

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### WHAT DO WE EACH BELIEVE ABOUT THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY?

#### *Introduction*

The topic of the next several chapters—the identity of Jesus and the meaning of his mission—will put our patience and forbearance to the test. The problem for us is that while the Qur’an never looks at Jesus with anything less than admiration, it most emphatically does not view Jesus as God’s son. We Christians might feel more comfortable if the Qur’an had ignored Jesus altogether or even if it had spoken disparagingly about him. Then, at least, we could mount a vigorous defense of him. But to see Jesus honored as a prophet and as a prophet only is to find ourselves in a position of rivalry with Islam. Christians and Muslims cannot both be correct about Jesus.

Does that fact, however, necessarily mean that the mistaken party’s love of Jesus (and of course we Christians identify the mistaken party with Muslims) is worthless or even a form of dishonor to him? For centuries our Christian ancestors thought so. To them, Islam—which they called “Muhammadanism”—was a heresy originated by Muhammad himself and stubbornly perpetuated by subsequent Muslim generations. The Qur’an’s refusal to accept Jesus as Son of God seemed to earlier Christians an unforgivable act of defiance, while the Qur’an’s

honoring of Jesus merely as a prophet seemed an unwelcome tribute, even a form of mockery.

We Catholic Christians face a parallel difficulty in talking with Muslims about Mary. As in the question of Jesus' divinity, we find ourselves in a position of rivalry. Muslims eagerly point out that they love Mary also and that she is actually mentioned more often in the Qur'an than she is in the Gospels. One whole *sura* of the Qur'an bears her name—an honor given to no other woman. In fact, she is the only woman whose name actually occurs in the Qur'an. And she is honored above all women by being selected by God to bear a son through the Holy Spirit. The Virgin Birth is as much a Muslim belief as it is a Christian one. Yet the son to whom she gives birth is a prophet, not God.

Even though Vatican II overturned the church's centuries-old denunciation of Islam, we are still uneasy about how to talk with Muslims about Jesus and Mary. Talk we must, however, because belief in Jesus' divinity is central to our Christian faith, while belief in Jesus as prophet is incumbent on every Muslim. Yet here we meet a perplexing asymmetry. Muslims don't share our need to talk about Jesus. Jesus is for them one of the great prophets, to be sure. Yet Muslim faith in God does not revolve around Jesus. Muslim faith revolves around the prophet whose advent the Qur'an says Jesus predicted, the prophet Muhammad himself. It is hard for us to accept a situation where Jesus is a subordinate figure, though an honored one. And because Jesus plays a subordinate role, Mary does too—despite all the special honor given to her in the Qur'an.

We Catholic Christians, in our conversations with Muslims about Jesus and Mary, face the task of restraining our competitive instincts and of listening to what Muslims have to say. Are our imaginations free enough to allow us to see Jesus and Mary through Muslim eyes? We have at least grown beyond the church's previous suspicion that Muslims are in any way mocking the Blessed Mother and her Son.

*The Texts*

THE BIBLE

Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

THE QUR'AN

*sura imran* "Imran" 3:35–38, 42–51

<sup>3:35</sup>Behold! The wife of Imran, Mary's mother-to-be, said, "O my Cherisher and Sustainer, I solemnly vow to dedicate to your service the child now in my womb. I ask you to accept this offering, for you hear all things, you know all things." <sup>3:36</sup>Afterward, when she had been delivered of the child, she said, "O my Cherisher and Sustainer, I have brought forth a female child!" Of course God knew very well the child's gender. "Yet," she said, "isn't a

female child just as acceptable to you as a male child?" I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her own children to your protection from Satan the deceiver."

<sup>3:37</sup>God was most pleased to receive the child from her mother. He caused the child to flourish in purity and beauty and gave her over to the care of Zechariah.

<sup>3:38</sup>Each time that Zechariah came to visit Mary in her chamber, he found her supplied with all kinds of provisions. He said, "O Mary, where do these bounties come from?" She answered, "They are from God. For God lavishes bounty on whomever he pleases." <sup>3:39</sup>Right then and there Zechariah prayed to God, "O my Cherisher and Sustainer, grant me as well a child that is pure. For you hear and answer our prayers...."

<sup>3:42</sup>Behold! The angels said, "O Mary, know that God has preferred you and has purified you—choosing you from among the women of all the worlds. <sup>3:43</sup>O Mary, be faithful to your Cherisher and Sustainer. Bow down to the ground and to the waist along with those who do the same."

<sup>3:44</sup>This, O Muhammad, is taken from the prophecies of hidden things which we grant to you through inspiration. For you were not there with the priests as they cast lots with their arrowshafts to see who among them would win the privilege of caring for Mary. Nor were you with them when they wrangled over the honor.

