

Religious history

4.1 Al-Ṭarafi on Mary, the mother of Jesus

The stories of the prophets were available in many different versions in the classical Muslim world but all served essentially the same purpose. They were designed to fill in the gaps in the Qur'ānic rendition of the stories, so it would not be necessary for Muslims to refer to the Bible or to ask Jews and Christians for clarification of the stories. Al-Ṭarafi provides one such version. Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafi was born in 387/997 in Cordova. Little is known of him other than that he was a religious scholar, especially devoted to the study of variant readings of the Qur'ān about which he wrote two books. He was famous among his contemporaries for his memory. He died in 454/1062.

Al-Ṭarafi's account of Mary and Jesus may be compared with those presented by al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'labī and al-Kisā'ī (all of which are available in translation): al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Cairo n.d., pp. 342–4, Arthur Jeffery (trans.), 'A prophet story,' in his *A reader on Islam*, S-Gravenhage 1962, pp. 560–9, al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden 1879–1901, vol. 1, pp. 723–8, Moshe Perlmann (trans.), *The history of al-Ṭabarī, volume IV: the ancient kingdoms*, Albany NY 1987, pp. 112–16, al-Kisā'ī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. I. Eisenberg, Leiden 1922–3, pp. 301–4, and W. M. Thackston Jr. (trans.), *The tales of the prophets of al-Kisa'i*, Boston 1978, pp. 326–30.

Al-Ṭarafi's stories are consistently exegetical, incorporating glosses of the Qur'ānic text, even to the extent that they can interrupt the flow of the narrative. The account of Mary and Jesus is extensively treated in the Qur'ān (as in section 1.6 above; it is also found in Q 3), which means that the storyteller's account is more frequently and obviously punctuated by scriptural reference. This feature is reinforced by the fact that the overall book is structured not according to the history of the prophets, but according to the exegetical usefulness of the

characters: the twenty-four prophets named in the Qur'ān are dealt with first, followed by seven alluded to in scripture. Also notable is that there is little concern for the formalities of the *isnād*, with attributions such as 'some exegetes say' seeming sufficient.

Further reading

- Loren D. Lybarger, 'Gender and prophetic authority in the Qur'ānic story of Maryam: a literary approach,' *Journal of Religion*, 80 (2000), pp. 240–70; analysis of the Qur'ānic story.
- Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Chosen of all women: Mary and Fāṭima in Qur'ānic exegesis,' *Islamochristiana*, 7 (1981), pp. 19–28.
- Jane I. Smith, Yvonne Y. Haddad, 'The Virgin Mary in Islamic tradition and commentary,' *The Muslim world*, 79 (1989), pp. 161–87.
- Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, traditions, and interpretation*, New York 1994, pp. 67–82.
- Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim literature*, Richmond 2002, pp. 155–7.
- 'The *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (d. 454/1062): stories of the prophets from al-Andalus,' *Al-Qanṭara*, 19 (1998), pp. 131–60.

Source text

Roberto Tottoli, 'Le *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* di Ṭarafī,' PhD thesis, Naples 1996, pp. 330–6; Tottoli's edition of the Arabic text with notes and introduction in English is available in Klaus Schwarz Verlag's series *Islamkundliche Untersuchungen* 2003. Tottoli has also published his Italian translation of al-Ṭarafī: Roberto Tottoli (trans.), *Al-Ṭarafī: storie dei profeti*, Genoa 1997.

The story of the birth of Jesus

1. *The angels said, 'O Mary, God has selected you', that is chosen you, and purified you, that is, from menstruation and the blemishes which are a part of the nature of all women, and chosen you above all women of the world (Q 3/42), that is, chosen you for Jesus. No other woman in the world carried the like of Jesus.*
2. It is said, He chose you over all women in the world during your time because of your obedience to Him.
3. It is related that the messenger of God said that the best of women was Mary, daughter of 'Imrān, and another was Khadīja daughter of Khuwaylid, that is, the best of the women of paradise. It is also related from him according to Anas ibn Mālīk that he said that the best women of the world were four in number: Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, Āsiya [the wife of Pharaoh], the daughter of Muzāḥim, Khadīja, the daughter of Khuwaylid, and Fāṭima, the daughter of Muḥammad.

