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MARY AND JESUS -
COUNTERBALANCING THE BIBLICAL PATRIARCHS
A re-reading of *sūrat Maryam* in *sūrat Āl ʿImrān* (Q 3:1-62)¹

BY
Angelika NEUWIRTH

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1) A concise version of this paper will be published in the Festschrift for Hartmut BOBZIN.

INTRODUCTION: SŪRAT MARYAM AND SŪRAT ĀL ʿIMRĀN

The following text is based on an earlier study by the present author, “Imagining Mary – Disputing Jesus – *Sūrat Maryam* and related Meccan texts within the qurʾānic communication process”, discussing the Meccan testimonies of Mary and Jesus². In that earlier investigation the qurʾānic stories of Mary and Jesus were contrasted: Whereas Mary’s image as a semi-mythical sacred female figure had soon – with *sūrat Maryam* (Q 19:1-33) – became firmly established, Jesus had not been made the object of a qurʾānic *Prophetenlegende*, but continued to appear in the Meccan texts as an only vaguely distinct and highly controversial figure, that not only had been the trigger of a schism in church history but was still arousing dispute between diverse groups among the Prophet’s listeners. Jesus’ narrative that reports the extraordinary circumstances of his birth, focussing, however, Mary rather than him, does not entail more than one single miracle: Jesus’ speaking up on behalf of his mother when he was still an infant in the cradle, thus saving her life and restoring her reputation. About the grown-up Jesus we learn little except that he who had been teaching the exclusive service of one God and the need to maintain unity among believers, eventually failed to implement his message and even triggered a schism that broke out after his death. It is worth noticing that the controversial issue of Jesus being God’s ‘offspring’ (in the Meccan texts: *walad*, not *ibn*) – raised by the pagan adversaries of the community – is not yet a point in a christological debate: The evidence to be deduced from the various Meccan texts does not yet reflect any interaction between the new community and ‘official Christians’ of whatever denomination. What the texts do suggest is that the community should have derived their knowledge about Jesus not from orthodox Christian, but rather from syncretistic circles, perhaps related to Jewish Christians. Although a number of reflections of Christian traditions dispersed over the Meccan suras, still await to be studied, the investigation on the Meccan testimonies may serve as a first attempt to evaluate the texts that explicitly mention Mary and/or Jesus in a chronological sequence so as to explore the gradually developing impact of the two figures on the process the genesis of the Qurʾān.

The present article as against that portrays a political development. It attempts to demonstrate the substantially new reading of the ‘Christian stories’ during the phase of the Prophet’s Medinan activities, when earlier texts

2) It will appear in Jean BUTLER & Thomas HOFFMANN (eds.), *Qurʾānic Studies. Literary and Hermeneutical Dimensions*, Leiden, 2006 (forthcoming).

were frequently re-modelled to fit the polemical-apologetical needs of the emerging community challenged by learned representatives of the older monotheistic traditions³. The fate of *sūrat Maryam* is no exception to the rule. It is subjected to a re-reading that serves a ‘political’ purpose: to disempower the predominant Jewish tradition represented by ʿĀl Ibrāhīm, whose weighty superiority in terms of scriptural authority had to be counter-balanced.

A. THE ‘PROLOGUE’ (Q 3:1-33) AND ITS RELATION TO THE NARRATIVE (Q 3:34-62)

The third *sūrah* of the Qurʾān, ʿĀl ʿImrān, a Medinan text, documents a rethinking of the stories of Mary and Jesus⁴ contained in *sūrat Maryam* (Q 19:1-33)⁵, presenting a later re-reading of the earlier text under new perspectives. The early Medinan *sūrah* is not a unity, but made up of diverse layers⁶ belonging to different periods of origin. The narrative part of the *sūrah* has been submitted to an analysis by Mathias Zahniser⁷ focussing on structure. Zahniser has divided the *sūrah* into three parts, Q 3:1-62, 3:63-99 and 3:100-198. There is, indeed, a neat caesura after Q 3:62, the closing verse of the Mary-Jesus-story, after which a sermon, addressed to the – until then not yet introduced – *ahl al-kitāb* begins, a section that obviously relies for its arguments on the text preceding it. Q 3:1-62 is to be considered as the earliest part, the *nucleus* of the *sūrah*.

The following observations will go beyond a narrative analysis, trying

3) See Angelika NEUWIRTH, “Meccan texts – Medinan additions? Politics and the re-reading of liturgical communications”, in Rüdiger ARNZEN & Jörn THIELMANN (eds.), *Words, texts, and concepts cruising the Mediterranean Sea. Studies on the sources, contents and influences of Islamic civilization and Arabic philosophy and science, dedicated to Gerhard Enderess on his sixty-fifth birthday*, Leuven, 2004, pp. 71-93.

4) See for Jesus in the Qurʾān: Neal ROBINSON, “Jesus in the Qurʾān”, in Jane MCAULIFFE (ed.) *EQ III*, 7-21, and Neal ROBINSON, *Discovering the Qurʾān. A contemporary approach to a veiled text*. London, 1996, Johan BOUMAN, *Das Wort vom Kreuz und das Bekenntnis zu Allāh*. Frankfurt, 1980. Geoffrey PARRINDER, *Jesus in the Qurʾān*, London, 1965. None of these authors, however, takes interest in the Qurʾānic texts as re-readings of earlier texts, though Robinson does proceed chronologically.

5) See for the image of Mary in the Qurʾān, Barbara FREYER-STOWASSER, “Mary”, in *EQ III*, 288-96. The article is not interested, however, in historical developments within the Qurʾān and, again, does not present the stories as readings of earlier intra- and extra-Qurʾānic texts.

6) See Theodor NÖLDEKE, *GdQ*, new edition by Friedrich SCHWALLY, Gotthelf BERGSTRÄSSER and Otto PRETZL, 3 vols., Leipzig, 1909-38.

7) A.H. Mathias ZAHNISER, “The Word of God and the apostleship of ʿĪsā: A narrative analysis of ʿĀl ʿImrān (3):33-62”, In *JSS* 37 (1991), pp. 77-112.

to trace the *Sitz im Leben* of the text, i.e. its social-political function within the historical development of the genesis of the Qurʾān. For this purpose not only the story of the family of Mary and Jesus, labelled Āl ʿImrān⁸ (Q 3:33-62), from which the sūrah takes its name, but also the introductory section (Q 3:1-32) will have to be discussed. It is this hitherto not considered text that – according to my reading – spells out the new significance that Christian tradition, encapsulated in the Mary-Jesus-story, had acquired for the community at the time when the extensive narrative of Mary and Jesus was presented. It may thus be duly regarded as a prologue to the narratives. The text, partly a direct address to, partly a report about the Medinan Jews⁹, presents a rethinking of the until then unquestioned rank of the Israelites (Āl Ibrāhīm) as the sole elects and transmitters of Scripture. In the light of the argument put forward in Q 3:1-33 the hypothesis suggests itself that it is with the intention to establish a counter-tradition to the predominant Jewish patriarchal tradition, that the story of Mary and Jesus – which already with *sūrat Maryam* had received an artistically highly sophisticated presentation and thus for purely liturgical purposes would not have called for a ‘reproduction’ – is retold in an extended form. In the new version of the story in *sūrat Āl ʿImrān*, the sole female protagonist of *sūrat Maryam* is further empowered by a second, more active figure, her own mother, who provides her with a – uniquely matrilineary – genealogy of her own. Jesus, in addition, for the first time is presented in his capacity of an apostle, a role which turns out to be of a kind of reversal of the public self-representations of earlier prophets, since it displays strikingly non-patriarchal traits.

