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THE SOURCES FOR THE MARIAN REFERENCES IN THE QUR'ĀN

*Dominic F. Ashkar, Ph.D.**

"E pluribus unum" (one out of many) is the motto of the United States. Speaking of the one Mary, we could reverse the motto and say "Many out of one"; for, in the past 2,000 years, as the title of George Tavard's recent book indicates,¹ we have given Mary thousands of faces. My goal is to present some of the images of Mary found in the Qur'ān and to suggest what were the sources for these texts of the Qur'ān.²

First, we must keep in mind how the Muslims view the Qur'ān. For Muslims, the Qur'ān has a mysterious origin. It is the Word of God that brings deliverance to those who believe in it, and it enlightens the soul. The Qur'ān is the "guarded tablet"³ that no one can imitate.⁴ It is the new Revelation in "the Arabic language"⁵ that came to "confirm" previous revelations

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¹George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press [A Michael Glazier Book], 1996). Tavard devotes a chapter to "Mariyam of Arabia."

²The Qur'ānic texts I will use are quoted from *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (New York: New American Library, n.d.). The biblical texts I will use are quoted from *The New American Bible* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1970).

³S. 85:22.

⁴S. 2:23.

⁵S. 16:103. Regarding the Arabic language, Arthur Jeffery says: "Emphasis has been placed in recent years on the too-long forgotten fact that Arabia at the time of

contained in the Torah and the Gospel. For this reason, the children of Israel and Christians are called "People of the Book."

The prophets of Hebrew Scripture are considered bearers and interpreters of God's Word and as God's instruments. They transmit the divine message according to the usual human means of conceiving ideas and images and explaining them. By contrast, Jesus is for Christians the Eternal Word who did not come "with a book," and so he will always remain a living and acting person.

The main idea of the Qur'ān⁶ is that everything comes from God, the universal Creator, and everything returns to God. God is the Creator of the universe, the angels and demons, the first man, and all other people. God spoke to people through the prophets and taught them the laws of worship and human conduct. He will raise them up for judgment, for reward or retribution in the life to come. This God—Creator and Master—wishes to reveal Himself to people as much as they are able to comprehend the impenetrable mystery.⁷

The Qur'ān often mentions the Torah and the Psalms—the books of early revelation—and the Gospels. In the Muslim

Muhammad was not isolated from the rest of the world, as Muslim authors would have us believe. There was at that time, as indeed for long before, full and constant contact with the surrounding peoples of Syria, Persia, and Abyssinia, and through intercourse there was a natural interchange of vocabulary. Where the Arabs came in contact with higher religion and higher civilisation, they borrowed religious and cultural terms. This fact was fully recognized by the earliest circle of Muslim exegetes, who show no hesitation in noting words as of Jewish, Christian, or Iranian origin. Later, under the influence of the great divines, especially of ash-Shafi'i, this was pushed into the background, and an orthodox doctrine was elaborated to the effect that the Qur'an was a unique production of the Arabic language" (A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran* [Lahore: al-Biruni, 1938], vii-viii).

⁶It is important to keep in mind that the Qur'ān was developed in three stages: 1) oral transmission, 2) fixation of the texts in writing, and 3) collection of the texts at the time of Caliph 'Uthman, leader of the Muslim community from 644-55. See the statement of Bukhārī as quoted in *Mishkāt al-Masābīh*, pp. 468-69.

⁷"Though the sea became ink for the Words of my Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even though We brought the like thereof to help" (S. 18:110).

"And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to help it, (were ink), the words of Allah could not be exhausted. Lo! Allah is Mighty, Wise" (S. 31:27).

view, the Qur'ān came to complete and confirm the truths of these early books.⁸ It confirms that the prophets preached the One Only God, and that two of these prophets, Adam and Jesus, were born by direct intervention of the Creator. On this point, there is a dialogue that takes place between Mary and Joseph when Joseph discovers her pregnancy, a dialogue that could be compared to a more detailed, longer, early Syriac text. The dating of such dialogues (*Soghyatha*) is problematic, but it would be reasonable to suppose that they go back to the fifth and sixth centuries.

MUSLIM

- J - I have had a thought about you. Though I have done my utmost to suppress it, it has overcome me. To speak of it would assuage my heart.
- M - Speak, and utter none but gracious words.
- J - I would utter no others. Can wheat grow without seed?
- M - Yes.
- J - Can trees grow without rain?
- M - Yes.
- J - Can there be a son without a father?
- M - Yes. Do you not know that God, Blessed and Exalted, made wheat to grow, when He created it, without need for seed? Today's seed simply comes from the wheat which God made to grow without seed. And do you know that God, Blessed and Exalted, by His omnipotence made trees grow without the aid of rain? It is by this same omnipotence that He has

CHRISTIAN

- J - Reveal to me the secret of what has happened to you; it is most shocking, what you speak of: who led you astray, virgin, and snatched your wealth, chaste girl?
- M - I will reveal to you how it happened, says Mary. So listen, Joseph. A man of fire came down to me. He gave me a greeting—and this took place.
- J - That I should believe this is hard; it is not nice, so do not repeat it. If you are willing, speak to me about what took place: who led you astray?
- M - How to tell you any more I know not, for I have told you how it actually happened: the chief of the angels came down and announced it to me; I became pregnant without being aware of it.
- J - I am astonished at what you say: how can I listen to your words? Virgins do not get pregnant unless they have intercourse or get married.

⁸"Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered" (S. 2:136).

made rain capable of vivifying trees. Or would you say that God, Blessed and Exalted, was unable to make trees grow without help of rain, the lack of which would make it impossible for Him to make them grow?

