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The Qur'an's Cultic Trinity: Marian Piety in Late Antiquity and the Qur'an

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"No one has ever claimed to sacrifice except to that Being whom he knew or thought or pretended to be God."[1] ---Augustine of Hippo (d. 430)

"There is no commandment to <offer> the Eucharist even to a man, <as though> to God, let alone to a woman."[2]---Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403)

"My Master, the Christ Whom I have in heaven, bless the land in which my offerings are made."[3]---Mary, in *Transitus Mariae* (5th-6th cent.)

Introduction

The Qur'an's fifth sura (*al-Māʾidah*), dated generally to the last years of the Prophet Muhammad's life (*ca.* 630),[4] suggests somewhat puzzlingly that some Christians divinized Mary.[5] Specifically, after criticizing "those who say 'Allāh is Christ'" (v. 72) and "those who say 'Allāh is one of three'" (v. 73), the surah declares that Christ was only "a messenger" (*rasūl*) and his mother "a righteous woman" (*ṣiddīqah*), both of whom "used to eat food" (v. 75).[6] More explicitly, at the end of the surah, and immediately after recounting what seems to be the Qur'an's version of the institution of Eucharist (vv. 112–15), God asks Jesus if he had commanded people to "take me and my mother as two gods (*ilāhayn*) besides Allāh" (v. 116). The qur'anic Jesus rejects this charge categorically: "if I had said it, you would have surely

* I am grateful to Cornelia Horn, Gabriel Reynolds, and *JLA*'s anonymous reviewers for their comments on different versions of this essay. Translations of the Qur'an are my own but are largely based on those of Ali Quli Qarai.

[1] Augustine, *City of God*, X.4, 122.

[2] Frank Williams (tr.), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Books II and III.* De Fide, second ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 643; angle brackets contain conjectural readings by Karl Holl, the editor of the Greek text.

[3] Smith Lewish, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, 57; translation slightly amended.

[4] Cuypers 2009, 481–87.

[5] I translate *Allāh* as God except when it appears in the context of discussing other beings that are potentially considered as deities in their own right.

[6] On this reference to eating, see the rich discussion in Tatari and von Stosch 2021, 210–17.

known it!" Since Jesus denies having asked his followers to "take me and my mother as two gods besides Allāh," the implication is that some of his followers did take them as gods and perhaps claimed that in doing so they were following a teaching of Jesus himself.

That post-Nicene Christians considered Christ divine accords with historical reality, although the precise relationship between his humanity and his divinity were fiercely debated. However, the suggestion that Mary was divinized next to Christ is difficult to explain in the light of Christian doctrine. As far as we know, all Christian groups of Late Antiquity viewed the Holy Spirit, and not Mary, as the third person of the Trinity. Why, then, do the above-cited passages from the fifth surah claim that Mary was divinized? And why does no qur'anic text criticize the inclusion of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity?

This study argues that answers to these questions may be found by attention to the realms of worship and liturgy rather than official theology. The Qur'an speaks of the divinization of Mary, and conversely makes no reference to that of the Holy Spirit, probably because it was referring primarily to the practical worship of its Christian interlocutors, not their abstract dogma. Many Christian communities of the Late Antique Near East endowed Mary with an elaborate cult and made her a central recipient of religious devotion, by constructing churches and monasteries in her honor, bringing offerings to these churches and monasteries, celebrating feast days to commemorate different moments of her life, performing the Eucharist on these feasts, making use of Marian icons, seeking her intercession, and believing in her miraculous protection—a complex of activities that could be seen as *de facto* divinization of Mary—while the Holy Spirit occupied a less prominent role in their practical, communal piety.

The idea that the fifth surah's statements about Mary reflect Christian devotion has been proposed before. The distinct contribution of this study is threefold. First, I provide a substantive survey of some relevant aspects of Marian devotion in Late Antiquity, a survey that (as far as I know) has not been sketched before in the context of Qur'anic Studies. Second, this paper suggests that of the various acts of devotion to the Virgin, what was most susceptible to the charge of divinization was intercessory appeals coupled with the devotion of offerings (including the Eucharist), especially if Mary could be viewed as a recipient of these offerings. The fact that the fifth sura pays particular attention to rituals of worship, including the Eucharist (Q 5:112–15) treated immediately before Q 5:116, supports the idea that its statements about taking Mary as a goddess also have to do with cultic devotion. Third and finally, this study attempts to explain why the Qur'an does *not* criticize the inclusion of the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity. I show that the Holy Spirit was not a prominent object of cultic devotion in Late Antiquity and argue that this state of affairs, together with the Qur'an's

seemingly high pneumatology, can explain its reticence on the official divinization of the Holy Spirit.

Before beginning the investigation, it is worth noting that the fifth surah (*al-Māʾidah*) is the only qur'anic text that speaks of Mary's divinization. A passage in another surah accuses Christians of taking Jesus and their religious authorities as "lords" (*arbāb*) besides God (Q 9:31), without referring to Mary. Throughout, the constant and primary focus of the Qur'an's criticism of Christians is the divinization and worship of Christ (e.g., Q 3:33–92). Even in the fifth surah, the Qur'an does not impute to some Christians the charge that they "say 'Mary is a goddess'," unlike the statements made earlier in Q 5:72–73 about Jesus and the Trinity. Nevertheless, in the light of the reference to Jesus and Mary as "two gods" besides Allāh in Q 5:116, and because the fifth surah may be one of the last qur'anic proclamations and thus of especial significance for post-prophetic developments, it is worth probing why it accuses some Christians of taking not only Jesus but also Mary as a deity beside the One God.[7]

Taking Mary as a goddess

As noted above, two passages in the fifth surah suggest that some Christians divinized Mary, while the Qur'an does not criticize or even mention the Christian belief in the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Scholars have offered a number of solutions to this problem. It has been argued, for example, that the Prophet had a mistaken understanding of the Trinity,[8] that the Qur'an addressed a Jewish-Christian group who identified Mary with the Holy Spirit,[9] that the criticism targeted Christians who viewed Mary as part of a Trinity consisting of a Father, Mother, and Son,[10] or that the accusation pertained to a specific Christian group who

[7] The extent of Christian presence in the qur'anic milieu is not a central concern of this study, but it is worth noting that I do not find the Qur'an's engagement with Christianity as particularly pervasive or deep—and it is possible to locate the passages concerned with Christians in the fifth (and the third) surah as belonging to a secondary (but still prophetic) textual layer. A minor migration to Christian Ethiopia, interactions with Christian communities of South and North Arabia, contact and trade with Syria and Yemen, presence of Christian individuals in the Hijaz, and some late confrontations with the Christian Byzantine empire seem sufficient for explaining the Qur'an's references to Christians. For a recent discussion of Christian presence in the Hijaz, see Lindstedt 2023, 108–119. For the view that parts of the Qur'an reflect a heavily Christianized and non-Hijazi context, see Shoemaker 2022, 230–257 and Dye 2022.

[8] Muir 1858–1861, 2:310: "Mahomet's confused notions of the blessed Trinity and of the Holy Ghost, seem most naturally to have been received through a Jewish informant, himself imperfectly acquainted with the subject."

[9] De Blois 2002, 14–15. Cf. Parrinder 1996 [1965], 136.

[10] Crone 2015, 250–253. The exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767 CE) erroneously attributed a Trinity of Allāh, Christ, and Mary to Melchites (*Tafsīr* 1:494, *ad* Q 5:73).

worshipped Mary. Various names are provided for such a putative group, including the Maryamiyyah,[11] the Barbarāniyyah,[12] and the Collyridians (or Philomarianites).[13]

Others have argued that it would be misguided to search for an unorthodox Trinity in the world of Late Antiquity. According to Michel Cuypers, what lies behind the qur'anic statements under discussion is the idea that a divine Mary is an inevitable and absurd corollary of a divine Jesus, the reasoning being that if Jesus is divine, Mary should also be divine, for "one cannot imagine a human being begetting a divinity!"[14] Another suggestion is that Q 5:116 reflects inner-Christian polemic. According to Frank Van der Velden, in this verse the Qur'an likely wades into Christian disputes about the status of Mary and approves the East Syrian criticism of Chalcedonian Christians who had adopted and promoted the title of Theotokos ("God-bearer") for Mary.[15] Alternatively, highlighting the tumultuous political and military context of the Late Antique Near East, Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch suggest that in accusing some Christians of divinizing Mary, the Qur'an targets the promotion of Mary as a "goddess of war" in Byzantine imperial propaganda.[16]

Finally, several scholars have suggested that the qur'anic statement reflects not a doctrinal elevation of Mary to the divine realm but rather her practical veneration, an idea that is found already within Muslim polemical writings.[17] For example, according to Régis Blachère, the Qur'an may have counted Mary as part of the Trinity on account of her

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[11] The Shīʿī commentator al-Ṭūsī mentions a Christian informant who related from a certain catholicos (*jāthalīq*) the existence of a group of Christians in the past who were called "the Maryamiyyah" and considered Mary a goddess (al-Ṭūsī 4:67, *ad* Q 5:73; cited in Mohagheghian *forthcoming*).

[12] Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) refers to this group and claims that they have gone extinct (*qad bādat*). See Ibn Ḥazm 1899, 1:47–48 (cited in Mohagheghian, *forthcoming*).

[13] The heresiologist Epiphanius (d. 403) mentions this group and accuses them of divinizing the Virgin by making offerings to her, while Lenotius of Byzantium (fl. sixth cent.) seems to refer to the same group under the name Philomarianites ("Mary-lovers"); see further below. For studies that mention the Collyridians, see Parrinder 1996 [1965], 135 and Cole 2020, 631–633. Some modern Muslim writers have identified the Maryamiyyah with the Collyridians or the Philomarianites (Mohagheghian *forthcoming*).