<sup>3:45</sup>Behold! The angels said, "O Mary, know that God has brought glad tidings to you of a Word from him. The child's name shall be 'Isa the Messiah, the son of Mary, a prophet honored in this world and the world to come, and one of those closest to God. <sup>3:46</sup>He shall speak to humankind from infancy to his years of maturity, and he shall be counted among the righteous."

<sup>3:47</sup>She said in reply, "O my Cherisher and Sustainer, how can it happen that I should bear a son when no man has ever touched me?" Then he said, "Like this—God creates whatever he

wills. When God gives a command, all he has to do is say 'Be!'—and it is!"

*sura maryam* "Mary" 19:16–21

<sup>19:16</sup>Remember what it says in the Book how Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a private eastern space to the east, <sup>19:17</sup>how she placed a screen to protect herself from intrusion and we sent down to her our own Spirit who appeared before her as a man in every way. <sup>19:18</sup>She said, "I seek protection against you from the most gracious God. You will not harm me if you have respect for God."

<sup>19:19</sup>He said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. I am only a messenger from your Cherisher and Sustainer, bringing you news that you will bear a pure son."

<sup>19:20</sup>She said in reply, "How can I bear a son when no man has ever touched me? And when I am not unchaste?"

<sup>19:21</sup>He answered, "Like this—Your Cherisher and Sustainer says, 'This is easy for me. For our intention is to make him a Sign to humankind and a Mercy from us. It is a matter ordained.'"

*sura al-tahrim* "Prohibition" 66:12

<sup>66:12</sup>And another example of those who believe was Mary, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity—she is the one into whom we breathed our Spirit, and she upheld the truth of the Word and of the Revelations of her Cherisher and Sustainer and so she is numbered among the Devout ones."

## GUIDED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Do Muslims honor Mary more than we do?*

This may seem an almost offensive question to ask, but consider the facts. In Luke's account, Mary comes from a poor peasant village in Galilee. By contrast, the Qur'an raises Mary's social status by treating her as a consecrated virgin and by turning her into the special ward of the prophet Zechariah, here seen not as

an obscure Galilean figure but as a powerful member of the temple clergy.

Should we be offended by such a retelling of “our” story, even though by means of it the honor given Mary is increased?

*2. Is Joseph’s absence from Jesus’ and Mary’s story a slight? Or is it another honor given Mary—and Jesus too?*

Joseph is notable in the Qur’an by his absence.

Should we Christians take offense at his erasure from the Holy Family? Or should we see his absence as Muslims do, as a way of protecting Mary’s honor from the rumor of fraud and adultery?

*3. Is Mary the same person in Luke’s and in the Qur’an’s account of the Annunciation?*

Aside from her different social status in the two accounts, Mary in Luke and Mary in the Qur’an seem to be the same person. In both scriptures she is a virgin singled out for a unique divine intervention. She reacts to this news in approximately the same way, first with wonder and concern and then with acquiescence. (The acquiescence is directly stated in Luke; it is implied in the Qur’an.)

Yet if Mary’s identity is indelibly shaped by the son she bears, how can it be the same person who bears a prophet—however miraculously—and the Son of God (Luke 1:35)? How does she become different as a result of Luke’s and the Qur’an’s statements about the identity of her son?

CHAPTER EIGHT  
WHAT DO WE EACH BELIEVE ABOUT THE  
BIRTH OF JESUS?

*Introduction*

If we Christians feel uneasy about the Qur'an's account of Jesus' birth and of its immediate aftermath, we should remember that Muslims will probably be feeling equally uneasy about the biblical account of the "same" events. The only solution is to listen in patience to what the other has to say. Such patience will be particularly difficult for Christians since the Qur'an explicitly singles Christians out for chastisement. What we regard as the central meaning of Jesus' birth—that through it God became human—is looked at by the Qur'an as an act of idolatry (see the following *sura maryam* 19:34–37)! Can our Christian patience receive such a blow without snapping?

An angry or even a dismissive reaction on our part to the Qur'anic chastisement might cause us to look with suspicion at the entire account of Jesus' birth as the Qur'an tells it. Mary's flight all alone into what seems to be the Arabian desert, the voice speaking to her from beneath the palm tree, and, later, the newly born Jesus' defense of his mother before the townspeople—these events may seem simply absurd, even offensive,

like magical happenings in a fairy tale. Yet Matthew's and Luke's renderings of the story contain elements that could uncharitably be called fabulous as well. Consider the star standing still over Bethlehem, for example, or even the appearance of the Magi seemingly out of nowhere. And if we complain that the Qur'an tells the story of Jesus' birth very differently from the way Matthew and Luke tell it, we have to acknowledge that Matthew's and Luke's accounts do not agree on details. For example, Jesus according to Matthew is born in a house; according to Luke he is born in a stable. This difference as well as others suggest that various versions of the story of Jesus' birth arose in the early tradition. The New Testament and the Qur'an simply reflect this variety.

