

Is Mary “in the Trinity”? A Dialectic of the Koran, Sura 5

by Edouard M. Gallez

The connection between the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and that of Mary, the sister of Aaron, was not a threefold error but necessarily derived from a tradition known to the author and the audience of his so-called “Qur’anic” preaching (regardless of whether it was written down in advance or not)¹. The existence of such a living tradition cannot, of course, be reconciled with the Islamic discourse presenting the Arabs (especially those of the Mecca region, assuming that this is where the polemics took place) as “polytheists,” alien to any biblical or Judeo-Christian tradition until then. Such a discourse is, moreover, implausible by its contradiction: How could merchants, whom travel had brought into close contact with Jews and Christians for centuries, remain in the “state of ignorance” (the so-called *jahilyya*) presupposed by Islamic dogma?

A similar question arises, but in the opposite direction, with another surprise that the Koranic text... which places Mary in the Trinity as a part of it (Q. 5:116). But is there not a misunderstanding, in the sense of another erroneous reading of the Koran by the Muslims, again an error due to the voluntary forgetting by Islamic dogma of the original Eastern-Christian context in which proto-Islam appeared?

“When God says: Jesus, son of Mary, have you said to people: Take me and my mother for two deities, beside [besides] God?” (beginning of s.5:116).

According to the common Islamic (mis)reading, the Christian Trinity is: “God, Jesus and Mary”; that is still what is taught to Muslim children and what every Muslim must believe about the faith of Christians, except where there are enough Christians who would too easily laugh at this nonsense (in Egypt, for example). Indeed, such a preposterous claim would be denied by any Christian, and has no foundation whatsoever.²

So, what is it doing in a text intended to convince Arabs—especially Christians, as we see again here? In fact, it is not Mary who is referred to here as mother. For Christians of the Aramaic language, the word for Spirit is feminine, which is why it is traditional for them to refer to the Holy Spirit as “mother of Jesus”. Such a use is found, for example, in Aphrahat,³ and especially in the Gospel of the Nazarenes; Origen, who quotes passages from it, add:

“This is a proof in their belief that the Holy Spirit is the *mother of Christ*” (In Jer. 15,4).⁴

This is what we can read also in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, in which Origen reported the following logion:

¹ See http://lemessieetsonprophete.com/annexes/Les_deux-Marie_du-Coran_G.Dye_et-l-iconographie.pdf.

² To support the Muslim dogma, some Islamologists have invented a pseudo-Christian Meccan sect whose doctrine would have met these characteristics. Of course, there is nothing in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius which goes in this direction. Nor elsewhere. Nor at any time.

³ Aphrahat (known as the Wise Man of Persia) wrote around 340 that the Christian who marries tends to forget “his Father and the *Holy Spirit his mother*” (in commentary on Gn 2,24 - cf. *Les exposés* [written between 336 and 345], transl. Marie-Joseph Pierre, S.C. n° 359, Paris, Cerf, 1989, t.2 p.791 /*Al-Bayyinât* 18,10 quoted by Azzi Joseph in *Le prêtre et le prophète...*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001, p.168).

⁴ Jerome also pinpointed these passages: “In that gospel written according to the Hebrews, which is read by the Nazarenes, the Lord says: ‘A moment ago, *my mother, the Holy Spirit*, raised me up” (In Is. 40,9 - PL 24, 405). And: “According to the gospel written in Hebrew language which the Nazarenes read... we find this: It came to pass, as the Lord came up out of the water, that the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon him, and said unto him, *My Son*, of all the prophets I have waited for thee, that thou mightest come and rest in thee. For you are my rest, you are my firstborn son who reigns forever” (In Is. 11,2 / PL 24, 144F || In *Mich.* 7,6 and In *Ez.* 16,13).

“The Savior said, 'A moment ago my Mother, who is the Holy Spirit, took me up by one of my hairs and carried me to the great mountain of Tabor' ” (*On the Gospel of John*, Hom. 2, 12).

And for which Jerome also transcribed two passages—the first of which is undoubtedly a parallel of the previous one:

“In that gospel written 'according to the Hebrews,' which is read by the Nazarenes, the Lord says: 'A moment ago my mother, the Holy Spirit, raised me up.’”⁵

And: “According to the gospel written in the Hebrew language which the Nazarenes read... we find this: It came to pass, as the Lord came up out of the water, that the whole fountain of the Holy Ghost descended and rested upon him, and said unto him, My Son, of all the prophets I have waited for thee, that thou mightest come and rest in thee. For you are my rest, you are my firstborn son who reigns forever.”⁶

Origen could have made the effort to explain that the word “spirit” is feminine in Hebrew as well as in Aramaic (*rûḥ*, spirit, breath);⁷ yet, given that Christian tradition (Luke 1:35) specifies that Jesus was begotten by the action of the Holy Spirit, it was inevitable that the title of “mother” be attributed to the Holy Spirit.

In Assyrian-Chaldean Christian theology and usage, it is still customary to refer to the Holy Spirit as “mother of Jesus,” something that the ancient Muslim commentators understood well.⁸ The mockery of the preacher of this sura 5 is not about that: verse 116 does not deny that the Spirit is “mother of Jesus,” it makes Jesus say: No, I never said that they should make me and the Holy Spirit gods in addition to God. This is a biting irony, and it does not escape the Arabs whose faith is targeted.

But the propagandists of the 10th-12th century no longer understood irony. Since they did not want to know Christians, and since they imagined that the Qur’anic preaching was addressed to pagan Arabs from Mecca (and not to Christian Arabs from the north, near Syria and Mesopotamia), they began to believe that the “mother of Jesus” in this verse is Mary as elsewhere in the Qur’anic text. This was another reason to mock the Christians—as long as they never asked them what they believed in. And even today, children are taught in Koranic schools that the Christian Trinity is “God, Jesus, Mary.”

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⁵ “Sed et in Evangelio quod juxta Hebraeos scriptum, Nazaraei lectitant, Dominus loquitur: *modo me tulit mater mea, Spiritus sanctus*” (Jérôme, In Is. 40,9 – PL 24, 405).

⁶ “Evangelium quod Hebraeo sermone conscriptum legunt Nazaraei... haec scripta reperimus : factum est autem cum ascendisset Dominus de aqua, descendit fons omnis Spiritus sancti, et requievit super eum et dixit : Fili mi, in omnibus prophetis expectabam te ut venires et requiescerem in te. Tu es enim requies mea, tu es filius meus primogenitus qui regnas in sempiternum” – Jérôme, In Is. 11,2 (PL 24, 144F || In Mich. 7,6 et In Ez. 16,13).

⁷ Most probably, the word “spirit” in ancient Arabic (and probably even in the primitive writing of the Koran) must also have been feminine, like the Hebrew and Aramaic (רוּחַ, *rûḥ*, spirit, breath) is masculine while *rîḥ* (wind, breath) is feminine: the distinction between the two seems to be artificial and late, as much from the point of view of meaning (in Hebrew and Aramaic, spirit is the wind) as from the point of view of consonants (*y* and *w* are basically interchangeable).

⁸ Commentators of the Qur’an such as at-Tabarî, al-Baydawî, al-Zamahšarî or al-Jalâlayn (and others) indicate about this verse Q.5:116 that it is about the Holy Spirit and not about the Virgin Mary. For them, no Christian has ever placed Mary among the Trinity (cf. Azzi Joseph, *Le prêtre et le prophète : aux sources du Coran*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001, p.169).