[14] Cuypers 2009, 432. See similarly Griffith 2011, 318.

[15] Van der Velden 2008, 164–167. As Van der Velden notes, a similar suggestion was made already by Francis Nau (*ibid.*, 165 n. 112). See also Cuypers 2009, 429–30. The Muʿtazilī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) also points to this East Syrian discourse against the Syrian Orthodox and the Chalcedonians (*Tathbīt*, 1:146).

[16] Tatari and von Stosch 2021, 219.

[17] A clear exposition is provided by ʿAbd al-Razzāq, who points out that many Christians "invoke [Mary] and ask her for prosperity, health, longevity, and forgiveness of sins" (*Tathbīt*, 1:146). For a discussion of ʿAbd al-Razzāq's treatise, see Reynolds 2004 (esp. 120, 148–9). For references to other Muslim thinkers, see Sirry 2014, 154–59 and the broader survey in Mohagheghian, *forthcoming*.

"distinguished position … in the devotion of eastern Christians."[18] This view seems more plausible in the light of the Qur'an's concerns in general and the fifth surah's content in particular. Specifically, after emphasizing the humanity of Jesus and Mary (who "used to eat food," v. 75), the sura criticizes the worship of those (presumably, Jesus and Mary) who do not have power over any benefit or harm for their worshipers (v. 76). Moreover, the passage (vv. 112–15) that immediately precedes reference to some people taking Jesus and Mary as "two gods besides Allāh" seems to concern the Eucharist and attempts to rectify what the Qur'an considers misconceptions about this rite of worship instituted by Jesus.[19] In the light of this context, Q 5:116 seems to refer not to official belief in Mary as a person of the Trinity but rather to her worship next to that of Christ—and perhaps especially to the suspicion that some Christians made offerings (including the Eucharist) to Mary during her festivals. If so, then what the surah criticizes in Q 5:116 is not the standard doctrinal Trinity but rather what can be called the devotional or cultic Trinity of Father, Son, and Mary.

Marian Devotion in Late Antiquity

One of the most important theological controversies of the fifth century centered on whether Mary can be called "God-bearer" (Theotokos). This title was eventually endorsed at the Council of Ephesus (431), leading to the separation of the East Syrian church. It appears that the Theotokos controversy significantly boosted the veneration of Mary, such that in the fifth century "the figure of Mary emerged like a comet in Christian devotion and liturgical celebration throughout the world."[20] This included the construction of many churches dedicated to the Virgin and the celebration of feasts honoring various aspects of her life.[21]

For example, against the backdrop of the Theotokos controversy, Empress Pulcheria (d. 453) had three churches built in Constantinople and dedicated to the Virgin.[22] Mention should also be made of the Kathisma, the earliest Palestinian church dedicated to Mary, which was

[18] Blachère 1966, 144 n. 77. Parrinder 1996 [1965], 135 considers the same possibility and refers specifically to the festivals of Mary's birth and assumption. See also Nasr 2015, 336. Gabriel Reynolds makes a similar suggestion by describing the qur'anic expressions as "a deliberate exaggeration, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Christian veneration of Mary" (Reynolds 2019, 2:233; *idem* 2014, 53–54).

[19] Goudarzi 2023b.

[20] Daley 1998, 6; cited in Cameron 2016, 3. Other scholars have argued that devotion to Mary was already an integral part of common Christian piety before the Theotokos controversy (Kateusz 2019, 24–27).

[21] Still, the pace and extent of Marian devotion differed from one area to another. As noted by Theodore de Bruyn, for example, even by the sixth century "at Oxyrhynchus … liturgies were celebrated either more frequently or as frequently at churches dedicated to several other saints than at the church dedicated to Mary" (de Bruyn 2015, 117).

[22] Daley 1998, 3–4.

built circa 456 CE around the rock on which the pregnant Mary allegedly rested on her way to Bethlehem.[23] Located midway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem and thus ideal as a location of pilgrimage, the Kathisma church became a site for celebrating the feast of the (Memory of) Theotokos.[24] This church, with its concentric octagonal plan, may have been one of the main architectural inspirations behind the Dome of the Rock.[25]

The Armenian Lectionary indicates that in the fifth century, the feast of the Theotokos was held at the Kathisma on August 15.[26] This feast was later moved to August 13, thereby making room for the celebration of Mary's Dormition and Assumption (i.e., her passing away and being taken up to heaven) on August 15, which Emperor Maurice (r. 598–602) established as an official feast across the Byzantine empire.[27] Feasts held in other times of the year were also introduced in Palestine and elsewhere in celebration of other moments in the life of Mary.[28] The Emperor Justinian (r. 527–65), for example, ordered the feast of the Annunciation to be held at the beginning of spring, on March 25, sometime around 530–53.[29] Other feasts included Mary's Nativity (Sep. 8) and Presentation in the temple (Nov. 21).[30] In addition, sometimes her name appeared at the beginning of documents alongside the name of Christ or

[23] Avner 2011, 14, 28–29. According to Theodosius the Pilgrim, around the turn of the sixth century the stone on which Mary had reposed was cut and transported to Jerusalem, where it "was made into an altar and used for communion" at the tomb of Jesus (*ibid.*, 15; Shoemaker 2006, 82–83).

[24] A feast dedicated to Mary's memory was probably celebrated already in the fourth century on the day before or after Christmas (Daley 1998, 4). A homily of Proclus (d. 446) compares the feast of the Theotokos favorably with those of other saints: "even though all the commemorations of the saints are wondrous, none of them can compare to the glory of the present feast" (cited in Peltomaa 2001, 63 n. 82).

[25] Avner 2010; Shalev Hurvitz 2015, 303–307.

[26] The Armenian Lectionary is usually dated to between 417 and 439 CE, though a recent article dates it to between 458 and 478 CE (Méndez 2021).

[27] Avner 2016, 20 and Calabuig 2000, 254.

[28] The calendar of Oxyrhyncus, which captures the liturgical celebrations of the Egyptian Church in the year 535–536, mentions three feasts that were held in honor of the Virgin's "divine motherhood … dormition … [and] assumption" (Calabuig 2000, 259).

[29] Peltomaa 2001, 22. Previously this feast was held before Christmas (Calabuig 2000, 256).

[30] Shoemaker 2006, 116 and Calabuig 2000, 254–255.

the Persons of the Trinity,[31] her image was imprinted on lead seals,[32] her intercession or invocation was featured in amulets.[33]

Mary was distinguished from other heroes of the faith—such as martyrs, bishops, apostles, and even prophets—primarily because of her vital role in the Incarnation. As noted by Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), the ardent defender of describing Mary as Theotokos, Mary was "the celestial ladder by which God descended" to this world in the Incarnation.[34] But if Mary facilitated God's descent among humans through the Incarnation, it stood to reason that she could also enable the ascent of human prayers to God through intercession. Accordingly, intercessory appeals to Mary appear in many Christian writings from the pre-Islamic period. For example, the hymns attributed to Rabbula (d. 435), bishop of Edessa, indicate that prayers of intercession to the Virgin were integrated in Christian worship from the fifth century. Through these hymns, the faithful asked Mary to "make supplication, O blessed one, to the Only-begotten, who sprang forth from you, so that he might work for us compassion through your prayers."[35] The believers who chanted these hymns offered their humble praise to Mary: "in glory you rule over all creation, because you held the Creator in your womb. Wherefore, Birthgiver of God, we all magnify you."[36]

Striking statements to the same effect are found in the Akathistos Hymn, "the most famous hymn of the Byzantine Church,"[37] which is dated variously to before the Council of

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[31] For example, a document from Lower Egypt (*BGU* 2 365) dated to 603 CE begins as follows: "In the name of the holy and consubstantial Trinity, and of our Lady, the holy God-bearer." See Bagnall and Worp 1981, 114–115 and de Bruyn 2015, 128–129.

[32] A study of Byzantine lead seals that date from the turn of the seventh shows that of the seals that bear figural representation, about 60 percent feature an image of the Virgin. Cotsonis 2005, 403 (chart VI). By contrast, 36.5 percent of these seals were imprinted with figures of other saints (*ibid.*, 399 [chart V]).

[33] Theodore de Bruyn 2015, 122–128.

[34] Cited and discussed in Atanassova 2015, 112. See also Proclus of Constantinople's (d. 446 CE) description of Mary as "the only bridge from God to humanity" (Limberis 2000, 358), and the Akathistos hymn's characterization of the Virgin as the "celestial ladder by which God descended" and a "bridge leading those from earth to heaven" (Peltomaa 2001, 5).

[35] Phenix and Horn, *Rabbula Corpus*, 309; cf. 295.

[36] Phenix and Horn, *Rabbula Corpus*, 303. These hymns were sung during the Midnight Office in some Syriac churches. Of the three watches of the night, the first was dedicated to Mary's intercession, the second to that of the saints, and the third to prayers for the departed (*The Rabbula Corpus*, cclii). The hymns may be by Rabbula or a later writer, though Phenix and Horn still consider them to belong to the fifth century (*Rabbula Corpus*, cclviii). It is noteworthy that although the hymns also call upon the martyrs, apostles, and prophets (e.g. *Rabbula Corpus*, 295–297, 299, 303), prayers to these saints are subdued by comparison to the prayers offered to the Virgin. See *ibid.*, ccl and following pages for a discussion of the hymns.

[37] Calabuig 2000, 256.

