

Christmas and the Eucharist in Early Islam?

Remarks about Assumptions and Methodology

Markus Gross

In several of Christoph Luxenberg's articles, Christian liturgical practices are claimed to be the source of Koranic texts, above all the Eucharist and Christmas. His views have been contradicted vehemently, not only on apologetic Muslim websites, but also in scholarly publications. Therefore it seems fair to take the arguments against his new interpretation of Koranic texts seriously. The present article will present some of the arguments of one of his critics, Nicolai Sinai,¹ but also some of the findings of another scholar, Stephen Shoemaker,² who found a material source in the form of a church for the Koranic narrative of Jesus' birth. This should be understood rather as the invitation to further discussion than as a final judgment.

In the following, the articles of both Sinai and Shoemaker are first summarized in as objective a way as possible. Only after that are their arguments assessed and if possible either confirmed or refuted.

1. Luxenberg's Hypotheses

Before assessing the above-mentioned articles, we should have a short look at Luxenberg's reinterpretations to be found in the present anthology. He reinterprets Surah 97 as follows: "The Destiny (of the Star of Nativity)"

1. We sent him down (Infant Jesus) during the Night of Destiny (of the Star of Nativity).
2. What do you know what the Night of Destiny is?
3. The Night (Nocturnal Office) of Destiny (of the Star of Nativity) is more beneficial than a thousand vigils?
4. The Angels (accompanied by) the Spirit, send down with the permission of their Lord, all sorts of hymns.
5. Peace there is until the break of day.

The birth story in the Mary Surah (Q 19:22–27) is also reinterpreted by Luxenberg (see his article "*Christmas and the Eucharist in the Qur'an*" in the present volume). Pickthall translated the story as follows:

22. And she, conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a place.
23. And the pangs of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of the palm tree. She said: Oh, would that I had died ere this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten!

24. Then (one) cried unto her from below her, saying: Grieve not! Thy Lord hath placed a rivulet beneath thee,
25. And shake the trunk of the palm tree toward thee, thou wilt cause ripe dates to fall upon thee.
26. So eat and drink and be consoled. And if thou meetest any mortal, say: Lo! I have vowed a fast unto the Beneficent, and may not speak this day to any mortal.
27. Then she brought him to her own folk, carrying him. They said: O Mary! Thou hast come with an amazing thing.

By interpreting the alleged word meaning “rivulet” – سرىا (*sryʾ*) as the Syro-Aramaic form ܫܪܝܐ (*šaryā*) he comes to the following rendering of verse 24:

Then he called to her immediately after her delivery: “Do not be sad, your Lord has made your delivery legitimate.”

One of his main arguments for this reinterpretation lies in the plot of the story. Mary’s concern is not food and drink, but the expected reactions of “her folk” to her illegitimate child. So although eventually she does eat and drink, she does so rather out of relief after having been assured of Jesus’ legitimacy.

2. Nicolai Sinai’s Criticism of Luxenberg

2.1. A Short Summary of Sinai’s Argumentation

In his article in the prestigious periodical *Der Islam*, Nicolai Sinai presents his view about Surah 97, Luxenberg’s reinterpretation, and the idea of Christmas being mentioned in the Koran. The article was written in German, its title in English would be “*Christmas in the Koran or the Night of Destination: An Interpretation of Surah 97.*”

His main points of criticism referring to Luxenberg’s theory can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Luxenberg judges certain Koranic passages, e.g., those dealing with the Virgins of Paradise, as dark because of their alleged “moral turpitude” (“moralische Anstößigkeit”) and because they differ from Christian views of Paradise, not—as Luxenberg purports—because of their “ambiguity” (“Unklarheit,” or “lack of clarity”).
- (2) Luxenberg does not mention that the identification of Surah 97 with Christmas is an old topos of Christian anti-Islamic polemic.
- (3) Luxenberg violates a general philological rule: when the use of a word or phrase in a specific part of a larger text is investigated, then the use of the same word or phrase in other parts of the text must be taken into consideration. In the Islamic exegesis this is called *tafsīr al-qurʾān bi-l-qurʾān*. Luxenberg refers the verb *anzala* – “to send down” (as in

verse 1: *anzalnā-hu*) to the infant Jesus, while this verb is never used referring to persons in the rest of the Koran, but exclusively to things, typically to revelations (as scripture/*kitāb* or admonitions/*taḍkīra*), e.g., 44:2-3: *wa-l-kitābi l-mubīn / 'innā 'anzalnāhu fī lailatin mubārakatīn 'innā kunnā mundirīn* (2. By the Scripture that maketh plain 3. Lo! We revealed it on a blessed night. Lo! We are ever warning).

In verse 4 Luxenberg changes the reading *tanazzalu* into *tunazzilu*, thus it is not God who sends down, unlike in the rest of the Koran.