4. Then God said to her, *O Mary, be dedicated to your Lord, prostrate and bow along with those who bow* (Q 3/43). She did not cease being in her state of dedication until her feet became swollen and pus began to flow from them because of the length of time she had been standing. When God intended to announce the birth of Jesus to Mary, He discovered that she had separated herself from her people and withdrawn from them to a place in the east where the sun did not set. That is in accord with the saying of God, *Mention in the book Mary, when she withdrew from her people to a place facing east* (Q 19/16).
5. Ibn ‘Abbās used to say that he knew best why the Christians have their *qibla* facing east; it is because of God’s saying, *she withdrew from her people to a place facing east* (Q 19/16). So they took the birthplace of Jesus as their *qibla*. It is said that Mary went to the place close to the rising of the sun because what was close in the east was, for them, better than what was close in the west.
6. *She took a veil apart from them* (Q 19/17), that is, a screen of palm-leaf stalks or a veil to protect her from the sun. *So We sent to her Our spirit*, who was Gabriel, *who presented himself to her as a man without faults* (Q 19/17). That was after she had purified herself from her menstruation. She saw that, with her, there was a man who was perfect. She was afraid that he would want her. She said, ‘I seek refuge with God from your getting from me what God has forbidden for you, *if you fear God!*’ (Q 19/18), that is, if you have a fear of God, you will fear what He has forbidden and you will avoid those sins. Whoever is fearful of God avoids that. During this time she thought that he was a male human being. So Gabriel said to her, ‘*I am a messenger from your Lord, to give you a boy, pure*’ (Q 19/19). Mary said to him, ‘How can it be that I will have a child? Who is my spouse? Am I to be married so that I may be blessed with him? Or does God intend to create him afresh since *no mortal has touched me*’ (Q 19/20), that is, a human creation by legal marriage? ‘*Nor have I been unchaste*’ (Q 19/20), that is, a fornicator such that I would become pregnant as the result of an illicit relationship. Gabriel replied to her that, *It shall be so! Your Lord has said, ‘It is easy for Me’* (Q 19/21). It is not difficult for Him to create him and grant him to you without a man to impregnate you. *We have appointed him as a sign to the people* (Q 19/21), that is, as a symbol and a proof of my creating him, *and a mercy from Us* (Q 19/21), to you and to those who believe in him and declare the truth of his breath in you. *It is a thing decreed* (Q 19/21); God decreed it and decreed it in His judgement and His prior knowledge. So God blew into her with His spirit and she became pregnant with Jesus. It is also reported that Gabriel blew into the opening of her cloak such that the breath went into her womb. He then departed from her.
7. Al-Suddī said that Mary went out wearing a robe, so Gabriel took her by her sleeves and breathed into the opening of her cloak such that it opened in the front and his breath entered her chest. So she became pregnant. Her sister, the wife of Zechariah, came to her one night to visit. When she opened the door, she clung to her. The wife of Zechariah said, ‘Mary, look, I am pregnant!’ Mary replied, ‘I am pregnant too!’ The wife of Zechariah said, ‘I feel the baby in my belly bowing down to the child in your belly.’ That is the meaning of the saying of God, *Confirming a word from God, noble* (Q 3/39).

8. Some of the exegetes say that Mary's nephew, Joseph by name, was with her in the temple (*mihrāb*). He used to serve her and speak to her from behind a veil. He was the first one to learn about her pregnancy. He was disturbed by that, not understanding how it came about. Her state distracted him from everything else. He was a wise man, devoted to God, and Mary had always drawn her veil over herself when he was with her. When their stock of water was depleted, the two of them would take their cups to the cave in which there was water and fill their cups and then return. He used to hear the angels informing Mary that God had chosen her and purified her; he was amazed at what he heard. When her pregnancy became clear to him, he remembered the merits which God had bestowed on her and that Zechariah had protected her in the temple. Satan had no way in which to reach her, yet his mind was unsettled. He thought of him with her while her belly grew and he feared that sin had occurred. So, one day, he turned to her and said, 'Mary, does a plant grow without a seed?' She replied, 'Yes.' He said, 'So, does a tree grow without rain falling on it?' 'Certainly,' she replied. Joseph said, 'Can there be a child without a man involved?' 'Yes,' she said, 'Do you not know that God caused the plant to grow on the day He created it without a seed? Do you not know that God caused the tree to grow without rain and by His decree made rain give life to trees only after He had created each one of them separately? Or do you say that God is unable to make the tree grow until He has sought the aid of the water and, if it had not been for that water, He would have been unable to make it grow?' Joseph replied, 'No, I do not say this, but I know that God is able to do what He wishes. He says to something "Be!" and it is.' So Mary said to him, 'Do you not know that God created Adam and his wife, Eve, without a man and a woman?' 'Certainly,' Joseph replied. When she said that to him, he realized for himself that her child was something from God and it was inappropriate for him to question her about it. That was when he realized that she was concealing her situation.