J - No, I do not say that. For I know that God, Blessed and Exalted, can do whatever He wills. He says to a thing "Be!", and it is.

M - Do you not know that God, Blessed and Exalted, created Adam and his wife without the assistance of a father and mother?

J - Yes.⁹

M - I am astonished that you will not believe, for it is very easy for the Lord of all to give fruit to a virgin—as happened with the lamb from the branch.

J - Eve was married to Adam, and from him she had many children, whereas you alone brazenly assert that your womb is full without any man being involved.

M - Eve is actually a witness to my words, for she came into being without any intercourse, issuing from Adam who produced her as fruit. Why do you not believe me?

J - Do you know of anyone else like you, who resembles you, according to what you claim? To you alone has this happened—because it is simply not true.

M - I do not have to be like anyone else, for my Son has no fellow companion: He is unique, and it is not possible for another conception like mine to take place.

J - It is very hard for me to believe you, that you have not exchanged me for another, as you are saying, for I know that I have no part in your conception; so it is quite apparent that you are telling lies.

M - It is very easy for you to believe me: my Son has one of the angels of fire and spirit who will testify in a revelation whether or not I am false.

J - There is error in your words, virgin, so that one is afraid for you af-

⁹Al-Tabarī, cited in R. J. McCarthy, "Mary in Islam," in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole, O.S.B. (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1982), 209-10.

ter what you have said. Take the bill of divorce peacefully, and be off: you may be sure I will not reveal the secret.

M - It is easy for the Child who resides in my womb to speak on my behalf when I am overcome; He will reveal the mystery that has happened to me. He will explain that I have not been false.

J - Listen to what I shall say to you, O wise woman: though I believe what you say, I do not dare to touch your pure womb, for it is filled with fire.

M - Your utterance is dear to me, Joseph. I have no desire for intercourse: the Child in my womb will persuade you that I am a virgin and have not played false.

J - There are two possibilities; and both disturb me: if it is true, it is most frightening for me, but if it is untrue, that is a great grief. How I wish I could escape from the two.

M - Now I shall pour out my words. . . . my Son hidden in my womb; He will reveal to you that I shall have no other children, and shall not be deprived of your company. . . .

When she had said that, Joseph knew intuitively that her state was the realization of a volition of God, Blessed and Exalted, and that he could not question her about it because of the secret she was keeping (the mystery she was guarding). Thereupon he alone took over the service of the Temple and himself undertook all the work that Mary had been doing. . . .¹⁰

¹⁰Sebastian P. Brock, *Soghito Magbito* (Holland, 1982).

The Qur'ān also mentions other humanly impossible conceptions that were announced by angels: those of Abraham and his wife Sara, Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth,¹¹ and Mary, the Mother of Jesus.¹²

According to the Qur'ān, Mary gave birth in the desert where water and dates appeared to save the mother and her son.¹³ Mary and her son Jesus the prophet hold a privileged place in the Qur'ān. She is the only female whose name occurs—indeed, it is repeated often, while other females are not named at all. The expression “Jesus, son of Mary” appears thirteen times, and the expression “Jesus, the Messiah, son of Mary” appears three times. Mary’s name or references to it appear about forty-five times.

Mary and Jesus are given a special place by God who made them a Sign: “And We made the son of Mary and his mother a portent.”¹⁴ Such a sign can also be interpreted as a direct manifestation of the divine science, a vehicle that opens eyes and hearts, giving a taste of the supernatural world. The main concern of the meaning of *ish`arah* (sign) here would be as a witness to faith and recognition, and above all to seeing Mary as the sign.¹⁵

¹¹S. 19:1–15.

¹²S. 19:16–22.

¹³S. 19:24–25.

¹⁴S. 23:50; S. 21:91.

¹⁵Massignon expresses it in his short but profound article, “Le signe mariale” (*Rhythmes du monde* [1947]:9): “Muhammad affirme, contrairement aux blasphèmes en cours dans ce milieu médinois, que Jésus et sa Mère Marie ont été non seulement purs, vierges et saints, mais que ce sont les seuls êtres humains dont la conception ait été immaculée, intouchée du Diable (Cor. 3,31: prière de Ste Anne). Que Jésus reviendra vainqueur, à l’heure du Jugement. Que le monde, comme Israël incrédule s’il s’obstine, sera jugé et condamné sur ce signe de l’Immaculée Conception de Marie, vase pur de la naissance virginale de Jésus, Arche de salut des prédestinés. Je ne dis pas qu’en annonçant ce signe de contradiction, Muhammad ait cru à la divinité de Jésus; c’est une question à laquelle, devant les chrétiens de Najrān, il a répondu par une demande d’ordalie, de Jugement de Dieu (*mubāhala*: Cor. 3,54). Il l’attend toujours, bien plus le Coran énonce que c’est au Jugement dernier seulement que Dieu posera ce signe, comme la question suprême, non seulement aux hommes, mais aux prophètes, en demandant à leur porte-parole, Jésus, s’il a proposé les deux seuls Purs, sa Mère et lui, comme ‘deux Dieux’ (*ilāhbayn*) à l’adoration des hommes. Et la prophétie coranique de la fin des temps s’arrête là (5,116), ayant mystérieusement rappelé, par le verset précédent (5,115) la damnation qui attend, ce jour-là, ceux qui nieront la Table sainte où Jésus a convié ses Apôtres, cette *Māīdat-al-kashf* communautaire où il faut goûter,

In the Qur'ān, three *suras* (chapters) bear titles recalling various aspects of Christian tradition: 1) Sura 3: The Family of 'Imrān; 2) Sura 5: The Table Spread (imagery recalling Jesus' miracles); and 3) Sura 19: Mary (in which Mary and Zachariah are prominent).¹⁶

