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“MARYAM AND HER SON AS A SIGN FOR
THE WORLDS”

“HOLY MARY”,
A MODERN ISLAMIC TALE OF PROPHETS.

by

Emilio PLATTI

“Wa ja’alnā Maryam wa-bnahā āyatan li-l-‘ālamīn”.
“And we made Maryam and her son as a Sign for the worlds”.

This is the last sentence of the Iranian serial in twelve episodes in the Arabic version, “*Mariam-e Moghaddas — Maryam al-Muqaddasa — Holy (Saint) Mary*”, an Islamic presentation of Mary and the prophets Zakariyā (Zachariya), Yahyā (John the Baptist) and ‘Īsā (Jesus), based on the Qur’ān¹ and Islamic Traditions². According to the Qur’ān, Jesus, the Son of Mary, has indeed been made as a Sign together with His Mother:

“Wa ja’alnā ibn Maryam wa-ummahu āyatan — And We made the son of Mary and his mother as a Sign” (Q 23, 50)³.

1. Cf. MUHAMMAD SĀMĪ MUNĪR, *Āyāt qur’āniyya min Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, Cairo, 2000.
2. In the Arabic version: *Riwāyāt islāmiyya*.
3. *The Holy Qur’an* (transl. and Comm. by A. Yusuf Ali), Beyrouth, s.d.; the same translation for quotations of the Qur’an is used in IBN KATHEER, *Stories of the Prophets. From Adam to Muhammad* (transl. Sayed Gad a.o.), Al-Mansoura (Egypt), 2001 (sigle: IbnK); this translation is not reliable and does not strictly conform to the Arabic text editions, such as: Abū al-Fidā’ Ismā’īl IBN KATHĪR, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Wāhid), Cairo, 1968 (sigle IbnK.ar.).

“*Holy (Saint) Mary*” was produced by the Broadcasting and Television Corporation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The original scenario was written by Ḥujjat al-Islām Muḥammad Sa’īd Bahmanpour and the producer is Shahrayār Baḥrānī. Parviz Pourhosseini was rewarded at the 19th International Teheran Film Festival 2001 for his role as Zachariya. A shorter version was released in 2002⁴. We viewed the serial in the long Arabic version made in Lebanon by the Dār Al-Manār Corporation. Unlike the other versions, the references to the Qur’ān and the *Hadīth*-literature can be compared with the original Arabic text. In the Arabic version, the faces of the prophets Zakariyā, Yaḥyā and ‘Īsā are unrecognizably enlightened, probably because strict Sunni Islam forbids showing the face of Prophets. That is not the case in the shorter English version released in the United States⁵. Apparently, some characters of both the longer and the shorter versions are not found in the Qur’ān or the *Hadīth*-literature: in particular the family of Herod, the Jewish priests (except for Zachariya himself) and the Roman officer Pericles and his wife Serafina.

The movie starts with the written text of the Qur’ān, 3, 45:

“*The angels said: O Mary, God giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be al-Masīh ‘Īsā Ibn Maryam, held in honor in this world and the hereafter, and of those nearest (to God)*”.

The story can be seen as a modern version of one of the chapters of what is known as the “*Tales of the Prophets — Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*”, a specific literary genre based on the Qur’ān and Islamic Traditions. As in al-Tha’labī’s “*Lives of the Prophets*”⁶, Zachariya, John, Mary and Jesus are brought together in a series of episodes, where Qur’ān and Traditions are intertwined. It seems therefore interesting to see in how far the serial represents the Qur’ānic presentation of Mary and the three Prophets⁷, and how much the story has integrated Islamic traditions coming from the most representative “*Qiṣaṣ*”-literature, such as found in *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (d. 923)⁸, the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*’ of

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4. SAINT MARY — Mariam-e Moghaddas: *Director*: Shahryar Bahrani; *Writer*: M.S. Bahmanpour; *Director of photography*: Hassan Pooya; *Editor*: Shahryar Bahrani; *Sound*: Eshagh Khanzadi; *Cast*: Parviz Pourhosseini, Mohammad Kasebi, Shabnam Gholikhani; *Producer*: M.A. Aliakbari; *Production*: 2002.
 5. On Internet: www.stmaryfilm.com (last visited: January 2009).
 6. Abū Ishāq Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm AL-THA’LABĪ, *‘Arā’is al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’ or “Lives of the Prophets”* (transl. and annot. by William M. Brinner), Leiden, 2002, pp. 622-714 (sigle Tha’).
 7. According to strict Sunni interpretation, Mary cannot be a prophet, as one of the conditions for being a prophet is to be male.
 8. *The History of al-Ṭabarī. III: The Children of Israel* (transl. by William M. Brinner), and *IV: The Ancient Kingdoms* (transl. by Moshe Perlmann), Albany, 1991 and 1987, pp. 102-125 (sigle Tab); Ja’far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr Aṭ-ṬABARĪ, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, Cairo, 1994.

al-Tha'labī (d. 1036), al-Kisā'ī (circa 1200)⁹, the most popular author of these stories, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), and the representative Shi'a author al-Majlisī (d. 1698), in his big compilation of Islamic traditions and commentaries on the Qur'ān, *Bihār al-Anwār*¹⁰.

