



The Islam Research Group

Who Wrote the Qur'an?

IX. The Church of the Kathisma



Contents

1	The nativity of Jesus in the Qur'an	2
2	The church of the Kathisma	2
3	Links to contemporary testimony	4
	Conclusion	5

© 2020, The Islam Research Group

[*https://IslamResearchGroup.com*](https://IslamResearchGroup.com)

The nativity of Jesus in the Qur'an

The Qur'an's account of the nativity of Jesus is found in {19.22-26}. Mary gives birth to Jesus, not in Bethlehem but 'in a place far off' when 'the pangs of childbirth' came upon her. Immediately after her birth, the newborn baby Jesus miraculously commands that a date palm tree bends down to offer his mother its fruit, fresh ripe dates, and also commands that a spring appear at her feet for her to drink from.

The account that Jesus was born in a remote place appears in the *Proto-evangelium of James*, thought to have been written in the mid second century.

The story of the miracle of the date palm appears in various traditions that had circulated in the near east since the third century.¹ However, these traditions had without exception described the miracle as having been performed, not during the nativity, but later during the Holy Family's flight into Egypt.

The Church of the Kathisma

In *Christmas in the Qur'an: The Quranic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition* Stephen J. Shoemaker reveals that the apocryphal stories of Jesus's birth in a remote place and the miracle of the date palm, which are otherwise entirely separate in Christian tradition, had one thing in common: they were both associated with the history of the Church of the Kathisma half way between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The ruins of this church were discovered and excavated in the 1990s. Shoemaker demonstrates that this church had once been the focus of the Jerusalem Church's Nativity celebration, since, prior to the canonisation of the New Testament, the Jerusalem Church had followed the *Proto-evangelium of James*. The church had, in the first century, been believed to mark the site of Jesus' birth on the road to Bethlehem.

After the canonisation of the gospel of Matthew with its now well-known story of Jesus' birth in a Bethlehem stable, Bethlehem naturally became the centre of the Church's Christmas celebration. A new significance had to be found for the redundant Church of the Kathisma, and so it came to represent the site of the miracle of the date palm during the Flight into Egypt. Shoemaker produces a pilgrim guide, written c. 560-570, in which the church is described in these terms.

When the ruins of the church were excavated in 1997, they showed that it had at some stage been converted into a mosque and decorated with date palm mosaics. Shoemaker concludes, it is suggested persuasively, that that this change of the church's use is the explanation for the miracle of the date palm becoming associated with the nativity in the Qur'an.

'The early Muslims found themselves in possession of an ancient Christian nativity shrine which had recently been identified as the site of Mary's encounter with the date palm.'

¹ *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, 2003, Shoemaker. This story was included in the apocryphal *Gospel of pseudo-Matthew/The Infancy Gospel of Matthew* but Shoemaker concludes that it is unlikely that this gospel influenced or was influenced by the Qur'an due to its time and place of composition.

Rather than preserving the two traditions separately ... the Islamic tradition fused them into what has become the Quranic version of the Jesus nativity'.²

He points out that these ruins, which reveal the church to have been an octagonal structure centred around an unhewn rock (upon which Mary is said to have rested on her way to Bethlehem), are strikingly similar to the design of the later Dome of the Rock, the earliest surviving building from the Arab conquests. This raises the intriguing prospect that the Quranic accounts of the birth of Jesus and the design of the Dome of the Rock may both derive in some unknown way from this ancient church.



Ruins of the Church of the Kathisma

² *Christmas in the Qur'an: The Quranic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition*, Stephen Shoemaker

Links to contemporary testimony

It is interesting that in his Christmas sermon of 634, two years after the reported death of Muhammad, but the same year in which a chronicler Thomas the Presbyter reported a raid on Gaza led by a Mohammed, the patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, lamented that he was unable to travel to Bethlehem because an '*army of godless Saracens*' barred his way there. It is striking that Sophronius places the '*godless Saracens*' precisely where the Church of the Kathisma lies. The significance of Shoemaker's theory is that the first part of **Surah 19 {19.2-33}** was in all probability composed during the Arab raids on Palestine in 634. If it was announced by the same individual who had composed the rest of the Qur'an, corroborates the non-Arab that accounts describing Mohammed as himself active in Palestine. It also suggests that the Qur'an took on a remarkably pro-Christian flavour after the commencement of the Palestine campaign.

Conclusion

The composer of the Qur'an was familiar with the Church of the Kathisma and used that familiarity to inspire his writing of {19.22-26}. In all likelihood this means that he was involved in, probably leading the Arab raids on Palestine referred to by Thomas the Presbyter and Sophronius in 634.