What is equally important, the story’s predominantly ‘female discourse’, centred around female purity and the sacredness of pregnancy and child-birth, spills over into the introductory section of the sūrah which is primarily concerned with the patriarchal prophetic discourse, centred around

8) See Roberto TOTTOLI, “ʿImrān”, in *EQ* II, 509. The identification is due to typological exegesis, the Old Testament Miryam being regarded as a pre-figuration of Mary who thus connects to Amran’s family, becoming the sister of Aaron (Q 19:28) and daughter of the wife of Amran (Q 3:35). TOTTOLI regards the attribution of Mary and Jesus to the Family of ʿImrān as a confusion due to “a Christian tendency to utilize earlier Biblical figures as ‘types’ for later ones” (II, 509). Indeed, the Qurʾān – being a re-reading of both Biblical and post-biblical lore, reflects exegetical processes that have reshaped the Biblical texts. The presentation of Biblical memory enriched by exegetical tradition is to be considered as a characteristic of the Qurʾān rather than the result of a ‘confusion’.

9) For the Medinan Jews, see Moshe GIL, “The origins of the Jews of Yathrib”, in *JSAI* 4, pp. 203-24, see also Montgomery WATT, *Muhammad in Medina*, Oxford, 1956, ch. IV, pp. 193-220.

revelation. The topic of revelation – customarily the introductory theme of later suras – in *sūrat Āl Imrān*, thus, acquires a strikingly new tenor, being interwoven with inignorably female-oriented strains of argument. Speech about revelation that had been until then, in terms of gender, predominantly imprinted by male concerns and male positions¹⁰, is now tinted with images and concerns from the female realm, such as ‘womb’, *arḥām*, ‘mother’ *umm*, or thoughts that evoke a gender-interrelation, like ‘desire’, *ibtigāʾ*, ‘seduction’, *fitnah*. This observation cannot, of course, be viewed in isolation from the core theme of *sūrat Āl Imrān* which is the presentation of a line of tradition originating in the election of female figures. It is the prologue, then, that entails the key to the new – politically relevant – understanding of the function of the Mary-Jesus narrative that it had acquired at the particular stage of the qurʾānic process of genesis when the *sūrah* emerged.

B. THE TEXT OF THE PROLOGUE AND ITS GENDER-INFORMED SUBTEXT

1. *The text*

The prologue in its very beginning evokes the main topic of the *sūrah* by explicitly naming the Gospel, *al-inḡīl*¹¹, a Scripture otherwise not mentioned in an introductory section of the Qurʾān¹². The text starts out with a hymnal affirmation of divine oneness (Q 3:2) and the revelation received by the prophet that has come down to prove the truth of what was revealed before, the *tawrāt* and the *inḡīl*¹³:

10) But see Michael SELLS, who to my knowledge for the first time has investigated female subtexts of the qurʾānic texts, though without attempting to trace a development, cf. Michael SELLS, “A literary approach to the hymnic suras of the Qurʾān. Spirit, gender, and aural intertextuality”, in Issa J. BOULLATA (ed.), *Literary structures of religious meaning in the Qurʾān*, Richmond, 2000, pp. 3-25. Feminist reading of the Qurʾān is still in its beginning, it is less interested in the gender aspects of the text than in the text’s reformist potential, cf. Margot BADRAN, *Feminism and the Qurʾān*, in *EQ* II, pp. 199-203.

11) See Sidney H. GRIFFITH, “Gospel”, in *EQ* II, 342f., who however, does not attempt to locate the Gospel as part of the qurʾānic discourse about revelation within the process of the genesis of the Qurʾān.

12) The Gospel, *Inḡīl*, which in the Qurʾān denotes one single Scripture – not a multiplicity of writings – is mentioned 12 times in the Qurʾān, exclusively in Medinan verses, with the exception of our text always within qurʾānic debates. *Inḡīl* is most frequently contextualized with *tawrāt* (3:3, 3:18, 3:74, 5:66, 5:68, 5:110, 7:57), once it appears with *tawrāt* and *qurʾān*: 9:111.

13) The translation used is that by FAKHRY: *Interpretation*, Reading 2000. FAKHRY’S use of the divine name ‘Allāh’ has been changed into the more universal ‘God’. Further modi-

- 3:3 He has revealed the Book to you in truth
confirming what came before it;
and he has revealed the Torah and the Gospel.
- نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ
مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ
وَأَنْزَلَ التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ.

The introductory section (Q 3:1-32) appears at first sight as a conventional debate about revelation and prophethood and their acceptance by diverse groups. It goes on expounding the topic of the divine origin of the new revelation insisting on its compatibility with the earlier Scriptures, indeed its confirming power. Yet, it has to be defended against some opponents' 'desire' (*ibtigā'*) to exploit the textual ambiguity of particular verses to arouse doubts and chaos:

- 3.7 It is He Who has revealed to you the Book
With verses which are precise in meaning and
which are the (Essence) <Mother> of the
Book
And others which are ambiguous.
As to those in whose hearts there is vacilla-
tion,
They follow what is ambiguous in it,
Seeking (sedition) <seduction> and intending
to interpret it.
However no one except God knows its inter-
pretation.
Those well-grounded in knowledge say:
"We believe in it: all is from our Lord";
Yet none remembers save those possessed of
understanding!
Or: However no one except God and the well-
grounded in knowledge know its interpretation.
- هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ
مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ
هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ
وَأُخَرٌ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ
فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ
فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ
ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ
وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ
وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ
أَمَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا
وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

They say: “We believe in it: all is from our Lord”...

3.8 “Lord do not cause our hearts to vacillate
after you have guided us
and grant us your mercy
You are indeed the munificent Giver”.

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا 3:8
بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا
وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً
إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ.

These verses go beyond the frequent qur'ānic complains about some listeners' reluctance to accept the new revelation. They for the first time raise the issue of linguistic ambiguity in Scripture, an issue that comes as a surprise in view the numerous qur'ānic self-declarations as being a particularly clear (*mubīn*) text (cf. Q 26:2 *tilka āyātu l-kitābi l-mubīn* – “those are the signs of the clear Scripture” – and often). For this and other reasons, these verses have aroused scholarly attention. Not unlike the Islamic exegetes, some scholars have attempted to determine the grammatical structure of Q 3:7¹⁴ to decide who is conceded the competence to the interpret the ambiguous verses¹⁵. Is this competence restricted to God alone or is it extended to encompass the “well grounded in knowledge” as well? Other scholars have underscored the striking qur'ānic self-referentiality¹⁶ attested in the text.

2. *The locus classicus of qur'ānic self-referentiality revisited*

But is it really the technical question of who is entitled to interpret, or is it not rather the principal question of the nature of revealed texts as such that is at stake in Q 3:72.

It is true that the announcement of the existence of ambiguous verses sounds like the concession of a deficiency, but at closer look this is not ne-

14) See Claude GILLIOT, “Exegesis of the Qur'ān, classical and medieval”, in *EQ*, II, pp. 99-124, particularly 99-100.

15) Jane MCAULIFFE, “Text and Textuality: Q 3:7 as a point of intersection”, in Issa BOULLATA (ed.), *Literary structures of religious meanings in the Qur'ān*, Richmond, Surrey 2000, pp. 56-76, discusses the inner-Islamic exegetical positions. See for the hermeneutic implications of the verse Daniel MADIGAN, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton, 2001, and in response Uri RUBIN, review of MADIGAN, in *JSAT* 23 (2003), pp. 381-386.

