

Section 101

Jesus' Early Life

Mary

Palestine 6 BC

In 6 BC Palestine was made up of three territories; Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle and Judea in the south. Politically it was a remote part of the Roman Empire having become so in 63 BC when Pompey had conquered the Selucids. Parthian troops had occupied Palestine in 40 BC but they were expelled by Roman troops in the following year. Herod had been appointed as King of Judea in 40 BC and remained as a Roman protegee until his death in 4BC during which time Palestine had prospered. In 6 BC Cyrenius had just been appointed governor of Syria. Judea was added to Syria and the emperor was keen to know what additional taxable resources were available as Josephus recounts

Josephus book XVIII p1

Now Cyrenius, a Roman senator, and one who had gone through other magistracies and had passed through them until he had been consul and one who on other accounts was of great dignity came at this time into Syria with a few others being sent by Caesar to be a judge of that nation and to take an account of their substance. Coponius also, a man of the equestrian order was sent together with him to have the supreme power over the Jews. Moreover Cyrenius came himself into Judea which was now added to the province of Syria to take an account of their substance and to dispose of Archelaus's money; but the Jews although at the beginning they took the report of taxation heinously, yet did they leave off any father opposition to it, by the persuasion of Joazar who was the son of Boethus and high priest. So they, being over-persuaded by Joazar's words gave an account of their estates without any dispute about it.

The Birth of John the Baptist

It was around this time that two babies were born in Palestine. They were vaguely related. The first was to an elderly couple named Zecharia and Elizabeth. She had been thought of as well past child bearing age. St Luke tells us of the events surrounding his birth

LUKE 1.5 to 1.25 [Q101-02]

In the days of Herod king of Judaea there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of the priesthood called after Abijah. His wife also was of priestly descent; her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were upright and devout, blamelessly observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. But they had no children, for Elizabeth was barren, and both were well on in years.

Once, when it was the turn of his division and he was there to take part in divine service, it fell to his lot, by priestly custom, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer the incense; and the whole congregation was at prayer outside. It was the hour of the incense-offering. There appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right of the altar of incense. At this sight, Zechariah was startled, and fear overcame him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard: your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. Your heart will thrill with joy and many will be glad that he was born; for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He shall never touch wine or strong drink. From his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit; and he will bring back many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will go before him as forerunner, possessed by the spirit and power of Elijah, to reconcile father and child, to convert the rebellious to the ways of the righteous, to prepare a people that shall be fit for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.'

The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel; I stand in attendance upon God, and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. But now listen: you will lose your power of speech, and remain silent until the day when these things happen to you, because you have not believed me, though at their proper time my words will be proved true.'

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, surprised that he was staying so long inside. When he did come out he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had had a vision in the sanctuary. He stood there making signs to them, and remained dumb.

When his period of duty was completed Zechariah returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she lived in seclusion, thinking, 'This is the Lord's doing; now at last he has deigned to take away my reproach among men.'

The Koran puts Zechariah's problems in a somewhat different light. He is placed as the guardian of Mary who will bear the son he has yearned for, but God gives him a surprise - he gets John as well.

Koran Sura III v 31 [Q101-03]

Remember when the wife of Imran said "O my Lord! I vow to thee what is in my womb, for thy special service. Accept it from me, for thou hearest, knowest!" And when she had given birth to it, she said, "O my Lord! Verily I have brought forth a female" - God knew what she had brought forth; a male is not a female - "and I have named her Mary, and I take refuge with thee for her and for her offspring, from Satan the stoned"

This last rather obscure point is that all birth is touched by Satan, hence the concept of original sin, however Hannah, who was Imran's wife had protected Mary from Satan. This is the origin of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Koran Sura III vv 32 [Q101-04]

So with goodly acceptance did her Lord accept her, and with goodly growth did he make her grow. Zacharius reared her.

Zechariah was selected to rear Mary by casting lots.

Koran Sura III v39 [Q101-05]

This is one of the announcements of things unseen by thee; To thee O Muhammed do we reveal it; for thou wast not with them when they cast lots with reeds which of them should rear Mary, nor wast thou with them when they disputed about it.

He evidently did a good job as God granted him his wish of a son.

