

Mary and the Mosque

by Rev. Marten de Vries

It is the time of Advent and we are talking about Mary. We are a group of Reformed students from the Rotterdam district of Delfshaven and some of the Muslim youth from a *madrasa*, an Islamic school of learning here in the neighbourhood.

Mary doesn't do much for us Reformed Christians. We are not Catholics. But we do hold this blessed woman, full of grace, in high esteem. So much so that her name is mentioned respectfully every Sunday in our Profession of Faith. And we are certainly willing to spend an evening talking about her. After all, our lives depend upon God's Son, who became one of us through her.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have a special place for Mary that we do not give her. She plays a role even for Muslims. In some ways they grant her a larger role than we do. No, there are no statues, candles or *Ave Marias* in the mosque. But, as we learned from the Muslim students, it is not without justification that she is the only woman called by name in the Qur'an. For Muslims, Mary is a perfect woman. As a role model she easily equals Muhammad's first wife Khadija, their daughter Fatima or even Asiya, the Egyptian Pharaoh's wife. Did not Asiya pull Moses out of the water? And when she saw Moses' staff turn into a snake and devour the magicians' snakes, she – very

much against her husband's wishes – converted to Islam.

One of the suras (chapters) of the Qur'an bears the name of Jesus' mother – Sura Maryam, number 19. In some detail it tells her story and that of Jesus' birth. Likewise, in Sura 3, *Ali Imraan* (Family of Imraan), a number of verses immediately bring Luke 1 to mind. That just makes our day!

However, there are some peculiarities. Maryam appears to be the daughter of Imraan (Amram). And the sister of Haroon (Aaron). So it seems to be a matter of mistaken identity with the woman whom we know as Miriam, from an earlier millennium. We also meet Zakariyya (Zechariah). He is the father of Yahya (John), but he also acts as Mary's guardian. Just like the small child Samuel, she had been given up by her mother in order to assist in the temple. She served there without interruption, except (typically Islamic!) during her menstrual periods.

You could say: Muhammad did hear the Christmas bells chiming, but then he got confused by apocryphal scriptures circulating amongst Christians. And, in the end, all does revolve around Jesus' birth ('Peace be with this great prophet!'), born of the *virgin* Mary. And that's advantageous.

Or is it? Taking a closer look, it appears we don't understand each other at all.

LAMMERT: So you also believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. But what was the necessity of this if Jesus was, as you claim, no more than a human prophet? Doesn't the special manner of Jesus' birth make it clear that at Christmas the Son of God, who had become man, came into the world?

HAFIZA: What nonsense! Was Adam also God? He lacked both his human parents!

BILAL: And what I don't get: if Mary is God's mother to you, aren't the Catholics more correct with their worship of Mary?

What came to light that evening? That there is much in the Qur'an that sounds familiar to us. We don't linger on the anachronisms and what is factually wrong in biblical light. But even what is the same means something different to Muslims because they don't really know Jesus. They don't know him as the content of what Paul describes as 'the great mystery of our faith': God, revealed to us in a mortal body. 'For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form' (Col. 2:9).

We praise God because, in the person of his eternal Son, the Redeemer came to the earth. The only possible Mediator. They are happy with men who lead them on the 'path of virtue': Muhammad, Jesus.

And Fatma and Zainab are pleased to have Mary as a wonderful woman to be their role model.

What appeals to Reinder is that 'the power of the Most High' overshadowed Mary. Mystery-language from Luke I

expresses the miracle by which Joseph's fiancée becomes pregnant. A shadow, an image of God, who has appeared before in the form of a cloud, is to fall over Mary. The result is the conception of the child of man, who is Son of the Most High at the same time. God and man in one.

Faris, on the other hand, is impressed by the fact that Allah displayed some of his power on the night in which Jesus was born. 'He spoke and it was there.' He commanded, and there it was, in Mary's womb – one of the greatest prophets ever born of a woman.

Although, when we take a closer look at the Muslim view, Gabriel appears to have had something to do with it, too. How? Mary takes shelter in the Al-Aqsa mosque. There the angel, in the form of a handsome young man, approaches her. With a message, true. But she also becomes pregnant by him. Not through normal sexual intercourse, but because the angel breathes God's Spirit into her clothes. According to the famous teacher Ibn Kathir, Gabriel blows so powerfully that his breath reaches her vagina. He blew in her 'honour', says sura 66:12. But what is the meaning of a virginal birth, when male member and sperm are 'merely' replaced by fleeting breath from angel's mouth? And are you then fully human, when it is God's heavenly messenger who impregnates your mother, be it via the normal route? Who should be questioning whom about the mixture of godly and human in Jesus' presence?

The Qur'an gives no mention at all of John, who, as a foetus of six months, leaps up in his old mother's womb when her pregnant young niece Mary greets her. As a baby, however, Jesus does speak. From his cradle, he announces himself to be a great prophet. And in doing this, he testifies to his unwed mother's chastity. So our Muslim friends tell us. But in the verses they refer to in sura 19, we do not see it stated in so many words.

Whatever you, as a minister, preach about on Sunday, in the end it is always about the Lord Jesus. Just as it always comes down to the same thing when church members talk to visitors from the mosque: Who is the true Jesus? Many questions arise. Do Christians bring God down from his high position when they worship Jesus? Or do Muslims not hold him high enough by denying that God could ever have come down to earth in his Son? Do we think too little of God who became man? Or

they too big of man, who has to redeem himself without the Christ-child?

We hold Mary in high esteem. But why? Because God chose her in spite of her 'humble state'. Just imagine if it had happened to you – becoming the mother of the Lord Jesus. Surely, she must have been a truly believing and obedient girl. But for the rest? She remains a name in the list of Jesus' ancestor-mothers, who were far from being holy virgins. Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba.

It more or less just 'happened' to them, too. Their pregnancy. Their place in Jesus' genealogical register. That God, in their descendant (singular!) is mindful of humble sinners. Themselves included. The impure. Not just through monthly menstruation but lost in *guilt* forever, except for Jesus Christ.

But thanks to Him – God's Son who became man – we are privileged to become God's children.