Chalcedon (451 CE), the reign of Justinian (esp. 530–553 CE), or even the siege of Constantinople (626 CE). The odd strophes of this Hymn are dedicated to hailing the Virgin while the even strophes recount the story of Christ's incarnation and extol his saving compassion toward humanity. Alternating between worshipful praise of Christ and Mary, the Akathistos Hymn describes the Virgin as "the acceptable incense of intercession"[38] and the "robe of free intercession given to the naked."[39] Indeed, the Akathistos refers to Christ himself as the one who "by dwelling in your womb … taught all to address you" and "to cry to you."[40] The hymn ends by such a cry: "Mother hymned by all … accepting this present offering, deliver from every evil and from the punishment to come, all those who cry to you: 'Alleluia'."[41]

By the early seventh century, and thus contemporary with the Prophet Muhammad's preaching in the Hijaz, the status and intercessory role of Mary had likely come to eclipse that of martyrs and other saints in many Christian regions, especially in the Byzantine Empire.[42] In this emerging hierarchy, Mary was ranked immediately after Christ while other holy figures stood beneath her.[43] Moreover, as Cornelia Horn notes, Mary's role went beyond merely relaying the prayers of the faithful to God, for through her mediation she "not only influenced but also effectively commanded her own share of her son's power."[44] This power was felt particularly in miraculous interventions that the Virgin made on behalf of the faithful.[45]

The idea of Christ and Mary constituting a dyad finds numerous artistic and literary expressions in early Christianity. A mosaic installed before 649 in the altar apse of the Chapel of St Venantius in Rome depicts Christ in heaven with seventeen people standing underneath him. Mary stands at the very center—directly below Christ and above the altar—and is thus

[38] Peltomaa 2001, 7.

[39] Peltomaa 2001, 13, 177–178.

[40] Peltomaa 2001, 17, 19.

[41] Peltomaa 2001, 19.

[42] Peltomaa identifies the reign of Justinian as a particularly important period during which Mary's image as "the foremost of the holy intercessors" was cemented (Peltomaa 2015, 136–7). Around the same time, it appears that the Axumite King Kaleb (r. 514–542) built a church dedicated to Mary in South Arabia (in Ẓafār) after invading and occupying the country. Indeed, one of the Ethiopic inscriptions found near Ẓafār seems to reference the Virgin, although the context of this reference is not clear. See Müller 2012, 10–13.

[43] Thus, in his hymn "On All Martyrs," Romanos the Melodist asked Christ to protect the Church and the Roman Empire through the prayers of the martyrs "[b]y the mediation (διά) of the Theotokos" (Peltomaa 2015, 136). See also Dal Santo 2012, 340.

[44] Horn 2020, 112.

[45] Horn 2020, 106–109. Some examples of miraculous protection are found in Anthony of Choziba's early seventh century *Life of Saint George*, 60 *et passim*. Many others are narrated in the Six Books apocryphon (Smith Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, 49–50 *et passim*).

represented, in the words of Ally Kateusz, as "the chief officiant of the Eucharist" with a "central position during the rite as mediator with the divine."[46] Kateusz also discusses many objects dating roughly from 500 (or even earlier) to 700 on which Mary and Christ are depicted "horizontally," that is to say, on the same level. These objects include various utensils used during the Eucharist, such as silver chalices, ewers, and censers, as well as "processional crosses, gold bishops' medallions (the encolpion), gospel book covers, church decoration, and reliquary boxes."[47]

In addition to constituting a devotional dyad next to Christ in general, Mary had come to occupy "a dominant—perhaps *the* dominant—place in the religious life" of the imperial capital, Constantinople.[48] Stark expression of Mary's prominent status in her "terrestrial fief" can be found in sources that describe the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626 CE.[49] A homily written by Theodore Syncellus (a senior clergyman of Byzantium) shortly after this event, and perhaps delivered a month after the siege "on the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God (8 September 626),"[50] celebrates Mary's perceived role in the city's deliverance. According to this homily, Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41) entrusted Constantinople to Jesus and Mary before leaving to campaign against Sassanid forces, and later beseeched Jesus and Mary to protect the city when he heard that it was under siege.[51] The text relates that the emperor's children in the city also prayed to Mary, the "All-Powerful Lady," termed themselves "your servants," and asked Mary to "save us, save the city and its inhabitants."[52] Sergius, the patriarch of Constantinople, reassured people that "the Lord himself fights for us" and that "the Virgin Mother of God will also be protective of this city."

Similarly, the anonymous writer of the *Paschal Chronicle* asserts that Constantinople was saved from the Avar siege by the grace of God, who acted on "the welcome intercession of his undefiled Mother."[53] It was "through the intercession of our Lady the Mother of God" that God repelled a sea attack against Constantinople, and the Avar Khagan later testified that he had

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[46] Kateusz 2019, 86. I thank Cornelia Horn for drawing my attention to this important study.

[47] Kateusz 2019, 101.

[48] Cameron 1978, 80. For dissenting voices about the cult of the saints, see Dal Santo 2011.

[49] The description of Constantinople as the Virgins' "terrestrial fief" belongs to Cyril Mango, cited in Peltomaa and Külzer 2015, 15.

[50] Howard-Johnston 2010, 147.

[51] This quotation and the following ones are taken from the sermon's English translation by Roger Pearse, available online at https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodore_syncellus_01_homily.htm (accessed Sep. 28, 2022). See also Peltomaa 2009 and Cameron 1978.

[52] Pearse's translation, available online at https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodore_syncellus_01_homily.htm (accessed Sep. 28, 2022).

[53] Whitby and Whitby 2007, 169.

seen "a woman in stately dress rushing about on the wall all alone," indicating the Virgin's personal intervention.[54] When Heraclius sent dispatches to inform his subjects that he has defeated the Sassanid Emperor, Khosro II (r. 590–628), he described the latter as an enemy of "our Lord Jesus Christ the true God and his undefiled Mother," and noted how "God and our Lady the Mother of God collaborated with us" to defeat the Persians.[55] (Khosro may have rejected this charge, for it was Mary herself who had earlier informed him in a vision that "the victories of Alexander of Macedon would be bestowed upon him,"[56] and his troops had reportedly used the Virgin's name as a password to recognize the Romans who had aided him to regain his throne during Maurice's (r. 582–602) reign.[57]) Heraclius concluded his letter by expressing his "confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ, the good and almighty God, and in our Lady the Mother of God" for their continued support.[58] A similar perception of Mary's role is found in a poem by George of Pisidia, Heraclius's court-poet.[59]

The relevance of this imperial context for understanding the Qur'an's engagement with Christianity has been recently highlighted by Zishan Ghaffar and developed further by Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch.[60] Tatari and von Stosch argue, in fact, that the qur'anic statements about Mary—that if God wants, He can "destroy Christ son of Mary, his mother, and everyone [else] on earth" (Q 5:17), and that some Christians have taken Jesus and his mother as two gods besides Allāh (Q 5:116)—should be understood as rejecting the utilitarian use of Mary in "imperial propaganda."[61] The Qur'an thus condemned the project to turn Mary into a "goddess of war,"[62] whose invocation could confer invincibility on the Byzantine empire. This is an important insight, although I believe that the Qur'an targets not only imperial appropriation of Mary but also popular practices of worship that were susceptible to excess from its point of view (on which see further below).[63] In fact, appeals to Mary to defend Byzantium may be seen as building on the more general idea of Mary as a powerful protectress. Still, and in line with Tatari and von Stosch's attention to the Byzantine context, it

[54] Whitby and Whitby 2007, 178, 180.

[55] Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale*, 183, 184.

[56] Whitby and Whitby, *History of Theophylact Simocatta* (5.15.8–10).

[57] Whitby and Whitby, *History of Theophylact Simocatta* (5.10.4–5).

[58] Whitby and Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale*, 187.

[59] Peltomaa and Külzer 2015, 16. Heraclius had relied on Mary even before, by taking her icons to battle "[d]uring his naval campaign against the reigning emperor Phocas in 610" (Himmelfarb 2017, 38).

[60] Ghaffar 2020; Tatari and von Stosch 2021, 202–220.

[61] *Ibid*., 217.

[62] *Ibid*., 219.

[63] Of such practices, Tatari and von Stosch 2021, 219–220 refer briefly to the veneration of Marian icons as potentially problematic but situate this practice primarily in "imperial and military contexts."

is worth noting that much of the evidence for the cult of Mary before Islam comes from this same context and the associated Greek tradition. Setting aside the rather exceptional witness of the Six Book apocryphon (on which see below) and the somewhat uncertain evidence of the Rabbula corpus (discussed above), there is little evidence that Syriac churches featured an elaborate cult of the Virgin before Islam or accorded her a dominant intercessory status.[64]

Before concluding the examination of Mary's image in Late Antiquity, it is worth quoting from two homilies composed in the early seventh century. The first is by John, the Archbishop of Thessalonica (r. 610–49), probably written to initiate the celebration of Mary's Assumption in Thessalonica. John declares that "we shall offer to that spotless Lady, Mary Mother of God, thanks second only to God."[65] He then notes the special favor that Christ will bestow on those who call on his mother: Christ will "bestow glory on those who glorify her," that is to say, those who "call upon her, celebrating her memorial every year."[66] Invocation of Mary during the festival of her Dormition, John proceeds to emphasize, brings about material benefits as well as remission of sins. That the festival involved celebration of the Eucharist is indicated by John's reference to "the sacred mysteries" that accompanied the festival of Dormition.[67]

Another sermon from the early seventh century, attributed to one Theoteknos of Livias, describes Mary as outshining the prophets and apostles "like the moon in the midst of the stars."[68] Mary was taken up to heaven and she remains there, body and soul, "exalted above Enoch and Elijah and all the prophets and apostles, above all the heavens, below God alone."[69] Theoteknos describes Mary as "the ambassador for the human race before the immaculate King,"[70] and invites the congregation to "celebrate, as the festival of festivals, the assumption of the Ever-virgin."[71] Just as Christ is "our peace (Eph 2:14)," likewise "Mary is peace."[72] And just as during her life "she watched over us all," now that she is in heaven she

[64] For a cogent overview of the evidence, see Horn 2015. See also the collection of homilies translated in Brock 1994 and Jacob of Serug's homilies translated in Hansbury 1998. These do not yield much evidence for a cult of the Virgin. For a discussion of the Mariology of the Church of the East at a later period, see Podipara 1980.