9. When her labour pains became severe, she was called to, 'Leave the temple.' So she left and went far away from the sacred house. While she was walking, the pains came upon her and she took refuge in a donkey's manger built around a palm-tree, which she hugged. The angels surrounded her, encompassing her in ranks, encircling her. So, *She said, 'I wished I had died before this happened'* (Q 19/23) today, and I felt ashamed in front of the people. *'And had become a thing forgotten'* (Q 19/23), that is, that I am like something forgotten whose request and memory has been neglected. So Gabriel called out to her, *But he who was below her called to her, 'No, do not sorrow; see, your Lord has set below you a stream'* (Q 19/24), that is, a creek. She was thirsty and a river was caused to flow towards her out of the ground. The dry tree stump which was among the palms started to bear fruit even though over time it had lost all its leaves because of dryness. The fruit matured into *fresh, ripe fruit* (Q 19/25), that is, juicy and succulent. So Gabriel called to her, *'Shake the palm-trunk towards you and fresh, ripe fruit will tumble down on you'* (Q 19/25) and *eat from this palm-tree and drink from this river and be comforted'* (Q 19/26). She said, 'What should I say when they ask me, "Where did this come from?"?' Gabriel said to her, *Say, 'I have vowed a fast to the All-merciful'* (Q 19/26), that is, be silent

about the matter of Jesus. *'And today I will not speak to any human being'* (Q 19/26) about him until he who comes forth from me is disclosed.

10. When the people could not find Mary in the temple, they went out looking for her. They heard the cry of a magpie from the top of the palm-tree under which Mary had been lying. Mary saw her people coming towards her as they hurried towards the magpie, so she took her child out to them. That is His saying, *Then she brought him to her folk, carrying him* (Q 19/27), because she was not suspicious of them. One of her nephews, whom she had named, came to her and they said to him, 'Mary has become pregnant as a result of fornication! Now the king will kill her!' So he went to her and took her and escaped with her. When he had travelled some distance, he intended to kill her but Gabriel told him that the child was from the holy spirit, so he held back from doing that and stayed with her.
11. When they saw her, her father 'Imrān rent his cloak and covered his head with dust. They said to her, *'Mary, you have surely committed an improper thing!'* (Q 19/27), that is, you have done a strange thing and provoked a great occurrence. They then said to her, *'Sister of Aaron'* (Q 19/28). This Aaron, to whom Mary was compared, was a righteous man; they used to name every righteous man Aaron. It is mentioned in the works of exegesis regarding this Aaron that 40,000 people escorted his funeral procession, all of them named Aaron. The family of Mary said to her, 'O rembler of Aaron in righteousness which we used to see from him in you, *Your father*, that is, 'Imrān, *was not an impure man*, committing impure acts, *nor was your mother an unchaste woman* (Q 19/28), that is, a fornicator who should be censured; that is, your parents were righteous and your people are righteous and you desire righteousness in such a way that you are excellent like Aaron the righteous man. So how can you be involved in this severe matter?'
12. Their censure of her increased and her ability to withstand it lessened, such that *she pointed to him* (Q 19/29), that is, to Jesus, indicating that they should speak to him. So they said to her, *'How can we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a child?'* (Q 19/29). The like of Jesus had not been known before and his ability to speak had not begun, so they thought that Mary was mocking them. That angered them substantially and they said, 'You were making fun of us when you suggested that we speak to this child; that makes your fornication even more significant a matter to us!' Then, at that moment, Jesus leaned over on to his left side and pointed with his finger, speaking about his mother and making clear his status, saying, *'Lo, I am God's servant; God has given me the book, and has made me a prophet. He has made me blessed, wherever I may be'* (Q 19/30–1), that is, He ordained it for me when I was in the belly of my mother.