

THE BLESSED VIRGIN'S GENEALOGY IN THE QUR'AN - AN EXEGETICAL PROBLEM

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Apart from being the one and only woman who is mentioned by name in the Qur'ān¹ the Blessed Virgin Mary may be considered one of the principal personages who are mentioned with praise in the holy book of Islām. In that book her name is *Maryam*. This word is mentioned 34 times in the Qur'ān, usually in combination with Jesus' name: *Isā ibn Maryam* (Jesus, the son of Mary). Moreover the 19th chapter (*sūra*) of the Qur'ān is entitled *sūrat Maryam* (the chapter of Mary) and together with chapter 3 it gives the bulk of the Qur'ān's tenets regarding Mary and Jesus. All this already shows a vivid interest of the Qur'ān, and therefore of Muslims, in the person of the Blessed Virgin. In the present article we shall investigate just one aspect of the Mary narrative in the Qur'ān: her genealogy as it appears in the book. If at first sight it seems to constitute a grave exegetical problem, after a more profound reading one might arrive at a well-balanced interpretation of the text. This is what I try to offer here.

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Sūra 3, 33-36 relates the nativity of Mary.

33. *God chose Adam and Noah and the House of Abraham and the House of Imran above all beings, 34. the seed of one another; God hears, and knows.*
35. *When the wife of Imran said, "Lord, I have vowed*

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1 Cf. Nilo GEAGEA, *Maria nel messaggio coranico* (Edizioni del Teresianum; Roma 1973)

- to Thee, in dedication,
 what is within my womb.
 Receive Thou this from me;
 Thou hearest, and knowest."
36. And when she gave birth to her
 she said, "Lord, I have given
 birth to her, a female."
 (And God knew very well
 what she had given birth to;
 the male is not as the female.)
 "And I have named her Mary,
 and commend her to Thee
 with her seed, to protect them
 from the accursed Satan."²

From the context we gather that 'Imrān's wife, whose name is not mentioned, became pregnant, and in her pregnancy she vowed to offer what was in her womb to the Lord. It is clear that she was expecting a baby boy, for 3,36 seems to express the mother's almost disappointment, especially in the bracket dividing her speech to the Lord into two parts: *And God knew very well what she had given birth to; the male is not as the female*. Nevertheless, the mother being a saintly woman, she readily overcame the crisis - she soon accepted the babe as a gift from God. She named her *Maryam* and commended her and her seed to God most high for protection from Satan the accursed (lit. *the stoned*).³

Scholars agree that sūra 3 belongs to the Medinan period of Islamic history, therefore it was revealed after the *hijra* (A.D. 622). The polemical tone against the "people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*) and especially against the Jews and against the "hypocrites" (*al-munāfiqūn*), the special way of addressing people as "oh you who believe" (*yā'ayyuhā l-mu'minūn*), apart from the length of the sūra (200 verses), its "calm" literary style and the various allusions therein to particular historical events, are all sufficiently clear elements pointing towards the post-migratory period.⁴

2 Qur'ānic quotations are taken from: Arthur J. ARBERRY, *The Koran interpreted* (Oxford University Press; London 1964)

3 *A ūdhu billāh min al-shayṭān al-raḥīm* (I take refuge in God from Satan the "stoned" = accursed). This is the usual Muslim "refuge-taking" enjoying universal usage both officially and popularly. Cf. *Sūrat al-falaq* (113) and *Sūrat al-nās* (114). Cf. also: Constance E. PADWICK, *Muslim Devotions a study of prayer-manuals in common use* (S.P.C.K., London 1969) 83-93

4 Cf. *Maria* 29-31

THE PROBLEM OF GENEALOGY

A serious problem rises to the reader of the Qur'ān regarding Mary's genealogy as to the way how it is presented therein. It is affirmed that Mary is the daughter of 'Imrān. But who exactly is this 'Imrān? He does not seem to be St. Joachim, husband of St. Anne, who are both considered to be the Blessed Virgin's parents by Christian tradition. Moreover, *Hannah* is never mentioned by name in the Qur'ān, although she is held to be 'Imrān's wife by Muslim commentators and theologians, such as *Tabarī* and *Mas'ūdī*.⁵

The name 'Imrān seems to be an Arabic rendering of Hebrew 'Amrām, who appears in the Bible as Moses' father. In Exodus 6,18-20 we find the genealogy of 'Amrām and Moses:

18. *The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel, the years of the life of Kohath being a hundred and thirty-three years...*

20. *Amram took to wife Jochebed his father's sister and she bore him Aaron and Moses, the years of the life of Amram being one hundred and thirty-seven years.*⁶

'Amrām's name is again mentioned four times throughout the Pentateuch. Then it is mentioned among the long genealogies of I Chronicles 6,2-3, where the above-mentioned position of Ex 6,18-20 is confirmed; and another four times throughout the two books of Chronicles. The Greek rendering of the name is *Am(b)ram*. Lastly from Ezr 10,34 we gather that 'Amram was "of the sons of Bani".

This situation is apparently confirmed by Q. 3, 33-34. It would be more logical to take 'Imrān's family as mentioned here to be that from which Moses was born. For it here concludes a chronological series of four Old Testament families descending from four Old Testament patriarchs. The families here mentioned are made to descend from one another.

