



THE
MYSTERY
OF THE
HISTORICAL
JESUS

The Mystery of the Historical Jesus



The Messiah in the Qur'an, the Bible, and Historical Sources

Louay Fatoohi



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6

The Virginal Conception

The claim that Mary conceived Jesus without having a sexual relationship with a man, which is stressed in both canonical Gospels and apocryphal sources, is one of the most controversial parts Jesus' story. Unsurprisingly, historical and scientific arguments have been made against the historicity of the virginal conception. What may be surprising to some, however, is that the New Testament itself has also been used to argue that the virginal conception was unhistorical! This scriptural argument is based on major inconsistencies in the New Testament. First, the miraculous nature of Mary's conception of Jesus is confirmed in only two books — Matthew and Luke. Second, there are passages in the New Testament that contradict the virginal conception. Third, the two birth stories that confirm this concept differ fundamentally from each other and, thus, are unreliable. Questioning the virginal conception has, not unexpectedly, led to questioning Jesus' illegitimacy.

The "virginal conception" is often mistakenly referred to as "virgin birth." The latter is a broader Roman Catholic doctrine that incorporates the virginal conception. The virgin birth doctrine states that in addition to conceiving Jesus while a virgin, Mary remained a virgin even after giving birth to him. This is why the Catholic Church describes Mary as the "ever-virgin" (*Aeiparthenos*).

The virginal conception is also at times confused with the "immaculate conception." This is another Catholic doctrine stating that Mary was free from the "original sin" from her conception. The original sin is a state of sinfulness that man is born with because of the sin of Adam and Eve. This is how Pope Pius IX defined the immaculate conception in 1854 when he turned this centuries-old concept into a revealed dogma that all Catholics had to believe in: "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin." The immaculate conception was introduced because it was believed that not only Jesus but his mother also had to be free of sin.

Both concepts of the virgin birth and immaculate conception have established themselves in Catholic theology, but they have no foundations in the Qur'an. In fact, the Qur'an's teachings about the noble, yet human, nature of both Mary and Jesus are at odds with these concepts, as well with much of Christian theology. The Qur'an confirms several times, however, that Mary became miraculously pregnant with Jesus while she was a virgin.

6.1. The Virginal Conception in Christian Sources

The conception of Jesus is described in Matthew and Luke in the New Testament and some apocryphal writings, where it is described as miraculously virginal. I have already quoted the relevant passages in Chapter 5, so I will only make quick references to them here.

Matthew makes it clear that Mary conceived a child through the Holy Spirit, without having a sexual relationship with Joseph: “While his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit”. When Joseph became aware of Mary’s pregnancy he thought of leaving her, as he was not the father of the child and naturally thought that she must have had an affair with someone else. But then he saw the angel in a dream who reassured him that Mary’s pregnancy was “from the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:18-20).

Matthew then goes on to say that Jesus’ birth would fulfill an Old Testament prophecy of a “virgin” giving birth: “This all happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: ‘Look! The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:22-23). There is more to say about the word “virgin” and Matthew’s quotation of this Old Testament prophecy later in the chapter.

Luke’s account of the annunciation is even keener on stressing the virginal conception of Jesus. He first emphasizes that when the angel visited Mary she was a “virgin” (Luke 1:27), although she was betrothed to Joseph. When the angel told Mary that she would conceive and give birth to a child (Luke 1:31), she was astonished and asked the angel how this could happen when she had not known a man. The angel’s reply made it clear that Mary’s conception was going to be miraculous and involve no man: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35).

The virginal conception is also confirmed in apocryphal writings. The Gospel of the Birth of Mary states that the angel addressed Mary as “Mary! Virgin of the Lord most acceptable! O Virgin full of grace” (BirMary. 7:3). He then went on to tell her: “For you have found favour with the Lord, because you made virginity your choice. Therefore while you are a Virgin, you shall conceive without sin, and bring forth a son” (BirMary. 7:9-10), and then “Think not, Mary, that you shall conceive in the ordinary way. For, without lying with a man, while a Virgin, you shall conceive; while a Virgin, you shall bring forth; and while a Virgin shall give suck. For the Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you” (BirMary. 7:17-19).

The Infancy Gospel of James also stresses that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus miraculously. The writer of this gospel has Mary ask the angel who informed her about the conception whether she would conceive naturally like any other women. The angel replied that Mary’s conception would not be natural but supernatural: “Not so, O Mary, but the Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you” (InJam. 9:13). This gospel also tells us that Joseph wanted to leave Mary when he learned about her pregnancy, but he was

instructed in sleep to keep her and was told that the child she bore was “of the Holy Spirit” (InJam. 10:18).

The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew does not mention the virginal conception explicitly, but it does say that when Joseph had doubts about Mary’s pregnancy, the angel appeared to him in his dream, told him to take Mary as his wife, and revealed that the child in her womb was of the Holy Spirit (PsMatt. 11).

6.2. The Arguments Against the Virginal Conception

The virginal conception has been rejected on three main grounds: scriptural, historical, and scientific or rational.

The *scriptural* argument is based on flaws and contradictions in the story of the conception of Jesus in the New Testament. The *historical* objection stems from the resemblance of the scriptural accounts of the virginal conception to historical stories that predate Jesus. The *rational* or *scientific* argument states that a virginal conception is an impossibility, so could not have taken place. We will examine these three arguments in this section.

In my discussion of scriptural and historical rejectionist arguments, I will frequently cite Jocelyn Rhys’ comprehensive study *Shaken Creeds: The Virgin Birth Doctrine*, which was originally published in 1922. Rhys’ work covers the main arguments against the virginal conception of Jesus.

6.2.1. The Scriptural Arguments

Rejectionists usually ignore the Qur’anic story of Jesus’ birth because they do not consider it independent, presuming that it is based on Christian sources. Additionally, the Qur’anic story does not contain any contradictions that can be used to discredit it. Apocryphal writings are also usually given very little attention by critics because what established the belief in the virginal conception is the account in the canonical Gospels, and because of the wider belief that apocryphal books are less original than the canonical ones and have little inherent value. Discrediting the New Testament story of the virginal conception, therefore, is seen as undermining the story in the apocryphal sources also. Thus, it is the New Testament that has been the target of the critics of the virginal conception; and this criticism is not unjustified.