[65] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 49.

[66] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 67.

[67] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 67. Cf. Calabuig 2000, 228 and Mitchell 1999, 267.

[68] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 74.

[69] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 74.

[70] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 75.

[71] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 78.

[72] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 79.

similarly "intercedes for us with God the Son,"[73] utilizing her "free access" to Christ.[74] Even though these two homilies may possibly date from the decades after the Prophet's preaching, they likely capture ideas and sentiments that already had currency during (if not before) the Prophet's lifetime.

Devoting Offerings to Mary

By the early seventh century, many Christians gathered to celebrate the feasts established widely in honor of Mary, during which they offered her hymns of praise and performed the Eucharist, in the hope of securing her intercession for their salvation and prosperity. As I have already indicated, the performance of the Eucharist in the context of praising Mary, invoking her name, and asking for her intercession may have appeared tantamount to her divinization, as sacrifice (a rubric under which the Eucharist fell) was a form of worship exclusive to God. Indeed, Epiphanius (d. 403), the bishop of Salamis, accused the so-called Collyridians not simply of offering Mary bread or cake but of performing the *Eucharist* in her honor. To Epiphanius, the offering of the Eucharist to Mary was tantamount to considering her a goddess. Therefore, railing against the Collyridians' practice, Epiphanius declared that "there is no commandment to <offer> the Eucharist even to a man, <as though> to God, let alone to a woman."[75] Eucharistic worship of Mary was inconsistent with Trinitarian monotheism because the Eucharist was to be devoted only to the persons of the Trinity.[76]

The idea that sacrifice, including the Christian rite of the Eucharist, was a form of veneration exclusive to the divine was not peculiar to Epiphanius. As Epiphanius's near contemporary, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), put it, "no one has ever claimed to sacrifice except to that Being whom he knew or thought or pretended to be God."[77] But were the Collyridians, assuming that such a distinct group existed, "women who sacrificed to Mary"?[78] Evidently, Epiphanius was not certain about this. Because although he initially accuses the Collyridians of offering Mary the Eucharist and castigates them for making offerings "in Mary's name,"[79] he claims later that their practice is heretical regardless of whether they "offer Mary the loaf as

[73] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 80.

[74] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 78.

[75] Williams (tr.), *Panarion*, 643 (79.7.5).

[76] Leontius of Byzantium (*fl.* first half of sixth century) seems to refer to a similar—if not the same—group when he speaks of "the loaves that the Philomarianites offer in Mary's name" (Daley 2017, 421).

[77] Augustine, *City of God*, X.4, 122. See also Augustine's description of pagan sacrifices: these "were offered to the wickedness of demons who claimed this for themselves, so that they might be considered gods, because sacrifice is an honor paid to God" (*Answer to Faustus*, XX, 280).

[78] Benko 2003, 170.

[79] Williams (tr.), *Panarion*, 637 (79.1.6), 643 (79.7.1).

though in worship of her" or whether they make the offering "on her behalf."[80] It appears, then, that Epiphanius was not sure how the Collyridians conceptualized their worship.[81] Perhaps they did not dedicate the Eucharist to Mary, but merely celebrated it as part of their festivals in honor of Mary, much like later Christians were to do. As Stephen Shoemaker notes, the putative Collyridians "were simply a little ahead of the curve: only half a century later their veneration of the Virgin would likely have placed them within the mainstream of Christian piety."[82]

If the Collyridians did not devote their offering (whether they conceptualized it in Eucharistic terms or not) to Mary, some other Christians may have done so, though again without considering Mary a goddess. Evidence for such a practice is found in the so-called Six Books apocryphon, also known as *Transitus Mariae*, a Syriac work that describes the Dormition and Assumption of Mary and was likely in circulation by the fifth century.[83] This text, which is available in multiple versions,[84] has Gabriel inform Mary that Christ will accept all her requests: "whatever thou dost seek from the Christ … thou shalt have both in earth and in heaven, and thy will is done."[85] Later, the text recounts that before departing this world, Mary asked Christ: "whenever men are assembled and are making a commemoration of me, and are presenting me with offerings (*metqarrbīn lī qūrbānē*) … accept, O Lord, their offerings from them, and accept the prayer which goeth up to Thy presence."[86] Consonant with this prayer,

[80] Frank Williams (tr.), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III.* De Fide, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 645 (79.9.1).

[81] Another problem Epiphanius had with the Collyridians was that their priests were women. This was a heretical innovation, for "[n]ever at any time has a woman offered sacrifice to God" (*Panarion*, 638 [79.2.3]).

[82] Shoemaker 2008, 385. Cf. Benko 2004, 170–195. However, Shoemaker notes that the Collyridians may not have seen their bread offering in Eucharistic terms (Shoemaker 2008, 399).

[83] For a discussion of the different versions of these texts and their dating, see Shoemaker 2006, 46–53. Shoemaker suggests that in criticizing the Collyridians, Epiphanius was responding "either directly or indirectly" to the Six Books apocryphon (Shoemaker 2008, 397).

[84] Here I will draw on the palimpsest (dated to the fifth-century) edited by Smith Lewis, and will cite the sixth-century manuscript edited by Wright when the palimpsest is not complete.

[85] Smith Lewish, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, 21 (Eng), ܠܫ-ܫ (Syr). In referring to Mary's will exercising influence in heaven and earth, the text echoes the Lord's prayer.

[86] Smith Lewish, 57 [Eng], ܥ_ܝ [Syr]). She also asked her son to bless "the land in which my offerings are made" (Smith Lewis, 57 [Eng], ܥ_ܝ [Syr]) and to bestow on those who make these offerings and celebrate her memorial various material and spiritual gifts. As Stephen Shoemaker notes, "a strong connection emerges between [Mary's] intercessions and agriculture and fertility" (Shoemaker 2015, 32), though of course other matters can be addressed to the Virgin as well.

the work advocates making "offerings and commemorations" (*qūrbānē və-dūkhrānē*) to Mary three times a year.[87] It also encourages praying to the Virgin through private acts of worship.[88]

Importantly, and perhaps concretizing its reference to offerings, the text prescribes performing a quasi-Eucharistic rite as part of these commemorations. The worshippers, the text indicates, are to have bread "kneaded and baked" and then placed "on the altar" in the morning. As they are gathered before the altar, those present are to recite from the "psalms of David" and "the New and Old Testaments," as they would do during the Liturgy of the Word that accompanied the Eucharist. Moreover, because they were gathered to celebrate Mary's Ascension, the worshippers were also to read "the volume of the decease of the blessed one," that is to say, the Six Books apocryphon itself. After these readings, the priests would "set forth the censer of incense and kindle the lights" and invoke the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thereby inviting the Holy Spirit to "come and bless these offerings," similar to consecration during epiclesis.[89] In the light of the text's references to offerings given to Mary, we may infer that when the congregation celebrated its quasi-Eucharistic rite, they saw the offering as being dedicated to Mary herself, and not (only?) to the Holy Trinity.[90] Still, the Six Books apocryphon does not claim that Mary is part of the Godhead and portrays her clearly as standing below Christ.

It is difficult to assess the extent of celebrations such as the one commanded in the Six Books apocryphon. However, in line with this text's portrayal of Mary as a recipient of the worshipers' offering, it would not be surprising if some simple Christians who celebrated festivals in honor of Mary and performed the Eucharist during those festivals viewed Mary as a recipient of their sacrifice. Writing at a time when the Martyrs' cults were more prominent than that of Mary, Augustine asserted that Christians do not "render rites and sacrifices for these martyrs" but know that "[b]efore the monuments of these martyrs, the Sacrifice is

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[87] Smith Lewish, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, 17 (Eng), ܠ (Syr).

[88] As Cornelia Horn notes, in many cases the text blurs the distinction between "imploring Mary for her intercession with God" and "expecting assistance directly from Mary" (Horn 2015, 166).

[89] Wright 1865, 25 (Eng), ܩܪܒܢܐ (Syr). In the sixth-century Göttingen MS Syr. 10, the priests call upon Mary herself, not the Holy Spirit, for blessing of the offerings: "as soon as the priests pray and say the prayer of my master Mary, the Theotokos, 'Come to us and help the people who call upon you,' and with the priest's word of blessing, my master Mary comes and blesses these offerings" (Shoemaker 2008, 387–8 n. 48).