The Qur'ān focuses on two particular events in the life of Mary: her birth and her stay in the Temple.¹⁷ "And when the angels said: O Mary! Allah has chosen thee and made thee pure, and has preferred thee above (all) the women of creation."¹⁸ The Qur'ān presents her son speaking at birth like an "old man,"¹⁹ and later on "creating birds from clay," an account similar to a Christian account in one of the apocryphal gospels.²⁰

The Qur'ān describes Mary and her place in two beautiful verses:

Lo! Allah preferred Adam and Noah and the Family of Abraham and the Family of 'Imrān above (all His) creatures. They were descendants one of another. Allah is Hearer Knower. (S. 3:33-34)²¹

What is striking in these verses is not the person but the act of being chosen, in which we see the element of "preference." The first three members of this favored family were Adam, Noah, and Abraham, early patriarchs of both Christianity and Islam. In the Qur'ān, God's first choice was Adam²²; after he

donc comprendre, concevoir intellectuellement la généalogie véritable, la purification prééternelle de ce corps humain sacrifié, que Jésus a reçu de Marie."

¹⁶In sura 19, a certain parallel is created between the story relating the birth of Mary and the story of the birth of John, son of Zachariah. After that, this sura relates the angel's announcement to Mary regarding the miraculous birth of Jesus and then his actual birth in the desert (S. 19:16-34).

¹⁷S. 3:33-37.

¹⁸S. 3:42.

¹⁹"Lo! I am the slave of Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet. And hath made me blessed wherever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and alms-giving so long as I remain alive" (S. 19:30-31).

²⁰"The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ," 15:1-6, in *The Lost Books of the Bible and The Forgotten Books of Eden* (New York: Meridian, 1927).

²¹This study of these verses, S. 3:33-34, will be based on the Muslim commentators: Tabarī, 6:326-27; Ibn Kathīr, 2:29-30; and Qurṭubī, 4:62-63.

²²Further detail is given in the Qur'ān about this favored family: Adam was the first man created by direct intervention from God and was entrusted with the Garden. He

failed, God chose Noah²³ to restore the new world. When people continued in darkness, God chose Abraham.²⁴ This time, the choice was not a single man but an entire family, his descendants and the prophets.

'Imrān²⁵ is the final name in verse 33 of Sura 3. This man is probably the most complex and difficult to compare with Bib-

was to be faithful and trustworthy in transmitting what he had received to his descendants. The Qur'ān compares Adam to Jesus, both being created from dust and set into being (S. 3:59). The angels were asked to bow in homage to Adam, and all did so except one "who disdained and turned insolent, and became a disbeliever" (S. 2:34).

²³Noah is the second name mentioned in verse 33 of Sura 3 and elsewhere in the Qur'ān. He was sent by God and lived to be the same age mentioned in the Bible (Gen. 9:29), 950 years. Piecing together his story, we find Noah a man "chosen," "sent" (S. 3:33), and "guided" (S. 6:85) by God. While Noah realized he was sent with a message, he also realized he was only human; but like other prophets, he was accused of being a "liar" and "possessed." Again, there are similarities and differences—between the treatment in the Bible and Syriac tradition and that in the Qur'ān—for this "second father of humanity."

²⁴The third name mentioned in verse 33 of Sura 3 is Abraham. With him would come a new cornerstone of revelation and faith in the One God who would be the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (see S. 2:133 and Mt. 22:32 and Ex. 3:6). For Muslims, Christians, and Jews, Abraham is the father of faith and the friend of God. But the Qur'ān gives Abraham a special role in the founding of Islam: "Neither was Abraham a Jew nor a Christian, but upright and obedient" (S. 3:67-68). He is also the founder of the *Ka'ba* and of Islamic religious practices.

As in the case of Adam and Noah, Abraham is chosen (S. 3:33); he is righteous (S. 19:41) and a leader (S. 2:124). These qualities seem to coincide in all three religions, but again there are differences.

While Christian tradition describes the importance of Abraham's leaving Ur of Chaldea, the Qur'ān describes him as "leaving his father and the idols" (S. 19:46-48). This occurred when he destroyed the idols, upon which the idol worshipers put him in the furnace; however, the fire was transformed into "coolness" (S. 21:69), and God then directed him toward the "blessed land" (S. 21:71).

Contrary to the story of Abraham in the Bible, Muslim authors tend to believe that Ishmael was the son that was to be immolated, but God stopped the sacrifice (S. 37:107). Even to this day, Muslims keep the custom of sacrificing a lamb on the tenth day of the month of pilgrimage, remembering Abraham's sacrifice.

²⁵According to Muslim sources, one 'Imrān is father of Moses, and he in turn is son of Yasfer, son of Qaheth, son of Lāwī, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. Another 'Imrān is father of Mary, son of Nathān, son of Solomon, son of David, son of Īsh, son of Judas, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. It is agreed that the man referred to in the cited text is the 'Imrān who is father of Mary who becomes Jesus' mother, because the Qur'ān further says she was given into the care of "Zachariah her guardian" (S. 3:37); Zachariah's father lived at the time of Nathān, and Zachariah is also the husband of

lical texts. When we make comparisons of 'Imrān with Adam, Noah, and Abraham, we see that what is important is not blood relationship so much as religious values that lead to total submission to God. This understanding prepares for the choice of Mary, who is depicted as responding to God in total submission.

