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MĀRIYA AL-QIBṬIYYA UNVEILED

Life in austere oasis-communities like Mecca and Medina in the seventh century A.D. could not have been too pretentious, not even that of a prophet. Consequently, when the need arose to construct for the prophet Muḥammad, who in Patricia Crone's apt phrase "was for some two hundred years studied under the title of *ʿilm al-maghāzī*"[1], a biography befitting his posthumous role as the founder of one of the great religions, there was a conscious effort to embellish the rather meagre and prosaic facts of his life. It was not enough to represent the Prophet as being the Seal of the Prophets, he should also be depicted as being the equal of his contemporaries among the worldly rulers. This was achieved by combining elements from various sources. Thus influences received from Byzantine and Persian literature and historiography, together with biblical history as it was known to the Muslims, combined to make a more or less fictive but fitting biography of Muḥammad. It is almost a basic law in historiography, as Herbert Franke has noticed for Chinese history but which is equally valid for Islamic history as well, that where documentary and factual knowledge was lacking either for events or figures of the remote past, these gaps had to be filled, and the less was actually known, the more legendary or speculative details could be expected in the description.[2] Maxime Rodinson was surely too optimistic when affirming that "the significant events of the Prophet's life, their approximate sequence (especially after the *Hijra*), the names of the principal actors in this vast historical drama, their relationship to each another, and their general attitudes — these remain essentially beyond question".[3]

Among topics considered delicate by most Muslims are certainly the biography of their Prophet, the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*; accordingly, research done by Western scholars in these fields has been more or less offensive to Muslim scholars. But, and here I borrow from anthropological phraseology, there is no need for Western scholars in Islamic studies to substitute an etic standpoint for an emic one; the Adam's sin of our imperialistic academic forefathers should not

burden today's Western islamicists collectively and lead to the increasingly popular "neo-flagellantism"[4] practised by many of us.

I

During the century or so following the Islamic conquests, the Arabs became aware of the traditions and stories belonging to the cultural heritage of the subdued peoples. This in spite of the fact that the Muslims themselves deliberately tried to cut their ties with the cultures that preceded them. This "transplantation" was first and foremost due to the *mawālī*, who in addition to their curiosity as to the Holy Scripture of their new faith (manifested in the great number of *mawālīs* among the early philologians), also maintained a certain concern about stories pertaining to their respective heritages (which to some extent accounts for the great number of *mawālīs* among the most important historians in the ninth and tenth centuries).

The Byzantine emperor Maurice (582-602) had, according to the *Shāh-nāma*, a daughter Maria whom he betrothed to the Sasanian ruler Khusraw Parvīz (590-628). Their marital bliss came, however, to an end when the Shah married the love of his youth Shīrīn, whose "cheeks were ever yellow with her bloodstained tears. At last she gave her rival a poison and so the Caesar's beautiful daughter departed from the world."[5] The sad end of Maria cannot be found in the Arabic sources; al-Ṭabarī mentions only that Maria was the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Maurice.[6] The earliest extant reference concerning this Maria is to be found in a Syriac chronicle compiled or redacted by an anonymous Nestorian monk in the 670s. The chronicle names both Khusraw's Christian wives, the Aramean Shīrīn and the Byzantine Maria.[7] This chronicle does not, however, give any information about Maria's father or her end. The story of Khusraw's alleged marriage to a daughter of Maurice named Maria, which the Byzantine historians significantly ignore altogether, is to be considered completely fictitious.[8]

Although the motives for tales like this do not concern us here[9], there is one feature in the description of the rulers of Byzantium and Iran that should be taken into consideration when pondering the biography of the Prophet. I believe that just as the two sovereigns were depicted as equals, being of similar rank and nature, so it was all-important for Muslim historians to present their Prophet not only as the Seal of the Prophets but as a worldly ruler equal to his contemporary imperial rivals in Byzantium and Iran.

II

The most obvious example for Muḥammad when taking the role of a prophet was that of Abraham, who, also, lived amidst an idol-worshipping people but had cut himself off from the worship of idols; who, also, emigrated from the land of his ancestors; who, also, was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *ḥanīf*.[10] The consciousness Muḥammad had had of being a new Abraham was shared by his religious community and duly elaborated after his death. Muḥammad's biography emerged gradually as a response to the needs of the community. It was quite natural for the biographers to continue on the course set by the Prophet himself and include in the "official biography" of the Prophet of Islam events and details from the life of Abraham (as it was known to the Muslims). A few instances may be mentioned.