There are three main criticisms of the story of the virginal conception in the New Testament. **First**, it is mentioned in only two of the twenty seven books of the New Testament. Of the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the twenty one Epistles, and the book of Revelation, only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke talk about the virginal conception. This is taken to mean that there was no knowledge or wide acceptance of the story. **Second**, the books of the New Testament, including Matthew and Luke, contain details that contradict the virginal conception of Jesus. **Third**, the two Gospels that mention Jesus’ virginal conception give very different

accounts of the events leading to and following his birth. As the birth story is closely tied to that of the conception, serious doubts are raised about the historicity and authenticity of the whole nativity account in the two books. Let's discuss these arguments in more detail.

6.2.1.1. Unknown Story

The Gospels of Mark and John do not contain any information about the birth of Jesus or his childhood. Both start their accounts around the time when Jesus met John the Baptist, which is believed to have happened when Jesus was around 30 years old. It is still very surprising that these two Gospels do not mention even in passing the virginal conception although it is one of the greatest miracles associated with Jesus. It is extremely difficult to accept that Mark and John could not have known of Mary's miraculous conception yet they had good knowledge of Jesus' life. Either they did not know much about Jesus' life, or that they knew about the story of the virginal conception but deliberately ignored it because they did not believe it. They wrote what they knew and believed, so they either did not know the story or did not believe it. Even when John reports how a group of Jews objected to Jesus' claim that he had come down from heaven on the grounds that they knew his mother and father, Jesus does not bother to correct and remind them that Joseph was not his father:

Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began complaining about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," and they said, "Isn't this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (John 6:41-42)

It is unlikely that the Evangelists did not believe the story of the virginal conception. After all, they reported many of Jesus' miracles. Also, there is nothing in their theologies that stands against the concept of Jesus' virginal conception.

The fact that the earliest and latest Gospels contain nothing at all about Jesus' early life probably means that the authors had no knowledge of that history. Even if they believed that the most important phase of Jesus' life started at his baptism, his earlier years would surely have merited at least brief coverage and would have been of so much interest to people. Additionally, ancient people had great interest in the birth stories of their heroes. Mark and John did not know anything about Jesus' birth and childhood. If these two Evangelists knew about the virginal conception story but did not believe it, they would have probably written what they knew of Jesus' birth and overlooked or explicitly rejected that story. I am excluding the possibility that the current versions of the Gospels of Mark and John are missing parts as there is no evidence to this effect.

The ignorance of the two Evangelists of that history should not be surprising, as these books were written several decades after the events they describe and in a

time where unrecorded history can be as easily lost and forgotten as changed and manipulated. It is still surprising, nevertheless, that the New Testament, which is supposed to be the most authoritative record of Jesus' life and religion, mentions his miraculous birth and his childhood only in 2 of its 27 books.

No matter how this absence of the virginal conception from Mark and John is explained, it represents a major and significant difference between them and Matthew and Luke. Mark's and John's complete silence about Jesus' early history also raises serious questions about the credibility of these two books, but it does not say anything about the credibility of the story of the virginal conception. To say that Jesus' childhood was religiously insignificant undermines the credibility of Matthew and Luke whose accounts are laden with miracles. Suggesting that Jesus' childhood was religiously significant reflects equally as bad on Mark and John.

It may be argued that the infancy story did not need to be reported in all Gospels, and that the four books complement each other. This argument is driven by faith, and it is false. The authors of these books did not sit together and agree who was going to report what, in which case it would have been understandable why the virginal conception, birth, and childhood of Jesus are not reported in all Gospels. Also, there are many events from Jesus' life that are reported in more than one Gospel, and some of them are found in all four Gospels. These books became parts of one scriptural unit centuries after they were written and after the events they describe. There is clear evidence that the Gospels are not completely independent of each other and that they have used earlier sources. There is no evidence that the four Gospels were intended to or do complement each other, and the many contradictions between these books prove the opposite.

The claim that the four Gospels shed light on the same history from different angles is a more general argument whose use is not restricted to explain the absence of Jesus' infancy from two Gospels. This argument is often used to explain why there are four Gospels rather than one and different accounts of the same events. It ignores the fact that there have been many more than four Gospels, and that the canon's embracement of only four of these Gospels and the other New Testament books was the result of a long process that involved many people and much politics.

The Acts of the Apostles, the twenty one Epistles, and Revelation also make no mention of the miracle of Jesus' conception. Even when a reference is made to Jesus' birth, the authors of these books do not make any reference to the virginal conception. For instance, when Paul says "but when the appropriate time had come, God sent out his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4), he seems to either deliberately avoid to mention the virginal conception, or is simply unaware of it. It is not possible that Paul knew and believed in the virginal conception yet did not mention it even when talking specifically about Jesus' birth. As already noted by others, a reference to the miraculous conception would have been as simple as replacing the word "woman" with "virgin" in Paul's words above. After

all, from the virginal conception point of view, Jesus' conception was different not because it involved a "woman," but because that woman was a "virgin." It is true that Paul does not mention any of Jesus' miracles, but he clearly believed Jesus did perform and can perform miracles. He prayed to him to heal him (2 Cor. 12:7-9) and claimed to have been converted to Christianity by a major miracle (Acts 9:3-8, 22:6-10, 26:13-18). Paul must have believed that Jesus was conceived naturally. This is confirmed by his tracing of Jesus' genealogy to David, who is Joseph's ancestor, and stressing that Jesus was related through the "flesh" to David: "concerning his Son who was a descendant of David with reference to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3). The Second Epistle to Timothy, whose attribution to Paul is doubtful, also stresses that Jesus descended from David (2 Tim. 2:8). In his letter to the Romans, Paul also emphasizes that Jesus came "by human descent" from the Patriarchs (Rom. 9:5).

