

The Miracle of the Embodiment in the Quran

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ABSTRACT: Within an intercultural dialogue and even between the two religions, we consider that the starting point should be one about which both parts agree. Christianity and Islam are religions that consider the birth of Christ a miracle. At a quick look in the Quran and the Bible we can notice that both sources are alike in many ways. Taking into consideration the appearance of both writings, it is possible that the Biblical description might have influenced the Quran writing or that the Quran writing might confirm the Biblical narrative or that the Quran writing might confirm the Biblical narrative completing it with some other aspects which are not mentioned in the Biblical text. The aim of the present paper is to render The Quran perspective taking into consideration the Biblical narrative.

KEYWORDS: Jesus, Messiah, birth, miracle

Sura 19 renders the longest version of announcing the birth of Christ, although there are also other short references.

Sura 19.16 – 16. And mention in the Scripture Mary, when she withdrew from her people to an eastern location. 17. She screened herself away from them, and We sent to her Our spirit, and He appeared to her as an immaculate human. 18. She said, "I take refuge from you in the Most Merciful, should you be righteous." 19. He said, "I am only the messenger of your Lord, to give you the gift of a pure son." 20. She said, "How can I have a son, when no man has touched me, and I was never unchaste?" 21. He said, "Thus said your Lord, 'It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign for humanity, and a mercy from Us. It is a matter already decided.

Another Quran reference about this event is found in sura 3-37/42-3:42-47. We can also refer to sura 21:19 și 66:12 „And Mary, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her womb, and so We breathed into her of Our Spirit; and she believed in the truth of her Lord's Words and His Books, and was one of the devout.”

There are many interpretations for Mary's withdrawal 'in a place in the East ', being covered 'with a veil'. The book of James affirms that Mary was working at a veil for the temple, in her own house, when the angel showed himself to her. Neither the Quran nor the Bible place the announcement of Jesus in the temple, and Maulana Azad, a modern exeget says that 'the place in the East' is Nazareth, which is 'confirmed by the New Testament' (Tottoli 2002, 215).

All the other Quran narratives mentioned above agree with the Gospel of Luke. In this context, in Quran the angel is not named Gabriel (Jibril), although in other parts of the Quran he appears as the revelation angel, and commentators supposed that he had appeared before Mary (Ata ur-Rahim 1987, 144).

Quran rejects all the allusions about Mary not being a virgin, or about the association between divinity and a woman, as antique classics or the Arab myths might suggest. But commentators were not exempt from the speculation that this is more legendary than Biblical. In his chronicle, Tabari affirms that Gabriel was sent to Mary to blow in her blouse so that she could remain pregnant, receiving, apparently, the spirit. Baidawi renewed this idea, according to which Gabriel breathed into Mary's shirt. Tabari advocates that Gabriel appeared to Mary having the physical appearance of Joseph the carpenter, because Mary had never seen another man, except for Zachariah and Joseph. And Gabriel told her she will be given a son,

Mary was afraid that Joseph came to have intercourse with her. But Gabriel said that God wanted to create a child without a father and make him a prophet. This is a vulgar legend, that has no Biblical support (Parrinder 2003, 73).

In the past, it was inferred that the teaching of the Quran talked about the birth of Jesus from a virgin. Some Christian apologists suggested that Mary's virginity arises from Sura 3:31/36. It was doubted that the Quran talks about the birth of Jesus from a virgin, without a humanly father. Some Christians and modern Muslims, who doubted the birth from a virgin due to scientific or historical reasons, tried to give a more natural interpretation to the words in the Quran and the Bible.

Older commentators considered that Jesus 'was born without a father'. Baidawi believe that the angels who addressed themselves to Mary represented a spontaneous miracle in her honour, although he admitted that even then there were some who denied the doctrine about spontaneous miracles, and others affirmed that the angels put those words in her mind (Parrinder 2003, 72).

Although the birth from a virgin was accepted, this situation did not confer Jesus priority over the other prophets, because such a rank does not only depend on his birth. Zwemer quoted the modern Muslim teachers, who said that 'His birth from a virgin does not prove his superiority', because 'Adam did not have a mother or a father and in this regard he was superior to Jesus'.