16) See Stefan WILD, *The self-referentiality of the Qur'ān, Sure 3:7 as exegetical challenge*, in Jane McAuliffe et al. (eds.), *With Reverence for the Word*, Oxford, 2003, pp. 422-436.

cessarily so. Verses admitting more than one interpretation are a self-understood reality in the Jewish reading of the Bible, their identification as such being part of the procedure of exegesis. Jewish tradition since the Tannaitic period, distinguishes between different ‘faces’, *panim*, of the Torah, a term, that will in early qur’anic exegesis re-appear to cover the very phenomenon of the ambiguous verses¹⁷. This perception of Scripture as being *per se* liable to more than one understanding, should have been familiar to the Medinan community. It is, then, not the ambiguous verses as such, but their reading that entails dangers. To express this idea the text refers to a metaphoric that is completely unfamiliar from earlier qur’anic discussions of revelation striking the reader as virtually sexual (*ibtigā’* – desire, *fitnah* – seduction¹⁸). It is the ‘desire’ of transgressing borders, of approaching seductive otherness and thus rebelling against original order that makes “those with vacillation in their hearts” wishful of interpretation, *ta’wīl*. *Ta’wīl* though later becoming the standard term for a particular type of commentary¹⁹, is etymologically an Arabic recoinage of the Hellenistic *reductio ad primum*, obviously a technique practised in the circles of those versed in scriptural exegesis that the community encountered at Medina. This kind of approach may have proven harmful once practised by individuals infavorably inclined towards the new revelation and following a

17) There is an early genre of commentary covering the polysemy caused by semantically ambiguous lexemes, called *mutašābih al-qur’ān* and *al-wuḡūh wa-l-naḡā’ir* respectively. In my view the concept of a positively connotated ambiguousness of Scriptural verses, so prominent in Jewish tradition with its concept of *panim shel ha-torah* (*wuḡūh*), did not, as Gilliot hold, originate only in early commentary, but seems to be reflected already in the Qur’ān itself.

18) Though *ibtigā’* in the Qur’ān is mostly oriented towards spiritual targets, such as the face of God, or his content; it may denote less noble desires such as covetousness, Q13:17. In view of the presence of the root *Bḡy* in the sense of ‘whore’ in the context of the Mary story, however, the sexual connotation seems not to be alien to the Qur’ān. Against the backdrop of the frequent spiritual targets of *ibtigā’* in the Qur’ān, its use in context of *fitnah* should appear particularly subversive. *Fitnah*, meaning ‘temptation’ (though its meanings extend to encompass ‘trial’, ‘straying from the right path’, ‘intracommunal strife’), in the Qur’ān often is a divine strategy to test human belief. An agent of *fitnah* par excellence, though not figuring explicitly in the Qur’ān, is, however, woman, cf. the Hadith *mā taraktu ba’di fitmatan aḡarr ‘alā r-rigāl min al-nisā’*, see Arnd J. WENSINCK, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, Leiden, 1937-1988, V. 63. The Hadith is adduced by Walid SALEH, “The woman as a locus of apocalyptic anxiety”, in Angelika NEUWIRTH, Birgit EMBALÓ, Sebastian GUENTHER, Maher JARRAR (eds.), *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature. Towards a new hermeneutic approach*, Beirut, 1999, pp. 123-45, 128. - Fakhry translates *fitnah* with ‘sedition’ thus blurring the virtual erotic implication.

19) See Claude GILLIOT, “Exegesis” in *EQ II*. *Ta’wīl* appears to denote in the Qur’ān not necessarily what it came to denote in early exegesis, namely “to apply a verse to a given situation”, GILLIOT, 100, but rather a free interpretation.

destructive intention²⁰. The text – when read in accordance with the usual grammatical rules demanding the position of the predicate before the subject (see above, alternative translation, though the matter cannot be decided conclusively) – seems to approve of *ta'wīl* as such, though not practiced by people who tend to swerve from a serious attitude. Seeking distraction, temptation, *fitnah*, is opposed to the attitude of the “well grounded in knowledge” who immediately connect between the core (“Mother”) of the Scripture, *umm al-kitāb*, and the ambiguous verses and accept the revelation as a whole. They thus cling to the image of the “mother-text”, in striking contrast to perverted exploitation of the text in search for *fitnah*. The qualification of the core of the Scripture as *umm*, mother, deserves attention: it conflates two discourses, the power-informed discourse of the vertical revelation on the one hand (*kitāb, tanzīl*), and the more submissive female discourse of purity, conception and child-birth. The image of *umm al-kitāb* is not new in *sūrat Āl Imrān*, there being earlier testimonies in Q 43:4, where the *qur'ān*, the recitation, is attested to be emanating from the “core (“Mother”) of the Scripture preserved with Us” and the later Q 13:29. In those two Meccan texts *umm al-kitāb* appears to denote the *Ur-Schrift* as such, from which all revealed Scriptures derive, whereas in Q 3:7 only parts of the revelation seem to constitute (or reflect) that core, whereas others are not as firm, *muḥkam*, and thus are open to interpretation. This latter use, though not the earlier²¹, seems to reflect a Jewish hermeneutical category, the securely known wording of a passage of scripture, “whose reading has a mother in scripture itself”, *yesh em la-miqra*, in contrast to a wording that is only indirectly known, based on tradition, *yesh em la-masoref*²². In admitting that parts of the text of the new revelation are not as firmly shaped as to reflect the heavenly source perfectly, but are apt to arouse debate, the qur'ānic text seems to reflect an experience with contemporary critics whose terminological

20) The “twisting of the tongue” with the intention to blur the meaning in their discussions about the revelation is in the Medinan texts of Qur'ān blamed more than one time on the Jews of Medina, who do not “accept from the non-Jews, the *ummiyyūna*” (Q 3:75).

21) Josef HOROVITZ, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Leipzig 1926, 65, - unjustifiedly - rejects the Jewish intertext arguing that it does not fit with the Meccan mentions of *umm al-kitāb*.

22) See *Babylonian Talmud bSukka 6b* (and often) and cf. the discussion in Wilhem BACHER, *Die exegetische Terminologie der jüdischen Traditionsliteratur I*, Leipzig, 1899, reprint Hildesheim, 1990, pp. 119f. It is worth noting that a recent Hebrew translation of the Qur'an (Aharon BEN-SHEMESH, *Ha-qur'an. Sefer ha-Sefarim shel ha-islam, Targum me-'aravit*. Tel Aviv, 1971, second edition 1978, p. 32) renders *umm al-kitāb* verbally by (*pesuqim meforashim, she-hem*) *em ha-sefer*, thus evoking the Talmudic *em la-miqra*. (Kind communication by Dirk Hartwig).

use may be reproduced here. Exegetic professionalism is clearly attested by further *termini technici*, *ta'wīl* being the Arabic re-coining of a technical term in Hellenistic rhetoric (*ad primum reducere*) and *mutašābih* resp. *muḥkam* resounding the Aristotelian *amphibolos* and *pithanos*. Those hermeneutically experienced critics whose activity is presupposed here would have to be sought among the pretenders of the authoritative (biblical) knowledge. In accusing them of an 'unchaste desire' for seduction/sedition, the texts contrasts them with those who display a pure relation to the text clinging to the ideal representation of scripture, the *umm al-kitāb* – a metaphorically male-female relationship which is viewed unambiguously positive. Whereas *umm al-kitāb* is used in a less dramatic context in Q 43:4, and Q 13:29, where its gender-implication was not functional, we find the denomination here re-charged with gender-significations, the term being positioned in the very centre of gender-informed speech.