This is how the author of *Shaken Creeds: The Virgin Birth Doctrine* summarizes these serious differences and the significance of the chronology of these books:

Thus neither the authors of the Epistles which are the earliest of our New Testament books, nor the authors of the earliest and the latest of our four Canonical Gospels, make any mention of a Virgin Birth. The Gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke are our only authorities for the story, and they, as we have already seen, were not written until about the middle of the first half of the second century. Then for the first time, more than a century after the date assigned to the birth of Jesus, and nearly a century after the date assigned to his death, appears the first mention of the Virgin Birth....

Even if a much earlier date be assigned to the publication of these two Gospels, the argument against the doctrine [of the Virgin Birth] on the score of lateness is not impaired. No scholar, however orthodox, denies that the Epistles are the earliest Christian documents in our Canon, or that the Epistles contain no reference to the Virgin Birth story, or that the Gospels were not written until at least three-quarters of a century after the date assigned to the birth of Jesus. So even the most conservative confess that the story first appears in two comparatively late documents, and that it is peculiar to these two out of all the other New Testament scriptures. Our "witnesses" are two. As we have already seen, neither of them is a first-hand witness. (Rhys 1922: 82-84)

Rhys concludes that the apostles had either never heard of or did not believe in the virginal conception of Jesus. This is the same conclusion that *has* to be reached about Mark's and John's failure to mention the virginal conception, although because these two, like Matthew and Luke, were particularly interested in Jesus' history, it is far more likely that they simply did not know about the virginal

conception, as they did not report anything about Jesus' early history, as I explained above.

Even the Qur'an, which does not share the Bible's great interest in historical details and covers Jesus' story only briefly, mentions the virginal conception four times in three different chapters — twice in passing (3.59, 4.171) and twice in more detail (3.45-47, 19.17-22). This further highlights the oddity of the complete silence of all but two of the New Testament books on this unique miracle.

Another group of Qur'anic verses (19.27-33) show Mary's people, expectedly, question Jesus' legitimacy and tell us how the infant Jesus responded on behalf of his mother. In the New Testament, there is no mention that people were aware of Jesus' miraculous virginal conception. This applies even to Matthew's wise men and Luke's shepherds who visited the newborn Jesus. They saw Jesus with Mary and Joseph, and in the absence of any mention of their knowledge of the miracle, the implication is that they thought that Joseph was the baby's father. The presence of Joseph in Mary's life must have had at least some people think that her conception was the result of her relationship with Joseph. This natural conclusion did not escape the author of the Infancy Gospel of James. In one episode of this nativity story, news that Mary was pregnant came to the knowledge of the high priest who accused the couple of getting married secretly. The author solves the problem by having Mary and Joseph pass the test of the "water of the Lord" and thus prove their innocence (InJam. 11). Yet apart from a passing reference in John (8:37-41), we do not read in the New Testament about people suggesting that Jesus was the son of a normal relationship nor any rebuttals for such claims. If this means that people were not aware of the virginal conception then they must have believed that Joseph was Mary's husband, otherwise she would have been accused of adultery and, according to the Jewish law (Lev. 20:10), stoned to death.

Rhys also sets out to prove that the first two chapters in Matthew and Luke, in which the virginal conception is mentioned, were added to their respective books later. He thinks, as many scholars do, that the story of the virginal conception was a relatively late invention that was forced into Matthew and Luke, as well as written in some apocryphal books. One interesting observation is that while Acts and the Gospel of Luke were both written by the same person, the earlier of the two does not mention the virginal conception. It is indeed difficult to understand why the author who was so impressed and fascinated by the virginal conception in his later book did not mention it at all in the first! Is it possible that he learned about it later? Additionally, Acts indicates that Jesus' apostles knew him only from the time of his baptism by John (Acts 1:22).

Scholars have noted that if the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke are ignored, these two Gospels would share with Mark and John the same starting point: Jesus' baptism. The gospel of the Jewish Christian group of the Ebionites (Aramaic: "poor men"), which seems to be a revision of Matthew, also omits the nativity story and starts with the story of John in the wilderness. Irenaeus, the 2nd

century bishop of Lyon, pointed out that the Ebionites believed that Jesus was the product of a normal relationship between Mary and Joseph:

Cerinthus, again, a man who was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, taught that the world was not made by the primary God, but by a certain Power far separated from him, and at a distance from that Principality who is supreme over the universe, and ignorant of him who is above all. He represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassable, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.

Those who are called Ebionites agree that the world was made by God; but their opinions with respect to the Lord are similar to those of Cerinthus and Carpocrates. They use the Gospel according to Matthew only, and repudiate the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.26.1-2)

Rhys (1922: 79) also argues that had the virginal conception been true, the baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit would have been unnecessary, as Jesus is supposed to have received the Holy Spirit in his miraculous birth.

There is another criticism that has been directed at Matthew's use of an Old Testament prophecy to suggest that the virginal conception had been predicted. The Evangelist states that Mary became "pregnant through the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:18), and that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20). He then has the following quotation from "the prophet": "'Look! The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call him Emmanuel,' which means 'God with us'" (Matt. 1:23). This prophet is Isaiah, and the prophecy Matthew quotes is this: "For this reason the sovereign master himself will give you a confirming sign. Look, this young woman is about to conceive and will give birth to a son. You, young woman, will name him Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). As is clear from the *New English Translation* of the Bible, which is used in this book, the original Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14 does not talk about a virgin! It uses the word *'almah*, which means "young woman," who may and may not be virgin. The word *'almah* does not mean virgin inherently. It is the feminine form of the masculine noun *'elem* which is used in 1 Samuel 17:56 and 20:22. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, *'almah* is translated into *parthenos*. The latter means "virgin," but it also used in the Septuagint for another two Hebrew words for "girl" and "young woman." Matthew does not quote the

original Hebrew Bible which talks about a young woman, but he uses the Greek translation which employs a word that is more suggestive of a virgin.