And Mary, daughter of 'Imrān, whose body was chaste, therefor We breathed therein something of Our Spirit. And she put faith in the words of her Lord and His Scriptures, and was of the obedient. (S. 66:12)

What is very unusual in the 'Imrān family is that God, who previously had chosen men, has now chosen a woman; His choice is not confined to men alone.²⁶ It is also interesting that the Qur'ān does not say "Imrān" but "the family of 'Imrān," because through 'Imrān's wife Mary will be chosen.²⁷ The Qur'ān speaks of Anna's dedication of Mary in her womb:

(Remember) when the wife of 'Imrān said: My Lord! I have vowed unto Thee that which is in my belly as a consecrated (offering). Accept it from me. (S. 3:35)²⁸

For Anna this prayer is more meaningful still. Despite the strong bond of parent and child, Anna wants her baby totally free to serve the Lord. When she vows her child to the Lord, she expects the baby to be a boy because only men served the Temple. Anna's words upon recognizing that she has given birth to a girl, "My Lord! Lo! I am delivered of a female" (S. 3:36), cannot be to inform God, who is all-knowing; besides, the second part of the verse says, "But God knew better what she had delivered. A boy could not be as that girl was." Anna continues:

I have named her Mary, and lo! I crave Thy protection for her and for her offspring from Satan the outcast. (S. 3:36)

Mary's aunt. This should clarify the confusion between the Mary who is mother of Jesus and the Mary who is Moses' sister.

²⁶S. 3:42.

²⁷Qurṭubī, 4:63-64; Zamakhsharī, 1:354. Ibn 'Arabī notes that as it is the righteousness of the father that engenders righteous children, so the righteousness of Mary and her son Jesus are the result of the righteousness of 'Imrān her father.

²⁸See Ṭabarī, 6:329-30.

Having given birth to a girl, Anna wonders if her child could serve the Lord as do men.²⁹ The Qur'ān responds:

And her Lord accepted her with full acceptance and vouchsafed to her a goodly growth. . . . (S. 3:37)³⁰

The same God who had chosen Adam, Noah, and the families of Abraham and 'Imrān has also chosen Mary. Three points are clear here: Mary is favored; she is made pure; and she is chosen from all women of the world.³¹ What is also clear is that when we compare texts relating to Mary in the Qur'ān and Christian sources, especially the apocryphal *Protoevangelium* of James, we find some close similarities.

MARY IN THE QUR'ĀN

(Remember) when the wife of 'Imrān said: My Lord! I have vowed unto Thee that which is in my belly as consecrated (offering). Accept it from me. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Hearer, the Knower! (S. 3:35)

And when she was delivered she said: My Lord! Lo! I am delivered of a female—Allah knew best of what she was delivered— . . .

I have named her Mary, and lo! I crave Thy protection for her and for her offspring from Satan the outcast. (S. 3:36)

MARY IN CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Then an angel of the Lord stood by her and said: Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard thy prayer; thou shalt conceive and bring forth, and thy progeny shall be spoken of in all the world.

Anna answered: As the Lord my God liveth, whatever I bring forth, whether male or female, I will devote it for a gift unto the Lord my God, and it shall minister him in holy things during its whole life. (*Protoevangelium* 4:1-2)

And when nine months were fulfilled to Anna, she brought forth and said to the midwife, What have I brought forth? And she told her, A girl . . .

She called her Mary. (*Protoevangelium* 5:6-7,9)

²⁹ Ṭabāṭabā'ī believes Anna was a widow at this point.

³⁰ See Ṭabarī, 6:345-57; Ibn Kathīr, 2:32-33; Ṭabāṭabā'ī 174-75.

³¹ A Syriac text still used in the Maronite Liturgy shows the same idea expressed in the Qur'ānic text regarding God's choice of Mary: "God has chosen you from among all people because he saw you the purest and the most devout of those who were born." It is difficult to discern the exact date of this liturgical text, but it seems to go back to early centuries. Further studies might prove otherwise.

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure,

and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation. (S. 3:42)

**MARY IN THE TEMPLE
QUR'ĀN**

And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East,

And had chosen seclusion from them. (S. 19:16-17)

... and made Zachariah her guardian. Whenever Zachariah went into the sanctuary where she was, he found that she had food. He said: O Mary! Whence cometh unto thee this (food)? She answered: It is from Allah. Allah giveth without stint to whom He will. (S.3:37)

This is of the tidings of things hidden. We reveal it unto thee (Muhummad). Thou wast not present with them when they threw their pens (to know) which of them should be the guardian of Mary, nor wast thou present with them when they quarrelled (thereupon). (S. 3:44)

**ANNUNCIATION
QUR'ĀN**

Then We sent unto her Our spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. (S. 19:17)

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation. ... O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near

The angel said to her: "Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you." (Lk. 1:28)

"Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb." (Lk. 1:42)

**MARY IN THE TEMPLE
CHRISTIAN SOURCES**

... And when the child was three years old ... [they took Mary] into the temple of the Lord. ... (*Protoevangelium* 7:15)

[Mary] received her food from the hand of an angel. (*Protoevangelium* 8:2)

[Zachariah is put in charge to find a husband to Mary. This one is found miraculously]. (*Protoevangelium* 8-9)

**ANNUNCIATION
CHRISTIAN SOURCES**

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. (Lk. 1:26-27)

Upon arriving, the angel said to her: "Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." (Lk. 1:28)

(unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous. (S. 3:42-46)

She said: Lo! I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from thee, if thou art God-fearing. (S. 19:18)

He said: I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless son. (S. 19:19)

She said: My Lord! How can I have a child, O Lord, when no mortal hath touched me? (S. 3:47)

She said: How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste? (S. 19:20)

He [the angel] said: So (it will be). Allah createth what He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is. (S. 3:47)

He [the angel] said: So (it will be). Thy Lord saith: It is easy for Me. And (it will be) that We may make of him a revelation for mankind and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing ordained. (S. 19:21)

And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a far place. (S. 19:22)

And We made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and We gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks and water-springs. (S. 23:50)

She was deeply troubled by his words, and wondered what his greeting meant. (Lk. 1:29)

The angel went on to say to her: "Do not fear, Mary. You have found favor with God. You shall conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus. Great will be his dignity and he will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over the house of Jacob forever and his reign will be without end." (Lk. 1:30-33)³²

Mary said to the angel: "How can this be since I do not know man?" (Lk. 1:34)

The angel answered her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God. Know that Elizabeth your kinswoman has conceived a son in her old age; she who was thought to be sterile is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God."