3. Female venues of power and knowledge

The gender aspects looming through the seemingly purely hermeneutic discussion of the different kinds of verses, appears to prelude the representation of sacred motherhood that is in the focus of the story of Āl ʿImrān, that forcefully confirms the gendered sub-text of the debate about the *āyāt muḥkamat* and the *āyāt mutašābihāt*. In this context, the verse preceding the discussion gains new significance as a prelude to what follows immediately:

3:6 It is He Who forms you in the wombs as He pleases, There is no God but He, The Mighty, the Wise.	هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَوِّرُكُمْ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ
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Though certainly entailing a predication of God's omniscience, this verse is no less a statement about motherhood, where the period before giving birth maybe understood as mirroring the very antagonism inherent in the two kinds of verses, God creating the child in his/her mother's womb without the child's gender being clearly recognizable (*muḥkam*), the unborn child remaining *mutašābih* for the human observers until his/her birth, though God is knowledgeable about his/her nature. The divinely willed fact of this ambiguity is in the focus of the story of Mary's birth. It is to God's discretion in what shape hidden things will come to the fore, in procreation equally as in revelation. It is important however, that God makes, in both his

acts of procreation and revelation, use of a female agent, i.e. the womb of the mother, *rahm*, for pro-creation, and the core of the Scripture, *umm al-kitāb*, for revelation. The juxtaposition of the two verses Q 3:6 and 3:7 with their analogous figure of thought, both being introduced by anaphoric *huwa lladī*, produces a conflation of the two main discourses of sūrah 3:1-63, the discourse of oneness & revelation and that of gender-diversity & procreation, i.e. of a vertical transfer of knowledge and a more inclusive imagination of knowledge warranted by the very nature of creation. There being a positive female agent, the *umm al-kitāb*, established for the revelation process, and respected by the listeners “well grounded in knowledge”, the aberration of the sceptics, consequently, again appears in gendered terms: they cling to the ambiguous, *mutašābih*, avoiding the clearly defined, *muḥkam*, for their desire of disorder, which is presented through a particularly strong metaphor, the female power of seduction, *fitnah*. Taking this gender-oriented subtext of the verses into consideration, it is difficult not to be reminded of the image of the ‘jealous’ God known from the Old Testament, particularly the prophet Hosea, who laments the ‘adulterous’ leanings of his people.

In the Qur’ān, however, the verdict addresses not the entire people of God, but only part of the receivers of revelation – the believers who wish not to become distracted and misguided like the sceptics pray for *rahmah*, a divine grace that in the context of *sūrat Maryam* is closely connected with the idea of legitimate progeny (Q 19:2) thus invoking the role of the mother, to whose womb, *rahm*, the word *rahmah* – is etymologically related. The once established close interrelation of the two discourses of revelation and procreation will reveal its full impact in the discussion of the narrative section of the sūrah.

It maybe of interest in this context to throw a look at a central liturgical text of Eastern Christianity, the *Akathistos hymnos*²³, the ‘Praises of the Virgin’, where Mary herself is the subject of diverse perceptions, being considered a symbol of faith by the believers and an agent of disturbance for the unbelievers: *Chaire, ton apiston amphibolon akousma, chaire, ton piston anamphibolon kauchema (Ifraḥīyā ḥabaran yaltabisu ʿalā l-kuffār. Ifraḥīyā faḥran lil-mu'minīna lā yuṣawwihuhu iltibās)*. In this text, it is not the ‘mother of the Book’, but the ‘mother of the Word’ that is praised as an

23) *Oi ekklesiastikoi hymnoi eis ten hyperhagian theotokon*, Athens, 1971, pp. 61-62, resp. *Kitāb al-ṣalāwāt, yaḥtawīʿ alā baʿd al-ḥidam al-tuqūsiyyah fīl-kan ʿāh al-urṭuḡuksiyyah* (without place and date). The extended text – closely related to the Rosary of the Western Church – is recited on the four Fridays of Lent in the Orthodox Church.

unambiguous object of faith for the believers – ambiguity arising only with the disbelievers.

4. Further traces of Christian tradition

The prologue further displays a number of evocations of the Christian tradition. There seems to be a hint to Christian piety imagined as particularly humble, again evoking female rather than male ideals of self-representation, in such verses as

3:16	Those who say: “Our Lord, we have believed, so forgive us our sins and guard us against the torments of Hell”.	الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا إِنَّا آمَنَّا فَاعْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ.	3:16
3:17	They are the patient, the truthful, the devout, the charitable and the seekers of forgiveness at daybreak.	الصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْمُنْفِقِينَ وَالْمُسْتَغْفِرِينَ بِالْأَسْحَارِ.	3:17

Some of these ascetic gestures are demanded of Mary herself in the narrative section, cf. Q 3:43. Q 3:16 reminds strongly of verses from the Our Father prayer, “forgive us our sins, keep us safe from the evil one” (*Matthew* 6:9-13, *Luke* 11:2-4); the combination of a prayer for forgiveness and for being spared the ‘bad’ is unique in the Qurān²⁴.

There is, however, dissent between diverse groups of those who have received Scripture before which can only be overcome by submissiveness to God²⁵:

The (true) religion with God is submissiveness	إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الإِسْلَامُ	3:19
Whose who were given the Book Did not disagree among themselves except after certain knowledge came to them.	وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ.	

24) It is however prepared by a verse in Q 40:7 where God in an angelic intervention is asked to forgive the believers and to spare them the punishment of Hell. - The prayer for forgiveness appears again in *sūrat Āl Imrān* (3:147, 3:193). The concept of an overall forgiving of sins seems to go back to *sūrat gāfir* (40).

25) FAKHRY, *Interpretation*, translates in the sense of the later understanding: Islam.

This verse that reminds of the earlier concluding verses of Qur'anic presentations of Jesus, insisting on the dissent that broke out after his disappearance (Q 19:37, cf. Q 43:65)²⁶, may again allude to the schism that occurred shortly after Jesus death, namely that between Judaism and Jewish Christianity, though there is no positive proof of that particular understanding. What is novel here is that the dissenters are associated with gender issues again, being put into a relation to adulterers, acting out of envy or impure 'desire', *baġyan baynahum* an expression reminding strongly of the key word of the accusation raised against Mary, to be a *baġī*, a whore (Q 19:28). Again, this is a metaphoric reference to the female social realm.

The destructive 'desires' attested for those you refuse to accept the message is in stark contrast to the attitude assumed by the prophet who calls for submissiveness:

3.20 So, if they dispute with you say:

"I have submitted myself to God and so have

those who followed me";

and say also to those who have received the

Book and to the unlearned:

Have you submitted?..."

فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ 3:20

أَسَلَّمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ

وَمَنْ اتَّبَعَنِي

وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ

وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ

أَأَسَلَّمْتُمْ

This verse is particularly noteworthy, since it attests not only to the Prophet's challenging the authority of the heirs of Scripture, certainly the most powerful group, whose pretentious attitude appears particularly striking in Q 3:23, but it attests as well his familiarity with another group, that although regarded as unfamiliar with Scripture, is a part in the dispute: the *ummiyyūn*. The term was introduced into the Qur'an in Q 2:78 to denote "those who do not know Scripture"²⁷. Though at first used with a degrading connotation, the term already in Q 3:20 and 3:75 figures in the neutral sense

26) See Angelika NEUWIRTH, *Imagining Mary*.

27) Q 2:78 is a polemic targeting individuals among the Jews, who are not sufficiently educated to be truly familiar with Scripture; the Qur'an thus employs the polemical tools of the adversary group itself. The word *ummi* formally is the *nisbah* of Arab. *ummah*, an old loan from Hebrew *ummah* that predates the genesis of the Qur'an. Semantically conveying a quite different meaning, however, *ummi* has to be considered as a calque, presumably a Jewish coining, since it does not refer to the neutral notion of 'community' conveyed by the Arabic *ummah*, but expresses the Jewish notion of 'belonging to the people of the world' (*me-ummot ha-'olam*) which in Jewish use has a negative, exclusive notion. It enters the Qur'an, however, in a less exclusive sense denoting people who are not acquainted with scripture.

of “unscriptured”, not yet divinely graced with a Scripture. In still later texts, it will become a purely positive qualification of the community, Q 62:2: *huwa llaḏī ba‘āta fīl-ummiyyīna rasūlan minhum*, relying on the identification of the prophet himself as *an-nabī al-ummī*, that is introduced in the Medinan extension of the Meccan *sūrat al-A‘rāf*, Q 7:157, 158²⁸.