[90] According to Shoemaker, the offerings described in the Six Books apocryphon were not considered Eucharistic by those who performed them. He also points out that one manuscript "identifies the vesper service, rather than the liturgy, as the proper context for the ceremony" (Shoemaker 2008, 399). Still, even if the offering was not identified with the Eucharistic service proper, its structure and contents strongly resemble that service. And in any case, they constituted a sacrifice (*qurbānā*), even if not *the* sacrifice *par excellence* (i.e., the Eucharist).

offered to God alone."[91] Still, Augustine acknowledged that "many ceremonies borrowed from divine worship have been misused … in order to honor men."[92] Those who offer sacrificial worship to the martyrs, Augustine wrote in a different work, are duly "rebuked by sound teaching."[93] Still, he admitted as a member of the religious elite that "what we teach is one thing; what we put up with is another."[94]

Elite Christians like Augustine were able to distinguish clearly between the worship offered to God and the honor rendered to creatures. Augustine used the term *latreía* (λατρεία) for the first and *douleía* (δουλεία) for the second.[95] Later, the Catholic tradition developed this distinction further, adding the category of *hyperdouleía* for the veneration owed the Virgin. However, considering "poorly trained clergy, spotty catechesis, and low levels of theological literacy,"[96] the non-elite mass of believers were likely innocent of such theological precision. When they went on pilgrimage to Marian churches, sought her intercession, offered her hymns of praise, brought material gifts to her churches, venerated her icons, celebrated the feasts established in her honor, and performed their spiritual sacrifice (i.e., the Eucharist) as part of the festivities, some may have regarded Mary herself as the recipient of their offerings.[97] And even if the believers themselves did not have such a conception of their acts of worship, it may have appeared an inescapable implication of their rituals and thus indicated Mary's undue elevation to the level of a divine power.[98] This state of affairs—and not a conscious doctrine of Mary as a person of the Trinity—can explain why the Qur'an criticizes the veneration of Christ *and Mary* as two gods besides the One God.

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[91] Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.27, 74. Theodoret of Cyrus also emphasized a similar point: "it is not sacrifices or libations we offer to our martyrs; we honor them like men of God and friends of God" (*A Cure for Pagan Maladies*, 178).

[92] Augustine, *City of God*, X.4, 122.

[93] *Answer to Faustus*, XX, 279.

[94] *Ibid*., Book 20, 280. Augustine makes this statement in the context of criticizing drunkenness during the festivals of the martyrs, which he admits is far less serious "than to offer sacrifices to the martyrs" (*ibid.*). While he thus condemns such behavior, he seems to take it for granted that it sometimes happened on the ground.

[95] *City of God*, X:1 (116). For a detailed discussion of this and similar distinctions before and after Augustine (including in the works of John of Damascus), see Bentley 2009.

[96] Tannous 2018, 236.

[97] Muslim scholars later had to grapple with similar issues with respect to the popular piety that developed around the shrines of holy men and women (Meri 1999). On the Prophet himself as a focus of popular piety, see most recently Takacs 2023.

[98] As Tatari and von Stosch point out, "from the outside, the veneration of an icon can easily be mistaken for worship" (Tatari and von Stosch 2021, 219–20). One might add that for some believers not well versed in official theology, the veneration of an icon may have been hardly distinguishable from worship.

One last piece of evidence to examine is *Sefer Zerubbabel*, a Jewish text that is generally dated to the early seventh century—and may thus be roughly contemporaneous with the Qur'an. A notable feature of *Sefer Zerubbabel* is its reference to two female figures who seem to reflect the image of Mary. One figure is Ḥephṣībah, the mother of the Jewish (Davidic) Messiah who adopts some positive features of the Byzantine Mary (such as her martial prowess). The second female figure is a polemical parody of Mary and represents the mother of Armilos (the anti-Christ).[99] She is in fact an idol who had given birth to Armilos after sexual union with Satan. Notably, Armilos forces all nations to worship this idol by bowing down, making offerings, and pouring out libations to her:

> Now this Armilos will take his mother—(the statue) from whom he was spawned—from the "house of filth" of the scornful ones, and from every place and from every nation they will come and worship that stone, burn offerings to her, and pour out libations to her. … Anyone who refuses to worship her will die in agony (like?) animals.[100]

This description is of course a brazenly polemical caricature of Marian veneration, but it is presumably based on the outsider perception that cultic devotion to Mary in the Byzantine Empire was a form of idolatry.[101]

Sefer Zerubbabel's characterization of the cult of Armilos's mother as pagan worship corroborates the idea that the fifth surah's statements may also refer to Marian devotion, while also showing the comparatively sober tone of the qur'anic statements.[102] Moreover, *Sefer Zerubbabel*'s awareness (and adoption) of Mary's martial image in Byzantine propaganda shows that this image was perceptible and striking to non-Christians. This may in turn support the proposal of Tatari and von Stosch that the Qur'an's fifth surah has this propaganda in view when it speaks of taking Mary as a deity besides God. On the other hand, it is notable that *Sefer Zerubbabel* does not seem to view this martial image as inherently polytheistic, as it appropriates it for the mother of the Jewish Messiah. Moreover, unlike *Sefer Zerubbabel*, the fifth surah contains no explicit reference to the martial powers imputed to Mary.

Cultic Reform and Monotheism

To better appreciate why certain Marian rituals may have been problematic from the qur'anic standpoint, it is worth examining the Qur'an's discourse with the *mushrikūn*, that is to

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[99] On the depiction of Ḥephṣibah, see Sivertsev 2011, 87–124 and Himmelfarb 2017, 35–59.

[100] Reeves 2005, 65.

[101] Cf. Tatari and von Stosch 2021, 102.

[102] As Zishan Ghaffar notes, *Sefer Zerubbabel* also negates the Christian allegorical understanding of Mary as the new temple who replaces the Jerusalem Temple, and instead insists that the messianic era includes restoration of the sacrificial cult (Ghaffar 2020, 35–38).

say, the pagans of the qur'anic milieu. In the wake of the groundbreaking studies of Gerald Hawting and Patricia Crone,[103] as well as growing archaeological evidence,[104] many scholars now recognize that the *mushrikūn* were likely not crude idol-worshippers. Rather, they appear to have been devotees of Allāh who also worshipped or venerated other beings as "lesser deities," perhaps primarily in the hope of securing their intercession with Allāh. Furthermore, the qur'anic polemic against the *mushirkūn* was not exclusively or even primarily directed at abstract convictions but rather concerned beliefs that were embodied in cultic practices.[105] When the *mushrikūn* gathered in places of worship such as the Meccan Sanctuary, they appear to have invoked beings other than Allāh and made offerings to these beings (e.g., Q 72:18). Many qur'anic criticisms of the *mushrikūn* seemingly pertain to this cultic veneration as much as, if not more than, intellectual recognition of deities other than Allāh.

Within this environment of cultic polemic, sacrifice was perhaps the most symbolically charged ritual of devotion. To devote animals or other offerings to beings other than Allāh (Q 6:136), to make offerings without the explicit and exclusive invocation of Allāh's name (Q 6:138), or even to partake of such offerings (Q 6:121) was tantamount to pagan worship. The beginning of the fifth surah elaborates on these regulations by outlawing the meat of animals that die violently and thus without explicit and exclusive consecration to Allāh. These regulations, the surah asserts (Q 5:3), are essential for perfecting the Believers' way of worship (*dīn*) and making sure that it remains within the bounds of monotheism (*islām*).[106]

The fifth surah not only distinguishes the Believers' sacrifices and worship (*dīn*) from that of the pagans, it also defends the Believers' way of worship against those Jews and Christians who mocked the Believers' rituals (Q 5:57–58).[107] Moreover, the surah charges with unbelief (*kufr*) or departure from monotheism a group, presumably from among Christians, who identified God (Allāh) with Christ or considered God (Allāh, perhaps understood as the Father) as only one among a Trinity of divine persons (Q 5:72–73). Moreover, having emphasized the humanity of Jesus and Mary, the surah commands the Prophet to ask: "do you worship (*a-taʿbudūna*) besides God that which does not have the power to bring you any harm or benefit?" (Q 5:76). Notably, this polemic is used elsewhere in the Qur'an with regard to polytheists, such as Abraham's people (Q 21:66). The next verse then asks the People of the

[103] Hawting 1999; Crone 2010. Cf. the notes of caution by Al-Azmeh 2014, 324.

[104] See most recently Al-Jallad and Sidky 2024, 9–10. Cf. the somewhat different treatment in Nehmé 2022.

[105] Goudarzi 2023a.

[106] On the meaning of *dīn* and *islām* as well as the significance of Q 5:3, see Goudarzi 2023c.

[107] For an analysis of this passage, see Goudarzi 2024, 50–59.

Book not to commit excess in their worship (Q 5:77).[108] The surah later returns to this discourse about Christian worship by commenting more specifically on practice, specifically, by providing a distinct account of the institution of the Eucharist, the Christian sacrifice (Q 5:112–115).[109] The qur'anic account recognizes the Eucharist as a festival (*ʿīd*) sanctioned by Jesus and God but insists that the festival was meant to strengthen faith in the One God as the Lord of all, including that of Christ, His Messenger (Q 5:111–114).

If rituals of worship such as pilgrimage and sacrifice are major concerns of the fifth surah, if Q 5:75–76 criticize the worship of Jesus and Mary, and if Q 5:112–115 pertain to the Eucharist, then a similar set of concerns may animate Q 5:116, which accuses some Christians of taking Christ and Mary as "two gods besides Allāh." As noted above, by the early seventh century many Christians went on pilgrimage or otherwise gathered in churches to celebrate festivals in honor of Mary, invoked her help, sought her intercession, and offered her hymns of praise in the hope that she would bring benefits to or avert harm from them.[110] Perhaps more significantly, as part of their veneration Christians also performed the signal Christian rite of worship—that is to say, the Eucharist—which some of them may have considered, or at least an outside observer may have interpreted, as offered to Mary herself. Further, the invocation and veneration of Mary was sometimes described as a teaching of Christ himself. As the famous Akathistos hymn puts it, it was Christ who "taught all to address you" and "to cry to you."[111] Considering the likely reference to Eucharist in Q 5:112–115 and the importance of cultic rituals to the surah as a whole, it seems reasonable to suggest that Q 5:116 also has in view rituals of worship—and in particular the devotion of offerings including the Eucharist—when it suggests that some Christians took not only Jesus but also Mary "as two gods besides Allāh."