- (4) Luxenberg interprets *qadr* as the equivalent of Syriac *helqā*, meaning “destiny.” As *helqā* is also a synonym of *bēt yaldā* (“birth/horoscope at birth”), he equates *lailat al-qadr* with Christmas. Luxenberg’s new interpretation is explained in a much-too-compressed way (one sentence) and the steps of his argumentation are not convincing. If he could adduce an attested Syriac expression like *lelyā d-helqā* instead of the common *bet-yaldā*, his theory might be taken seriously, but instead he only comes up with dictionary entries without quotations in real texts to prove his point.
- (5) Luxenberg’s interpretation of *šahr* in verse 5 as *šahrā* (vigil) is probably due to the fact that he assumes an earlier writing with *sīn* instead of *šīn*, thus interpreting the underlying root as *sahar/sahira* – “to guard, watch over (remaining awake).” There is, however, a similar text in the Psalms, known for a long time, 90:4: “For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.” This clearly indicates that the designation “night” here points to a much longer space of time.
- (6) Equating the Koranic *'amr* with the Syriac *memrā* (“hymn”) is an ad-hoc explanation and not corroborated by other passages.

Already at the beginning of his article, Sinai summarizes his assessment of Luxenberg’s methods, calling them “seriously flawed” and “circular” and his results “a methodically arbitrary play with associations.” However, his devastating criticism is coupled with an important reservation: Sinai does not entirely dismiss Luxenberg’s “hunch” that this Koranic text is somehow connected with Christmas, an idea he then develops in the second half of his article. At the very beginning of his argumentation, he clearly states that he assumes the traditional scenario (“[das] traditionelle Szenario”) of Koranic exegesis, which he characterizes with the following basic features: proclamation (“Verkündigung”) by a charismatic founder at the beginning of the seventh century in the West Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina. Moreover, he explicitly adheres to Theodor Nöldeke’s subdivision of Surahs into four chronological layers (Early Meccan, Middle Meccan, Late Meccan, and Medinan). Interestingly, he assumes later changes and additions to the

Koranic text and opines that the dating of the “night of destiny” in the month of Ramaḍān is secondary and late.

He begins his further investigation with a lengthy discussion of the Arabic root *q-d-r* and comes to the conclusion that the *lailat al-qadr* was a “feast of the pre-Koranic Meccan cult which . . . was newly filled according to revelation theology” (p. 20). According to Sinai this was done by selectively reinterpreting Christian motives and replacing baby Jesus with the Koran, thus creating a “counter-Christmas” (“Gegen-Weihnachten”).

He then dedicates a few pages to the interesting question of relative chronology, in other words: when was this Surah composed relative to other Koranic texts. As reasons for an early dating he mentions the brevity of the verses and the use of the particle *'inna*, although he does not consider this evidence conclusive. As the above-mentioned verses 44:2–3 (a “Middle Meccan” text) obviously refer to our text, they are almost certainly later. Although Sinai considers Surah 97 an Early Meccan text, he still does not count it among the oldest text fragments of the Koran. His main reason is its eschatological content, which is not found in Surahs Q 105 and Q 106, which display a rather positive attitude to the community of Mecca. According to Sinai, a break can be discerned between the latter Surahs and Q 99 or Q 101, which demonstrate a “fundamental disturbance and crisis in the relationship God–man and threaten the listeners with an individual eschatological reckoning.”

Among the “non-eschatological” Surahs he enumerates Q 93, 94, and 108, which all use the second person. Sinai calls them “comfort surahs” (“Trostsuren”).

Sinai’s conclusion is that Surah 97 should be considered an ex post authorization of earlier Koranic texts, attributing them to an act of revelation during the *lailat al-qadr*.

In the following chapter, “Considerations Concerning Literary Criticism” (“Literarkritische Überlegungen”), Sinai comes up with a number of interesting ideas concerning the history of the text itself. His observation that verse 4 is longer than the other verses coincides with another observation regarding its contents: “*tanazzalu l-malā’ikatu wa-r-rūḥu fihā bi-’idni rabbi-him min kulli ’amrin* – The angels and the Spirit descend therein, by the permission of their Lord, with all decrees (Pickthall).” If the underlined part is omitted, then the length of all verses is roughly the same, but then the angels are active agents able to take decisions. The addition, on the contrary, makes it clear that God alone has a free will. Sinai adds that the phrase “*bi-’idni . . .*” is not attested in other early texts.

Another peculiarity of verse 4 is the mentioning of the “spirit” (*al-rūḥ*), which, according to Nöldeke, is rather typical of Middle and Late Meccan texts. In one Medinan verse (Q 2:97) it then is identified with Gabriel. Sinai

finally concludes that not only the second half, but the whole of verse 4 must be a later addition.

The next chapter deals with Surah 97 and the nativity. Sinai mentions an “intertext” found on the website of the project *Corpus Coranicum*³ and discovered by his colleague Yusef Kouriyhe. It is one of Ephrem the Syrian’s hymns⁴ on nativity and uses the verb *naḥḥet*, which is the exact equivalent of Arabic *anzala* – “to send down.” Sinai remarks (p. 26):

In any case we cannot exclude that the original Koranic semantics of the verb *ʿanzala* in verse 1 and *tanazzala* in verse 4 respectively might have been partially influenced by such Christian references.