As for the Qur'anic account itself, a calm appraisal reveals that, different as it might be from the New Testament accounts, it still manages to treat mother and child with the utmost respect. Mary's flight into what seems to be a harsh and lonely landscape (reminiscent of the barren areas in the Arabian desert) is seen as a natural if desperate reaction by a girl who is pregnant and without a husband. Fear of scandal and of capital punishment drive her forth from her sanctuary; in Luke's account it is the Roman census that sends her forth. (Fear of scandal and its consequences play a larger role in Matthew's account; see Matthew 1:18-25.) Once strengthened by the angelic voice, Mary assumes a new tone of authority. Unsupported and unprotected by males, she stands forth ready to defend herself from them, should they besiege her. She apparently gives birth to her child all by herself. Hardly a picture of female weakness!

The infant Jesus' defense of her before the townspeople has its own power and point, once we get over its strangeness. Instead of directly answering the townspeople's implied accusa-

tion that his mother is a fornicator and that he himself is illegitimate, Jesus calmly asserts his full adult identity, as if his life had already been lived in advance. Evidently this was enough to stifle the accusation, to protect his mother from disgrace and punishment and to clarify his own role as a prophet uniquely created by God.

But what is perhaps most curious about the infant Jesus' speech to the townspeople is that it sets up a parallel with the proclamation in Luke. Both Luke and the Qur'an speak with wonder of Jesus' birth by a virgin. Where they differ is that in the New Testament the angels, the heavens and the shepherds all testify to the infant Jesus' glory, while in the Qur'an it is the infant Jesus who testifies—to his mother's chastity, as validated by his own prophetic destiny.

*The Texts*

THE BIBLE

Luke 2:3–20

All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a

Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

#### THE QUR’AN

##### *sura maryam* “Mary” 19:22–37

<sup>19:22</sup>So Mary conceived ‘Isa. Then she withdrew once more to an even more remote place. <sup>19:23</sup>Her birth-pangs brought her to the shade of a date palm tree. She cried out, “Oh, how much better if I had died before this. How much better to be a thing lost and forgotten.” <sup>19:24</sup>Just then a voice cried out from beneath the palm tree, “Don’t despair, Mary, for your Cherisher and Sustainer has made a stream flow at your feet. <sup>19:25</sup>And shake loose some dates from the palm tree. <sup>19:26</sup>It will drop fresh ripe dates down for you. Eat and drink and refresh yourself. And if you see any male stranger, say, ‘I have made a vow to the Merciful One to undergo a fast. Nor shall I speak this day to any human being.’”

<sup>19:27</sup>Once ‘Isa was born, Mary brought him to her people, carrying the babe in her arms. The townspeople said, “Oh Mary, what a strange thing you’ve brought home! <sup>19:28</sup>Oh daughter of

Aaron, your father never chased after prostitutes, nor was your mother a whore.”<sup>19:29</sup> But instead of defending herself, Mary pointed at her child. The townspeople said, “How are we supposed to talk with a child in a cradle?”<sup>19:30</sup> But the child spoke up. “Hear this,” he said. “I am a servant of God. God has given me his message and has made me a prophet.<sup>19:31</sup> He has made me blessed wherever I go, and he has commanded me to be faithful to prayer and almsgiving as long as I live.<sup>19:32</sup> He has made me gentle and just with my mother, neither bossy nor irritable.<sup>19:33</sup> So peace [*salaam*] is with me from the day of my birth to the day of my death till the day I shall be raised to life.”

<sup>19:34</sup>Such a man was ‘Isa, son of Mary. This is the truth, about which the various Christian sects vainly dispute.<sup>19:35</sup> For it is not fitting that God should beget a son. Glory to God! When God decrees a matter, he only has to say of it, “Be!”—and it exists.<sup>19:36</sup> Remember that God is my Cherisher and Sustainer and yours as well. So worship him and him alone.<sup>19:37</sup> But the Christian sects differ rancorously among each other. Woe to the unbelievers at the Reckoning on that Terrible Day!

### GUIDED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Is the voice from beneath the palm tree magical or angelic?*

Christian readers need to come to their own conclusions about Mary’s second “withdrawal,” this time into the desert.

Does the voice that comforts Mary in the Qur’anic account trivialize the event by seeming to turn it into a tall tale? Or is this voice meant to express heaven and earth’s approval of Mary? If so, what are they approving her for? And how are the qualities referred to or suggested in this *sura* like and unlike the qualities displayed by Luke’s account of Mary?