Ibn Ishaq suggests that this idea was discussed during the time of the prophets, together with the Christians from Najran and Abyssinia:

Jesus was conceived in a womb – they cannot deny this- just like any other son of Abraham... God made him through His spirit and breath... Although it is stated that Jesus was conceived without man's interference, I created Adam from dust, using the same power, without a man or a woman and Adam was created in the same way as Jesus : body and soul with hair and skin. Jesus' conception without a man is is by far more wonderful than Adam's creation. (Ata ur-Rahim 1987,102)

Some modern Muslim writers claim that the Quran contains no teaching about the birth from a virgin. Others, such as Maulana Azad, believe that, despite a rationalization, taking into consideration the context, the fact must be admitted that this dogma is accepted by the Quran (Parrinder 2003, 73).

If the whole Quran narrative can be interpreted as talking about the birth from a virgin or a natural one, is debatable. One more aspect must be mentioned here, the Quran denies again and again the fact that God gives birth or takes on posterity. One of the favourite verses is the one from sura 112, '*He did not give birth, nor was He born*'. And many times we read, '*He is far above having a son*'.

We must also observe here that the Quran is totally opposed to the notion of God's physical birth. Definitely, this was in contrast with the way in which pagans attributed wives and children to their deity (Ata ur-Rahim 1987, 103).

A similar objection seems to be reflected upon in the Book of Jacob. Mary told to herself:

Shall I conceive from God, and shall I give birth just as other women?" And the angel answered "Not like this Mary, for the power of the Lord will overshadow you; therefore he who is born of you shall be called the Son of the Mightiest.

The term 'Son' is used in a technical sense, but the passage seems to show that no seed from above was put into the woman, but the power of God had put it into shade (Jeffrey 2007, 213). So, the Quran proclaims the divine decision through the expression 'Let there be', without mentioning if the birth will take place in a natural way.

The birth

Sūra 19 continues with a rendering of the birth of Jesus.

22. So she carried him, and secluded herself with him in a remote place. 23. The labor-pains came upon her, by the trunk of a palm-tree. She said, “I wish I had died before this, and been completely forgotten.” 24. Whereupon he called her from beneath her: “Do not worry; your Lord has placed a stream beneath you. 25. And shake the trunk of the palm-tree towards you, and it will drop ripe dates by you.” 26. “So eat, and drink, and be consoled. And if you see any human, say, ‘I have vowed a fast to the Most Gracious, so I will not speak to any human today.’” 27. Then she came to her people, carrying him. They said, “O Mary, you have done something terrible. 28. O sister of Aaron, your father was not an evil man, and your mother was not a whore.” 29. So she pointed to him. They said, “How can we speak to an infant in the crib?” 30. He said, “I am the servant of God. He has given me the Scripture, and made me a prophet. 31. And has made me blessed wherever I may be; and has enjoined on me prayer and charity, so long as I live. 32. And kind to my mother, and He did not make me a disobedient rebel. 33. So Peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the Day I get resurrected alive.”

There are some connections here with the Canonical Gospel, although perhaps more with the apocryphal. The withdrawal in a ‘far away place’ was taken to make reference to Mary’s travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which was a town although the baby was put in a ‘manger’. A modern Muslim commentator says:

We can assume that giving the news and the conception took place in Bethlehem. It was a distant place, not only referring to the 71 miles away from Nazareth, but also because the birth took place in Bethlehem in a dark corner, under a palm tree, from where the baby was probably taken to a manger from a stable.

Some writers saw in the ‘height with a safe living and a spring’ one of the places on the way during the Flight of Jesus’ parents with their child in Egypt.

Another Muslim tradition situated Mary’s tree on a hill close to Damascus. The story of Agar and Ishmael comes to our minds. Mary’s agony cries are pretty natural, although some youthful Muslim mystics have made curious reflections upon Mary’s deadly danger before abandoning herself again to God, as she had done before (Parrinder 2003, 76)

The meaning of the expression ‘he called her from her beneath’ was disputed and the reading is confusing. Some considered it as an angelic voice, like in Agar’s story, probably the angel Gabriel, sitting at the foot of the mountain, while others thought it was Baby Jesus. Some exegetes believed that Jesus talked to his mother before birth and they supposed that the word ‘beneath’ could not have here his common Arab meaning and that it must be a foreign word meaning ‘venter’ (Jeffrey 2007, 32).

In the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, a Latin writing, maybe compiled about the 8th century, although containing an older material, says that during the flight to Egypt Mary sat under the palm tree and craved its fruits. Joseph was much more worried about the lack of water. Jesus, in the arms of Mary, told the tree to bow and give his mother some of its fruits and the tree listened. Then, she told the tree to lift and give a little from the water hidden under its root and a spring stepped out and they drank and enjoyed themselves (Parrinder 2003, 77).