Bible scholar Robert Miller (2003: 201-206) argues that even if Matthew meant to use “parthenos” to mean “virgin,” he would still not necessarily have meant a virginal conception. He might have meant to talk about a lady who was then a virgin and was going to become naturally pregnant later. Miller’s argument is derived from his uncommon view that Matthew did not have a virginal conception on his mind when he wrote his Gospel.

That said, since the Hebrew term may still mean “a virgin,” a conclusive argument cannot be made for either position.

The real problem in Matthew’s use of Isaiah’s prophecy is that he takes it completely out of context in order to apply it to Jesus’ conception. Around 735 BCE, Rezin, King of Syria, and Pekah, King of the northern kingdom of Israel, formed an alliance against the threat of invasion by the neighboring superpower of Assyria. They wanted Ahaz, King of the southern kingdom of Judea, to join their coalition, but Ahaz was fearful of becoming Assyria’s enemy. Rezin and Pekah then sent their armies to depose Ahaz and install a new king who would join their alliance. Ahaz thought of allying himself with Assyria to seek its powerful protection against Rezin and Pekah’s advancing armies toward Jerusalem. God sent Prophet Isaiah to allay Ahaz’s fears and give him a sign: a young woman will give birth to a boy called Immanuel, and before this boy is old enough to differentiate between right and wrong, the lands of Rezin and Pekah would be destroyed:

For this reason the sovereign master himself will give you a confirming sign. Look, this young woman is about to conceive and will give birth to a son. You, young woman, will name him Immanuel. He will eat sour milk and honey, which will help him know how to reject evil and choose what is right. Here is why this will be so: Before the child knows how to reject evil and choose what is right, the land whose two kings you fear, will be desolate. (Isa. 7:14-16)

The text goes on to talk about events that would follow.

Matthew has completely misused Isaiah’s prophecy in applying it to Jesus’ birth. **First**, there was nothing special or miraculous about the conception or birth that Isaiah described. **Second**, the birth was not itself significant, as it was only a sign to Ahaz about future events. **Third**, that birth would be a sign only if it happened during Ahaz’s life. **Fourth**, while Isaiah talked about a child called Immanuel (Isa. 7:14, 8:8), Jesus is never actually called “Immanuel” anywhere in the New Testament. The context of Isaiah’s prophecy could not be clearer, so Matthew must have consciously decided to take the prophecy out of its context and apply it to Jesus.

This is not the only Old Testament prophecy that Matthew misuses to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies that he links to the coming of the Messiah, to show that Jesus is the awaited Messiah. The fact that the cited prophecies are forced to seem applicable to their respective parts of the Jesus story makes it highly unlikely that Matthew used those prophecies as a source of inspiration to fabricate the relevant episodes. If Matthew was using his imagination to create history, his keen interest on linking Jesus' life to Old Testament prophecies would have made him come up with events that are much easier to match to those prophecies. Yet almost every time he linked an episode in Jesus' life to a Biblical passage the latter had to be taken out of context, changed, and/or clumsily applied, which means that it is far more likely that the Evangelist was reporting what he believed to be history. He simply used the Old Testament to provide support for the history he had learned about, believed in, and accordingly reported. In the case of the virginal birth, Isaiah 7:14 does not talk about the conception of a virgin but a "young woman" and is not applicable to Jesus' story anyway, so this Biblical passage could not have inspired Matthew with the story. He simply wanted an Old Testament text that he thought he could apply to the story which he already knew to give it Christological dimensions. He reported a story that was already in circulation as part of the tradition of Jesus' birth which he believed. Whether that tradition is historical or not is, of course, a different matter.

Additionally, the suggestion that Matthew made up the events he reported makes the fulfillment argument which he persistently pursued completely meaningless. Matthew must have genuinely believed in the events he reported to diligently seek reference to these events in the Old Testament to prove that Jesus was the Christ (France, 1979: 120).

The fact that other apocryphal gospels misuse prophecies more or less in the same way Matthew does does not necessarily mean that they copied Matthew. It is more likely that these writings, including Matthew, were based on earlier oral or written sources.

6.2.1.2. Contradictory Accounts

The second attack against the authenticity of the Gospel accounts of the virginal conception is that the books of the New Testament, including Matthew and Luke, contain passages that contradict the virginal conception. One contradiction is the repeated reference to Jesus' descent from David, which implies that Joseph was his father, as Mary was probably not Davidic. Rhys links this contradiction to the assumption of the late inclusion of the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke:

The contradictions involved in a story which frequently refers to Joseph as the father of Jesus, and yet begins by the Virgin Birth episode, can be accounted for only by assuming that the original Gospels did not contain the earlier chapters of our present Gospels, and that when these chapters were

added the editors omitted to make all the alterations in the text of the original chapters which would be necessary to bring these into accordance with the new commencement. Some small modifications seem indeed to have been made, but much remains which is absolutely inconsistent with the Virgin Birth story. (Rhys 1922: 105)

Miller (2003:65) has interestingly pointed out that a number of ancient manuscripts changed the child's "father and mother" in Luke 2:33 to "Joseph and his mother," and Mary's words "your father and I" in Luke 2:48 to "we." Clearly, those ancient copyists recognized that calling Joseph *Jesus' fathers* challenged the story of the virginal conception, so they changed this description. The contradictions and textual variations regarding whether Jesus was the son of David or not, and what this link meant, can be seen also outside the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. They reflect awareness of the conflict between making Jesus of Davidic descent and his virginal conception. For instance, the clause "the carpenter, the son of Mary" in Mark 6:3 appears in different versions in some copies. In several old manuscripts, including the oldest available manuscript, it reads "the son of the carpenter and Mary," and a few others have it as "son of Mary and Joseph" Miller (2003:213). Matthew also has a different version: "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother named Mary?" (Matt. 13:55). Jesus was repeatedly linked to David not because Joseph was known to be his father, but because the awaited Messiah was believed to be Davidic (p. 234).

