

THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE *QUR'AN*

Brother John M. Samaha, S.M.

Contemporary interest in Islam and the *Qur'an*, its sacred book, runs high. *Qur'an* means literally a book, a reading, a recitation; and is sometimes less accurately transliterated from Arabic to English as *Koran*.

Among the queries raised concerning the *Qur'an* is the place Mary the Mother of Jesus occupies in Islam. For the past two millennia people have given many faces to Mary. Some of the most impressive images of her are found in the *Qur'an*. And ample evidence exists to indicate that the sources of the Marian references in the *Qur'an* are found in early Judaic and Christian traditions.

Muslims believe the *Qur'an* has a mysterious origin. It is the word of God that brings deliverance to those who believe in it. It enlightens the soul. It is the "guarded tablet" that no one can imitate. It is the new Revelation "in the Arabic language" that came to "confirm" previous revelations contained in the Torah and the Gospel. This is the reason Jews and Christians are called "People of the Book."

In the Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) the prophets are considered bearers and interpreters of God's word, God's instruments. They transmit the divine message by human means. Christians, in contrast, regard Jesus as the Eternal Word who did not come "with a book," and remains a living and active Person.

The central idea of the *Qur'an* is that everything comes from God (*Allah* in Arabic), the universal Creator, and everything returns to God. God is the Creator of the universe, angels and demons, and of all persons. Through the prophets, God spoke to the people and taught them the laws of human conduct and of worship. For reward or for retribution in the life to come, he will raise them up for judgment. The *Qur'an* explains that God wishes to reveal himself to people.

The *Qur'an* mentions the Torah and the Psalms, recognized as books of early revelation, and the Gospels. In the Muslim view the *Qur'an* was given to complete

and confirm the truths of these earlier books. It states that the prophets preached the One Only God, and that two of the prophets, Adam and Jesus, were born by direct intervention of the Creator. The *Qur'an* also records other humanly impossible conceptions that were announced by angles: those of Abraham and Sara, of Zachariah and Elizabeth, and Mary the Mother of Jesus.

Mary and her son Jesus the prophet hold a privileged place in the *Qur'an*. Mary is the only female whose name is cited. While other females are not named at all, Mary's name is repeated frequently. The expression "Jesus son of Mary" appears 13 times; and "Jesus, the Messiah, son of Mary" is found three times. About 45 times we find Mary's name or references to it.

According to the *Qur'an* God made Mary and Jesus a sign, a witness to faith: "And We made the son of Mary and his mother a portent" (S. 23:50; S. 21:91).

Three *suras* (chapters) in the *Qur'an* bear titles recalling various aspects of Christian tradition: Sura 3, The Family of 'Imran; Sura 5, The Holy Table, concerning imagery recalling Jesus' miracles; and Sura 19, Mary, giving prominence to Mary and Zachariah.

In general, the *Qur'an* focuses on two particular events in the life of Mary: her birth and her time in the Temple. "The angels said: O Mary! Allah has chosen thee and made thee pure and has preferred thee above all women of creation" (S. 3:42).

The same God who has chosen Adam, Noah, and the families of Abraham and 'Imran also chose Mary. The texts indicate clearly three points: Mary is favoured; she is pure; she is chosen over all women of the world. In comparing Marian texts of the *Qur'an* with Christian sources we find some close similarities with the *Protoevangelium* of James and other apocryphal writings.

God chose Mary and prepared her for an important mission, "to adore and pay homage" (S. 3:43). Mary was chosen to be a messenger of God and to bear a child through the Word of God rather than normal intercourse.

Like their Christian counterparts did with the Bible, Muslim commentators embellished the *Qur'an*. Muslim stories about Mary are based on the same

apocryphal stories believed by Christians in countries where Islam replaced the Gospel.

The important point in Mary's genealogy for Muslim exegetes is that her family is from David's lineage, because Islam places great importance on lineal descent from the prophets.

Nothing is said about Joseph in the *Qur'an*, but he has a place in the Muslim tradition.

Mary's Annunciation holds special significance in the *Qur'an*, especially in suras 3 and 19.

Sunni, Shi'ite, and Sufi commentators all express profound reverence and deep appreciation for Mary. Although the vocation and mission of Jesus, and Mary's association with him, are not clearly stated in Islam as in the Gospels, particularly Luke's, these beliefs are found in the *Qur'an* or are indicated in commentaries.

Both the *Qur'an* and the entire Islamic tradition consider Mary the most blessed and prominent of women. This belief reaches back to Muhammad as noted in *Musnad* by Ibn Hanbal. The founder of Islam placed Mary above even his daughter Fatimah, and said Fatimah would have been highest among women were it not for Mary.

The *Qur'an* is clear that Mary was born without sin, and that Jesus son of Mary was born of a woman who had no relations with a man, since the common reference to a man in that culture is as son of his father, not of his mother.

Christianity and Islam are both missionary faiths originating among Semitic peoples. They have this in common: belief in one God, who is just, merciful, omnipotent, omniscient, and who acts in history. Accepting Jesus as prophet and Messiah, Islam thus elevates his mother, Mary, to a special position and role. Since some Qur'anic statements about Mary do not exist in the New Testament, scholars look for other sources in existence at the birth of Islam. The influence of canonical Christian Scripture on the *Qur'an* and Islam is minimal, but the apocryphal texts seem to have been a considerable influence, especially the *Protoevangelium*.

Even though Christianity and Islam grew from the same Near Eastern monotheistic tradition, and even though from its inception Islam recognized the common heritage – acknowledging both the virgin birth and Jesus as prophet – Muslims reject the divinity of Jesus. The strong aversion of the *Qur'an* to Jesus being the Son of God might be attributed to the fact that its sources were removed from the truth of the Gospel. Islamic unfamiliarity with the divinity of Jesus might be attributed to the fact that its sources were removed from the truth of the Gospel. That unfamiliarity with the divinity of Jesus and the Gospel might also contribute to its anti-Christian attitude.

While Islam seems unwilling to delve deeper into Qur'anic textual sources, the similarity between the *Qur'an* and Christian Scripture might serve as the springboard of a fruitful journey of dialogue. And mutual understanding of Mary might be a bridge.