Unlike in these "Qisās"- literature concerning Zachariya, John, Mary and Jesus, where much more is told about John the Baptist's and Jesus' life, the movie ends after Jesus' birth under the palm tree, when his mother Mary comes back to the city and finds herself insulted by the crowd; perfectly in tune with the Qur'ān:

"She brought the (babe) to her people, carrying him (in her arms)" (Q 19, 27a); *"and they said: O Mary! Truly an amazing thing hast thou brought! O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste!"* (Q 19, 27b-28). *"She pointed to the babe. They said: How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?"*

The miracle of the child talking and reciting the words of the Qur'ān is in fact the apotheosis of the movie: finally, the horrified Jewish priests are confronted with their unbelief, Zachariya himself, the Roman officer and the three astrologers, together with the crowd, recognize the miracle as a Sign coming from God:

"(The child) said: I am indeed (al-Masīḥ: in the film, not in the Qur'ān!) 'Abdu llāhi (a servant of God): He hath given me the Book and made me a Prophet. And He hath made me blessed wheresoever I be, and hath enjoined on me prayer (aṣ-ṣalāt) and charity (az-zakāt) as long as I live. He hath made me kind to my mother, and not overhearing or miserable. So peace is on me, the day I was born, the day that I die (yawma amūtu), and the day that I shall be raised up to life (wa-yawma ub'athu ḥayyan)!" (Q 19, 30-33)¹².

Kneeling with all the people present, the three astrologers offer their gifts, while a voice confirms the miracle saying: *"And we made Maryam and her son as a Sign for the worlds"*, the very last sentence of the movie.

This presentation of Mary, mother of Jesus, avoiding mention of events to occur in Jesus' later life, underlines the specific character of the Qur'ānic *"cycle of Mary and Jesus"*, much more an *"infancy gospel"* than a description of the life of Jesus, proclaiming a divine message and acting accordingly, so that it would become clear why Mary and Jesus were indeed *"a Sign for the worlds"*. The only quotation from the

9. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh AL-KISĀ'Ī, *Tales of the Prophets (Qisās al-anbiyā')* (transl. Wheeler M. Thackston jr.), Chicago, 1997, pp. 326-336 (sigle Kis); *Vita prophetarum: auctore Muḥammed Ben 'Abdallāh Al-Kisa'i*, (ed. Isaac Eisenberg), Leiden, 1922.

10. Muḥammad Bāqir AL-MAJLISĪ, *Bihār al-Anwār XIV*, Beyrouth, 1983, *Kitāb an-nubuwwa, Bāb 15-24*, pp. 163-350.

11. In the film, they are with Mary in the city, and the priest says: *"... still in his swaddling clothes"*.

12. Cf. Q. 19, 15, with regard to the Prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist): *"So peace on him the day that he was born, the day that he dies and the day that he will be raised up to life"*.

Qur'an ("the day that I die and the day that I shall be raised up to life" Q 19, 33), without referring to the more problematic verse concerning the cross ("...But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them..." Q 4, 157b)¹³, makes it impossible to go beyond a kind of "miraculous infancy of Jesus and Mary"¹⁴. In the movie, Mary is only 16 when entering the city with the child, and almost one third of the shorter version is related to the miraculous birth of Jesus and the virginity of his mother; so that there can be no leaning towards traditions found in the Catholic tradition, like the description of Mary as "the mother of sorrows", in connection with Jesus' life towards his passion and crucifixion, Mary standing with Saint John at Golgotha, or as depicted in the popular catholic art motif called a "pietà". Just an indication is given where it is said that the Messiah will bear many sufferings.