Connected with cultic devotion, the issue of intercession may also stand in the background of the polemic between Christians and the Believers. Veneration of Christ and Mary, not to mention other saints, was often predicated on the idea that their souls were active and had access to God.[112] Martyrs died on earth but were reborn in heaven and lived before the throne of God, where they enjoyed the privilege of *parrhesia*, that is to say, freedom to speak with God. However, while the bodies of martyrs remained here on earth, the body of

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[108] Incidentally, when the next verse claims that both Jesus and David cursed those Israelites who committed *kufr* (unbelief or deviation from monotheism), it may be invoking David to reject the Christian argument that Jesus was divine and the Son of God on account of his status as the Davidic Messiah (e.g., Psalm 2:7).

[109] For the connection between Q 5:72–77 and 5:109–120, see Goudarzi 2023b, 124–125.

[110] Cf. the Akathistos asking Mary to "accept … this present offering" (Peltomaa 2001, 19).

[111] Peltomaa 2001, 17, 19.

[112] Of course, not all Christians subscribed to this idea. For an eloquent discussion of relevant debates at the turn of the seventh century, see Dal Santo 2012, 1–83.

Christ was resurrected and then ascended to heaven, where Christ "sits on the right hand of the Father" (per the Nicene creed) and "is able for all time to save those who approach God through him" (Heb. 7:25, cf. Rom. 8:34, 1 John 2:1–2). Similarly, Mary passed away but, as related in the Dormition and Assumption apocrypha, she was taken to heaven "in a chorus of singing angels."[113] Mary lives in proximity to her son and can intercede with him thanks to Christ's grace.[114] As the hymnographer Romanos the Melodist (*fl.* first half of sixth century) put it in an address to Christ, ""You granted the honoured Lady the freedom of speech (παρρησίαν) to cry to you, 'My Son and my God'."[115]

One may detect in the sura pushback against the idea that Christ (and Mary) should be seen as the main mediator between God and humanity. Specifically, after insisting that Jesus and Mary were mere human beings who "used to eat food" (v. 75), the sura proceeds to ask: "do you worship, besides God, that which has no power to bring you any benefit or harm?" (v. 76). This statement suggests that the reciprocal relationship of worship—in which a person renders service through acts such as offerings and anticipates help from the recipient of service—should be directed at God himself and not at Christ or Mary.[116] Similarly, after relating the question that God posed to Christ ("did you tell people to take you and your mother as two gods besides Allāh?"), the surah has Christ respond as follows:

> I did not say to them except what You had commanded me [to say]: "Worship Allāh, my Lord and your Lord." And I was a witness over them so long as I was among them. But when You took me away, You Yourself were watchful over them, and You are witness to all things.

In addition to having Jesus confirm his commitment to strict monotheism, this verse suggests that he did not remain in charge of his followers' affairs after the end of his presence on earth ("I was a witness over them as long as I was among them, but when you took me away, You Yourself were watchful over them").[117]

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[113] The expression is by Gregory of Tours (d. 594) (*Glory of the Martyrs*, viii, p. 9). According to Enrico Norelli, traditions about Mary's ascension developed as a result of belief in her intercessory powers (Shoemaker 2015, 23).

[114] See, *inter alia*, Horn 2015, 163–165.

[115] Peltomaa 2015, 132.

[116] This reciprocal relationship is quite clear in the Six Books apocryphon, for example, in which Mary's protection and intercession are predicated on the offerings brought to her and the commemorations held in her honor.

[117] Note also the Messengers' confession that "We have no knowledge" when they are asked, presumably in the next world, "what answer were you given" (v. 109).

Still, while the sura criticizes the worship of Christ and Mary, it does not reject the underlying assumption that they were particularly close to God.[118] For example, the Qur'an recounts Mary's regular access to heavenly food when she was in the household of Zachariah (Q 3:33).[119] Consumption of heavenly food is reminiscent of Edenic bliss, a sign of proximity to God, and elsewhere described as the privilege enjoyed by martyrs, who are "alive with their Lord and provided nourishment" (Q 3:169). While martyrs are provided for (*yurzaqūn*) in heaven, Mary had access to heavenly provision (*rizq*) already on earth (Q 3:33), a sign of her exceptional credentials.[120] And if Christian intercessors had to be "acceptable to God," as John Chrysostom put it,[121] the qur'anic verse cited above asserts that God "accepted Mary graciously" after her mother dedicated her to God. Another special feature of Mary and Christ is their protection from satanic influence (Q 3:36). When we also consider the qur'anic comparison between the creations of Christ and Adam (Q 3:59), one may infer that Christ and Mary were not subject to the consequences of the Fall and lived an Edenic life already here on earth.[122]

Whither Holy Spirit

If the qur'anic statements about Mary as a deity are not a result of confusion about the doctrine of the Trinity, then why does the Qur'an never criticize or even mention the fact that Christians considered the Holy Spirit as a Person of the Trinity? One answer, in line with the overall thrust of this paper, is that the Qur'an was concerned primarily with the practical veneration of Christians. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit's divinity was not a prominent subject of concern or debate between the earliest Muslims and their Christian contemporaries because this doctrine was not accompanied with significant cultic devotion to the Holy Spirit—Christians did not dedicate many shrines or churches to him, did not make grand pilgrimages

[118] On the role of Christ as a "mediator to bridge the chasm of unlikeness" between heaven and earth, see Augustine, *City of God*, 99–101, 104–105.

[119] Of course, the story of Mary having access to heavenly food appears in the *Protoevangelium of James*, §8.

[120] Rabbula refers to the Father inviting to his banquet "the apostles, prophets, and martyrs" (*Rabbula Corpus*, 295). This access and presence is why, Rabbula explains, "we call out to them, saying … 'Intercede and make supplication on our behalf, so that the souls of us all may be saved from anger!" (*Rabbula Corpus*, 297). For a broader but succinct discussion of martyrdom in early Christianity, see Young 2010.

[121] Homily 9 on Genesis, cited in Peltomaa and Külzer 2015, p13.

[122] To use the Christian idea of Christ and Mary as the second Adam and Eve, one could say that the Qur'an espouses the notion that Christ and Mary were not subject to the consequences of the fall without endorsing the view that Christ and Mary had restored humanity as a whole to its Edenic potential. Contrast with Jacob of Sarug, who wrote that by reversing Eve's curse Mary again made accessible "the Tree of life which offered itself to those who ate it" (*On the Mother of God*, 40). See also Peltomaa 2015, 131–132.

to such shrines as existed, did not bring offerings in devotion to the Holy Spirit, and did not invoke the Spirit commonly for the purpose of relief from material hardships or damnation.

It is true that the Holy Spirit was mentioned as an object of worship alongside the Father and the Son during the Eucharist. However, setting aside this brief creedal reference, most of the anaphoras and the other prayers and readings that accompanied this rite address the Father and have the saving acts of the Son as their primary subjects.[123] The epicleses—Eucharistic or baptismal—did not entail direct prayers of invocation to the Holy Spirit, but rather commonly asked *the Father* to send down *His* Spirit to consecrate the offerings.[124] Even on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit does not seem to have served as the primary object of Christian devotion and invocation in Late Antiquity.[125] That the Spirit was not commonly prayed to may reflect the fact that, among the three Persons of the Trinity, the Spirit was the only one to remain "without a personal face."[126]

In addition to this "pneumatological deficit" in pre-Islamic Christian worship,[127] a second potential reason for the absence of the Spirit from the Qur'an's critical discourse is that, apart from his inclusion in the Trinity, many of the roles Christians attributed to the Spirit were apparently endorsed by the Qur'an as well. To begin, from the Qur'an's perspective God does not have a Son, but He *does* have a Spirit. In fact, the Qur'an posits an intimate

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[123] That addressing the Father alone could give the impression that He is the sole recipient of the sacrifice is reflected in the fact that some church authorities had to counter precisely such an impression. See, for example, the remarks of Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe (*c.* 467–533): "When words of honour are directed to the Person of the Father only, the Trinity is honoured by the integral faith of the orthodox believer, and when the intention of the offerer is directed to the Father, the tribute of the sacrifice is offered to the whole Trinity by one and the same act of the offerer" (cited in Clancy 2010, 108).

[124] While many epicleses ask the Father to send His Spirit, others express the hope that the Spirit descends, while still discoursing with the Father (e.g. "may the Holy Spirit come, Lord, …"), while yet other epicleses in ancient anaphoras ask Christ directly to consecrate the offerings. A similar pattern can be observed in baptismal epicleses. See the examination in Brock 2008, 85–90, 133–136, 140–150.

[125] See, for example, the two Pentecostal homilies of Leontius of Constantinople (fl. mid-sixth century) translated in Allen and Datema 2017, 137–166 as well as the homily of Jacob of Sarug in Kollamparampil 2010. See also the chapters on Pentecost in Bishop, Leemans, and Tamas 2016 as well as Galadza 2009. This latter study (esp. 131–135) refers to some Eastern Orthodox hymns sung to the Holy Spirit (such as Basileu Ouranie), but these hymns seem to date from after Islam's emergence.

[126] The expression belongs to Yves Congar, cited in Chan 2009, 54. Similarly, Baby Varghese notes that "prayers directed to the Holy Spirit are rather rare in the West Syrian tradition, another characteristic that it shares with the Byzantine and other Eastern traditions" (Varghese 2004, 77).