The Arab Gospel of childhood says they rested under a sycamore in Matarieh and there Jesus made a spring come out, where Mary washed his coat (Ata ur-Rahim 1987, 105). The sycamore from Matarieh, Heliopolis, is one of the four sides of the Flight revered in Egypt by Christians and Muslims and it is said to have transformed Egypt into a land of peace, but

today's sycamore replaced a palm tree in the 17th century. Tabari claims that Mary's tree was a dry palm tree, whose leaves fell down and whose branches were torn. He says that others claimed that in the temple there was a pillar of a palm tree which supported the building and that Mary leant upon this pillar, but he advocates that the other story according to which Mary gave birth outside the city is more comfortable for the Quran. E.F.F. Bishop suggests that the 'streamlet' or the 'runlet' was Pilat's aqueduct in Betlehem (Parrinder 2003, 83)

Mary is told to swear a fast to the merciful al-Rahman, one of the favourite Quranic names for God and apparently pre-islamic, possible christian, but incorporated in the new faith and taking place 56 times in the Quran, apart from its use in the Bismillah heading of each sura. This thing can be compared with the phrase from Mary's song, the Magnificent, 'God, my Saviour' (Luca 1:47) (Parrinder 2003, 78). The commentators explain that the 'fast' also meant that she had to refuse human conversation on the pretext of her vow made to god. It doesn't mean abstinence from food and drinks, as Mary was told to eat dates and drink from the river. This is the only mention about fast in the Meccan sura.

When Mary returned home with the baby she was accused of immorality. This can be compared to Joseph's hesitation, 'who did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly' (Matthew 1:19) There were discussions about the phrase 'Aaron's sister' (ukht Harun). Some consider that the phrase refers to a descendant of Aaron because the term ukht doesn't limit to a close blood relationship and Mary was Levit blooded. Others consider the phrase as a confusion sign with Miriam, who was Aaron's sister. However, others consider it as a kunya, a nickname or an epithet from Miriam, the famous ancestor of Mary.

The baby talking 'in the cradle' is mentioned in 3,41/46;5,109/110; ši 19,30/29. The traditions and older commentators took it literally. Baidawi said that even when he was a baby, but also when he was an adult, Jesus spoke in the prophet's language without variation. He even added that when Mary was little she also spoke like Jesus did later. Another tradition says that 11 children spoke in their cradles, although a contradictory commentary said that Jesus was the only one who did this because He was Mahdi, 'the guided', who spoke in his cradle (Ata ur-Rahim 1987, 112)

Ibn Ishāq said that Christians in Najran who came to see Mohammed discussed about the fact that Jesus 'spoke from his cradle and this was something that no other child of Adam had ever done' (Yusuf 1989, 1225). The only apocryphal reference seems to be the transcriber note from the beginning of the Arab Infantile Gospel, which says:

While being in a cradle, Jesus spoke and told his mother, "I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Word, whom you have given birth as the angel Gabriel informed you."
The modern editor remarks that this anecdote must have been quite early among Arab Christians

However, modern commentators tend to interpret these sayings as applied to Jesus at an older age, but still when he was a minor. It is said that old and educated Jews talked about a boy as a simple boy in a cradle and would not like to address to someone who is so young. Yusuf 'Ali tries to accept both possibilities, saying that the baby Jesus came through a miracle, defended His mother and preached to an incredible mass of people; then he quotes the words of the Gospel that say that Jesus grew in wisdom and in God's and men's pleasure and had disputed with the old men from the temple. Undoubtedly, the most satisfying parallel is the Gospel story of baby Jesus going with His parents to Jerusalem, asking questions to the teachers and saying: 'Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?' (Luke 2:49). The Gospel says that Jesus was 12 and he was still a minor. At 13 a Jew boy reaches his religious maturity and becomes a 'son of the command' (bar mitzvah) and from now on able to praise the law through songs and read the lesson in the synagogue service.

Conclusion

Truly the study of this subject can be a starting point in the dialogue between Christianity and Islamism. Both parts agree with the fact that the birth of Jesus was a miracle. Mary was a virgin before being pregnant, aspect that was humanly impossible. Both parts do not agree on other aspects that are less essential and important (the place, what Mary and Jesus did at the moment of birth), but the essential aspects are similar.

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