From the very beginning of the movie, the story of saint Mary is historically situated in the time of King Herod the Great¹⁵, who is said to maintain his power thanks to the Romans, who support him; the Romans are represented by an officer, called Pericles. Herod is informed about the birth of a child, expected by the people to be the coming Savior and Messiah and born at the very moment of the appearance of a comet. The king is frightened and terrified by the idea that someone is going to dethrone him. He is sending some soldiers to kill the expected Messiah. Herod's wife Maryam(ne), daughter of Antigonos, and his sister, Deborah, are murdered, and also his son Antipater, for the same reason: that they could dethrone him. The new born child, however is... a girl, called Maryam! And a girl will be a threat to nobody... At least this is assumed to be so. Herod will have the same reaction when another new born child is announced: al-Masīḥ, son of Maryam. When Persian astrologers (*munajjimūn*), following a star, are searching for the king to be born, he wishes them well, but wants to kill the child, expected to become the promised Savior (*al-mukhalliṣ al-maw'ūd*). Some people and some Jewish priests are indeed expecting the Jewish people to dominate the entire world (*saytarat al-Yahūd 'alā kull arjā' al-'ālam*).

13. The meaning of this verse is not clear; some commentaries are unambiguous: p.e. Dr. Muḥammad Taqī-ud-Dīn AL-HILĀLĪ and Dr. Muḥammad Muḥsin KHĀN, *Interpretation of the Meaning of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, Al-Madina al-Munawwara, 1994, p. 157: "And because of their saying (in boast), 'We killed Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah (...), but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but the resemblance of Jesus was put over another man (and they killed that man), and those who differ therein are full of doubts. They have no (certain) knowledge, they follow nothing but conjecture. For surely, they killed him not (i.e. Jesus, son of Mary): but Allah raised him (Jesus) up (with his body and soul) unto Himself (and he — peace over him — is in heavens). And Allah is ever All-Powerfull, All-Wise' (Qur. 4, 157-158).

14. Just an indication concerning the promised Messiah: He will cure the blind and raise the dead.

15. King Herod the Great died probably 4 B.C.

Herod is not mentioned in the Qur'ān, but appears in all the four collections of *Stories of the Prophets*. Ṭabarī mentions the messengers from Persia, their gifts, gold, myrrh and incense, and the star; and also that king Herod plotted against Christ, so that Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt¹⁶. Al-Kisā'ī says that the news of Mary's pregnancy reached the king of Israel, whose name was Herod, and that they told him "*she was possessed*"¹⁷. Al-Tha'labī is even shorter in mentioning the same facts¹⁸. Ibn Kathīr has information only about the King of the Jews who commanded John the Baptist to be decapitated. It is obvious that the additional details in the longer version of the movie are modern.

As it is the case in Ibn Kathīr's presentation of the story of Zachariya, John, Mary and Jesus, the basis of the whole story are two passages from the Qur'ān, quoted by Ibn Kathīr: Q 19, 1-15, and in particular 3, 35-44; the dedication of Mary is referred to in verses 35-37:

35. Behold! a woman of 'Imrān said: "O my Lord! I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So accept this of me: For Thou hearest and knowest all things."
 36. When she was delivered, she said: "O my Lord! Behold! I am delivered of a female child!"- and Allah knew best what she brought forth — "And no wise is the male Like the female. I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from the Evil One, the Rejected."
 37. Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty...

The starting point for the whole movie, the underlying theme until the end, is the prophecy from 'Imrān, the already deceased father of Mary, that the Messiah will come from his offspring. It is said that Mary's father is indeed a prophet ("*Inna wālidaki nabīyy Allāh*"). Everyone is expecting his wife's child to be that Savior; while in fact, as will appear later on, the savior will be Mary's child. In the Qur'ān, the only reason given why 'Imrān's wife, Ḥannah, wanted to dedicate her child to the temple, is her prayer to have a child, even being an old women. There is no other reason given by the authors of the Prophet's tales. On the other hand, 'Imrān is not one of the twenty-five prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān. He could, however, be one of the many other prophets not explicitly mentioned. Tha'labī tells the story in this way:

Once, when she (Ḥannah) was in the shade of a tree, she saw a bird feeding its young, and it made her yearn for a child. So she prayed to God to give her a son; saying: O God, I pledge myself to You; if You give me a child, I shall offer him as a gift to the Temple, and he shall be one of the attendants and servants, as a votive

16. Tab p. 125; *Tārikh Ṭabarī 1*, Cairo, 1960, p. 605: "*al-malik 'alā bayt al-Maqdīs... Hīrudūs al-kabīr...*".

17. Kis p. 329.

18. Tha' p. 647.

offering and a thank offering (...). However, only boys were dedicated; a girl did not undertake this work, nor was she suited to it, because of menstruation and illness that afflicted her¹⁹.