[127] This expression is sometimes used to characterize the Spirit's less prominent role in the Christian West as compared to the Eastern forms of Christianity, although here I am using it in reference to pre-Islamic Christian worship in general. See, for example, Kärkkäinen 2018, 7.

connection between the Spirit and God by using possessive pronouns in expressions such as "My spirit" (Q 15:29, 38:72) and "Our spirit" (Q 19:17, 21:91, 66:12) in the divine voice. It is even tempting to see in the qur'anic descriptions of the Spirit as being from God's "affair/command" (*amr*, e.g. Q 17:85) an analogue to the Christian idea that the Spirit "proceeds from" (Syr. *nāfeq*) the Father.[128] Moreover, as in Christianity the Qur'an places the Spirit above the angels—the latter prostrate to Adam after God blows His Spirit into Adam (Q 15:29, 38:72)—considers it as the agent of revelation (Q 16:2, 16:102, 26:193, 40:15), and mentions its role in strengthening believers (Q 58:22).[129]

The overlap between the qur'anic and Christian ideas may be seen in a comparison of Q 5:110 and 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, a key text in the Pauline discourse on the Spirit. In Q 5:110, God reminds Jesus that "I aided you with the Holy Spirit" and then enumerates the various gifts and capabilities that Jesus possessed—suggesting that the Spirit was instrumental in the bestowal of these gifts and powers. Jesus was able to "speak with people in the cradle as in adulthood," he was taught "[Mosaic] scripture and wisdom" as well as (or exemplified in?) "the Torah and the Gospel,"[130] and he performed many miracles of a life-giving nature, such as creating birds out of clay and resurrecting the dead, as well as healing "the blind and the leper." These exceptional powers resemble the various gifts of the Spirit that are catalogued in 1 Corinthians 12:4–11—such as knowledge, wisdom, prophecy, "various kinds of tongues," "the working of miracles," and "gifts of healing" (cf. Isaiah 11:2)—[131]as well as the life-giving powers of the Spirit, which are proclaimed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed.[132]

If the Qur'an's proclaimer considered the Holy Spirit as intimately connected with God, placed the Spirit above the angels, and shared many aspects of the Christian view of the Spirit, then in what way did the qur'anic view of the Spirit differ from the Christian understanding? Presumably the proclaimer would have rejected the idea that the Spirit was somehow co-equal with God. What about the notion that the Holy Spirit was uncreated? It is difficult to answer this question based on the qur'anic data. However, it is possible that the Qur'an's author

[128] Contrast with Durie 2018, 164–175.

[129] Cf. the following expression from Mar Theodore's anaphora: "by the Holy Spirit … all rational natures … are strengthened and sanctified" (Spinks 1999, 34).

[130] For a discussion of the items taught Jesus and their relation to each other, see Goudarzi 2018, 218–241, Hussain 2022, 284–286, and Stewart 2024, 100–104.

[131] See also discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in Brock 2008, 47–84.

[132] "And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, Who spoke through the Prophets" (Leith 1982,33). Contrast this description with that of the Son, in which his divinity is clearly emphasized: "Lord Jesus Christ … true God from true God … of the same essence as the Father, through Whom all things came into being" (*ibid*.).

intentionally avoided clarifying its perspective on the Holy Spirit—in particular, how the Spirit relates to God—because that would have entailed participating in a conversation that was prone to misunderstanding. A potential sign of this qur'anic reticence is found in Q 17:85: "They ask you concerning the Spirit. Say: 'the Spirit is an affair of my Lord; and you have been given only scant knowledge.'" If threading the pneumatological needle was difficult and could potentially open the pandora's box, that may be another reason why the Qur'an refrains from criticizing the inclusion of the Holy Spirit as a Person of the Trinity alongside the Father and the Son.

Conclusion

Attention to rituals of worship may help explain why the Qur'an accused some Christians of taking Mary as a goddess besides Allāh. By the time of Islam's emergence, devotion to Mary had become a major part of Christian piety, in many cases eclipsing the cults of martyrs and other saints. Specifically, many Christians considered Mary as the main intercessor with her son, who was in turn the chief mediator between humanity and the Father. According to the Akathistos hymn, Christ himself had "taught all to address" Mary,[133] so the faithful invoked her and brought her offerings of praise in the hope that she would "deliver [them] from every evil and from the punishment to come."[134] Moreover, worshipers devoted to Mary not only "thanks second only to God,"[135] but they also brought offerings to her churches and performed the Eucharistic sacrifice, which some of the less theologically literate (the majority of worshipers in many contexts) may have considered as being offered to the Virgin herself.[136] As we saw above, Epiphanius had taken issue with the putative Collyridians for a similar practice, which he considered tantamount to divinizing Mary. Moreover, Christian authorities like Augustine had to defend Christians from the charge of saint-worship by insisting that only God was the recipient of the spiritual sacrifice performed during the saints' festivals and that the animals slaughtered in the context of festivities were not blood sacrifices offered to the saints but simply food for the participants.[137] Still, Augustine admitted that some Christians may have erroneously viewed martyrs as the recipient of the offerings. It would not be surprising if some of those who participated in Marian festivals shared a similar impression.

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[133] Peltomaa 2001, 17.

[134] Peltomaa 2001, 19.

[135] Daley 1998, 49.

[136] In fact, as Jack Tannous points out, while Late Antique Christian writings generally "represent the interests and views of theological elites," the Qur'an may enable us to "see Christianity from below" (Tannous 2018, 253).

[137] See, e.g., *Answer to Faustus*, XX:20, 278 (discussed briefly in Goudarzi 2024, 57 n. 116).

Considering these historical precedents, it is tenable to view cultic devotion to Mary as the reason behind the qur'anic claim of taking her as a goddess. The contents of the fifth sura, within which this claim appears, corroborate this view. For a primary concern of this surah is to delineate the contours of proper, monotheistic worship (*islām*) by differentiating the Believers' rituals and pilgrimage from that of the pagans, by defending the Believers' sanctuary-focused rituals against Jewish and Christian criticism, and by raising objections to the People of the Book's way of worship. This includes an apparent reference to the Eucharist in verses 112–115, which immediately precedes the reference to taking Christ and Mary as gods besides Allāh in verse 116. Consequently, this reference may pertain to the worship offered to Mary, and perhaps specifically to the conjunction of intercessory appeals with the offerings brought to her churches and/or the Eucharist celebrated during her festivals. The same focus on rituals of worship may explain why the Qur'an does *not* mention or criticize the inclusion of the Holy Spirit in the official Trinity, because the Holy Spirit was not a major object of practical Christian devotion in late antiquity.

This concern with devotional practices is not limited to the Qur'an's discourse with Christians, for much of the Qur'an's polemic against the *mushrikūn* also targets their *worship* of certain beings (and not merely their theoretical divinization of these beings), including the making of offerings accompanied with invocation in cultic contexts. After all, the Qur'an was not a theological treatise written for the elites, and the *mushrikūn* or the majority of Christians in the qur'anic milieu may not have espoused an official, fixed, or precisely formulated theology. In any case, belief and practice were deeply intertwined. Considering a being (angels, spirits, Jesus, Mary) the son or daughter of Allāh and capable of intercession went hand in hand with actual worship of the being in question, as favors were bestowed on devotees in return for services rendered. Accordingly, one verse bids the Prophet to say: "if the Merciful had a son, I would be the first of [his] worshipers" (Q 43:81). In like manner, Mary's elaborate cult coupled with her title as "the mother of God" could be seen as her de facto divinization.

But if the absence of theological education and official doctrine left some rituals open to interpretation and vulnerable to misuse (as Augustine acknowledged), perhaps clear commitment to right belief could make them tolerable. For example, some qur'anic statements appear to leave room for seeking the intercession of angels as long as the angels are not seen as acting independently of the One God (e.g., Q 21:28, 53:26). One wonders, therefore, how much and which aspects of Marian devotion would have appeared problematic to the Qur'an's proclaimer if it was categorically clear that Mary has no share in the offerings of the faithful and if like their elite, the simple masses distinguished fundamentally between the "worship" offered to God and the "veneration" or "honor" paid to Mary and the other saints.

Appendix: The Kathisma Church and Jesus' Birth in the Qur'an

Stephen Shoemaker and Guillaume Dye have argued that the liturgical traditions of the Kathisma church have influenced the qur'anic story of Jesus's birth in surah 19.[138] According to this story, the impregnated Mary withdrew to "a remote place" (*makānan qaṣiyyan*, v. 22) and, while giving birth, was miraculously provided for by a spring and a date palm (vv. 24–26).[139] The remote location of delivery is reminiscent of the *Protevangelium of James*'s claim that Mary gave birth in a cave between Jerusalem and Bethlehem (and not in Bethlehem itself), while the second element resembles miraculous provision for Mary (including through a date palm) during the flight to Egypt according to some Christian traditions.[140] In the view of Shoemaker and Dye, the Qur'an's distinctive combination of elements previously associated with the separate events of the Nativity and the flight to Egypt had a sole precedent in the liturgical traditions of the Kathisma church, a site of pilgrimage that they claim was associated with both the Nativity and the flight to Egypt.[141] Both Shoemaker and Dye contend that not only does the qur'anic story of surah 19 reflect the traditions of Kathisma but that the author(s) of the story must have been physically present at this site. Assuming further that this alleged physical presence must have happened during or after the Islamic conquests,[142] Shoemaker and Dye conclude that the account of Nativity in surah 19 is post-prophetic.