In the report of his ascent to heaven Muḥammad related: "(...) Then to the seventh heaven and there was a man sitting on a throne at the gate of the immortal mansion. Every day seventy thousand angels went in not to come back until the resurrection day. Never have I seen a man more like myself. This was my father Abraham."[11] The Prophet's grandfather had vowed to sacrifice one of his sons to God at the Kaʿba: "ʿAbdu'l-Muṭṭalib said to the man with the arrows, 'Cast the lots for my sons with these arrows', and he told him of the vow which he had made. (...) It is alleged that ʿAbdullah (the Prophet's father) was ʿAbdu'l-Muṭṭalib'a favourite son, and his father thought that if the arrow missed him he would be spared. (...) Then the man cast lots and ʿAbdullah's arrow came out. His father led him by the hand and took a large knife (...) to sacrifice him."[12]

In the latter story of how Muḥammad's grandfather vowed to sacrifice his favourite son "nous sommes certes en présence d'une légende typologique, inspirée du récit biblique sur le sacrifice d'Isaac, souvent reporté sur Ismaël. En effet, le souvenir d'Abraham planait sur l'Islam naissant, lequel ne cessait de se réclamer de son monothéisme, et les auteurs de la *Sīra*, répondant en cela à une aspiration profonde et constante du Prophète, recherchaient par tous les moyens à renouer les liens généalogiques, spirituels et symboliques entre le 'premier' musulman, Abraham, et le 'rénovateur' de l'Islam abrahamique, Mahomet."[13]

It seems probable that the pre-Islamic Arabs, with possible exceptions, were not aware of being the purported descendants of Abraham and Ismāʿīl; it was the Prophet Muḥammad who made them ancestors of all Arabs and central figures

of the new monotheistic religion.[14] But at which stage of the Prophet's career the role of Abraham became increasingly to be emphasized has been a most controversial matter. The *Hijra* has been a dividing event for Western scholars: there are those in whose opinion Muḥammad's idea of Abraham took form prior to the *Hijra*, and those in whose opinion it was only after the *Hijra* that Abraham became of importance for Muḥammad. There is, however, no need for a controversy here; I believe, in accordance with J. Waardenburg[15], that there is a continuous development of the Abraham conception in the Qur'ān beginning already in the third Meccan period.

But the most important borrowing from the life of Muḥammad's spiritual *Vorbild* was the story of Abraham, his Egyptian concubine Hagar and their son Ismā^{c}īl, ancestor of all the Arabs.

III

According to Arabic historiography the Prophet Muḥammad sent in the year 6/628 ambassadors with letters to the major sovereigns of the countries surrounding the Arabian peninsula requesting them to embrace Islam. Among the recipients were the Kisrā of Persia, the Qaiṣar of Byzantium, the Negus of Abyssinia and al-Muqauqis of Egypt. Despite the fact that "originals" of these letters have since been found and relic-ized by the Muslim community, the story of the deputations *cum* letters is totally devoid of any historicity.

The reasons for fabrications like these are open to debate. L. Caetani called attention to Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, where the Prophet's sending of messengers is clearly compared with Jesus and the apostles, and suggested that the ultimate motive behind these stories was the desire of the numerous Christian converts to Islam to create parallels between Jesus and Muḥammad.[16] G. E. von Grunebaum compared these summons to Islam with those sent by the Sudanese *khalīfa* ^{c}Abdallah between 1885 and 1888 to Queen Victoria, King John of Abyssinia and Sultan ^{c}Abd al-Ḥamīd II of Turkey, summoning them to accept Mahdist Islam. One of the reasons for these summons was to serve as the warning the *sharī^{c}a* requires to precede the unleashing of *jihād*.[17] J. Wansbrough, on his part, placed these delegations to the rulers in connection with the age-old motif of *"dialoge devant le prince"* as a vehicle for doctrinal assertions.[18]

The community's claim, during the decades following Muḥammad's death, for the universality of his mission is in my opinion the main reason for the fabrication of traditions where the then already conquered and even partly islamicized empires (with the exception of Abyssinia) are requested to accept Islam.