Like in the Qur'ān, 'Imrān is the father of Mary; and she is the sister of Hārūn (Q 3, 35 and 19, 28); prophet Zakariyā (Zachariya) is assigned to take care of her in the temple, when the priests cast lots; in the movie, they cast lots with their pencils, not with arrows, as in some traditions²⁰. In the Qur'ān this detail is told (by God) to Muḥammad, who is not supposed to have seen the scene by himself...:

37. Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty... To the care of Zachariya was she assigned... (...) 44. This is part of the tidings of the things unseen, which We reveal unto thee (O Messenger) by inspiration: Thou wast not with them when they cast lots with arrows, as to which of them should be charged with the care of Mary: Nor wast thou with them when they disputed (the point).

No more information is given in the Qur'ān. It is in the Tradition that we find the name of 'Imrān's father, Mathān, the name of Mary's mother, Ḥannah, and also that Zachariya is married to Elisabeth, the sister of Ḥannah: "Zachariya was made a guardian over Mary, daughter of 'Imrān, son of Mathān"²¹; Ibn Kathīr has transmitted two different traditions concerning Elisabeth, called Ashyā': "The mother of Yaḥyā is Ashyā' (Elisabeth) daughter of 'Imrān, sister of Maryam, daughter of 'Imrān. But it is said also that Ashyā' (Elisabeth) was the wife of Zakariyā and that the mother of Yaḥyā was the sister of Ḥannah, the wife of 'Imrān, mother of Maryam; so that Yaḥyā was the son of the aunt of Maryam; but God knows best!"²².

It is also in the tradition, and not in the Qur'ān that we find the name of Yūsuf (Joseph), who is a carpenter working with Zachariya, known in the Islamic tradition as Yūsuf an-Najjār; according to Ibn Kathīr, it is mentioned in the Tradition coming from Wahb Ibn Munabbih²³ that a man from the Banū Isrā'īl was the first to perceive signs of pregnancy: "he is called Yūsuf Ibn Ya'qūb an-Najjār, the son of her uncle"; and this surprised him immensely, as he was aware that she was pious, chaste and devout²⁴.

19. Tha' p. 623.

20. Tha' p. 625; one of the traditions transmitted by al-Suddī is represented in the film: "Zacharia's pen stood up straight above the water as if it were in mud; while the others were carried away by the water's current".

21. IbnK p. 298.

22. IbnK.ar p. 364; p. 348: "Zachariyah is said to be Ibn Barkhiyā; said to be Ibn Dān; said to be Ibn Laden... (...) Ibn Sulaymān, Ibn Dāwūd".

23. This reference to Wahb is only one of the multiple indications given by the authors of the histories of the Prophets concerning the origin of the Traditions they mention.

24. IbnK.ar p. 388.

A boy will be granted to Zachariya: the prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist). Both the children, Mary and John, are born in a miraculous way, while the parents are already old and the mother said to be barren. The announcement of the miracle of the birth of John is conform to the version of the Gospel of Luke (chapter 1) and is explicitly mentioned in the Qurʾān, *sūra* 3:

38. *There did Zachariya pray to his Lord, saying: "O my Lord! Grant unto me from Thee a progeny that is pure: for Thou art He that beareth prayer! 39. While he was standing in prayer in the chamber, the angels called unto him: "(Allah) doth give thee glad tidings of Yahyā, witnessing the truth of a Word from Allah, and (be besides) noble, chaste, and a prophet, - of the (goodly) company of the righteous."* 40. *He said: O my Lord! How shall I have a son, seeing I am very old, and my wife is barren? "Thus, was the answer, doth God accomplish what He willeth".* 41. *He said: "O my Lord! Give me a Sign!" "Thy Sign," was the answer, "Shall be that thou shalt speak to no man for three days but with signals. Then celebrate the praises of thy Lord again and again, and glorify Him in the evening and in the morning."*

When visiting Mary in her room specially prepared for her, contingent to the temple, he will find fruit and other aliments miraculously brought there²⁵. This also is mentioned in the Qurʾān (Q 3, 37):

To the care of Zachariya was she assigned. Every time that he entered (Her) chamber to see her, He found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! Whence (comes) this to you?" She said: "From Allah, for Allah Provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure."

While it is easy to find the members of the family of ʿImrān in the Islamic tradition, the priests of the temple represented in the movie are most probably not traditional, except Zachariya; the general negative image given is inspired by the negative image of the Jewish people presented in the Qurʾān.