Towards the end of the prologue, a verse of Mary’s hymn, the ‘*magnificat*’, is put in the mouth of the prophet:

<p>3:26 Say: O God, Master of the Kingdom You give the kingship to whom You please And take away the kingship from whom You please. You exalt whom You please and humble whom You please In Your Hand is all the good, And You have the power over everything!</p>	<p>قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَالِكُ الْمُلْكِ 3:26 تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ.</p>
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The revolutionary tenor of this dictum from the ‘*magnificat*’ (Luke 1:46-55) – which as a whole as David Flusser has shown, goes back to a Maccabean revolutionary anthem – preludes the core message of *sūrat Āl ‘Imrān*, the toppling of the predominance of the exclusively Abrahamian receivers of revelation and the elevation of another group of legitimate receivers, the Āl ‘Imrān, a group that is represented not by patriarchs but by two female protagonists and a male figure who in his apostleship displays submissiveness and remains remote from the association of patriarchal authority.

There follow some further dicta that strongly remind of Gospel texts, such as the saying recommended to the prophet as a motto:

28) Q 2:78 is a polemic targeting individuals among the Jews, who are not sufficiently educated to be truly familiar with Scripture; the Qur’ān thus employs the polemical tools of the adversary group itself. The word *ummī* formally is the *nisbah* of Arab. *ummah*, an old loan from Hebrew *ummah* that predates the genesis of the Qur’ān. Semantically conveying a quite different meaning, however, *ummī* has to be considered as a calque, presumably a Jewish coining, since it does not refer to the neutral notion of ‘community’ conveyed by the Arabic *ummah*, but expresses the Jewish notion of ‘belonging to the people of the world’ (*me-ummot ha-‘olam*) which in Jewish use has a negative, exclusive notion. It enters the Qur’ān, however, in a less exclusive sense denoting people who are not acquainted with scripture.

3:31 Say: If you love God, follow me;
then God will love you and forgive
your sins.

3:31 قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي
يُحِبُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ

God is Forgiving, Merciful.

وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ.

Such verses clearly betray an awareness of the community of Christian traditions that seem to have been transmitted independently from the context of the New Testament stories. Already in the prologue to the narrative part of the *sūrah*, the tenor of the two Christian stories, humbleness *vis à vis* the will of God and steadfastness in belief in spite of rational objections, is thus clearly present. But there is also a strong confidence in God's power to change existing harmful power relations, and to turn situations into their very opposite such as it is expressed in the 'magnificat'²⁹. This divine power will be unequivocally disclosed in the narrative part of the *sūrah*.

C. THE STORIES

The stories that in their core are known to the listeners from *sūrat Maryam* are re-told in *sūrat Āl Imrān* under the new aspect of their forming part of a particular prophetic genealogy – an idea that presupposes a divine project of prophethood to be enacted by a number of prophets, labelled no longer *rusul*, but in accordance with the Jewish model of this concept, *nabiyyūn* or *anbiyā'*, a loan from Hebrew *nabi*³⁰.

The concept has been prepared by several earlier texts³¹, but attains particular significance in *sūrat Āl Imrān*. It will later encompass the person of Muhammad (Q 33:7). It is certainly not mere coincidence that one Gos-

29) See David FLUSSER, "The 'Magnificat', the 'Benedictus' and the War Scroll", in David FLUSSER, *Judaism and the origins of Christianity*, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 126-149.

30) See for the concept Hartmut BOBZIN, "Rasūl and Nabī", in Michael MARX, Angelika NEUWIRTH, Nicolai SINAI (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context*, Leiden, 2006 (forthcoming).

31) See for Meccan *sūras* Q 42:13, 6:85; these texts connect a series of prophets without, however, claiming their genealogical relationship. The Medinan interpolation of a genealogy in *sūrat Maryam*, Q 19:58, encompassing all the prophets that had been recalled in the *sūras*, appears to be an attempt at classifying a number of prophets under particular genealogical clusters, namely Ādam, Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm and 'Imrān, that had been introduced in Q 3:33: *ulā'ika llaḏīna an'ama llāhu 'alayhim mina n-nabiyyīna min ḏuriyyati Ādama wa-mimman ḥamalnā ma'ū Nūḥin wa-min ḏurriyyati Ibrāhīma wa-Isrā'īla wa-mimman hadaynā wa-ḡtabaynā idā tullā 'alayhim āyātu r-rahmāni ḥarrū sugḡadan wa-bukiyyā*, the last group obviously reflecting the Christian tradition characterized by humbleness. Here the explicit mentioning of Āl 'Imrān is replaced by a paraphrase.

pel, that of Matthew, equally opens up with genealogy, indeed two subsequent genealogies, the first – short one – mentioning David and Abraham as the progenitors of Jesus (*Matthew* 1:1), the ensuing long one covering 3×14 generations and including five female figures (*Matthew* 1:2-16). Though Matthew's extensive genealogy refers to Joseph, it has been taken as implicitly including Mary³². It is noteworthy that the Qur'ānic story of Jesus' family uses a looser form of genealogy by declaring Adam, Noah and the families of Abraham and Amran elects of God and at the same time genealogically related to each other. Adam and Noah represent the two beginnings of human life on earth, Abraham and his family are God's elects in the Torah, hitherto acknowledged as the uniquely blessed family of prophets. ʿImrān, who through the typological reading of Mary's origins is identified with Mary's father Yoachim (not the Old Testament Miryam's father Amran), with this text for the first time – and only through the agency of his wife – enters the stage as the founder of another elect family, that of the protagonists of the Gospel, Mary and Jesus, who are genealogically related to the Abrahamian family. Four great epochs then, the first opened by the First Man, the second by the retorer of mankind after the deluge, both presented as forefathers of the founders of two later traditions, that of the patriarchs starting with Abraham and that of the family of Mary and Jesus, starting with Mary's father. (The relationship of Jesus to David (*Matthew* 1:1) is not relevant for the Qur'ān since Jesus is not perceived as the messiah in the Jewish sense of a reviver of the Jewish monarchic political entity, but simply bears the name of *masīḥ* as part of his nomenclature). It is noteworthy that genealogy is not the exclusive focus of the verse, the four founders of new 'generations' being first of all elects, (*inna llāha ṣṭafāʾ*). Since Zechariah is obviously taken as part of ʿAl ʿImrān, the two stories of Zechariah and Mary, that earlier were detached stories only connected through the analogy of their motifs, have merged to form one joint story as they do in the Gospel of Luke.

1. The wife of ʿImrān

Mary's story which now occupies the first place, since it begins with her birth that precedes Zechariah's events, starts with a short prologue:

3:33 God chose Adam, Noah,

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ آدَمَ وَنُوحًا 3:33

32) This is stressed by JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, see *Šarḥ Inğīl Mattā li-l-qiddīs Yūḥannā al-Dahabīl-famm*. Trsl. by Adnan TARABULSI, 3 vols., 1996, 1998, 2004, I, pp. 52-54.

the family of Abraham and the family of

وَأَلِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَأَلِ عِمْرَانَ

‘Imrān

above all mankind,

عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

3:34 Descending one from another;

ذُرِّيَّةً بَعْضُهَا مِنْ بَعْضٍ 3:34

God is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing!

وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ.

The Arabic word *ḡurriyyah* that was until then only used to denote direct physical offspring here acquires a discursive meaning to match the Greek *gene*³³ or the Hebrew *toledot*³⁴, a chain of generations that partake in a particular divine project. Mary will be an important link in the chain of such a *ḡurriyyah* (Q 3:36). The story of Mary’s – unnamed – mother who vows to give her child to the service of God – following the narrative of the Protevangelium of James – is strikingly explicit in its gender-specific physical details, *fī baṭnī, waḡa‘u, waḡa‘at, untā*. The woman speaks uninhibitedly about her female condition, at the same time she proves perfectly at home in the language demanded when addressing God. Having born a daughter instead of the expected son she still is determined to fulfil her vow. She herself names the child Maryam/Mary³⁵ – the fatherly role being unoccupied in the story – and hands her over to the temple asking God for guardianship. Thus, contrary to the scenario in the Protevangelium, in the qur’ānic story no male human protagonist is involved. God himself, though – as a prophetic ‘aside’ underscores – well aware of the different nature of male and female, accommodates the child Mary in the temple. Only then Zechariah, absent from the story in the Protevangelium, enters the stage. He has been put in charge of Mary; his care, however, turns out to be of no need: Mary is fed with heavenly food. Thus, even the one male admitted to the scene proves superfluous – patriarchal categories of male social priorities are set out of validity. The active members of Āl ‘Imrān until the appearance of Jesus, are women.

33) Greek *gene* is the Septuaginta translation of Biblical Hebrew *toledot*.

34) For *toledot*, see e.g. *Num.* I.20 and often. The current Arabic Bible translation presents *tawālīd*, cf. *Al-Kitāb al-muqaddas*. The Bible Society in the Near East. Beirut, 1970, p. 206.

35) Ilana PARDES, *Countertraditions in the Bible. A feminist approach*. Cambridge, Mass., 1993, has underscored the significance of women’s initiative in naming their children in various Biblical accounts.

3:35 When the Wife of ‘Imrān said:

“Lord, I have vowed to You what
is in my womb to Your service
Accept it from me, for You are the
All-Hearing, the All-Knowing”.

3:36 And when she delivered her, she said:

“Lord, I have given birth to a female”,
And God knew best what she gave
birth to,

The male is not the same as the
female –

“I have named her Mary and I
commend her and her descendants
to You to protect her from the ac-
cused Devil”.

3:37 Then the Lord accepted her gra-
ciously

and made her to grow into a fine
child,

entrusting her to Zechariah.

Whenever Zechariah went in to
see her in the sanctuary

he found that she had some provision.

“Mary”, he said, “where did you
get this?”

She replied: “It is from God,

God provides for whom he
wishes without measure”.

إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَةُ عِمْرَانَ 3:35

رَبِّ إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا

فَتَقَبَّلَ مِنِّي 3:35
إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ 3:36

رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ
وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعَتْ

وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ

وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ
وَإِنِّي أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهَا

مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ 3:37

وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا

وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا

كَلِمًا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ

وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا

قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّىٰ لَكَ هَذَا

قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ.

2. Zechariah

Again – as in the Gospel of Luke – Mary’s story alternates with that of Zechariah³⁶. His account remains close to that familiar from *sūrat Maryam*, it is indeed a summary of the former which serves the purpose to connect the events around Mary and Zechariah. There are a few specifications, the account now underscores his wish for a child to perpetuate his offspring, *durriyyah* – not just for a single heir, *walī*. This time it is not the Lord himself (who seems to be the speaker in the earlier story), but angels who approach him when he is standing praying in the temple, *mihrāb*, in his priestly function; they predict the birth of a son called John/Yaḥyā, adding to the already known attributes of John/Yaḥyā that of a lord and an ascetic. In this account again, Zechariah unable to believe the promise, asks for a sign and is predicted muteness and is instructed to order God’s praise in the morning and in the evening. The story which now indirectly provides a temple background for the story of Mary, ends with the prediction of the birth of a son whose fulfilment is already known to the listeners.

Thereupon Zechariah prayed to

3:38 هُنَالِكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُ قَالَ

his Lord saying:

“Lord, grant me from Your Bounty

رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً

fine descendants.

Indeed You hear every prayer!”.

إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ الدُّعَاءِ.

3:39 Then the angels called him

3:39 فَنَادَتْهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ

while he was at prayer in the

وَهُوَ قَائِمٌ يُصَلِّي فِي الْمِحْرَابِ

sanctuary, saying:

“God bids you rejoice in John,

أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ بِيَحْيَى

confirming a word from God,

مُصَدِّقًا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ

a master, chaste

وَسَيِّدًا وَحَصُورًا

and a Prophet and one of the

وَنَبِيًّا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ.

righteous”.

3:40 He said: “How will I have a son,

3:40 قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ

36) For details about the relation between the Gospel and the qur’anic account, see Angelika NEUWIRTH, *Imagining Mary*.

seeing I have been overtaken by old age and my wife is barren?"

"This is how God does what ever He pleases".

3:41 He said: "Lord, give me a sign".

God said: "Your sign is that you will not speak to anybody for three days, except by signs, and remember your Lord often and give praise evening and morning".

وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِي الْكِبَرُ وَأَمْرَاتِي عَاقِرٌ

قَالَ كَذَلِكَ اللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ.

3:41 قَالَ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ لِي آيَةً
قَالَ آيَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ

ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْرًا
وَأَذْكُرَ رَبَّكَ كَثِيرًا
وَسَبَّحُ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِبْكَارِ.

3. Mary

Mary's story in *sūrat Maryam* had been strongly imprinted by mythical traits. Now, that the location of Mary is known and she is placed into an environment occupied by other humans, her story loses the character of a mythical tale. Still, she remains passive figuring as a receiver of messages rather than an interlocutor:

3:42 And when the angels said: "O Mary, God has chosen you and purified you, preferring you to all woman-kind".

3:43 O Mary, be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself and bow down with those who bow down".

3:44 This is part of the tidings of the Unseen which We reveal to you. You were not in their midst when they cast their pens to see who will take charge of Mary, and you were not in their midst when they were disputing.

3:42 وَإِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ
وَاصْطَفَاكِ عَلَى نِسَاءِ الْعَالَمِينَ.

3:43 يَا مَرْيَمُ اقْنُتِي لِرَبِّكِ
وَاسْجُدِي وَارْكَعِي مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ

3:44 ذَلِكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ
نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ
وَمَا كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ يُلْقُونَ أَقْلَامَهُمْ

أَيْهُمْ يَكْفُلُ مَرْيَمَ
وَمَا كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ
إِذْ يَخْتَصِمُونَ

3:45 When the angels said: “O Mary,
 God bids you rejoice in a word from Him
 whose name is the Messiah, Jesus,
 son of Mary.

He shall be prominent in this world
 and the next
 and shall be near to God.

3:46 He shall speak to people from the cradle
 and while an grown up man
 and will be one of the righteous”.

3:47 She said: “Lord, how can I have a child
 when I have not been touched by any
 man?”

God said: “Thus God creates
 whatever He pleases.

When He decrees a matter,
 he simply says to it: ‘Be’, and it comes
 to be”.

إِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ 3:45
 إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكِ بِكَلِمَةٍ مِنْهُ
 اسْمُهُ الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ

وَجِيهًا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ

وَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ 3:46
 وَيُكَلِّمُ النَّاسَ فِي الْمَهْدِ

وَكَهْلًا وَمِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ. 3:47
 قَالَتْ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي وَلَدٌ
 وَلَمْ يَمَسِّنِي بَشَرٌ

قَالَ كَذَلِكَ اللَّهُ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ

إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا 3:47
 يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ.