Sinai finds another parallel in verse 5: “*salāmun hiya ḥattā maṭlaʿi l-faḡr* – (That night is) Peace until the rising of the dawn,” which had already been seen in connection with Christmas by Richard Bell. Sinai himself sees it in connection to Luke 2:14: “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

In spite of his own arguments, however, Sinai does not think that Surah 97 is directly referring to the nativity. He rather assumes a “reinterpretation” (“Umwertung”) of an Old Arabian night of destiny, by selectively adopting Christian motives and the construction of a kind of “counter-Christmas” (“Gegen-Weihnacht”). He concludes (p. 28): “The text could fulfill this function only if the Koranic listeners understood the Christian allusions as such.”

In the following chapter, which deals with the interpretation of the inserted verse 4, he mentions a parallel verse in Gen 28:11–19. In verse 12 we read about angels who “ascend and descend:”

He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

According to Sinai, the semantics of the word *rūḥ* is influenced by the Syriac *rūḥa d-qūḏṣā* or *ruḥā qaddīṣā*, which designates the “holy spirit,” an angelic being that “speaks through the prophets,” according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed:

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets.

Sinai opines that here the descending angels do not—as in the Gospel of Luke—accompany the birth of Christ, but the transmission of the Koranic revelations, but he acknowledges the purposeful use of Christian motives in

order to authorize the Koranic text and thus to “overwrite” Christmas with a feast of Koranic revelation. His last sentence is a German play on words:

Gegen Korandeutungen im Stile *Luxenbergs* ist dabei auf den wesentlichen Unterschied zwischen *Überschreiben* und *Abschreiben* zu insistieren. [In contrast to interpretations of the Koran in the style of *Luxenberg* we have to insist on the fundamental difference between *overwriting* and *copying*.]

2.2. Assessment of Sinai’s Arguments

At first glance Sinai’s article purports to be a clear refutation of Luxenberg’s reinterpretation of Surah 97, more so of his whole method, as can be seen in formulations like “seriously flawed,” “circular,” “a methodically arbitrary play with associations.” The very general rejection of Luxenberg, also to be felt in other publications of Sinai, is in some contrast to his otherwise scholarly and unemotional, even open-minded style. In how far he succeeds in refuting Luxenberg, or rather what remains of Luxenberg’s theory and in how far Sinai manages to save the “classical” view, is a question to be answered in the present chapter.

Sinai’s first point of criticism concerning Luxenberg’s method is the reproach that he reinterprets linguistically clear passages because of their “moral turpitude” or because they differ from the Christian view, probably referring primarily to the Virgins of Paradise. This reproach was first made in a panel discussion in Germany by Stefan Wild, and it has meanwhile appeared in several German press articles. In Luxenberg’s original books and articles he never adduced moral reasons for a reinterpretation, but rather pointed out the inconsistency of the notion of Virgins of Paradise on the one hand and Koranic verses that indicate that the believers will meet their wives in paradise, on the other, for example Q 36:56–57: “They and their wives, in pleasant shade, on thrones reclining; Theirs the fruit (of their good deeds) and theirs (all) that they ask.”

Moreover, the linguistic form allegedly designating the Virgins of Paradise as pronounced today: *ḥūr ʿīn* – “white (ones), eyed (ones)” is far from clear, as can easily be demonstrated by the fact that in all later works of Arabic literature they are called *ḥuriya*. So the motives here assumed for Luxenberg’s work are definitely wrong.

Sinai’s second reproach refers to Luxenberg’s style: he leaves out too much, does not check properly, and renounces on explaining in detail. In the present case, Luxenberg did not mention that the identification of Surah 97 with Christmas is an old topos of Christian anti-Islamic polemic, he does not consider the use of the verb *anzala* – “to send down” in other passages of the Koran and above all he explains his hypotheses by squeezing all his reasoning into one subordinate clause.

Here in fact Sinai broaches a subject that cannot easily be dismissed. Luxenberg's books are definitely not easy to digest, and they presuppose a reasonable command of several languages, including Syriac and Hebrew, apart from a fair knowledge of the Bible. His style is often very elliptic and complicated, and each of his articles could easily be expanded to twice its size by simply adducing all relevant secondary literature or parallel texts and by explaining his argumentation in more detail.

However, the fact that an idea has been used in polemic or apologetic works centuries ago does not necessarily mean that the idea is wrong. On the contrary, it might reflect an early counterargument in a debate. As Luxenberg's article was a mere *philological* analysis dealing with the *composition* of the text of Surah 97, he probably considered the much later discussion about the already *finished* and *interpreted* text as irrelevant.

But Sinai also reproaches Luxenberg for violating a general philological rule: the use of a verb *anzala*, if reinterpreted with a new meaning, would have had to be compared to its use in other passages of the Koran. Here in fact Sinai's criticism is not unfounded. In the Koran, the verb *anzala* is indeed mostly used with things that are "sent down" by God (primarily revelations), not with persons.

At this point we should have a look at other words based on the same root. In the Koran we find the word *manāzil*, plural of *manzil* ("mansion, station") and especially *munzil* ("a receiver of guests, one who causes to descend"),⁵ for example in Q 23:29:

wa-qul rabbi 'anzilnī munzalan mubārakan wa-'anta hayru l-munzilīna – And say: My Lord! Cause me to land at a blessed landing place, for Thou art best of all who bring to land.