The Jewish priests are working and offer sacrifices in the Temple of Salomon, where they pray in the Holy of Holies (*Quds*²⁶ *al-Aqdās*). Two groups are represented, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The upperpriest is Hillel, an old, wise and just man, who presides over the Sanhedrin²⁷. In some traditions, Zachariya is said to be "*raʾīs al-aḥbār — head of the priests*"²⁸; but in the sources mentioned, no other names are given. In the film, other representatives of the priests and scribes (*kahana* and *kataba*) are called Yasaqar, Sidqia, Ephraim, Yarbaʿam (Yeroboam) and the younger student Nathan. Two priests are supporting Zachariya: Dāwūd and Yahuyakeen. The others

25. Tha' p. 625: "... fruit out of season: summer fruit in the winter, and winter fruit in the summer".

26. In the Arabic version, al-Quds is wrongly translated in English by "Jerusalem", while it is obvious that what is meant is not the city, but the Holiest place of the Temple of Jerusalem.

27. Hillel, d. 10 A.D., the Talmud calls him indeed the president of the Sanhedrin.

28. AL-MAJLISĪ, *Bihār al-Anwār* XIV, p. 173.

represent the opposition to Zachariya and Mary, and in that opposition, we recognise the critical attitude of the Qur'ān towards "those who are Jews" (*alladhīna hādū*).

One of the two most important criticisms expressed in the Qur'ān is that "they uttered against Mary a grave false charge"; (the other is that they said that they killed al-Masīh 'Īsā Ibn Maryam)(Q 4, 156c and 157a). This becomes very clear at the end of the movie, when they ask Mary about the new born child and pretend that with the child the hypocrisy and falsehood of Zachariya's and Mary's claims is becoming evident ("she bewitched everyone").

Other charges are clearly inspired by the Qur'ān:

They changed the words of the Holy Scriptures, God's Word: *badaltum kalām ar-Rabb; inna at-Tawrāt maktūba bi-aqlāmikum antum* "the Tawrāt has been written with your pencils!):

"*yuharrifūna al-Kalām: They displace words...*" (Q 4, 46) (they falsified the word of God).

The priests don't follow the way of justice and truth, but they love their world's affairs (*ḥubb ad-dunyā*) and income; they are self-interested and corrupt:

"they took usury, though they were forbidden; and they devoured men's substance wrongfully" (Q 4, 161a);

They move away from God's command:

"they hindered many from God's way" (Q 4, 160);

Zachariya repeats the terrible Qur'ānic word:

"*bi-kufrihim bi-āyāt Allāh wa-qatlihim al-anbiyā'* — (they have incurred divine displeasure: in that they broke their Covenant), that they rejected the Signs of God; that they slew the Messengers..." (Q 4, 155a).

The Jewish people is the chosen one (*al-sha'b al-Yahūdī sha'b al-rabb al-mukhtār*)²⁹, but they introduced changes in God's religion and the practices of Moses ("Sunnat Mūsā"):

"And We chose them (the Children of Israel) aforetime above the nations, knowingly" (Q 44, 32);

and they say:

"We hear and we disobey (*aṣaynā*)" (Q 4, 46b).

29. In the longer Arabic version of this Iranian movie (!) this idea is expressed in an extreme way by Yasaqar: "The Lord has chosen the Jews as his people to command over the whole world and to rule humanity" ("*Inna ar-Rabb ikhtāra al-Yahūd sha'babu al-muhtār li-yu'ammirū ad-dunyā wa-yahkumūna al-bashar*").

A dialogue between God and David quoted by Zachariya is an indirect criticism of the Temple itself³⁰: “*God said: O David, purify your home for God to reside in! David said: O Lord, what home is this that holds your Greatness and Majesty? He said: It is the heart of the true believer. David said: How shall I purify it? God said: Kindle fire in it, a fire that burns everything that is mine and then should you see someone searching for me, then guide him there, for my Holiness (Qudsī) is there*”: This dialogue is neither in the Qur’ān nor in the representative *Qisāṣ* -books.

The same for the long reference to Isaiah: “*I accept love and mercy — al-mahabbaba wa r-rahma —, not sacrifices; I don’t like your festivals and rites...*”³¹.