Mary said: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say." (Lk. 1:35-38)

Thereupon Mary set out, proceeding in haste into the hill country to a town of Judeah, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. (Lk. 1:39-40)

³²These two parallel passages may not seem to express the same idea, but in both the messenger brings a message (Jesus), who, according to the biblical text, will rule the house of Jacob, though he is referred to in the Qur'ān as the Messenger to the Children of Israel.

God has chosen Mary and prepared her for an important mission. She is asked to "adore the Lord and pay homage" (S. 3:43). Mary is to be a messenger of God, bearing a child through the Word of God rather than normal intercourse:

(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, . . . (S. 3:45)

In the Qur'ān, this is a happy announcement, a Word from God.³³ There are parallels with the announcement to Zachariah about the birth of John (Yaḥyā).³⁴ The sura goes on to describe Jesus:

. . . illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in the cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous. (S. 3:45-46)

The reference to Jesus speaking "in the cradle" would occur when his mother was accused of wrongdoing although she was a pure virgin. Having a child without human intercourse would expose her and destroy her reputation, as indeed happened.³⁵

The Muslim commentators expanded the Qur'ān with many embellishments, as their Christian colleagues did for the Bible. However, Muslim stories about Mary—along with those found directly in the Qur'ān—seem based on apocryphal stories

³³In the Qur'ān, as in the Bible, the event announcing that Mary would have a son also gives the name—or, rather, three names, titles, or identifying terms: Messiah, Jesus as a word from God, and Son of Mary. Muslim commentators reflect some confusion when it comes to the meaning of these different titles.

³⁴Comparing Christian and Islamic character presentation in the annunciation to Zachariah and the birth of John, we see that Zachariah is visited by more than one angel in the Qur'ān but by only one in the Bible. In both accounts, the angelic message is that God will give him a son. His name is to be John; he will become great in God's sight and have prophetic ministry. In both accounts, Zachariah asks how this can happen because he is elderly and his wife is barren. The two accounts differ concerning the origin and duration of Zachariah's muteness. The Bible continues the account with details not found in the Qur'ān.

³⁵"Then she brought him to her own folk, carrying him. They said: O Mary! Thou hast come with an amazing thing. Oh sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a wicked man nor was thy mother a harlot" (S. 19:27-28).

believed by Christians in countries where Islam took hold.³⁶ Al-Bayḍāwī,³⁷ for example, referring to sura 19:28, in which Mary is called "sister of Aaron," speaks of Mary as belonging to this prophet's later lineage.³⁸ Commentators such as al-Ṭabarī³⁹ mention the name of Mary's mother as Hannah (Anna).⁴⁰

The important point in Mary's genealogy for Muslim exegetes and historians is that her family is from David's lineage, for Islam attaches great importance to pure lineal descent from the prophets. It makes certain commentators think Mary might have prophetic calling as well, although women are never called prophets in Islam. What is perhaps clearer in Mary's relationship with David is the simplicity of heart that drew God to choose and raise them both to unparalleled heights. But some commentators have been scandalized that Christ's genealogy contains several sinful women.⁴¹

Muslim exegetes expand the story of Anna's conception of Mary to say that one day as Anna sat in the shade of a tree, she saw a nest in which the bird was feeding its young. This reminded her of her sterility and created in her the desire to have a child. Praying to God, Anna promised that if her request were granted, she would offer the child for service in the Temple. This story closely corresponds to the account from the *Protoevangelium* of James.

Commentaries often refer here to the prohibition against female service in the Temple due to menstruation.⁴² As Mary reached puberty, a solution had to be found. The Temple priests

³⁶V. Courtois, *Mary in Islam* (Calcutta: Oriental Institute-Islamic Section, 1954), 34.

³⁷Al-Bayḍāwī was a Persian religious scholar (d. 1291) who wrote the commentary of the Qur'ān; he is regarded as the soundest and most authoritative commentator.

³⁸'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar Bayḍāwī, *Beṭḍhawī commentarius in Coranum [Anwar al-tanzīl]*, ed. H. L. Fleischer (Lipsiae: Sumptibus F. C. G. Vogelii, 1846-1848), 1:580.

³⁹A scholar (839-923), he was a prolific writer on the subjects of theology, literature, and history. He wrote the history of the world from creation until his own time.

⁴⁰Ṭabarī, 6:329-30.

⁴¹Abd-el-Jalīl, 15.

⁴²Cf. Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," in *The Muslim Word* (Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT) 79 (July/October 1989): 163-64.

could not reach agreement as to whether to accept Mary or not. They drew lots to choose her protector (S. 3:44)⁴³ by throwing their reeds (staves) in the Jordan.⁴⁴ When her uncle Zachariah's was the only one to float,⁴⁵ he then took care of Mary, educating her and seeing to her basic needs.

Nothing is found of Joseph in the Qur'ān, but he is found in the Muslim tradition. By some authors, he is represented as a companion of Mary in Temple service—sometimes he is her actual guardian instead of Zachariah, sometimes a "just man" assisting in this task. By still other authors, he is viewed as Mary's relative, son of Jacob and grandson of Mathan.