In this verse the verb *anzil-nī* ("cause me to land/descend") obviously refers to a person, so Sinai is not right when he claims that the verb is never used with persons. The original meaning of the root *n-z-l* in the Koran seems to be "to descend, to come down from a higher position to a lower position," for example from a camel. That is why the one who makes you descend from your camel is a "receiver of guests (*munzil*)" and the place where you descend is a "station (*manzil*)." The root is certainly not limited to things, let alone to divine messages. Had Luxenberg done his homework here, it would only have corroborated his theory!

Another point of criticism is Luxenberg's interpretation of the word *qadr*, which he sees as the equivalent of Syriac *helqā* ("destiny"), which itself is a synonym of *bēt yaldā* ("birth/horoscope at birth"). For Sinai, it is farfetched to infer from these equations that *qadr* actually can refer to the birth of Christ, although he does not question the equations as such. In fact, the

evidence adduced is far from conclusive and suggests little more than a vague possibility. In the standard Syriac dictionary of Payne Smith⁶ we find the following meanings of the underlying verbal root *ḥlaq*: “to allot, to determine by lot or fate, to destine,” and for the noun *ḥelqā*: “lot, portion; fate, destiny.” Moreover he quotes a sentence: “*nḥaq ḥelqā men alāhā* – the lot went forth from God.” Given the importance assigned to astronomy at that time it is understandable how this word became a synonym of “birth.” Moreover, in Brockelmann’s dictionary the Syriac root is seen as the etymological equivalent of the Arabic root *ḥalaqa* – “to create.” If we then consider that Christians to this day consider the birth of Christ to be a decisive moment for mankind, which in fact did change the “destiny” of humanity, then we have to agree that Luxenberg’s reasoning is not compelling, though his explanation is at least possible.

Luxenberg interpreted the word *šahr* in verse 5 as *šahr-ā* (vigil), thus “The Night of Power is better than a thousand months” becomes “The Night (Nocturnal Office) of Destiny (of the Star of Nativity) is more beneficial than a thousand vigils?” Against this interpretation Sinai adduces a verse from the Psalms; that is, Ps 90:4:

כִּי אֶלֶף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ כְּיוֹם אֶתְמוֹל כִּי יַעֲבֹר וְאַשְׁמוּרָה בְּלַיְלָה:
kī ālāp šānim bə-‘ēnāy-kā kə-yōm ätmōl kī ya^hbor wə-ašmūrāh ḥa-lāylāh
 For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as
 a watch in the night.

With this verse he wants to prove that a “night” points to a much longer space of time. However, in the Hebrew Bible, as much as in modern literature, a very long period of time is hardly ever designated with a phrase containing the word “month,” but typically with the word “year.” A phrase like “a thousand years” appears in the lyrics of numerous songs, “a thousand months” virtually never. So Sinai’s argument here is more than weak.

Finally, Sinai criticizes Luxenberg’s equation of *‘amr* with the Syriac *memrā* (“hymn”) in the phrase: *bi-‘idni rabbihim min kulli ‘amrin* – Pickthall: “by the permission of their Lord, with all decrees.” Semantically, the classical interpretation does not make very much sense. A permission is not given “with all decrees,” but rather with one decree. Moreover, the equation of *‘amr* with *memrā*, meaning the “logos, demiurge,” is not only mentioned in Paret’s commentary to his standard German translation of the Koran, but also in footnote 46 of Sinai’s own article. So if *‘amr* as the equivalent of *memrā*, meaning “logos,” in general is accepted, why should it be so farfetched to assume it also as its equivalent when the latter means “hymn”?

As we have seen, Sinai’s criticism of Luxenberg is not totally unfounded, but it is far from compelling.

But now we will have a look at his own alternative explanation. First of all, he explicitly states that he bases his research on the traditional scenario (pro-

clamation by a charismatic prophet at the beginning of the seventh century in the West Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina) and assumes at least four layers of Surahs (Early Meccan, Middle Meccan, Late Meccan, and Medinan).

Then we have to consider his assumptions and conclusions in the second half of his article:

- (1) The dating of the “night of destiny” in the month of Ramaḍān is secondary and late.
- (2) In Surah 97, Christian motives were intentionally replaced with a new view—not the birth of a savior, but the sending down of the Koran took place—thus a “counter-Christmas” was created.
- (3) Unlike most of the Koran, the earliest Surahs did not have eschatological content. The disturbance and crisis in the relationship God-man and the subsequent threats with hell-fire came later.
- (4) One method of dating Surahs is the choice of words, for example the use of the particle *'inna*.
- (5) Surah 97 should be considered an *ex post* authorization of earlier Koranic texts.
- (6) Whole verses, in other cases whole phrases, were added later, in the present case verse 4, or at least the second half of it.
- (7) The “spirit” (*al-rūḥ*) does not appear often in the earliest layer, is typical for the Middle and Late Meccan texts, and is reinterpreted as the archangel Gabriel in a Medinan Surah.
- (8) The problem of free will is seen as a problem, therefore verse 4 was added.
- (9) There is a parallel text in Ephrem’s hymns, a text collection assumed by Luxenberg as a model also for other Surahs.
- (10) There is a Biblical parallel text where angels ascend and descend in Gen 28:11–19.
- (11) The semantics of the word *rūḥ* is influenced by the Syriac *rūḥa d-qūḏšā* or *ruḥā qaddīšā*, which designates the “holy spirit.”