There are several problems with this series of increasingly tenuous claims. First, whether or not the Kathisma's site was initially associated with the site of the Nativity mentioned in the *Protoevangelium of James*,[143] it is not clear if this association was operative in the sixth and early seventh centuries. After all, the idea that Jesus was born in Bethlehem was firmly established in the Christian tradition and anchored securely in place with the

[138] Shoemaker 2003; Dye 2022.

[139] Note that the root *q-ṣ-y* which connotes remoteness is used both for the birthplace of Jesus and "the farthest mosque" (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*), which seems to denote the Temple Mount in Q 17:1. This lexical connection thus mirrors the architectural connection between the Kathisma and the Dome of the Rock, each of which is built on a concentric octagonal plan and has a sacred rock at its center.

[140] Shoemaker 2003, 18–21.

[141] Shoemaker 2003, 22–31; Dye 2022, 168–9.

[142] According to Dye, the author of surah 19's account must have been so familiar with the Jerusalem liturgy that he was "certainly a Christian cleric, active around Jerusalem, who 'converted' to the new faith, or put his pen at the service of the newcomers – all this happening, therefore, certainly *after the conquests*" (Dye 2022, 182; emphasis original). See also Shoemaker 2003, 39.

[143] Avner notes that "to date no material evidence has been found to support the theory that the Kathisma was identified by Christians at any time as the birthplace of Jesus" (Avner 2011, 18). She argues that the celebration of Mary at the Kathisma "emerged from local veneration of Rachel as a mother and a successful intercessor that had been popular in the rural area north of Bethlehem" (Avner 2015, 48).

construction of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.[144] The available sources from the sixth century do not claim that the Kathisma was the place where Mary gave birth to Jesus. For example, in reference to the site of the Kathisma, Theodosius the Pilgrim (writing in the early 6th century) mentions the stone which Mary "blessed when she dismounted from the ass on her way to Bethlehem and sat down on it."[145] However, Theodosius does *not* claim that Jesus was born near this stone. Presumably he thought that Mary sat on the stone but then left the area and reached Bethlehem, where she gave birth to Jesus as told in the Gospels of Matthew (2:1) and Luke (2:4–7). In his *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, Cyril of Scythopolis (d. after 557) mentions the construction of the church of Kathisma by a certain Ikelia (AKA Hicelia), who "led the way in having the Presentation [in the Temple] of God our Saviour celebrated with candles."[146] Again, Cyril does *not* connect the Kathisma to the Nativity.

Despite the absence of references to the Nativity in these sources, Dye views the Feast of the Memory of Mary (celebrated at the Kathisma) as involving "the commemoration of the role of Mary *in the Nativity*,"[147] while Shoemaker describes the feast more broadly as "a commemoration of *the Nativity* and the Virgin's role in the incarnation and birth of Christ."[148] Dye and Shoemaker base this putative connection with the Nativity on the readings associated with this feast as well as the fifth-century homilies of Hesychius and Chrysippus for the occasion. However, the feast's scriptural readings are not about the Nativity as such but rather about the incarnation and Mary's unique contribution to this process.[149] The homilies of Hesychius confirm this impression. While the Nativity is naturally relevant to the incarnation, the focus of reflection and celebration for Hesychius is not the Nativity in particular but rather Mary's crucial role in Christ's incarnation in general (including her miraculous conception, her pregnancy without pain, and her giving birth without losing virginity).[150] Avner thus seems to provide a more accurate description of the feast's significance when she notes that "the central theme of the celebration was the glorification of the Theotokos, focusing on Mary's

[144] In fact, according to Avner 2011, 18, "to date no material evidence has been found to support the theory that the Kathisma was identified by Christians at any time as the birthplace of Jesus."

[145] Wilkinson 1977, 70.

[146] Cyril, *Lives*, 263.

[147] Dye 2022, 173; emphasis added.

[148] Shoemaker 2003, 24; emphasis added.

[149] The Armenian Lectionary mentions the following texts: Psalm 132:8, Isaiah 7:10–16, Galatians 3:29–4:7, Psalm 110: 1, and Luke 2:1–7. See Renoux 1971, 354–357. The later, Georgian lectionary of Jerusalem provides the following list for this feast (now held on Aug. 13): Psalm 72:1, 6; 65:2; Isaiah 7:10–17; Hebrews 9:1–10; Luke 11:27–32. See Dye 2022, 174.

[150] See Pittman 1974, 61–90. Hesychius also notes clearly that Christ was born in Bethlehem (*ibid.*, 72, 84).

virginal motherhood, as most scholars have observed."[151] Avner adds in fact that "the Kathisma was the only strictly Marian *locus sanctus* devoted solely to the figure of Mary, as the Theotokos, and it was not a *locus sanctus* shared with the figure of Christ."[152]

In fact, Shoemaker himself suggests that "an effort was made to dissociate the Kathisma church from its hoary Nativity traditions."[153] However, he proceeds to assert that this putative effort was meant to "reinvent [the Kathisma] as a shrine commemorating Mary's rest during the flight into Egypt."[154] Yet the connection of the Kathisma with the Flight to Egypt is itself tenuous, as it is based on the witness of the so-called Piacenza Pilgrim alone. Shoemaker admits that this witness is "unique," but he still infers from it "that in the sixth century there were some who adhered to this interpretation" of the Kathisma.[155] While it is possible that others also had come to link the Kathisma with the flight to Egypt,[156] there is no actual evidence that this was the case. Indeed, Avner (like some scholars before her) argues that the Piacenza pilgrim "conflated the site of Mary's rest … during the flight into Egypt with her rest before the Nativity."[157] In support of this possibility, it is worth noting that the Kathisma is located to the *north* of Bethlehem and hence an unlikely site for a stop during the flight from Bethlehem to Egypt.

To sum, it is far from clear that the Kathisma had a strong association with the flight to Egypt, and there is little reason to believe that in the sixth century (or even earlier) it was widely considered the site of the Nativity. It is therefore questionable to claim that the Kathisma represented a unique site where "the two early Christian traditions of Christ's birth in a remote location and Mary's encounter with the date palm and spring are brought together"[158]—especially because even in Shoemaker's own thinking one tradition (flight to Egypt) became prominent *at the expense of* the other (Nativity), not to mention that the Piacenza Pilgrim makes no reference to a date palm at all.[159] There is in any case no pre-Islamic

[151] Avner 2011, 19. This theological focus means that "the theme of the feast of the Virgin Mary was not connected with an event [such as the Nativity] but with the celebration of a theological concept: namely, Mary's role as Theotokos" (*ibid.*, 20).

[152] Avner 2011, 19.

[153] Shoemaker 2003, 31.

[154] Shoemaker 2003, 31.

[155] Shoemaker 2003, 29. See also Shalev-Hurvitz 2015, 135.

[156] Dye 2015, 86–88.

[157] Avner 2011, 28.

[158] Shoemaker 2003, 31. See also Dye 2022, 168.

[159] The Piacenza Pilgrim (visiting *c.* 570) mentions only the "water which came from a rock" (Wilkinson 1977, 85). It is therefore inaccurate to attribute to the Piacenza Pilgrim the story of "Mary *and the palm*" (Shoemaker 2003, 22, 34; emphasis added).

text that connects the Kathisma *simultaneously* with these two separate traditions. So far, these traditions have met only in Shoemaker's and Dye's hypothetical reconstructions of the Kathisma's festivities. It seems unwarranted to use this inferred meeting of traditions as some sort of smoking gun that shows the Jerusalemite and post-conquest origin of the Qur'an's Nativity account.[160]

As for the distinct elements of the qur'anic story, one does not need to posit a *physical* site to explain why certain motifs are joined together in this story. The early life of Jesus and Mary's role therein constitute a distinct *conceptual* site that could facilitate the movement of topoi from one part of the site to another. We can only speculate about the purpose and logic of the palm tree and spring episode in the Qur'an's Nativity account. First, it is worth noting that the Qur'an does not mention the flight to Egypt, so the birth of Jesus serves as the next best occasion for relating the divine provision of water and dates for a vulnerable Mary. Some factors that may have facilitated the addition of this episode include God's miraculous feeding of a younger Mary when she was in the care of Zachariah (mentioned in Q 3:37) and miraculous provision of water and food in the desert for the Israelites after the exodus (e.g., Q 2:60, 7:160).[161] A second reason for the inclusion of feeding in the account of surah 19 may have been to emphasize the helplessness of Mary. By portraying her in agony ("would that I had died before!" v. 23) and subsequently showing that God provided her with water and dates (vv. 24–26), the story of surah 19 underlines both God's care for Mary and her human limitations and needs.[162] This emphasis may have served in turn to undermine the common perception of Mary as an especially potent intercessor in heaven and protector on earth.[163] It is perhaps not a coincidence that a verse in the fifth surah rejects supra-human conceptions of Jesus and Mary by noting that "they used to eat food" (Q 5:75), before proceeding to criticize the worship of those who "have no power to bring you any benefit or harm" (Q 5:76).

[160] Shoemaker 2022, 254–255. Thus, when Shoemaker notes that "there is no evidence that this peculiar fusion of traditions was known even among Christians who lived outside Jerusalem and Bethlehem" (*ibid.*, 254), one might add that there is no solid evidence for such a fusion in Jerusalem or Bethlehem either.

[161] Compare "eat and drink of God's provision" addressed to the Israelites in Q 2:60 with "eat and drink and be comforted" addressed to Mary in Q 19:26.

[162] See also Nicolai Sinai's insightful discussion of some other reasons why surah 19 presents Mary as giving birth in a remote location and has God provide for her after delivery ("Christian Elephant," 39–42).

[163] For the latter aspect, see, e.g., *The Life of Saint George*, XXVIII-XXIX (p. 60).

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