Three events are at the center of what we call “*the cycle of Zachariya, John, Mary and Jesus*”: the birth of Maryam, of John (the Baptist) and of Jesus; and in telling this, the movie gets closer to the Qur’ānic texts itself, as the miraculous nature of these events is at the heart of the story. Skepticism, unbelief and strong opposition by the priests on the one hand, and the faithful attitude of the group of “believers”, on the other hand, underlines the tension towards the final climax: the miracle of the little child Jesus, talking to defend his mother Mary in front of believers and unbelievers, as the ultimate Sign coming from God. The “group of believers” is represented by Zachariya and Elisabeth, Hannah, Mary and Joseph, the two priests Dāwūd and Yahuyakeen, and the daughter of Fanuel, who will stay near by the temple and is said to be Mary’s niece; and the Roman officer, with his wife Serafina, even asks Mary to cure their child. The old high priest Hillel is rather sympathetic to Zachariya and Mary; he thinks Zachariya is really a prophet.

Maryam.

From the very beginning of the story, skepticism and opposition on behalf of the Jewish priests is obvious: as soon as it becomes clear that the new born child is female (*unthā*), they try to oppose firmly her entrance to the temple: only a boy (like Joseph) can serve in the temple: she prays to God, saying: “I am your servant — *anā khādimatuka*”. Thanks to Zachariah and Hillel, she will make it, even if opposition remains tough. In the meeting of the priests in the Sanhedrin, Yasaqar will say that God has

30. Not in the Qur’an. The Islamic tradition says that David wanted to build a holy house on the Rock (in Jerusalem), but that it was in fact Salomon who built it (Tab p. 151).

31. Cf. Isaiah 1, 13 and 14: “*Bring no more vain offerings... Your new moon and your appointed feast my soul hates...*”.

only spoken to men. And he will add some harsh words about “limitations for women in Jewish tradition”. This theme is however only indirectly present in the Qur’ān:

...a female child — *unthā* (Q 3, 35),

and not really developed in the traditions as it is done extendedly in the movie.

Zachariya will say that Mary never sins — *lā tukhḥī’* —. With her child Jesus, she is protected from the devil’s evil; this idea of an “immaculate conception” is present in the Islamic tradition, based on the Qur’ān:

“I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from the Evil One, the Rejected” (Q 3, 36).

Ibn Kathīr states that, according to a tradition going back to Abū Hurayra, “when- ever a child is born, Satan touches it. A child, therefore, cries loudly at the time of the birth because of the touch of Satan, except Mary and her child”³².

When grown up as a 16 year old girl, she enters the holiest place (*Quds al-Aqdās*) to pray; this will be seen as an ultimate provocation. Maryam and Zachariya refer to the voice which told her to do so, according to the Qur’ān:

“O Mary, worship thy Lord devoutly: prostrate thyself, and bow down (in prayer) with those who bow down” (Q 3, 43).

People will see Mary as the mother of the Messiah, mother of Christ — *Umm al-Masīh* —, as the Qur’ān calls Jesus al-Masīh ‘Īsā Ibn Maryam (Q 3, 45b); she is Holy — *muqaddasa* —: this attribute is not in the Qur’ān, but indirectly traditional:

“Allah selected Mary, cleared her from vices, granted her lofty morals and made her the best woman of all nations”³³.

In the film, Mary says she had a vision about three other women who are the best in paradise; in this Iranian film the first is of course Fatima, “the daughter of the Seal of the Prophets, and the best of women — *afdal an-nisā’* —”.

According to a very common tradition, the Prophet said that “the best women of paradise are Khadija bint Khuwaylid, Faṭīma bint Muḥammad, Maryam bint ‘Imrān and Āsiya bint Muzāḥim, the wife of Pharaoh”³⁴.

32. IbnK p. 311; Tha’ p. 624: “With the exception of Mary and her son, there is no human being born who is not touched by Satan at the moment of his birth, and who does not begin to cry out because of Satan’s touch”.

33. IbnK p. 312.

34. IbnK p. 313; AL-MAJLISĪ, *Bihār al-Anwār* XIV, p. 195; the wife of Pharaoh: cf. Qur’an 28, 9 and 66, 11; Tha’ p. 624.

Underlining the general atmosphere of the film, where miracles and divine intervention are continuously present, Saint Mary is said to cure the sick and help the poor; even the Roman officer asks Mary to cure their little child...

The story of the annunciation is traditional: Mary never left the Temple, except for some necessity, such as to get water³⁵; inside the cave with the well, suddenly, she will have a vision of angels, or of a single angel (as suggested in the film), looking like a man; the Islamic tradition will call him the angel Jibrīl³⁶; both versions (with angels or a single one) are strictly Qur'ānic: Q 3, 42-43 and 19, 17-22:

42 "The angels said: O Mary, God hath chosen thee and purified thee — chosen thee above the women of all nations. O Mary, worship thy Lord devoutly: prostrate thyself, and bow down in prayer with those who bow down";

17. *She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent her our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects.* 18. *She said: "I seek refuge from thee to (Allah) Most Gracious: (come not near) if thou dost fear Allah."* 19. *He said: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord, (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son.* 20. *She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?"* 21. *He said: "So (it will be): Thy Lord saith, 'that is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': It is a matter (so) decreed."* 22. *So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place.*

Yahyā (John the Baptist).