If he should be right with these assumptions and conclusions, two things become clear:

- (1) Although Sinai and other (former or current) staff members of the Corpus Coranicum try to give the impression that they defend the classical view of Early Islam, and thus their findings will not contradict the orthodox Islamic doctrines, this is definitely not the case. His view is incompatible with Islamic tradition. Especially the following points would certainly be rejected by pious Muslims:
 - He assumes that the Koran as we know it today had sources or models, e.g., Ephrem the Syrian and the Bible.

- The layers in the Koran represent very different religious ideas (e.g., regarding the “spirit,” eternal punishment, free will, etc.), different styles, and different wording. This is hardly compatible with the idea of one single charismatic founder and one original Koran in heaven.
 - There are obviously no real polytheists in Sinai’s explanation, but numerous allusions to the Old and New Testament.
 - The dating of the Islamic calendar (e.g., regarding the dating of feasts) is secondary.
 - If a “counter-Christmas” is created, the original Christmas must have been known to the target group of the Koran, thus they must have been familiar with Christianity.
- (2) At least in his interpretation of Surah 97, he is not very far away from Luxenberg. Like Luxenberg, he assumes strong influence from both the Syriac language and the literature written in it. And like him he assumes that the decisive incident for mankind was reinterpreted: the birth of the savior is replaced by the sending down of the Koran. The difference is rather that for Luxenberg, Surah 97 still refers to the former, for Sinai already to the latter.

So we come to the following conclusion: Sinai’s article at first glance looks like a refutation of Luxenberg, but on closer inspection it is at least a partial confirmation. To save the orthodox Islamic view, *both* Luxenberg *and* Sinai would have to be wrong!

3. Shoemaker’s Kathisma Church

3.1. A Short Summary of His Article

In his above-mentioned article, “Christmas in the Koran: The Koranic Account of Jesus’ Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition,” Stephen Shoemaker tries to demonstrate that the story of Jesus’ birth in the Koran (Q 19:22–27) goes back to a liturgical tradition attached to the Kathisma church situated between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

This church was discovered in 1997 on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It displays striking resemblances to the Dome of the Rock. It seems to point to a reinterpretation of the birth story under a palm tree, which provided nourishment for Mary—the story we also find in the Koran—leading to the new notion of a stopover, a rest on the flight to Egypt, after Bethlehem had become the undeniable birthplace of Jesus. Shoemaker writes:

This church was originally associated with the Nativity of Christ, but eventually came to be linked with the commemoration of Mary’s death and, more

importantly, with certain events from the Holy Family's legendary flight to Egypt, as described in several early Christian apocrypha . . . it is (to my knowledge) the only place where these two early Christian traditions meet, outside of the Qur'anic account of Jesus' Nativity.

That the palm tree is strongly linked to the "Flight to Egypt" is common knowledge among scholars dealing with Christian apocryphal literature, but here it seems that early Christians had used this church to commemorate the birth of Jesus, and when this was no longer possible, they reinterpreted the reason for building the church as the holy family's resting on their flight, i.e., exactly the story we find in the Koran.

The church was converted into a mosque in the eighth century, but the depiction of the Nativity of Jesus on the mosaics in the church was preserved. The significance of the church for the composition of the Koran is described by Shoemaker as follows:

If we assume that the Christian traditions present in the Qur'an derive from earlier Christian sources, rather than being revealed or composed *ex nihilo*, then the Kathisma church and its related traditions present the only known precedent for the Qur'anic account of Jesus' Nativity.

He then explicitly mentions "revisionist" scholars of Islam:

The probability that the Qur'anic account of the Nativity developed under the influence of specific local Palestinian Christian traditions confirms the recognitions of Wansbrough and others that the content of the Qur'anic text almost certainly continued to develop well after the death of Muḥammad.

Shoemaker surmises that in this case the

text of the Qur'an is not Muḥammad's, but rather a later product of his followers who drew on prior Christian traditions in composing the Qur'anic account of Jesus' birth. . . . Similarly, the Qur'an's dependence on these local, Jerusalemite traditions adds additional weight to revisionist arguments against the origin of Islam in the Ḥijāz. . . . In addition, the archaeological record of southern Palestine fits more with the traditions of early Islam than does the Ḥijāz.

Surprisingly, what now follows in Shoemaker's text is a lengthy apology, or rather justification, that one would have expected either at the very beginning or not at all:

Furthermore, as should be quite obvious, this article is a work, in the words of Crone and Cook, "by infidels for infidels . . . which any Muslim whose faith is as a grain of mustard seed should find no difficulty in rejecting."