The Prophet's mission was to his own people, the Arabs, and his vision never crossed beyond the limits of the Arabian peninsula[19], although the representatives of his community wished to depict him as a Prophet for the whole world.

The deputation to al-Muqauqis was headed by Ḥāṭib ibn abī Balta^{c}a. When he, according to Arabic sources, returned the following year (7/629) to Medina he brought back with him, besides a polite answer to the Prophet's letter, a multitude of precious presents. Among these presents were two (in some traditions up to four) fair Coptic maidens, named Māriya and Shīrīn, intended for the Prophet. As the girls were sisters and *sharī^{c}a* prohibited sexual intercourse with sisters, the Prophet kept only one of them; his choice fell upon the exceptionally beautiful Māriya who, more importantly, responded faster than her sister to the appeal to embrace Islam.[20] In March-April, 630 (*dhū al-ḥijja*, 8 A.H.) she gave birth to a son to be named after Abraham.[21]

Tieing loose ends

Consequently, when the would-be (and very successful) biographers of the Prophet began their laborious task, traditions existed in the community claiming the universality of Islam; a wish to see the Prophet as a new Abraham and at the same time as an equal to other contemporary sovereigns; knowledge of historical and pseudo-historical literature from the cultures introduced into the *dār al-Islām*; and a need for an appropriate biography. All this resulted in a coherent and credible story of how the Prophet received from al-Muqauqis, the ruler of Egypt in Arab opinion, a concubine named Māriya (and an Egyptian like Hagar), who bore the Prophet a son called Ibrāhīm.

The Egyptian traditionists seem to have taken advantage of the fact that Hagar was from Egypt. The Prophet was reported to have said: "When you conquer Egypt treat its people well, for they can claim our protection and kinship", and this was explained to mean "that Hagar, the mother of Ismā^{c}īl, was of their stock."[22] After the introduction of Māriya into the household of the Prophet by his biographers we do, however, find this tradition in a slightly supplemented form where it is explained that the prophet Ismā^{c}īl's mother came from Egypt, and the apostle of God took one of the Egyptians as concubine.[23] Henceforth Hagar and Māriya are always coupled together in this context. There is another interesting tradition given by Ibn ^{c}Abd al-Ḥakam where the Prophet's Egyptian connections are further elaborated, and according to which three prophets had chosen Egyptian wives or concubines for themselves: Abraham with his concubine Hagar, Josef who married the daughter of the *ṣāḥib* of ^{c}Ain Shams, and Muḥammad with his concubine Māriya.[24]

Māriya umm Ibrāhīm ibn rasūl Allāh was an *umm walad*, as from an Arab viewpoint Hagar also was. The example Hagar/Māriya played a role even in *Shīᶜa* genealogy: the mother of the ninth Imam Muḥammad ibn ᶜAlī al-Riḍā (d. 220/835), or Muḥammad al-Jawād as he was known, was an *umm walad*. Her name is given as Khaizurān and she is claimed to be a relative of Māriya (*min ahl bait Māriya*)![25]

I think that we can conclude that the whole story of the Prophet's Egyptian concubine Māriya and their son Ibrāhīm is just a transposition of the older story of Abraham, Hagar and Ismāᶜīl, with additions, in the form of the names of the Sasanian Shah's two Christian wives from the pseudo-historical literature of Persia, to give the story more standing.[26] But there remains an awkward question which I have tried to avoid so far: who, then, was the Māriya *maulāt al-nabī* mentioned by Ibn Ḥazm[27], and what were her relations to "the principal actors in this vast historical drama"?

NOTES

1 *Slaves on horses*. Cambridge 1980, p. 5.

2 "Some random notes on fact and fancy in Chinese history", *Oriens Extremus* 22 (1975) 1.

3 "Bilan des études mohammadiennes", *Revue Historique* 222 (1963) 198; English translation in M. L. Swartz (tr. & ed.), *Studies on Islam*. New York & Oxford 1981, pp. 43f.

4 R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Society, polity and religion", *Israel Oriental Studies* X (1980) 234f.

5 In Reuben Levy's translation *The epic of the Kings*. London 1977, p. 382.

6 *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wal-mulūk* I, 994; 999; 1047.

7 "Chronicon anonymum", in I. Guidi (ed. & interpr.), *Chronica Minora* I. Paris 1903, text p. 17, tr. p. 16.