The film tells the story of John the Baptist according to the Islamic tradition also related by Tha'labī:

Zachariya was the High Priest, who used to perform the sacrifice and open the door to the sacrificial altar, and no one entered unless he gave permission...³⁷. There he will have a revelation, "a good tiding of John...". For Tha'labī, it was the angel Gabriel who came to tell him the birth of the boy, even if he is old and his wife is said to be barren.

The two texts of the Qur'ān referred to in the movie, are in perfect conformity with the Infancy Gospel of Luke (chapter 1): (Q 3, 39-41, already referred to, and 19, 2-11):

35. Tab IV; p. 112: "Mary and her cousin Joseph, the son of Jacob, were attached to the service of the sanctuary. It is said that when Mary's water and Joseph's water ran out, each of them would take the pitcher to go to the cave where they used to draw the water they liked. When the day arrived on which the angel Gabriel met her — it was the longest and hottest day of the year — the water ran out. She said: O Joseph, should we not go fetch water? He said: I have more than enough for the day, enough to last until tomorrow. She than said: By God, I have no water left. She took her pitcher and went alone. She entered the cave and found Gabriel there — God made him appear to her as a shapely human...".

36. IbnK.ar p. 386: *ar-Rūh al-amīn Jibrīl*.

37. Tha' p. 627.

2. (This is) a recital of the Mercy of thy Lord to His servant Zachariya. 3. Behold! he cried to his Lord in secret, 4. Praying: "O my Lord! infirm indeed are my bones, and the hair of my head doth glisten with grey: but never am I unblest, O my Lord, in my prayer to Thee! 5. "Now I fear (what) my relatives (and colleagues) (will do) after me: but my wife is barren: so give me an heir as from Thyself, — 6. "(One that) will (truly) represent me, and represent the posterity of Jacob; and make him, O my Lord! one with whom Thou art well-pleased!" 7. (His prayer was answered): "O Zachariya! We give thee good news of a son: His name shall be Yahyā: on none by that name have We conferred distinction before." 8. He said: "O my Lord! How shall I have a son, when my wife is barren and I have grown quite decrepit from old age?" 9. He said: "So (it will be) thy Lord saith, 'that is easy for Me: I did indeed create thee before, when thou hadst been nothing!'" 10. (Zachariya) said: "O my Lord! give me a Sign." "Thy Sign," was the answer, "Shall be that thou shalt speak to no man for three nights, although thou art not dumb. 11. So Zachariya came out to his people from his chamber: He told them by signs to celebrate Allah's praises in the morning and in the evening.

Jesus, son of Mary

According to the film, and in conformity with Tha'labi:

The story goes that when Mary grew heavy and her delivery-time drew near (...) Mary moved to the house of her maternal aunt, Zachariya's wife, the future mother of John. When she came in, John's mother arose and came forward and embraced her. Then she said: Mary, do you notice that I am pregnant? Mary said: And do you also perceive that I am pregnant? Zachariya's wife said: But I find that which is in my womb is worshipping that which is in yours³⁸.

When they hear about that pregnancy, the opposition of the priests is increasing; in the confusion and the heavy discussions, the "believing" priest Yehuyakeen is even killed. People are accusing Mary and Zachariya of fallacy and hypocrisy, even blasphemy; according to Ṭabarī:

Then the Israelites said: "Only Zachariya made her pregnant; he used to have relations with her"³⁹.

38. Tha' p. 641.

39. Tab IV, p. 120; Ṭabarī's and Kisā'ī's chapters on Jesus and Mary are short and contain some traditions different from those presented by other authors and in the film. We have to consider the particular way in which the Islamic scholars collected and transmitted *ḥadīṭ* in the past and also in modern times, how the traditions were then brought together in the "*Qisās*"-literature, and how they are brought together in modern books. From what we learn from the analysis of the film, it is clear that the Qur'an is the main source, but also that some *ḥadīṭ*-traditions were integrated; it is most probable that there was no single direct source of traditions for the script of the film.