Further down he continues:

Finally, I also wish to add that I am not at all insensitive to the concerns about “Orientalism” that have recently become an important focus of modern academic discourse. . . . Out of such concerns, many scholars from both the Islamic world and the West have argued that we must respect Islamic truth claims regarding Islam’s most authoritative traditions, the Qur’ān and the sunna, and refrain from challenging them with historical criticism. To do so, many would maintain, is to commit an act of intellectual colonialism. Although I deeply sympathize with the intent of this position, it is simply not an acceptable option in my view, at least from the vantage of the academic discipline of Religious Studies. . . . It is therefore not intellectually defensible in my opinion to study the early histories of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., both critically and skeptically, and then for some reason to exempt early Islam alone from this type of analysis.

Shoemaker then widens his perspective and mentions two texts that might contain motives that survived in the Koranic version of the Nativity story, the “*Latin Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and, to a lesser extent, the traditions of the *Protevangelium of James*.” What can be found both in the Protevangelium and the Koran is the tradition of Jesus’ birth in a remote place. According to the Protevangelium it took place in a cave halfway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Koran is not very specific on this point, as Shoemaker notes:

The stream and date palm seem to imply (but certainly do not demand) a rural location, and there is no indication in the text of the Qur’ān that this birth takes place in Bethlehem or any other city: this information is presumably supplied from the Christian tradition by later interpreters.

The second source mentioned by Shoemaker is more revealing:

Modern scholars of the Qur’ān have long acknowledged that the Qur’ānic account of Jesus’ birth is based largely on the reworking of a relatively obscure, apocryphal Christian tale, which is now known in several versions. . . . According to these traditions, while Mary and Joseph were travelling to Egypt with their newborn son, the Holy Family came into a remote, desolate area. In the midst of this desert, Mary expresses her hunger to Joseph, and in response, her infant son causes a tall date palm to bend and offer her its fruit. Then, in some versions of the story, Mary also drinks from a spring that her son miraculously provides. The parallels between this legend and Mary’s feeding from the date palm and stream in the Qur’ānic Nativity account are obvious. . . . The story of Mary and the Palm is never, to my knowledge, directly associated with the events of the Nativity in the Christian tradition. Thus we are left with a need to explain why, if in fact the Qur’ān has borrowed this earlier Christian legend,

the Qur'an has altered the legend's original setting, thereby transforming it into a Nativity tradition.

The second book mentioned by Shoemaker, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew,

is primarily a reworking of the Protevangelium of James, to which Pseudo-Matthew adds some "unique" material, including in particular the story of Mary's encounter with the date palm during the flight into Egypt. . . . In view of Pseudo-Matthew's combination of these early Christian apocryphal traditions, it might at first glance be tempting to identify this apocryphon as the primary source of the Qur'an's borrowed Christian traditions: most of the traditions that appear in the Qur'an are found in some form or another in Ps.-Matthew. Unfortunately, however, the solution is not so simple.

The main argument against the Gospel of Ps.-Matthew as the direct source of the Koran is the fact that it stems from the West and was written in Latin. However, this text should not be prematurely dismissed, as

Ps.-Matthew relies on earlier sources for many of its traditions, including the story of Mary and the palm in particular. . . . Recent efforts by the present writer have shown that the story of Mary and the date palm circulated in the Christian Near East perhaps as early as the third century, and beyond doubt by the early fifth century. The earliest extant version of this legend is found among the ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption, a collection of narratives that describe the events of Mary's departure from this life.

Shoemaker summarizes the Dormition narrative as follows:

As the narrative opens, Christ, who is also identified as a "Great Angel," appears to his mother to announce her impending death. When Mary expresses some uncertainty at her interlocutor's identity, the Christ-Angel reassures his mother by reminding her of their journey through the desert into Egypt, when he miraculously fed her from the date palm. He then recapitulates for her the story of Mary and the date palm.

But hunger and thirst are not the only grief of the young couple:

I first revealed it to you at the spring, where I led Joseph. He was crying, the child who is glorified because he is greater than everything, and Joseph was angry with you, saying, "Give your breast to your child." At once you gave it to him, as you went forth to the Mount of Olives, fleeing from Herod. And when you came to some trees you said to Joseph, "My lord, we are hungry, and what do we have to eat in this desert place?" Then he rebuked you, saying, "What can I do for you? Is it not enough for you that I became a stranger to my

family on your account; why didn't you guard your virginity, so that you would [not] be found in this. . . I [i.e., Jesus] say this to you Mary: know who I am and what power is upon me.

But Joseph refuses to eat, still angry:

And I am afflicted because I did not know the child that you have; I only know that he is not from me. But I have thought in my heart, perhaps I had intercourse with you while drunk.

But then Joseph starts to calculate and finds out that he cannot be the father:

And behold, now it has been made known that I was not negligent, because there were [only] five months when I received you in [my] custody. And behold, this child is more than five months; for you embraced him with your hand. Truly, he was not from your seed but from the Holy Spirit.

Then Jesus tells his father to climb the date-palm and bring it to her, then tells the date-palm to incline its head with its fruit. Jesus asks:

And who made it incline? Is it not because I have power, which was because of me? And you and Joseph were satisfied, because the date-palm's branches were placed as a wave of the ocean on the shore.