Other contradictions that have been identified is that Joseph and Mary "were amazed" at the praise of the child Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:33), and that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5). Mark even suggests that Jesus' brother and mother thought that he was mad (Mark 3:21, 31)! Rhys argues that had Jesus been born of a virginal conception, Mary would not have been "amazed" at the good words that were being said of him. He also contends that Mary would have certainly told Jesus' brother of his miraculous birth, so they would have believed in him. Rhys concludes that these texts show that the Gospels did not contain originally anything about a virginal conception, and that this story was introduced later on.

It is perhaps another sign of the confusing state of the accounts in Matthew and Luke that the basic argument of these texts can be read completely differently by different experts. For example, Miller (2003: 198-206) accepts that Luke's account is clearly suggestive of a virginal conception but raises serious doubts about whether Matthew had a miraculous conception in mind, yet Parrinder (1995: 71-72) concludes almost the opposite, suggesting that it is Matthew's account that is more plainly talking about a virginal conception! Nevertheless, the majority of scholars agree that both Matthew and Luke talk about a virginal conception.

6.2.1.3. Different Infancy Narratives

The third flaw in the New Testament's story of the virginal conception is that the two books that mention the story differ fundamentally in their accounts of Jesus' birth, which is closely tied to the story of his conception, thus raising serious questions about the credibility of the two nativity accounts. There is no disagreement that Mary had a virginal conception. While Luke talks in detail about Gabriel's visit to Mary, Matthew only makes a passing reference to the fact that Mary "was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:18) and that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20). But the two Gospels give very different accounts of Jesus' birth. I will discuss these differences in more detail when I study Jesus' birth (pp. 168-169), but here I would like to focus on two major differences.

Matthew talks about Herod's massacre of young infants that targeted Jesus' life and forced Joseph to take Mary and little Jesus and escape to Egypt. This major event in the Matthean account is completely missing from Luke. The latter, on the other hand, talks about Joseph and the heavily pregnant Mary traveling from Galilee to Judea to register in a census that was ordered by the Roman empire, yet Matthew makes no mention of this journey. Both Gospels talk about a journey, but each ties its journey to his own version of events. Significantly, both stories of Herod's massacre (§11.3.2) and Roman census (§10.6) have also serious historical problems.

The three arguments above highlight major contradictions and inconsistencies in the New Testament and raise serious questions about the account of the virginal conception. These arguments often lead critics to reject the story of the virginal conception. They conclude that these problems are indicative of the inauthenticity and non-historicity of the story of the virginal conception.

It is undeniable that the story of the virginal conception in the New Testament has real problems. The many contradictions raise serious questions about the credibility of the New Testament authors, not the least the authors of the four Gospels. This does not necessarily mean that the story of the virginal conception, or to that matter other events in Jesus' life that the Gospels mention, did not take place. These flaws and inaccuracies can have an alternative explanation, and the Qur'an offers one.

From the Qur'anic perspective, Biblical textual problems are no surprises. The Qur'an has made it clear that the religious books that the Jews and Christians possess were written and changed by people. Even the Torah and the Injil were tampered with. There is no reason to believe that the Gospels or other books in the New Testament are more factual or accurate about Jesus' life than other books that were not chosen for canonization. The fact that Luke's and Matthew's infancy narratives look isolated and probably unauthentic undermines the credibility and authenticity of the Gospels not the narratives. Focusing on problems in the two

nativity narratives is a red herring, as these problems are not confined to these parts of the New Testament. They are rather a small sample of similar problems permeating many parts and books of the New Testament, and indeed the Old Testament also. They are symptomatic of more fundamental problems with the Bible.

Many scholars believe that the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke — specifically the accounts of the virginal conception — are inauthentic, as they are inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament. The likelihood, however, is that Matthew, Luke, and the other two Evangelists were not as informed and knowledgeable as tradition would have us believe. The contradictory picture of the virginal conception in the New Testament is the result of the confused state of its books not the story's incredibility. This is the Qur'anic perspective.

6.2.2. The Historical Arguments

In his rebuttal of the concept of virginal conception, Rhys compiled ancient stories from various cultures and traditions in which some form of miraculous conception features one way or another. His collection includes many myths and legends from ancient Egypt, Greece, China, India, Asia, Mexico, and North America. Rhys' long list of pre-Christianity characters that traditions claim to have been born by virgin mothers include Pharaoh Amenhotep III (1386-1349), the Phrygian god Attis, the Grecian God Dionysos, Buddha (6th century BCE), the Indian god Rama, and many others.

In his quest to prove that the concept of the virginal conception lived long before Christianity and that the latter copied it from older traditions, Rhys confused this concept, which he inaccurately called the "virgin birth," with "non-sexual, supernatural conception." For instance, Rhys mentions Buddha's mother who is said to have conceived Buddha through a dream. Buddha's mother was actually married, even though she did not conceive Buddha through her husband. The same applies to the mother of the Indian god Rama, Queen Kausalya. She had been married to King Dasarath, but had no children. Dasarath, who was married to other women who also did not have children, performed a special sacrifice at the end of which he was given a divine drink. He gave the drink to his wives who gave birth, with Kausalya giving birth to Rama.