Moreover, in Q. 19,28 (Sūrat Maryam = 2nd Mekkan period) Mary is addressed by her people as "*Yā ukht Hārūn*" (Oh sister of Aaron). This is confirming all that has been said up till now: the Qur'ān places Mary as daughter of 'Imrān and sister of Aaron, and naturally, even though it does not mention it

5 Cf. V. COURTOIS, *Mary in Islam* (The Oriental Institute; Calutta 1954)

6 Biblical quotations are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*.

specifically, Mary would also be sister of Moses. On the other hand, however, the Bible speaks of a "Mary" sister of Aaron and Moses:

"Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron took a timbrel in her hand; and all the woman went out after her with timbrels and dancing." (Ex 16,20-21)

Then follows the song of Miriam. In Numbers 26,59 she is specifically qualified as daughter of 'Amrām and Jochebed, and as sister of Aaron and Moses. Miriam is also mentioned in: I Chron 5,29; Ex 15,21; Num 12,1,4,5,10,15; 20,1; in Dt 24,9; and in Mi 6,4. In Greek the name is rendered *Mariam*.

SOLUTIONS OF THE PROBLEM

There could be three possible solutions to this enigma.

(a) We must either admit that, through badly informed sources, the Qur'ān makes a flat confusion between Miriam, sister of Aaron and Moses, and Maryam, mother of Jesus. This judgement is generally given by classical western orientalis: Marracci, Ullmann, Nallino, Bonelli, Sidersky, Montet, Zakarias. But does it not seem to be quite naive to admit this? It seems rather impossible that the Qur'ān should have fallen into such an error, mixing up two biblical personages who lived in two different epochs with a range of time amounting to more than a thousand years separating them. This position is held by Sale, Gerock and others.⁷ It is true that one should keep in mind the differences between Mekkan and Medinan Sūras. During the composition of the former Muhammad might have still had a confused mind in things concerning the Bible. But it is a fact that the apparent confusion between the two "Marys" is repeated in both Mekkan and Medinan Sūras.

(b) Or we must admit that by pure chance there may have been two distinct men named 'Imrān, and another two named Aaron. In this case, an 'Imrān and an Aaron would be father and brother of Miriam, sister of Moses; and another 'Imrān and yet another Aaron would be father and brother of Maryam, mother of Jesus. This position is held by some Muslim commentators.⁸ But being based on pure chance, and finding no more profound basis to back it, I would disregard this opinion altogether.

(c) Or else we must try to solve this problem enquiring into the exact

7 Cf. A.J. WENSINCK, "Maryam", in: *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, H.A.R. GIBB and J.H. KRAMERS, eds (E.J. Brill; Leiden, Luzac & Co; London, 1961)

8 J.M. ABD-EL-JALIL, *Marie et l'Islam* (Beauchesne; Paris 1950) 12-15

meaning of "genealogy" in semitic mentality in general. The Bible will help us to understand this. In I Chron 1,1 - 9,44 we find whole lists of the so-called "threshold genealogies". The literary genre of Biblical genealogies is characterized by monotony and inconsistencies, and, in the words of Robert North in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, it "must not blind a modern reader to its indispensable role, replaced nowadays by parish and civil record offices, in vindicating legitimacy of both family and function".⁹ An author's intent to trace out a genealogy is not administrative and much less historical, but it is rather theological.

This affirmation is best understood when one studies the genealogies of Jesus reported in Matthew 1,1-17 and in Luke 3,23-38. By his genealogy of Jesus, Matthew wants to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who brings to completion the history of salvation started by the promises given by God to Abraham. So he makes him descend directly from Abraham, through David, the ideal figure of Messianic king. Any Biblical scholar or exegete will today notice that Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is a literary artifice made up of three groupings of generations with 14 heads forming each group.¹⁰ The same thing may be said about the genealogy reported by Luke, although they both differ in literary formation, contents, and purpose. Luke's intents are to prove Christ's divinity and his universality, as contrasted with Matthew's, who puts the Hebraicity of Jesus much in evidence. Moreover, in the links between Abraham and David, Matthew and Luke agree substantially, but between David and Jesus, both Evangelists disagree completely, except for only two names.¹¹

Now, keeping the basic semitic orientation in mind, I think we might as well apply what has been said so far to our Qur'anic text. Mary, the mother of Jesus is made to be daughter of 'Imrān and she is conversely called "sister of Aaron" by the Qur'ān, for a similar reason to that for which Jesus is called "son of David" by the Gospels. Maryam, being a quasi-prophetess; Maryam, being the mother of 'Isā al-Masīh, the major prophet of Islām after Muhammad, is made to descend directly from other major personalities. She is believed to belong to the lineage of Prophet Aaron, and she thus acquires intimate relationship with 'Imrān, his and her father, and consequently with Moses, his and her brother.¹² I feel that this is the most plausible position of the three. It is upheld by

9 "The Chronicler: 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah", *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol.I (Chapman; London 1970) 405-406

10 Cf. John L. McKENZIE, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Vol.II (Chapman; London 1970) 66; Angelo POPPI, *Vangeli a confronto, sinossi didattico pastorale* (Ed. Messaggero; Padova 1970) 13

11 Cf. Carroll STUHLMÜLLER, "The Gospel according to Luke", *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Vol.II (Chapman; London 1970) 129; POPPI *Vangeli*, 136

12 Cf. ABD-EL-JALIL, *Marie*, 12-15 and COURTOIS, *Mary*, 4-7

Al-Baydāwī in his “*Anwār al-Tanzīl*”. Explaining the expression “*ukht Hārūn*” *al-Baydāwī* says: “...they meant the Prophet Aaron; she was indeed in the posterity of those who were with him in the category of brotherhood. It is said that she belonged to his lineage and that there were thousands of years between them.”¹³

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13 Cf. AL-BAYDAWI, *Anwār al-Tanzīl*, Vol.I (Ed. Fleischer; Lipsiae 1846) 580