At the end of the chapter, Shoemaker wonders (p. 21):

But how are we to explain the very different setting of Mary's encounter with the date palm and spring in the Qur'ān?

His answer makes us return to the archeological site of the beginning of his article:

With the discovery of the ancient Kathisma church near Jerusalem, we have almost certainly found the source of this transformation, not in a specific literary source, but in the local liturgical traditions and holy sites of the Jerusalem Christians.

Further down (p. 31 ff.) Shoemaker offers some interesting information about the Kathisma church itself:

It was long thought that the Kathisma church had been discovered by archaeologists in the 1950s, during the excavations of Ramat Rahel, just to the south of Jerusalem. When the archaeologists excavating at Ramat Rahel discovered a large basilical church (13.5m x 20m) and monastery from the fifth-century, they quickly determined that they had uncovered remains of the long lost Kathisma church and monastery.

For almost fifty years, this church was considered to be the Kathisma church when

in 1992, efforts to widen the Jerusalem–Bethlehem highway led to a salvage excavation in which the foundations of a large, octagonal church (43m x 52m) were uncovered, approximately 350 meters north of the monastery of Mar Elias.

In the center of the newly found church, a rock of about 2 x 4 meters was found. The excavators drew the conclusion that

this new church was in fact the church of the Kathisma, rather than the church at Ramat Rahel, just few hundred meters to the north. This identification is supported, they argue, by the large rock at the center of this church, which, as we have already noted, certain accounts identify as an important feature of the Kathisma traditions.

Shoemaker thinks that

there is strong indication that there were two such churches: an “Old Kathisma,” a church and monastic community constructed sometime before 450, and a “New Kathisma,” built sometime around 450. On the basis of both the literary evidence and the archaeology, I have argued that the smaller church and monastic community at Ramat Rahel were likely the Old Kathisma.

In this latter, bigger church a striking feature can be observed: Its floor is decorated with mosaics, one of them depicting “a large date palm, flanked by two smaller palms, all of which are laden with fruit.” The mosaics stem from the time after the church had been converted into a mosque “near the beginning of the eighth century,” which Shoemaker takes as a sign of this tradition’s endurance. He is nevertheless undecided as to when the merging of the two early Christian traditions had taken place:

It seems rather likely that the two early Christian traditions had already been merged by the Islamic tradition into the single Nativity tradition known from the Qur’ān.

Further down he states:

The dependence of this Qur’ānic tradition on the two earlier Christian traditions is, from a historical point of view, undeniable.

But then he adds:

It is admittedly possible that the Qur’ānic story of Jesus’ Nativity had already formed in its present state before the invading Arabs had ever seen or heard of the Kathisma church.

Another point worth mentioning is the influence of the New Kathisma Church on the Dome of the Rock:

Experts on early Islamic art and architecture have long maintained that the Dome of the Rock is an architecturally unique edifice. . . . Numerous Byzantine churches, including several in Palestine, for instance, were constructed as concentric octagons, but “all of these buildings were planned according to standard ratios (Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 110).” . . . Oleg Grabar explains, “the plan of the Dome of the Rock is distinguishable from the plans of most comparable buildings by its inordinate size and by the perfection of its symmetries around multiple axes without visible focus or direction. (ibid., pp. 108–9) . . . With the recent discovery of the Kathisma church, however, the Dome of the Rock’s uniqueness has suddenly come into serious question, . . . that this fifth-century church served as the primary architectural model for Abd al-Malik’s construction of the Dome of the Rock . . . , about an hour’s walk from the Temple Mount, it is architecturally almost identical with the Dome of the Rock, right down to the enormous, sacred rock at its center. Approximately the same size as the Dome of the Rock, the Kathisma consists of two concentric octagons, centered on a large rock which is enclosed by a third octagon. . . . Moreover, Avner has also shown that the mosaic floors of the Kathisma mosque are particularly unusual, with the only known parallels being found in the wall mosaics of the Dome of the Rock. More specifically, the Kathisma’s palm mosaic . . . is identical to a mosaic from the Dome of Rock.

Shoemaker concludes:

All of this suggests that the Dome of the Rock is not the unique building that it once was thought to be.

The question of why a church had to reinterpret the nativity tradition and instead to identify with the “tradition of Mary and the palm tree from the legend of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt,” is also answered by Shoemaker:

Once the basilica of the Nativity in the city of Bethlehem had emerged as the dominant Nativity shrine, with the authoritative support of the canonical gospels, new significance had to be found for the church of the Kathisma that would supplant this dissonant, and yet ancient, Nativity tradition.

At the end of his article, Shoemaker again returns to his purported apologies and justifications:

Nevertheless, if one continues to adhere to the traditional model of the Qur’ān’s composition and formation, then most of what we have proposed in this article will likely seem almost completely preposterous.

Still, he is adamant in his statement:

Given the growing body of evidence that the Qur'anic text, or at the very least, significant parts of it, developed only after the Arab conquests of the Near East, the influence of the Kathisma church and its traditions on the Qur'an seems not only possible, but likely.