Mary's Annunciation is highly significant in the Qur'ān, as well as in Muslim commentary. She is depicted as remaining in the Temple, praying and worshiping. In suras 3 and 19, God sends His spirit in the "likeness of a perfect man," (S. 19:17) and Mary receives the angelic salutation that God has chosen her and made her pure, preferring her above other women (S. 3:42).⁴⁶ The angels also told her that God gave her the "glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the hereafter, and one of those brought near to God, who would speak in His cradle as well as in His manhood" (S. 3:45-46).

Although Mary was afraid at first, seeking "refuge in the Beneficent One," the angel assured her he was only a messenger

⁴³Courtois, *Mary in Islam*, 8.

⁴⁴Cf. also S. 3:42-63, S. 3:84, S. 57:27, and S. 61:6,14, as well as Michel Hayek, *Le Christ de l'Islam* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959), 69, n. 1: "Ibn Athīr, *Kāmil* I, 211-212; Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I/III, 711-712; Tha'labī, *Qisas*, 371-372; Kisā'ī, *Qisas*, 301-302."

⁴⁵The story of the reeds applied by the Qur'ān to Zachariah may have been inspired by a similar apocryphal story relating how Joseph was chosen as Mary's husband. When Mary was fourteen years old, the High Priest called on twelve bachelors, one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to bring to the Temple their rods. The rods were placed in the sanctuary for a sign from God as to whom he had selected to be Mary's husband. From Joseph's rod a dove flew out (Courtois, *Mary in Islam*, 66, n. 15).

⁴⁶The English translation of this verse uses two words in the same verse: "chosen you" and "preferred you." In the Arabic text, the word is *iṣṭafākt* and is used twice. In the first instance, the meaning is that she was chosen or preferred, but it does not say from or above whom. In the second instance, the meaning is that she is chosen or preferred "above all women," because no woman gives birth without a man.

from God, come to bestow on her a "faultless son" (S. 19:18-19).⁴⁷ To her question, how could this be since she was untouched by man (S. 3:47) and "had not been unchaste" (S. 19:20),⁴⁸ the angel said that it was simple for God, who can do all things (S. 3:47) and planned to make of Jesus "a revelation for mankind and mercy from Us" (S. 19:21).⁴⁹

Since the Qur'ān does not give a complete explanation of the Annunciation, Islamic tradition has provided a fuller explanation. One such area is Mary's age at the Annunciation and the conception of Jesus. Opinions vary, ranging between the ages of thirteen and twenty. The Gospel accounts do not provide such information. Other details, filled in by Muslim commentators, are that Mary retired to a place east of the Temple, either to get water or to make ablutions; but Gabriel appeared in the privacy of her room.⁵⁰ Muslim exegetes of the Annunciation can be divided into hagiographers, who base their explanation on the plain facts, or mystics, who give a spiritual interpretation to every detail.

Sunni, Shi'ite, and Sufi commentators all express profound reverence and deep appreciation of Mary. Representing the Sunni viewpoint, al-Ṭabarī links the angel's announcement of Mary's divine selection to Anna's dedication of her unborn daughter to God's service. Thus God not only "chose" Mary but also "selected" and "elected" her to be "obedient" to Him. Ṭabarī sees Mary as chosen over the women of her *own* time, not over the women of *all* time, yet he places Mary above Fāṭimah (Muḥammad's daughter) in Paradise.⁵¹ The good news given Mary is the annunciation of Jesus.⁵² By contrast, Zamakhsharī⁵³ considers that Mary is placed above *all* other women. He portrays the Annunciation as a unique event in

⁴⁷Cf. Lk. 1:30-31.

⁴⁸Cf. Lk. 1:34.

⁴⁹Cf. Lk. 1:35-38.

⁵⁰Courtois, *Mary in Islam*, 11.

⁵¹Ṭabarī, 3:262-64. See also Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981): 20.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Zamakhsharī (1075-1144) was a great authority on Arabic language. He is best known for his commentary on the Qur'ān.

which God gives a son without a father, as happened to no other woman.⁵⁴

Some Muslim commentators link the angelic Annunciation to the possibility that Mary may have received the gift of prophecy. The Sunni Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,⁵⁵ for example, says that while the Annunciation did not elevate her to the rank of prophet (reserved only to men), she received it secondarily because Christ received the divine favor of prophecy.⁵⁶ Muslims disagree whether Mary is a prophetess or just a saint.⁵⁷ The modern Sunni Rashīd Riā notes that the choice of Mary occurred when she accepted her consecration to serve in the Lord's house, the only woman receiving this honor. God's elevation of her above other women was due, he said, to her conceiving a prophet while remaining a virgin.⁵⁸

Riā analyzes the Arabic term applied to Christ's conception in Mary, *bi-kalimatīn minh* (literally, "of a word from Him") and finds four different meanings: (1) genesis, creation, or formation, rather than revelation; (2) a reference to Christ, because it refers to His annunciation by the prophets; (3) the "Word" describing Christ as clarifying the word of God that Islam believed the Jews had distorted; and (4) a description of Christ as the "good or happy news," despite the feminine gender of this word in Arabic. Hence, *bushrā* means "good news" or "glad tidings."

⁵⁴Zamakhsharī, 1:362.

⁵⁵Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209) was an historian, philosopher, and theologian.

⁵⁶Al-Rāzī, 8:45–46.