Mary’s story is reduced again to its traditional monotheist elements: angels address her, first announcing her divine election. She has been purified and elected and is – like Mary in the Gospel of Luke (*Luke* 1:42) – praised as uniquely blessed among women³⁷. She is called to worship God piously – like the unnamed Christian worshippers mentioned in the prologue (Q 3:17, see above). The election scene merges into a reminder – addressing the qur’anic speaker – of the mysterious character (*ḡayb*) of his accounts, that are not due to his own experience but divinely revealed³⁸. He has there-

37) See for the reading of this benediction - which in the Gospel is uttered by Elizabeth, not by an angel - in qur’anic exegesis, Jane MCAULIFFE, “Chosen of all Women. Mary and Fatima in qur’anic exegesis”, in *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981), pp. 19-28.

38) This is a characteristic trait of qur’anic story-telling. The presence of the teller in the story, the underscoring of his own limited knowledge as a narrator, sound very modern: The Qur’an indeed stresses that reality is not entirely reproducible through what is explicit, there

fore no access to the details of all the events, such as the episode of the casting of lots to find out the appropriate guardian for Mary. The story goes on with the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, who now bears his full name and title al-Masīḥ ʿĪsā b. Maryam. He is predicted a worldly and heavenly elevated rank and the privilege of particular closeness to God such as until then was characteristic only of Moses. His presentation is devoid of divine attributes, the Qurʾān remains silent about the Christian dogmas, the text not engaging in disassociating itself from the different position held by the Christians. Mary pronounces a hesitating response –defending her purity – that only serves to provoke the already familiar verdict that God is powerful over everything and creates by his mere verbal imperative, cf. Q 19:35. The story, though clearly a re-capitulation of the earlier one, does clarify some whereabouts such as the temple background, the relationship to Zechariah, but it primarily reduces some earlier mythic images to more general and abstract ideas, thus, instead of the spirit turned visible, angels, presumably invisible, take over to speak to Mary, in Zechariah’s case they even replace God’s speech. Most striking however is the wholesale dismissal of a previously introduced mythical scenario: the birth story of Jesus is altogether left out in the text. The entire account is no longer ‘miraculous’. It is all the more surprising to find Mary in this text elevated to a unique rank as superior over all women in the world. She is – a privilege over all other qurʾānic figures – integrated into a prophetic genealogy, which in her case is made up primarily of women, and even receives a birth and childhood story of her own.

In this later version the core verse of Mary’s story in the Gospel: Mary’s election and her ranking above all women, is given full right. It should be kept in mind that that benediction of hers, as well as the ‘*magnificat*’, form an important part of Christian liturgical lore. If we further take into account the allusions to Christian tradition found in the prologue that describe Christians in their ascetic practices and prayers, quote from them we may assume an intense contact between the community and liturgically versed, perhaps ascetic – though dogmatically rather unpretentious – adherents of the Christian tradition to have preceded the composition of the sūrah.

4. Jesus’ miracles

Jesus’ account in *sūrat Āl ʿImrān*³⁹ is closely linked to the divine verdict

being a hidden subtext to the explicit word. The qurʾānic text made up of *āyāt*, signs, that have to be properly de-coded.

39) See for its qurʾānic pretext in *sūrat Maryam*, Angelika NEUWIRTH, *Imagining Mary*.

pronounced in response to Mary's questioning the possibility of her giving birth: God, speaking about himself in the third form, announces to create Jesus in an equally supernatural mode as he created Adam and to teach him the Scriptures – the relationship between Scripture and Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel remaining undetermined – and dispatch him as a messenger to the Israelites. Jesus' deeds – serving to prove his divinely imposed task –, are a series of miracles, that he reports about himself: he blows life into stone figurines – a playful miracle known from the Gospel of Infancy that associates him rather with an infant than with a grown up male, and that fits well with his miracle of defending his mother when being still an infant. He has further come to heal the sick – a caring and curing task that could be equally imagined as carried out by a woman, though his reviving the dead qualifies him as a divinely authorized powerful agent. He does not, however, perform this miracle in his own authority, but "with God's permission". His miraculous predicting of details of people's daily life (Q 3:49), concerning their consuming and storing up foodstuff in their houses, however, would associate him again with the female sphere of reality. It is noteworthy that when it comes to his task of implementing the traditional laws, he does not act as a legislator enforcing authority on the people but as the reverse: though he is sent to affirm the Tora he will also abolish some of its interdictions (Q 3:50), thus loosening the authority of Scripture. His reconciling call for the worship of God alone (Q 3:51), a quotation from his speech in *sūrat Maryam* (Q 19:36) and *sūrat az-zuḥruf* (Q 43:64), may pass as Jesus' qur'ānic 'motto'. Jesus thus appears on the other side of patriarchal power. – Insofar as Jesus has, however, not come to abolish the 'interdictions', the Jewish law as such, this position in the Medinan text fits well with the image of Jesus cherished by Jewish-Christians.

3:48 And He will teach him the Book,
the Wisdom, the Torah and the
Gospel.

وَيُعَلِّمُهُ الْكِتَابَ 3:48
وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَالتَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ

3:49 And send him forth as a Messenger
to the Children of Israel saying:
"I bring you a sign from your Lord.
I will create for you out of clay
the likeness of a bird:

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ 3:49
أَنِّي قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِآيَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ
أَنِّي أَخْلُقُ لَكُمْ مِنَ الطِّينِ كَهَيْئَةِ
الطَّيْرِ

then I will breathe into it and it will
become a bird, by God's Leave.

فَأَنْفُخُ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طَيْرًا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

And I will heal the blind and the leper
and will raise the dead, by God's
Leave.

وَأُبْرِئُ الْأَكْمَهَ وَالْأَبْرَصَ
وَأُحْيِي الْمَوْتَى بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

And I will inform you concerning
what you eat and what you hoard in
your homes.

وَأُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا تَأْكُلُونَ
وَمَا تَدَّخِرُونَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ

In all this there is surely a sign for you,
if you are believers!"

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً لَكُمْ
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ.

3:50 "I have come to confirm what came
before me of the Torah
and make lawful to you some of the
of the things that were forbidden to
you.

وَمُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ 3:50

I have come to you with a sign from
your Lord,
so fear God and obey me".

وَلَأَجَلٍ لَكُمْ بَعْضَ الَّذِي حُرِّمَ
عَلَيْكُمْ

3:51 "God is indeed your lord and my
Lord;
so worship Him.
This is the Straight Path!"

وَجِئْتُكُمْ بِآيَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا.

3:51 إِنَّ اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ

فَاعْبُدُوهُ

هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ.

5. Jesus' fate as a messenger

The catalogue of Jesus' deeds reported by himself in the first person turns into a story only with Q 3:52. Viewing Q 3:49-51 and 3:52-55 together we rediscover a pattern familiar from earlier prophetic stories, though decisively modified: Jesus like previous prophets after conveying his message – and contrary to other prophets, working miracles and alleviating the existing law – at a certain stage of his apostleship experiences the stubborn unbelief of his

people. Instead of seeking refuge with God, however, as earlier prophets did, he calls for “helpers”, *anṣār*, to maintain his divine mission. A group of the *ḥawāriyyūn*, volunteer to become his *anṣār*, suscribing to the new faith of submissiveness. The term *anṣār* obviously derives from the experience of Muhammad himself who brought with him followers, labelled *anṣār*, when migrating from Mecca to Medina. But in spite of the *anṣār*’s commitment, Jesus’ mission fails. The allusion to a ruse enacted by a non-specified group and another ruse enacted by God in response (Q 3:54) remains obscure. In the end, God releases Jesus through divine intervention elevating him to heaven (Q 3:55) – not without promising him to grant his followers a rank above their adversaries. The event of Jesus’ elevation to heaven, that in the Qur’ān is not narratively expounded but merely announced by God to Jesus, is, again, presented devoid of any dogmatic-polemical implication. It obviously does not imply a reference to the substantially different Christian tradition about Jesus’ end of his worldly life; the crucifixion not being mentioned in this text at all. The entire section on Jesus appears as a loose collection of isolated reports about his life, that are occasionally interrupted by addresses to Muhammad’s opponents. Its concluding verse Q 3:59 re-affirms the analogy between Jesus and Adam who both were created by God through the mere creational imperative *kun fa-yakūn*⁴⁰; the earlier polemic against the assumption of Jesus as offspring of God, is not resumed in this context.