Koran Sura III vv 32-36 [Q101-06]

So oft as Zacharias went in to Mary at the sanctuary he found her supplied with food. "Oh Mary" said he "Whence hast thou this?" She said "It is from God for God supplieth whom He will, without reckoning.

There did Zacharias call upon his Lord; "O my Lord!" said he "vouchsafe me from thyself good descendants, for thou art the hearer of prayer." Then did the angels call to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary.

"God announces John to thee, who shall be a verifier of the word from God, and a great one, chaste and a prophet of the just"

He said "O my Lord! how shall I have a son, now that old age hath come upon me and my wife is barren?" He said "Thus will God do His pleasure."

He said "Lord! give me a token" He said "Thy token shall be, that for three days thou shalt speak to no man but by signs; but remember thy Lord often and praise him at even and at morn.

Luke picks up the tale again reporting the birth of John. Zacharius remembers God's name for the child.

LUKE 1.57 to 1.80 [Q101-06]

Now the time came for Elizabeth's child to be born, and she gave birth to a son. When her neighbours and relatives heard what great favour the Lord had shown her, they were as delighted as she was. Then on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother spoke up and said, 'No! he is to be called John.' 'But' they said, 'there is nobody in your family who has that name. They inquired of his father by signs what he would like him to be called, He asked for a writing-tablet and to the astonishment of all wrote down, 'His name is John.' Immediately his lips and tongue were freed and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbours were struck with awe and everywhere in the uplands of Judaea the whole story became common talk. All who heard it were deeply-impressed and said, 'What will this child become?' For indeed the hand of the Lord was upon him.

And Zechariah his father was filled with the Holy spirit and uttered this prophecy:

'Praise to the God of Israel! For he has turned to his people, saved them and set them free and has raised up a deliverer of victorious power from the house of his servant David.

So he promised: age after age he proclaimed by the lips of his holy prophets, that he would deliver us from our enemies out of the hands of all who hate us; that he would deal mercifully with our fathers calling to mind his solemn covenant..

Such was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from enemy hands, and grant us, free from fear, to worship him with a holy worship, with uprightness of heart, In his presence, our whole life long.

And You, my child, you shall be called Prophet of the Highest, for You will be the Lord's forerunner to prepare his way and

lead his people to salvation through knowledge of him, by the forgiveness of their sins: for in the tender compassion of our God the morning sun from heaven will rise upon us, to shine on those who live in darkness, under the cloud of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

As the child grew up he became strong in spirit; he lived out in the wilds until the day when he appeared publicly before Israel.

The Annunciation

The second child was Jesus. About the only 'fact' that Luke had to go on was that he was born, that his mother was Mary and that to be the Son of God there had to be something very special about the manner of his birth. And what a wonderful story Luke told.

He begins by describing how Mary knew she was to have a baby.

LUKE 1.26 to 1.56 [Q101-07]

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.

Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view.

MATTHEW 1.18 to 1.25 [Q101-08]

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us).

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until

she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

Again the Koran's version has a different emphasis. It makes the point that what God wants God can do. It foretells Jesus' life

Koran Sura III vv 37-38

And remember when the angels said "O Mary! verily hath God chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee above the women of the worlds! O Mary! be devout towards thy Lord and prostrate thyself and bow down with those who bow,

The Koran goes on to tell how the Angel forecast to Mary what her baby was to be.

Koran Sura III vv 40-43 Q101-103

Remember when the angel said "O Mary! verily God announceth to thee the word from Him. His name shall be Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, illustrious in this world and in the next and one of those who have near access to God.

And He shall speak to men alike when in the cradle and when grown up; and he shall be one of the just.

She said " How O my Lord shall I have a son when man hath not touched me?" He said "Thus: God will create what he will; when He decreeth a thing, He only saith 'Be' and it is"

And he will teach him the Book and the wisdom and the Law and the Evangel and he shall be an apostle to the children of Israel "Now I have come" he will say "to you with a sign from your Lord; Out of clay will I make for you as it were the figure of a bird, and I will breathe into it and it shall become, by God's leave a bird. And I will heal the blind and the leper; and by God's leave will I quicken the the dead; and I will tell you what ye eat and what ye store up in your houses! Truly in this will be a sign for you, if ye are believers.