⁵⁷As Schuon says: "The trilateral root of his name comprises amongst other things the meaning of 'prosperity' and 'flowering,' which are most appropriate for her whom God 'caused to grow with a goodly growth' and to whom He gave 'His sustenance beyond measure' (S. 3:37). It should be noted that the words 'daughter of Imrān' link Mary not only to her direct father but also to her ancestor, the father of Moses and Aaron, whence the description 'sister of Aaron' which the Koran likewise employs, wishing thus to stress that the priestly and esoteric supereminence of the brother of Moses is manifested in Mary: in other words, it is a question of showing, on the one hand that the Blessed Virgin is of the race of the two brother prophets, and on the other hand that she is a prophetess—not law-giving and esoteric like Moses, but contemplative and esoteric like Aaron" (F. Schuon, "The Wisdom of the Virgin," *Studies in Comparative Religions* 2 (1968): 134–35, n. 2).

⁵⁸Muhammad Rashīd Riā, 3:300ff.

Shi'ite commentators do not seem to differ much from Sunni exegetes in their approach to the Annunciation, but see Mary's purification as more physical than spiritual. Al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, for example, notes the special favor granted Mary through the virginal birth of Jesus, having heard God's word and seen the angel. He views Christ as the Word of God—announced, but not announced to—similar to the word of command ("Be") that comes from God.⁵⁹ The mystics or ufis, such as Ibn 'Arabī⁶⁰ and Jallaluddin Rumi, attach more importance to the detail of the length of Mary's pregnancy than do exegetes and theologians.⁶¹

The Muslim commentaries on the Annunciation and Mary's conception of Jesus may seem too physical or sensual, to the extent that some texts may embarrass our sensitivities. But Islam is more concrete than Christianity in its thought forms. Similar detailed descriptions are also found in certain Christian texts, such as the story of Mary and the midwife in apocryphal infancy narratives. Christianity and Islam would agree that these are ways of describing divine intervention; Christianity goes a step further by seeing in these events a sign of Jesus' divinity. These suggestive descriptions should be kept in the general context of Muslim tradition which holds Mary's purity and her fidelity to God in high esteem. They provide the human mind with some comprehension of what is incomprehensible.

Although the Qur'ān is silent about the duration of Mary's pregnancy, Muslim commentators are not. Some hold that she gave birth immediately or a few hours after the Annunciation⁶²; others state that the pregnancy lasted six to eight months.⁶³ What the writers agree on is that a mysterious birth followed the mysterious conception. As told in the Qur'ān, the place and events of the birth, and Jesus' fulfillment of the angel's prophecy that he would speak while yet in the cradle, all

⁵⁹ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 3:193ff.

⁶⁰ Ibn 'Arabī (1165-1240) was a mystic and teacher. He is considered by many as the greatest Muslim exponent of metaphysical doctrine.

⁶¹ Ibn 'Arabī, *Fousous*, 252-58; Jallaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 3:307-12.

⁶² Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ*, 383.

⁶³ Ṭabā'ī, 16:44.

reveal God's greatness and the power and the special vocation of the son of Mary (S. 19:21, S. 3:45-49).

Muslim tradition views Jesus' vocation and mission as planned, from his conception to ascension. Some of the different events that prepare for his coming are reflected in the announcements to Zachariah and Mary and in Mary's visitation to Elizabeth.⁶⁴ Although these events are not so clearly stated in Islam as in the Gospels, particularly Luke's, they are found in the Qur'ān or mentioned in commentaries.

Both the Qur'ān and the entire Muslim tradition in its various writings consider Mary the most blessed and preeminent of women. This belief goes back to the days of Muḥammad, as Ibn Ḥanbal notes in his *Musnad*. The founder of Islam placed Mary above even his daughter Fāṭimah, who, he says, would have been highest among women were it not for Mary.⁶⁵

Like Christian theologians, Muslims view Mary's great dignity as a result of the many privileges and favors bestowed on her. Al-Bayḍawī writes of her selection as totally unique and having double significance. First, God had never accepted a woman for divine service. The food he provided made her free from the need to work, and the purification he provided made

⁶⁴It is of interest that the Syriac-Maronite Church recalls this same sequence of events as it celebrates the six Sundays that precede the commemoration of the birth of Jesus (Christmas), called the "Sundays of Announcements." These Sundays are: 1) The Announcement to Zachariah, 2) The Announcement to Mary, 3) The Visitation to Elizabeth, 4) The Birth of John the Baptizer, 5) The Revelation to Joseph, 6) and the Genealogy of Jesus. These six Sundays lead to the greatest Announcement of all, the Birth of Jesus: "Glory to God on high and peace and good hope to all men." This particular season in preparation for the birth of Christ is called in Syriac *souborey*, which means "happy announcements."

⁶⁵Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Amad ibn Ḥanbal* (Cairo, 1311 H.), 3:80.

Mary appears to be honored above all women in Christianity and Islam alike. In Christianity she is regarded as mother of the incarnate Word; in Islam she is seen as mother of an important prophet, who is called a "Word from Allah" (S. 4:171). "This interest in Mary has remained alive among the people of Christianity and Islam up to the present: It is also authentic Qur'ānic doctrine that among women, whether in Paradise or on earth, none may challenge Mary, the mother of Jesus, in dignity—not even Fāṭimah, the Prophet's beloved daughter to whom Muslims apply the qualities of Mary: 'Because "Maryam" is a saint among Christians, so "Fāṭimah" is the saint of the Muslims!'" (Fāḍil al-Ḥusaynī al-Milānī, *Fāṭimah al-zabrā': umm abihā* [Najaf: Maṭba'at al-Ādāb, 1968], 36.)

her free from normal female periods. Second, God was always guiding her, sending angels as messengers and helpers.

The Qur'ān is clear that Mary was born without sin. A *ḥadīth* attributed to Muḥammad himself declares (according to Abū Hurayrah and, in turn, cited by al-Bukhārī) that, although Satan touches all mortals, God prevented him in the case of Mary as well as her son.⁶⁶ In such great purity, Mary was fit for Temple service and for ministry from the angels.