Most of the stories that Rhys cites do not really share anything of significance with Jesus' story. Even when a story does contain some form of virginal conception, the similarity is negligible given the substantial differences between the two stories. Let me give two more ancient examples cited by Rhys, one from Greece and the other from Sicily:

Dionysos, the Grecian God, was said in one version of the myth concerning him to be the son of Zeus out of the virgin goddess Persephone, and in another version to be the miraculously begotten son of Zeus out of the mortal

woman Semele. He, according to this story, was taken from his mother's womb before the full period of gestation had expired, and completed his embryonic life in Zeus's thigh. Dionysos was thus half human and half divine, born of a woman and also of a god. (Rhys, 1922: 118)

A Sicilian tale, probably very old, tells of a king's daughter who was shut up in a tower which had no aperture through which the sun could shine, as it had been foretold that she would conceive a child by the sun, and her father was anxious to prevent this occurrence. The girl, however, made with a piece of bone a small hole in the wall, and a sunbeam, entering through this hole, impregnated her. (Rhys, 1922: 143)

The attempt to discredit the virginal conception of Jesus because similar stories existed before Jesus is a good example of one of the flaws of the secular approach (§1.1.2). One astonishing aspect of this flaw is that the claimant is not required to prove that the latter story was copied from the earlier one(s), or that all these stories are instances of a literary motif and thus the work of the imagination of man. The mere existence of the two is taken to mean that story copying or creation did take place! The ridiculousness of this conclusion is clear from the fact that it can be applied almost at will, as no evidence is required. For instance, it could be claimed that no story of extraordinary or inexplicable healing, including the miraculous healings performed by Jesus, can be factual, because almost all nations and cultures from ancient times have had such stories in their traditions.

Jesus' virginal conception should be treated as a myth, it is often claimed, because other religious leaders have also been claimed to have been born to virgins. This is how the New Testament story is seen by those critics. This criticism cannot be made of the Old Testament where a number of miraculous conceptions are reported but none is claimed to have been virginal. More significant, the Qur'an also contains a number of stories of miraculous conceptions, but only Jesus is said to have been born of a virgin. Not even Muhammad is described as having been born of a virgin. In fact, the tone of exaggeration that religious books are often accused of engulfing the lives of their leaders with is remarkably missing from the Qur'an's account of Muhammad's life. With respect to the Prophet's birth, we know that he was an orphan (93.6), and there is no claim about him being born by a virginal conception, or that any miracle was involved in his birth. It is interesting to contrast the Qur'an's account with other Islamic literature where the writers associate many miracles with Muhammad from his conception to his birth. This is another example on the fundamental differences between the Qur'an and other writings. Had Muhammad written the Qur'an, you would expect him to have attributed all kinds of miracles and marvels to himself to impress an Arab society that was submerged in myths and legends. It is remarkable and significant that

none of this exists in the Qur'an. This adds credibility to the only account of virginal conception in the Qur'an, which is that of Jesus.

By its very nature, a conception can be known to be virginal only by the woman who experiences it. She is the only person who can know whether her pregnancy was indeed miraculous and did not involve a man. Even the presence of the hymen cannot provide conclusive independent evidence that the pregnancy of a woman was not caused by human sperms. This is why we cannot expect to find independent, historical evidence to support the virginal conception of Jesus. This does not mean that history refutes this claim; it simply means that it cannot provide evidence for it.

Aware of the fact that the virginal conception cannot be known or verified by independent evidence, Matthew, the Gospel of the Birth of Mary, and the Infancy Gospel of James have Joseph informed paranormally in a dream that Mary's conception of Jesus was virginal, facilitated by the Holy Spirit. The Infancy Gospel of James (14:18-19) and The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (13) address this differently. They have two midwives examine Mary after the birth and find her still a virgin. What they found is actually evidence on a virgin birth not only virginal conception.

In the Qur'an, the supportive evidence from God to Mary's claim to chastity came from her infant son Jesus — the very subject of the accusation — who spoke in the cradle in defense of his mother, as we shall see later in this chapter (also p. 178).

6.2.3. The Scientific Arguments

Science has also been used to reject the virginal conception. This argument appeals to the fact that a human conception happens when a sperm from a male fertilizes an egg from a female. In the virginal conception, there was no male involved, so it is claimed that the pregnancy could not have occurred.

The development of an egg into an individual without fertilization has actually been known to exist in nature since the 18th century. Parthenogenesis, as it is known scientifically, has been observed in lower plants and animals, such as insects. In many social insects, such as the honeybee and the ant, the unfertilized eggs develop into the male drones and the fertilized eggs into the female workers and queens. Recently a captive female hammerhead shark at a zoo in Nebraska made the news when it gave birth without having contact with a male. Scientists confirmed that the young animal possessed no paternal DNA.

Parthenogenesis has also been induced artificially. This was first clearly demonstrated by 1900 by Jacques Loeb, who found that unfertilized frog eggs that he pierced with a needle caused some times normal embryonic development to start. Artificial parthenogenesis has been achieved in almost all major groups of animals and in mammals, although usually resulting in incomplete and abnormal

development. What is relevant to the discussion of the virginal conception of Jesus, however, is that there are no reports of successful parthenogenesis involving humans.

The scientific argument has been elaborated further. The nucleus of the human cell contains two sex chromosomes. These are X chromosomes in females, and one X and one Y in males. In a normal fertilization process which involves a sperm and an egg, the fertilized egg would either inherit one X chromosome from the egg and one X chromosome from the sperm and develop into a female, or one X chromosome from the egg and one Y chromosome from the sperm and become a male. As there is no male participation in a virginal conception, no Y chromosome is involved, so the egg would have only X chromosomes and would develop into a female. Since Jesus was a man, he could not have been conceived by virginal conception.

The scientific arguments against the virginal conception are misguided, because Jesus' conception is presented in the scriptures as a miracle — that is, an event that violated natural laws. In fact, the whole point of a miracle is that it is supernatural. Jesus' story in the both the New Testament and the Qur'an contains many miracles, and the virginal conception is only one of those miracles, so the scientific arguments go actually beyond the current discussion of the virginal conception. Science can also be appealed to, for instance, to reject Jesus' miracles of raising the dead. I have already indicated that I will not deal in this book with the question of whether miracles can or cannot happen, as this complex subject is outside the scope of this book. But I have it made clear that, following the Qur'anic approach, I believe that miracle did and can happen.