Once Joseph becomes aware of Mary's pregnancy⁴⁰, and others start questioning this, Mary will leave for the desert. From here on, the story is strictly Qur'anic: Q 19, 23-27:

23. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree: She cried (in her anguish): "Ah! would that I had died before this! would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!" 24. But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): "Grieve not! for thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee; 25. "And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee. 26. "So eat and drink and cool (thine) eye. And if thou dost see any man, say, 'I have vowed a fast to (Allah) Most Gracious, and this day will I enter into not talk with any human being'. " 27. At length she brought the (babe) to her people, carrying him (in her arms).

Zachariya knows: "*Laqad wulida al-Masīh: Christ is born!*". This new born child is Jesus, son of Mary, without a father. The film underlines, as it is also by the Islamic tradition, that precisely Jesus' creation and birth, peculiar as it is, is a Sign unto men, proceeding from God's divine Decree⁴¹.

Very few things are said about the child's future; but it is understood from the tough opposition to Zachariya, Hannah and Mary, that "*al-Masīh will bear many sufferings — 'isābāt kathīra*". They all suffer much, and it is suggested that Mary has even been beaten when she was six years old, while the prophet Yaḥyā "*will die a martyr but will stay alive forever*"⁴². It has surely not been specified that Christ will be the promised Savior through his sufferings. Nothing in the Qur'ān or the Islamic Tradition allows such an interpretation. It is perhaps the Iranian and Shi'a origin of this movie that has allowed suffering to be more explicitly referred to.

Jesus is repeating the divine message, so that people will hear the Law of Moses through Jesus' tongue: *Sharī'at Mūsā bi-lisāni 'Isā*. In that sense, Bint Fanuel is allowed to say that "*the Holy Scripture is the Book of Life — al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas huwa al-Kitāb li l-ḥayāt*".

He is a prophet, and his message will be supported by miracles. And the greatest miracle will be his birth; saying so, Ibn Kathīr refers to the Qur'ān, where, according to him:

"Allah the Almighty narrates that when the Angels brought the news to Mary — peace upon her — that Allah had chosen her, and that He will grant her a son who will be a gracious, sinless Prophet, supported by miracles, she wondered at the possibility of begetting a child without a father, as she did not have a husband. The angels then told

40. Tha' p. 642 has a tradition from al-Kalbi telling that: "At one point of the journey, Joseph had wanted to kill her, but Gabriel came to him and said: It is from the Holy Spirit, so do not kill her".

41. IbnK p. 316.

42. Ibn Kathīr and other authors describe the martyrdom of John the Baptist: IbnK.ar. p. 362s.; Tha' p. 634-637.

her that Allah is capable of effecting whatsoever He wills. When He decrees a matter, He says to it “be”, and it is”⁴³; this is a reference to Q. 3, 47:

“She said: O my Lord, how shall I have a son when no man has touched me? He (the angel) said: So it will be; for Allah creates what He wills. When He has decreed something, He says: ‘be’, and it is (kun, fa-yakūn)”.

The film is following the tradition transmitted by Tha‘labī and coming from Wahb Ibn al-Munabbih, telling that Mary came with the child in the middle of the arguing people:

Zachariya came to Mary while the Jews were arguing with her... At that, although he was a child only forty days old, Jesus said: I am a servant of God, He has given me a Book and made me a prophet (Q 19, 30)⁴⁴.

At the heart of the film is this message: all the miracles described, and in particular the miracle of the birth of the two prophets, John and Jesus, and the miracle of the child talking and reciting the words of the Qur’ān, are the confirmation of God’s mysterious intervention in human’s history, Signs for the world. And nobody should refuse the Lord’s Religion — *Dīn ar-Rabb* —, as it is defined by the priests who are “true believers”, Yahuyakin and Dāwūd, and confirmed by Zachariya: in the confusion and alienation of their time, while priests are involved in corruption and worldly affairs — *ḥubb ad-dunyā* —, and money and power have subjugated the people, one should follow the way of justice and truth, *ṭarīq al-‘adl wa l-ḥaqq*, love and mercy — *al-maḥabba wa r-raḥma*, as Zachariya quotes from the prophet Isaiah (who is not in the Qur’ān!).

Implicit is, of course, all the messengers’ task to call to worship God alone, as it is expressed in a Tradition transmitted by al-Kisā’ī:

Gabriel descended to him (Zachariya) and greeted him, saying: “*Your Lord sends you as a prophet to Israel that you call them to worship Him*”⁴⁵.

43. IbnK p. 315.

44. Tha’ p. 646.

45. Kis p. 326. I wish to thank for the corrections and comments on an earlier draft of this article by the participants at the Princeton Theological Conference organized by the *Académie internationale des sciences religieuses* (Princeton, August 25-30, 2007).