8 N. Garsoïan, "Byzantium and the Sasanians", in E. Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Iran. Vol. 3(1): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian periods*. Cambridge 1983, p. 579.

9 They could be seen together with the semi-legendary traditions of adoption from one imperial house to another that appear between the fifth and seventh centuries as a part of the détente between the two superpowers of the day. In this paper I will just state my opinions; for further argumentation on the more or less controversial subjects to be dealt with below I must refer to my forthcoming study *The enigma of al-Muqauqis. Studies in the Arab conquest of Egypt*, vol. I.

10 J. Hjärpe, "Rollernas Muhammed", *Religion och Bibel* XXXVI (1977) 70; W. A. Bijlefeld, "Controversies around the Qur'anic Ibrāhīm narrative and its 'Orientalist' interpretations", *The Muslim World* LXXII (1982) 81-94.

11 A. Guillaume's translation of Ibn Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh *The Life of Muhammad*. Oxford 1980, p. 186; the original's slightly differing wording in vol. II, Cairo 1963, pp. 275f.

12 A. Guillaume's translation p. 67; Arabic text vol. I, p. 99.

13 T. Fahd, *La divination arabe. Études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam.* Strasbourg 1966, p. 186. Abraham was not the only biblical example upon which the biographers would draw, see f.ex. P. Jensen, "Das Leben Muhammeds und die David-Sage", *Der Islam* XII (1922) 84-97; P. Crone & M. Cook, *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world.* Cambridge 1977, pp. 16-20 and H. Busse, "The Arab conquest in revelation and politics", *Israel Oriental Studies* X (1980) 17 both for Moses, whom, incidentally, Muḥammad met in the sixth heaven and addressed as his brother.

14 R. Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismaël d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes.* Genève 1981, p. 44; cf. M. Rodinson's preface to the book, p. xix, xxiii f.

15 "Towards a periodization of earliest Islam according to its relations with other religions", in R. Peters (ed.), *Proceedings of the ninth congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, 1st to 7th September 1978.* Leiden 1981, p. 318.

16 *Annali dell'Islam* I. Milano 1905, 6 A.H., p. 727.

17 "Islam: religion, power, civilization. A note.", in *Der Orient in der Forschung. Festschrift für Otto Spies.* Wiesbaden 1967, p. 237 n. 7.

18 *The sectarian milieu. Content and composition of Islamic salvation history.* Oxford 1978, p. 115.

19 F. Gabrieli, "Arabisme et Islamisme", in *Studies on Islam. A symposium on Islamic studies, Amsterdam, 18-19 October 1973.* Amsterdam & London 1974, pp. 10f.; A. T. Welch, "Muhammad's understanding of himself: the Koranic data.", in *Islam's understanding of itself. Eighth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference.* Malibu 1983, pp. 47-51.

20 Ibn ᶜAbd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr wa-akhbāruhā* (ed. C. C. Torrey). New Haven 1922, p. 49.

21 Ibn Saᶜd, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* (ed. E. Sachau & al.) I:1. Leiden 1904, pp. 86f.

22 A Guillaume's tr. of Ibn Isḥāq, p. 4; Arabic text vol. I, p. 3. Muᶜāwiya ibn abī Sufyān did, according to Egyptian traditionists, exempt the village where Māriya was born from taxes (Ibn ᶜAbd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr*, pp. 52f.).

23 A. Guillaume's tr. of Ibn Isḥāq, p. 691; Arabic text vol. I, p. 3.

24 *Futūḥ Miṣr*, p. 4. In Jewish circles the Arab connection with Egypt was further enhanced centuries prior to the coming of Islam, as exemplified by Flavius Josephus (as quoted by R. Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismaël*, pp. 145f.) by claiming an Egyptian wife for Ismāᶜīl.

25 al-Kulainī, *al-Uṣūl min al-kāfī* I. Teheran 1388 A.H., p. 492.

26 Although the two maidens sent by al-Muqauqis were not of royal blood it was claimed by Muslim authors that they were of high status in Egypt (*"lahumā makān fī al-qibṭ ᶜaẓīm"*) as Ibn Ḥadīda, *al-Miṣbāḥ al-muḍī* II. Hyderabad 1977, p. 132 stated.

27 *Jawāmiᶜ al-sīra.* Kairo [s.a.], p. 298; cf. H. Lammens, *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'Hégire.* Beirut 1928, p. 19.