Christians might be tempted to assume, then, that such Muslim belief is only a short step away from the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, but Muḥammad did not believe in original sin. As Smith and Haddad note: "While Roman Catholics tend to understand purified as a possible reference to an immaculate conception (i.e., sinlessness), Muslims understand *ṭaharāh* as the opposite of defilement (i.e., menstruation or any other ritual impurities)."⁶⁷

The often-occurring Qur'ānic description of Jesus as "son of Mary" is, for al-Bayḍawī, a clear sign that Jesus was born of a woman who had no relations with a man, since the common reference to a man is as "son of his father," not his mother.⁶⁸ Then, too, despite the possibility seemingly raised in the Qur'ān that Mary may have harbored doubts, clearly the Muslim commentators do not seriously consider that she lacked faith. They can explain her questions.

In summary, Christianity and Islam, both missionary faiths originating among Semitic people, have one thing in common: belief in the One God—who is just, merciful, omnipotent, omniscient, and who acts in history. In accepting Jesus as prophet and Messiah, Islam elevates his mother, Mary, to a special role and position. Since a number of Qur'ānic statements about Mary do not occur in the New Testament at all, we must search for other sources existing at the time of the coming of Islam.

⁶⁶Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il Bukhari, *Les traditions islamiques*, trans. Octave V. Houdas (4 vols.; Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1984 [reprint of original 1903-1914 ed.]), 3:278-79. (At head of title: El-Bokhari.)

⁶⁷Smith and Haddad, "Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition," 164.

⁶⁸Abd Allah ibn 'Umar Bayḍawī, *Chrestomathia Baidawiana*, trans. David Samuel Margoliouth (London: Luzac & Co., 1894), 35.

One such source is the Syriac branch of Christianity, with which Muḥammad was most familiar.⁶⁹ The Syriac tradition is an important source for understanding the Qur'ān, but we recognize that many Muslims—except those who already make this point an important part of their studies—will not accept theories that the Qur'ān borrowed from other sources or was influenced by other religions, such as Judaism or Christianity. We must also keep in mind that the golden age of Syriac literature extended from the fourth to the sixth centuries, just prior to Islam.⁷⁰

Chief among the early Syriac writers focusing on Mary was St. Ephraem, called “Harp of the Holy Spirit.” Ephraem viewed Mary as a model for the ideal relationship between humanity and God, which is the potential role Eve failed to develop. He focused on Mary as the New Eve and on her unique traits of virginity, humility, and obedience.

It is important to understand that Syriac tradition is open to the feminine aspect of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is mistakenly believed to be female, the Trinity would thus be Father, Mother, and Child (like the Triad worshiped at Hatra). Here is a particularly clear example of how the Qur'ānic view of Mary as a member of the Christian Trinity may be explained by existing sources.

From these few comparisons, it seems obvious that the influence of canonical Christian texts on the Qur'ān and Islam is minimal, whereas the apocryphal texts seems to have greater influence, especially the *Protoevangelium*. If this is, in fact, the main Christian source for the Qur'ānic presentation of Mary, some questions arise:

- Was the *Protoevangelium* an innovative book promoting new ideas, or was it a summary of popular beliefs that would soon be included in the canonical teaching?

⁶⁹Orientalists doubt, however, that the Prophet had any direct familiarity with either Judaism or Christianity outside the Arabian Peninsula.

⁷⁰Sebastian P. Brock, “Mary in Syriac Tradition” [Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary pamphlet, 1997], in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole, O.S.B. (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow Co., 1982), 182.

- Does the *Protoevangelium* make Mary the woman *par excellence*, a type of Eve prior to the Fall, the only one who could become pregnant by the Holy Spirit?
- Is this process of seeing Mary in the original state possibly a return to a pre-Christian outlook, or is it a belief deeply anchored in human history?
- If Christianity brought Mary to the highest possible level, could Islam bring her back to a lower level?

Certainly the author of the *Protoevangelium* relied on elements that already existed and appealed to Christians from pagan backgrounds, helping them in their devotional life and fostering practices that soon became part of the Church's faith regarding Mary as the New Eve.

Even though Christianity and Islam grew out of the same Near Eastern monotheistic tradition, and even though from its very inception Islam recognized and emphasized the common heritage—acknowledging both the virgin birth and Jesus as prophet—Muslims have rejected his divinity. Could the strong aversion the Qur'ān expressed in regard to Jesus being the Son of God be attributed to the fact that its sources were so removed from the truth of the Gospel? Could Islamic unfamiliarity with that truth have also led to its anti-Christian attitude? In an attempt to confront the Muslim tradition, accusing both Jews and Christians of having deformed the Book and changed the meaning, we must return to the original sources without renouncing the past to build a future.

In drawing this presentation to a close, I wish to emphasize the following points:

1. Despite Islam's unwillingness to accept the possibility of discussing Qur'ānic textual sources, the similarity between the Qur'ān and Christian texts is a convincing argument for dependence. These shared texts could serve as the beginning of a long journey of dialogue.
2. Although the Christian apocryphal stories and legends regarding Mary and Jesus influenced the Qur'ān, this does not mean that texts were copied word by word. It is rather what was retained or what could be remembered from these stories and legends that remained.

3. For the Syriac tradition, there exists the deep relationship between the Holy Spirit (the Sanctifier) and Mary (the one who is sanctified). The Syriac tradition also has numerous mythological descriptive images that should be looked at as many windows allowing the eyes to see a wider horizon—the mystery of Mary and Jesus. To take such images as truths would be like changing the glass of a window into a mirror; it would limit the vision and hide the horizon.