The burden of proof is consequently assigned to defenders of the traditional view:

While many scholars who remain loyal to the traditional narrative of the Qur'an's formation may reject our proposal, we would ask them to present equivalent evidence demonstrating the likelihood, or even possibility, that Muḥammad would have encountered the combination of these two traditions in the Ḥijāz.

3.2. Assessment of Shoemaker's Arguments

Shoemaker's article offers material evidence of far-reaching importance. First of all, he demonstrates that the story of Jesus' birth in the Koran is based on a liturgical tradition attached to the New Kathisma church situated between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, or at least religious ideas in connection with it. Two literary sources, the *Latin Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and the traditions of the *Protevangelium of James* probably played a major role in the development of the Koranic version of Jesus' birth.

Luxenberg's reinterpretation of the alleged "rivulet" is confirmed by the depiction of Joseph's anger and suspicions. For Mary the problem was legitimacy, not water. So Luxenberg's new rendering: "Do not be sad, your Lord has made your delivery legitimate" fits much better into the context than a rivulet between her legs.

After the excavation of the New Kathisma church, the Dome of the Rock resembles more and more a *church*, not a *mosque* in the modern sense. Moreover, it followed a model, even one that could be reached after a short walk from the Dome of the Rock.

The Arabic conquerors adopted the "message" of the church so easily that it is very likely that they were aware that their own traditions were linked to this church.

Shoemaker's article is also mentioned by Angelika Neuwirth in her essay "Imagining Mary: Disputing Jesus Reading Sūrat Maryam and Related Meccan Texts within the Koranic Communication Process."⁷ In the "post-script" (p. 414) she writes:

On the basis of these observations, the church seems to represent a materialized merger of the two traditions reflected also in the Koran, that prominently feature a palm tree nourishing the virgin in the situation of her delivery, with a

stream of water nearby. The fact that this church with its double liturgical purpose—to recall both Mary’s resting on the flight to Egypt and her delivery—was turned into a mosque by the early Muslims, serves Shoemaker as evidence for an assumption that the Koran should have been composed “not by Muḥammad but only after the conquests.”

She tries to defend the traditional account on the next page and points out that if Shoemaker were right, then

the Kathisma Church should hardly be the only case in point, but there should be existing analogous “Qur’anic” borrowings from other monuments such as studied from Klaus Bieberstein, Amiqam Elad, and Andreas Kaplony.

Absence of proof is not proof of absence, but in this case the point she makes seems to be: *Absence of further proof is proof of absence*.

At the end of our assessment, I have to come back with a personal remark about Shoemaker’s “apologies” at the beginning and the end of his article.

The fact that the findings of researchers might contradict the teachings of major religions is not surprising. What does leave me nonplussed is the need he obviously feels to stress that he is “not at all insensitive to the concerns about ‘Orientalism,’” that he “deeply sympathize[s] with the intent of this position” and that “most of what we have proposed in this article will likely seem almost completely preposterous.” The fact, however, that he considers it “not intellectually defensible” to study the early histories of religions critically and skeptically, and then for some reason “exempt early Islam alone” from this type of analysis demonstrates his scholarly integrity. So why these initial statements?

Excavations of dinosaur bones and their subsequent dating by paleontologists clearly contradict the teachings of creationists, but representatives of this discipline never apologize in their publications for hurting the feelings of those who believe that the earth was created around 6000 BCE.

And historians who investigate the history of the Spanish Inquisition never apologize to the Catholic Church for findings that the latter might not like.

And finally, physicists who publish about the probability amplitude in quantum physics never apologize to Buddhists because their theory clearly contradicts the Buddhist doctrine of cause and effect.

The truth claims of the religions of the world are for the most part mutually exclusive, and they never apologize to each other, so in academia we should follow scientifically sound methods in an unbiased way and not worry about religious or ideological doctrines.

Notes

- 1 Nicolai Sinai, “‘Weihnachten im Koran’ oder ‘Nacht der Bestimmung’?: Eine Interpretation von Sure 97,” *Der Islam* 88 (2002): 11–32.
- 2 Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Christmas in the Qur’ān: The Qur’ānic Account of Jesus’ Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (2003): 13–39.
- 3 See Corpus Coranicum, <http://www.corpuscoranicum.de/kontexte/index?sure=97&vers=1&anzeigen=Anzeigen> (accessed May 23, 2014).
- 4 Text edition with a translation to be found in Edmund Beck, ed., *Des heiligen Ephrem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 186, Scriptores Syri 82 (Louvain, 1959), pp. 10–11.
- 5 Meanings according to John Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran* (1873; reprint Delhi, 1990), p. 145.
- 6 The dictionaries used here are: Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2nd ed. (Halle, 1928) and J. Payne Smith, *Syriac Dictionary*, founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith (Oxford, 1903).
- 7 Angelika Neuwirth, “Imagining Mary: Disputing Jesus Reading Sūrat Maryam and Related Meccan Texts within the Qur’ānic Communication Process,” in Benjamin Jokisch, Ulrich Rebstock, and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *Fremde, Feinde und Kurioses* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 383–416.