6.3. The Accusation of the Illegitimacy of Jesus

Unsurprisingly, questioning the virginal conception has led to questioning Mary's chastity. If Mary was unmarried, did not conceive Jesus miraculously, and Joseph was not Jesus' father, then she must have been impregnated by another man. The conclusion is that Mary must have had an illicit relationship that led to her becoming pregnant with Jesus. This is not a new allegation. The Gospel of John seems to include a reference to this accusation being made by Jews in a debate with Jesus:

I know that you are Abraham's descendants. But you want to kill me, because my teaching makes no progress among you. I am telling you the things I have seen while with the Father; as for you, practice the things you have heard from the Father!" They answered him, "Abraham is our father!" Jesus replied, "If you are Abraham's children, you would be doing the deeds of Abraham. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth I heard from God. Abraham did not do this! You people are doing the deeds of your father." Then they said to Jesus, "We were not born as a result of immorality! We have only one Father, God himself." (John 8:37-41)

Some think that this accusation was probably merely intended as an insult and did not represent a real doubt about Jesus' legitimacy (e.g. Miller, 2003: 214). Strangely, there are no more references to people accusing Jesus of being an illicit son or to rebuttals of this accusation.

One old mention of accusing Jesus of being born of fornication is found in the *Acts of Pilate*, which records Jesus' trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. This work is included in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which is believed to have been compiled in the beginning of the 5th century, although it probably used older materials. It is believed that the 2nd century Christian apologist Justin Martyr referred to the Acts of Pilate.

After accusing Jesus, in the presence of Pilate, of breaking the law, the Jewish elders went on to accuse Jesus of being a son of fornication:

Pilate called Jesus, and said to him: "What is it that these witness against you, and you say nothing to them?" And Jesus answered: "If they had not the power, they would not speak. Everyone has power over his own mouth to say good and evil; let them see to it."

And the elders of the Jews answering, say to Jesus: "What shall we see? First, that you was born of fornication; second, that at your birth in Bethlehem there took place a massacre of infants; third, that your father Joseph and your mother Mary fled into Egypt, because they had no confidence in the people."

Some of the bystanders, kind *men* of the Jews, say: "We say that he was not born of fornication; but we know that Mary was espoused to Joseph, and that he was not born of fornication." Pilate says to the Jews who said that he was of fornication: "This speech of yours is not true, seeing that the betrothal took place, as these of your nation say." Annas and Caiaphas say to Pilate: "We with all the multitude say that he was born of fornication, and that he is a magician; but these are proselytes, and his disciples." And Pilate, calling Annas and Caiaphas, says to them: "What are proselytes?" They say to him: "They have been born sons of the Gentiles, and then have become Jews." Then answered those who testified that Jesus was not born of fornication, Lazarus and Asterius, Antonius and James, Annes and Azaras, Samuel and Isaac, Finees and Crispus, Agrippa and Judas: "We were not born proselytes, but are sons of the Jews, and we speak the truth; for we were present at the betrothal of Mary."

And Pilate, calling to him those twelve men who proved that Jesus had not been born of fornication, said to them: "I adjure you by the health of Caesar, tell me if it is true that Jesus was not born of fornication." They say to Pilate: "We have a law not to swear, because it is a sin; but let them swear by the health of Caesar that it is not as we say, and we are worthy of death." Then said Pilate to Annas and Caiaphas: "Answer you nothing to those things which these testify?" Annas and Caiaphas say to Pilate: "Those twelve believe that he is not born of fornication; we — all the people — cry out that he was born of fornication, and is a magician, and says that he himself is the Son of God and a king, and we are not believed." (Nic. 2)

This piece of text is probably completely forged and does not have much historical value, but what interests us here is its documentation of the fact that there were Jews — possibly many of them — who considered Jesus an illicit son. Equally interesting is the fact that the dispute is not over whether Jesus was conceived miraculously by a virgin or not, but whether he was the legitimate son of Mary and Joseph or the illicit son of Mary and another, unknown man.

Celsus, a staunch 2nd century opponent of Christianity, recounts in his book *The True Doctrine*, which is quoted in Origen's *Against Celsus*, an attack by a Jewish interlocutor on Jesus and the accusation that Jesus fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin:

He accuses Him of having “invented his birth from a virgin,” and upbraids Him with being “born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.28)

Other reports have even identified and named the man who is alleged to have fathered Jesus illegitimately. Celsus cites the following claim by a Jew against Mary: “when she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.32).

The Jewish Talmud also has a few references attributed to rabbis from the early 2nd century that call Jesus “son of Pantera,” and appear to treat “Pantera” as a family name. Other Talmudic references call Jesus the “son of Stada.” Miller points out that the Rabbis knew that “son of Stada” was not Jesus’ real name. He suggests that this seems to have been the name of a Jew who promoted the worship of non-Roman gods and was put to death because of that, so Jewish Rabbis applied it to Jesus because they considered him also to have called to the worship of false gods. In a reference to both “son of Pantera” and “son of Stada,” one Rabbi claims that Stada was Mary’s husband and Pantera was here paramour (Miller, 2003: 217).

Commenting on linking “son of Stada” to Jesus, France accepts that “it is not unlikely that later Rabbis identified Ben Stada with Jesus,” but he voices caution of “assuming that any Ben Stada tradition originated as a historical reminiscence of Jesus” (France, 1999: 38).

One modern variation on these stories which tries to preserve Mary's chastity yet allow for the possibility that Jesus was an illegitimate son is the suggestion that Mary was raped by a Roman soldier. Such a scenario actually requires a considerable amount of creative imagination to stitch together a number of ancient stories of unknown reliability using a good amount of convenient assumptions, as can be seen in Miller's (2003: 220-222) version.

6.4. The Qur'an's Affirmation of the Virginal Conception

It has been claimed by some that the Qur'an does not confirm explicitly the virginal conception of Jesus. Geoffrey Parrinder states that while the Qur'an makes it clear that the conception involved divine intervention, it does not say whether it was natural or not. He also points out that in the past, commentators considered Jesus to have been born without a father, but that some modern Muslim writers deny, on scientific and historical grounds, that the Qur'an teaches the virginal conception (Parrinder, 1995:70-74).