3:52 When Jesus sensed their dis- belief,
he said: “Who are my supporters in
God’s Way?”

3:52 فَلَمَّا أَحَسَّ عِيسَىٰ مِنْهُمُ الْكُفْرَ
قَالَ مَنْ أَنْصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ

The disciples said: “We are God’s
supporters

قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ

we believe in God, so bear witness
that we submit.”

آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَأَشْهَدُ بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

3:53 “Lord, we believe in what You have
revealed

3:53 رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا بِمَا أَنْزَلْتَ

and we have followed the Messenger;

وَاتَّبَعْنَا الرَّسُولَ

40) The argument has been presented in the insertion Q 19:34-40. God has no need of a child in view of his creational power. The connection between Adam and Jesus as a second Adam is a prominent idea in ecclesiastical tradition.

- write us down with those who bear witness”.
- 3:54 And they contrived and God contrived;
God is the Best of the contrivers.
- 3:55 When God said: “O Jesus, I will cause you to die, will lift you up to Me, purify you from those who have disbelieved and place those who followed you above those who heave disbelieved, till the day of Resurrection. Then unto Me is your return, so that I may judge between you regarding what you were disputing”.
- 3:56 But as for those who disbelieved, I will sternly punish them in this world and the Hereafter, and they shall have no supporters”.
- 3:57 And as for those who have believed and done the good deeds, He will pay them their rewards in full. God does not love the evildoers.
- 3:58 This is what We recite to you of the Revelations and Wise Reminder.
- 3:59 Jesus is in God’s Sight is like Adam: He created him from dust, then He said to him: “Be”, and there he was.
- فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ.
- 3:54 وَمَكْرُوا وَمَكَرَ اللَّهُ 3:54
وَاللَّهُ خَيْرُ الْمَاكِرِينَ
- 3:55 إِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَا عِيسَى ابْنِي مَتْوَفِّكَ 3:55
وَرَأَفَعَكَ إِلَيَّ
وَمُطَهَّرَكَ مِنَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
- وَجَاعِلُ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوكَ
فَوْقَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ
ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرْجِعُكُمْ
فَأَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ
فِيمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ.
- 3:56 فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا 3:56
فَأَعَدُّبُهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا
فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ
وَمَا لَهُمْ مِنْ نَاصِرِينَ.
- 3:57 وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ 3:57
فَيُؤْتِيهِمْ أُجُورَهُمْ
وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ
- 3:58 ذَلِكَ نَتْلُوهُ عَلَيْكَ مِنَ الْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ
الْحَكِيمِ
- 3:59 إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَى عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ آدَمَ 3:59
خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ
ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ
فَيَكُونُ.

The narrative section is concluded by an affirmation of its rank as a revelation, it merges into a hymnal praise of God who is evoked with his attributes mentioned in Q 3:6⁴¹:

3:62 This indeed is the true story,
and there is not God but God,
and God is truly the Mighty, the Wise!.

إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْقَصَصُ الْحَقُّ 3:62
وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا اللَّهُ
وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ.

The story is followed by a long sermon that addresses “the people of the Scripture”, *ahl al-kitāb* who were until then not labelled as such but transcribed as “those who were given the Scripture”. The new designation that later is to become the technical term for both Jews and Christians, points to a later origin of the text following the narrative section that therefore deserves a discussion in a context of its own.

CONCLUSION

What strikes the reader of the extended story of Mary and Jesus (Q 3:1-62) is the politicisation of the earlier purely didactic and edifying story. Mary’s story is retold to top a female-dominated genealogy of elects, herself being staged as one of two women that entertain a particularly close relationship with the divine. This empowerment appears to serve to counterbalance the overweight of the one until then uniquely acknowledged lineage of apostleship, the Jewish tradition, that relies on the genealogy of Abraham. Authority connected with that patriarchal tradition is counterbalanced by humbleness and steadfastness on the side of the adherents of Āl ʿImrān whose only male agent, Jesus, is presented as uniquely non-patriarchally-oriented. The entire realm of revelation is affected by this turn in perspective: female metaphors penetrate the until then purely male power discourse. The community is thus empowered to cope with the prerogatives of the dominant patriarchal tradition of revelation. ‘Besieged’ by what was presented to them as the Abrahamian tradition, the community invents an outlet through the establishment of a counter-tradition. The earlier imagination of Mary as a sacred individual has come to imprint the collective image of the

41) Verse 3:61 presenting a *mubāhala*, is usually considered as a later addition:

61 *wa-man hāggāka fīhi min baʿdi ma, gāʾaka mina l-ʿilmi*
fa-qul taʿālaw naḍʿū abnāʾnā wa-abnāʾakum
wa-nisāʾanā wa-nisāʾakum wa-ʿanfusānā wa-ʿanfusakum
ṭumma nabtahil
fa-nagʿal laʿnata llāhi ʿalā l-kāfirīn.

Āl ʿImrān that offers itself to the new believers as a new paradigm, a non-patriarchal tradition cherishing the virtue of submissiveness. Jesus, in turn, is singled out as a messenger who is not only – like other qurʿānic messengers – saved from the disaster of his people’s punishment, but who is finally transferred by God to heaven. If we may infer from the allusion in Q 43:61⁴², that he will resume a role on the Last Day, the suspended fulfilment of his function would fit, again, with Jewish Christian expectations who view Jesus as the Messiah destined to reign at the end of times. The thus enlarged image of Jesus who had until then been presented only in the context of his birth, again serves to underscore the electedness of the Āl ʿImrān, heirs to the counter-tradition to that of the earlier exclusively acknowledged elects, the Āl Ibrāhīm. This attempt at the integration of a non-patriarchal tradition imagined as imprinted by female no less than male experience, is, in my view, an important stage of development in the shaping of the qurʿānic message. It is easily overlooked since it had to cede its prominence at a later period to the reconstructed Abrahamian paradigm. The Islamic ritual prayer does not celebrate Āl ʿImrān but has put the priority unambiguously clear:

Allāhumma ṣallī ʿalā sayyidinā Muḥammad
Ka-mā ṣallayta ʿalā sayyidinā Ibrāhīm
Wa-bārik ʿalā sayyidinā Muḥammad
Ka-mā bārakta ʿalā sayyidinā Ibrāhīm
Fīl-Ālamīna. Amīn.

42) The reading transmitted in the qurʿānic text of Ḥafṣ ʿan ʿĀšim is less convincing than that ascribed to ʿIkrima, who replaces ʿilmun, knowledge, by ʿalamun, sign. The verse according to that transmission reads: *innahu la-ʿalamun li-s-sāʿah*.

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Lehrstuhl für Arabistik
Freie Universität Berlin - **Allemagne**
E-mail: angelikaneuwirth@hotmail.com

Angelika NEUWIRTH