to be safeguarded and that she was to conceive by the

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ch. V, 2 and *Prot.* Ch. VIII, 2, which adds the charming note that the Virgin received her food from the hand of an angel.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ch. VII, 16f. and *Prot.* Ch. IX, 12f. According to the *Birth*, the Virgin being already acquainted with the countenance of angels was neither surprised nor terrified at the sight of the Angel.

Holy Ghost 'without sin'. Hearing this, the Virgin stretched forth her hands, lifted her eyes and magnified the Lord.

When the days of her conception were accomplished (although some of the commentators recognize hardly any interval between the Annunciation and the birth of Christ), the Virgin retired, according to the Koran, into a far-off place. The pangs of childbirth overtook her under a palm-tree (19, 23). In order to enhance the beauty of the narrative, the commentators describe how the palm-tree, originally withered, was miraculously made to yield fresh dates for the Virgin to eat from and a stream of water to flow at her feet. Thus although she travailed in solitude,<sup>9</sup> the Virgin was not forsaken by God, and a voice called out to her: 'Shake ye the trunk of the tree and it will yield ripe dates. Eat and drink and be joyful' (19, 25-6). When she had brought forth her baby, she carried him and went back to her people. At the sight of the child they were greatly astonished and reproached her bitterly. The Virgin did not answer but only pointed to the child, who spoke forthwith these words: 'I am the servant of God, who has given me the book and made me a prophet. . . . May peace be upon me the day I am born, the day I die and the day I rise from the dead' (19, 29-33).

A record of this miracle is found in the *Gospel of the Infancy of Christ*, one of the earliest books of the Apocrypha. Jesus is reported there to have spoken in the cradle, his first words being: 'Mary, I am Jesus, the Son of God, that Word which thou didst bring forth according to the declaration of the Angel Gabriel to thee, and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world' (Ch. I).

Despite this difference in the content of Christ's actual words and despite the conflicting theological implications underlying both statements, the important point is that according to these legends Christ *did* speak as a babe and herein the Apocrypha and the Koran are in agreement.

<sup>9</sup> In the *Protevangelion*, the pains of childbirth overtook the Virgin, who was accompanied by Joseph, in the desert. Joseph, leaving her in a cave, went away to look for a Hebrew midwife, but when he returned the Virgin was already miraculously delivered. Cf. Ch. XII and Ch. XIV.

To sum up, then, the Koran and the Apocrypha bring out two fundamental aspects of the Virgin's character which were intended to supplement the canonical narrative. First, the holiness and piety of the Virgin from her earliest childhood and prior to her conception of the Word of God. Second, her submission and humility, subsequently to this event. The Koran does not only recognize these two aspects of Mary's character, but raises her above all the women of mankind. In a rather obscure passage, even her Assumption seems to be acknowledged. This passage reads: 'We have made the Son of Mary and his mother a sign (i.e. a divine witness or proof) and have made them to resort to a secure and elevated place flowing with water' (23, 50). Although the Muslim commentators interpret this as referring to Mary's journey into the mountain on her way to Egypt, there is every indication that this is an allusion in the oblique and metaphorical language of the Koran to the assumption of the Virgin Mary to heaven. Indeed, Christ who is mentioned here in conjunction with his mother is explicitly stated in the Koran to have been 'taken up by God' to heaven, the reality of his crucifixion being denied altogether (4, 157-8). Whence precisely did the Koran derive this important notion of the assumption of Mary, we cannot say with certainty. But the apocryphal element in it is considerable, and accordingly it is not unlikely that this notion might have crept into the Koran from some such apocryphal source. The *Transitus Mariae*, a Syriac apocryphal work, describes graphically the bodily transition of the Virgin to heaven in these words: 'And a pleasant and sweet odour went forth from the highest heaven of his glory. . . . And (the angels) carried the Blessed One to paradise with this glory, and her holy body was placed there.'<sup>10</sup> Might it not be this or some similar source from which the Koran learnt about the assumption?

One final point must be mentioned here. In accusing the Christians of tritheism, the Koran reckons Mary as the Third Person of the Trinity (5, 111). The Holy Ghost, identified with the Angel Gabriel as we have seen, could naturally not do for this office. Hence Muhammad accuses the Chris-

<sup>10</sup> Cf. W. Wright's English translation, London, 1865, p. 40.

tians of deifying Mary. Although there does not appear to have been a full-fledged worship of Mary as the Third Person of the Trinity, St Epiphanius mentions a heresy, 'widespread in Arabia, Thracia and Upper Scythia', that of the Collyridians, who offered sacrifices to Mary.<sup>11</sup> Some such heretical notion of the status of Mary in Christianity might have reached Muhammad. Or it might even have been a piece of malicious, heterodox propaganda disseminated by the Nestorians, as flowing logically from the official teaching of the Church, defined at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and according to which the Virgin Mary could rightly be called *Theotokos*, or Mother of God.<sup>12</sup> For, 'would not the Mother of God partake of his divinity?', our hypothetical heretic would argue in the manner of the Nestorians. But with this important question we cannot deal at length here, especially as the suggestion belongs to the realm of conjecture.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Ad. Haer.* L. 3, 79.

<sup>12</sup> This point suggested itself to me as the result of a discussion with Professor A. Guillaume on this question and it is consequently to him that the credit for it belongs.



## SPIRITUALITY AND PERSONALITY

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**I**N the course of twenty centuries the simple message of Christ has developed in many directions, like the mustard-seed of the Gospel. Dogma, moral theology, canon law, administration and organization have branched out, together, into a gigantic system which gives the impression of providing all the answers the world needs to become heaven on earth.

The only answer the system does not contain is the personal answer of each soul to its Maker. That is the soul's own and exclusive preserve. It also happens to be the only answer that really matters. St Paul made that abundantly