This is probably one of the most obvious misreadings of a Qur'anic text. The Qur'an can hardly be any clearer in stating that Mary conceived Jesus without having a relation with a man. This is clear in the story of annunciation, which we have already studied; the story of the birth of Jesus (§10.4); and some other verses. This is a list of explicit and implicit confirmations in the Qur'an that Mary did not have a sexual relationship and that her conception was caused miraculously:

① After hearing the good news about Jesus, Mary replied to Gabriel: "How can I have a son when no man has touched me, neither have I been unchaste?" (19.20), and "How can I have a child when no human being has touched me?" (3.47). Gabriel did not reply with something such as "yes, but you will get married," but he rather responded with a statement emphasizing that the conception was going to happen miraculously: "Thus Your Lord has said: 'It is easy for Me. And so that We may make of him a sign for people and a mercy from Us, and it is a matter that has been ordained'" (19.21), and, "Thus Allah creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it 'Be!' and it is" (3.47).

② These are two verses that refer to Mary *guarding her private parts*, emphasizing that she was made to conceive miraculously while a virgin: "And [Allah set forth an example] Mary, daughter of 'Imrān, who guarded her private parts, then We breathed therein of Our spirit. And she believed in the words of her Lord and His Book, and was one of the obedient" (66.12), and, "And she who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her of Our spirit and made her and her son a sign for the peoples" (21.91). The Qur'an keeps stressing Mary's chastity to make it clear that the conception of this *unmarried* woman did not involve a sexual relationship.

③ Gabriel's words to Mary that he was sent to *bestow on her a pure son* mean that he was directly involved in causing the conception of Jesus. This does not mean that Gabriel had a relationship with Mary, because in his reply to her

question about how she could get pregnant without having a sexual relationship with a man he still maintained that the pregnancy was going to happen through a miracle. In a subtle way, Gabriel's presence in that room caused Mary's ovum to be fertilized. In another verse, Mary's conception is also described as happening by the breathing of God's Spirit into Mary, confirming Gabriel's involvement and the non-sexual nature of his role: "And she who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her of Our spirit and made her and her son a sign for the peoples" (21.91).

④ God stresses in another verse that He "made the son of Mary and his mother a sign" (23.50). While Jesus being a "sign" for people may be understood in terms of the many miracles he performed from his birth, calling Mary also a "sign," which is a term associated with miracles in such a context, can only denote her virginal conception of Jesus. There is nothing else in Mary's story to make her a sign for people. The miracle of having food brought to her in the sanctuary was probably witnessed by Zechariah only, as she was living in isolation. This conclusion is also confirmed by the significant observation that the mention of Mary being a sign is made in the context of calling her with her son a sign.

We may also note that the word "sign" is used in the singular, i.e. the speech is not about *two signs* but *one*, so it must be about the virginal conception. Additionally, verses 21.91 and 23.50 talk about making Mary and her son *themselves* a sign, which suggests a miracle that happens to them as opposed to miracles that they perform. Probably even Jesus' ability to perform miracles was related to his paranormal conception.

⑤ Mary's words during the pangs of birth, "I wish I had died before this and had become someone totally forgotten" (19.23) — which reflect distress, despair, a deep sense of shame, and utmost apprehension — indicate that the childbirth was not going to be seen favorably by people, because they would not recognize the legitimacy of the child.

⑥ When Mary went back to her people with baby Jesus they said to her: "O Mary! You have come up with a grave thing. O sister of Aaron! Your father was not a bad man, and your mother was not an unchaste woman" (19.27-28). The accusation means that she was known not to have been married.

⑦ When baby Jesus spoke to defend his mother against her people's accusation, he did not say that he was the legitimate son of Mary and her husband. He spoke instead about his status as a prophet and showed that he was indeed a miraculous boy: "I am Allah's servant. He has given me the Book and has appointed me a prophet. He has made me blessed wherever I may be. He has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive. And [He has made me] kind to my mother, and has not made me arrogant or wretched" (19.30-32). He is clearly telling people to believe in his miraculous origin on the basis of his miraculous nature.

⑧ In his words above, Jesus states that God made him kind to his mother, but he does not mention his father, because he did not have one.

⑨ The Qur'an calls Jesus "son of Mary" 23 times — 13 times as "Jesus son of Mary," 5 times as "the Messiah son of Mary," 3 times as "the Messiah Jesus son of Mary," and 2 times with no other name or title. Jesus is also referred to once as "her son," i.e. Mary's son (21.91). The title "son of Mary" is clearly intended to emphasize the fact that Jesus had no father. It cannot mean that Jesus had an unknown father, because it is a title that God Himself used for Jesus, not simply one used by people who did not know Jesus' father. God is described as omniscient in the Qur'an, so it cannot be claimed that this title implies that Jesus' father was unknown.

⑩ The Qur'an identifies people after their fathers, so its identification of Jesus after his mother is a unique case. People in general are referred to as "the sons of Adam" (e.g. 7.26, 17.70), the Israelites are called "the Children of Israel" (e.g. 5.72, 20.80), Adam's two sons are called "the sons of Adam" (5.27), and Mary herself is called "the daughter of 'Imrān" (66.12). Note that Mary's father died before her birth (p. 49), but she is still called after him. Even if Jesus' father was no more around after his birth, he would have still been called after his father, had he had one.

I do not think these arguments leave any room to doubt that the Qur'an emphasizes that Mary was virgin when she conceived Jesus and that this conception was not through a sexual relationship with a man. It was a miraculous, virginal conception.

We discussed in the previous section the insinuation that started at least as early as the 2nd century that Jesus was the fruit of an illicit relationship between Mary and someone other than Joseph. We also saw that this defamatory allegation was used by opponents of Christianity, including Jews. The Qur'an also mentions the Jewish accusation to Mary of unchastity. This occurs in the context of criticizing Jews for misbehaviors, including breaking their covenant and killing prophets:

And because of their disbelief and of their speaking against Mary a tremendous calumny (4.156).

The Qur'an stresses that Mary was virgin when she conceived Jesus miraculously and strongly criticizes those who accused her of unchastity. There is no mention in the Qur'an of Mary's getting married or having other children.