

CHRISTMAS IN THE QUR'ĀN: THE QUR'ĀNIC
ACCOUNT OF JESUS' NATIVITY AND PALESTINIAN
LOCAL TRADITION*

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In winter of 1997, an archaeological discovery occurred on the outskirts of Jerusalem, holding great significance for our understanding of the earliest development of the Qur'ānic traditions. Approximately halfway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, just to the east of the main highway, a group of archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority engaged in a salvage operation unearthed a large octagonal church, which our late ancient sources identify as the church of the “Kathisma of the Theotokos,” or the “Seat of the God-Bearer.” As the present article will demonstrate, this church was originally associated with the Nativity of Christ, but eventually came to be linked with the commemoration of Mary's death and, more importantly, with certain events from the Holy Family's legendary flight into Egypt, as described in several early Christian apocrypha. The new church's connection with both Christ's Nativity and the flight into Egypt is particularly important, since it is (to my knowledge) the only place where these two early Christian traditions meet, outside of the Qur'ānic account of Jesus' Nativity. There is a great deal more, however, than just this mere coincidence to suggest that traditions associated with this shrine influenced the development of early Islamic tradition. The church of the Kathisma was converted into a mosque in the early eighth century, and its mosaics indicate that the recycled sacred space probably continued to commemorate the Nativity of Jesus, as the Christian shrine had before the Arab conquests. Moreover, the significance of this shrine in early Islam is underscored by the important ar-

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chitectural and artistic relationships that scholars have identified between the Kathisma church/mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

The confluence of this evidence strongly suggests that the traditions associated with Kathisma church gave rise to the rather peculiar account of Christ's Nativity found in the Qur'ān. This shrine's pre-Islamic traditions offer a convincing explanation for the Qur'ān's puzzling mixture of two Christian apocryphal traditions that, with the exception only of the Kathisma church, were kept quite distinct by ancient Christianity. If we assume that the Christian traditions present in the Qur'ān derive from earlier Christian sources, rather than being revealed or composed *ex nihilo*, then the Kathisma church and its related traditions present the only known precedent for the Qur'ānic account of Jesus' Nativity. Yet this fact in itself cannot exclude the possibility that somehow and for some reason the early Muslims independently combined the two previously unrelated traditions of Christ's Nativity and the flight into Egypt. But given the demonstrable importance of the Kathisma church/mosque on the formation of early Islamic culture in other areas (as will be seen), it is considerably more likely that the Qur'ānic tradition of Jesus' birth came into being only after the Islamic tradition had encountered the Kathisma church and its traditions.

The weight of this new evidence thus adds considerable force to many of the positions advanced by various "revisionist" scholars of early Islam. In the first place, the probability that the Qur'ānic account of the Nativity developed under the influence of specific local Palestinian Christian traditions confirms the recognitions of Wansbrough and others that the content of the Qur'ānic text almost certainly continued to develop well after the death of Muḥammad.¹ Since

¹ John E. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, London Oriental Series, 31 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 1–52. See also idem., *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, London Oriental Series, 34 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). A brief and helpful introduction to Wansbrough's methods and conclusions can be found in Andrew Rippin, "Literary Analysis of Qur'ān, Tafsīr, and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Richard C. Martin, ed., (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp. 151–63. One should also see the special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* that was devoted to Wansbrough's legacy in the study of early Islam: Herbert Berg, ed., "Islamic Origins Reconsidered: John Wansbrough and the Study of Early Islam," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997): 3–90.

Fred McGraw Donner has recently attempted to challenge Wansbrough's conclusions with regard to the Qur'ān. See Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 14 (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), pp. 35–63; but see the brief responses by Andrew Rippin, ed., *The Qur'ān: Formative Interpretation*, Formation of the Classical Islamic World, 25 (Aldershot, Eng.; Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999), p. xv; and Ibn Warraq, "Studies on Muḥammad and the Rise of Islam," in *The Quest for the Historical Muḥammad*, Ibn Warraq, ed. (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000), p. 74. Donner is particularly hopeful that an early Qur'ān discovered in Yemen might disprove Wansbrough's theory by dating it to the first century A.H. (Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p. 63), but Estelle Whelan, no friend of Wansbrough or revisionist scholarship, has demonstrated that this manuscript is likely to have originated in the post-Umayyad period. See Estelle Whelan, "Writing the Word of God: Some Early Qur'ān Manuscripts and their Milieux, Part I," *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990): 113–47, at 120–21.

Whelan has elsewhere attempted to argue for an early date for the Qur'ān based on the Dome of the Rock's inscriptions in Estelle Whelan, "Forgotten Witness: Evidence for the

Muḥammad did not live to lead the conquest of Palestine (at least according to the traditional Muslim accounts), the traditions of the Kathisma church could only have impacted the Qurʾānic text well after Muḥammad had already died. This presents us with a very high probability that in at least this one instance the text of the Qurʾān is not Muḥammad's, but rather a later product of his followers who drew on prior Christian traditions in composing the Qurʾānic account of Jesus' birth. I would argue that this new evidence opens the door significantly to the views of Wansbrough and his followers, many of whom have identified similar evidence of the Qurʾān's composition in the Levant after the death of Muḥammad.

Similarly, the Qurʾān's dependence on these local, Jerusalemite traditions adds additional weight to revisionist arguments against the origin of Islam in the Ḥijāz. As many scholars have demonstrated, but perhaps none more convincingly than Patricia Crone, the traditional Islamic narrative of Ḥijāzi origins is both late and problematic from a historical point of view.² Moreover, various peculiarities of formative Islam that have somehow escaped the censorship of the later tradition's "Ḥijāzī nostalgia" point to the beginnings of Islam somewhere in the Levant, and more specifically in the southern deserts of Palestine and Roman Arabia.³ In addition, the archaeological record of southern Palestine fits more with the traditions of early Islam than does the Ḥijāz.⁴ Although

Early Codification of the Qurʾān," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 1–14. Her arguments are not convincing: Ibn Warraq rather easily dismisses them in Ibn Warraq, "Studies on Muḥammad," pp. 72–73. In response to the challenge to Wansbrough raised in C. H. M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Quranic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), see Andrew Rippin, "Studying Early *Tafsir* Texts," *Der Islam* 72 (1996): 310–23; and Andrew Rippin, "Qurʾānic Studies, Part IV: Some Methodological Notes," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997): 39–46. Regarding to the later composition of the Qurʾān, see also the early but important article, Alphonse Mingana, "The Transmission of the Koran," *The Muslim World* 7 (1917): 223–32; 402–14 and Patricia Crone, "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qurʾān," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 1–37.

²Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 203–30.

³Of the various studies, see in particular Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, esp. pp. 45, 138–46 (although Wansbrough favors Mesopotamia over Syro-Palestine); Patricia Crone and M. A. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 21–26; G. R. Hawting, "The Origins of the Muslim Sanctuary at Mecca," in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, G. H. A. Juynboll, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), pp. 23–47; G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); G. R. Hawting, "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997): 23–38; Herbert Berg, "The Implications of, and Opposition to, the Methods and Theories of John Wansbrough," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997): 3–22; Moshe Sharon, "The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land," in *Pillars of Smoke and Fire: The Holy Land in History and Thought*, Moshe Sharon, ed. (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1988), pp. 225–35; Suliman Bashear, "Qurʾān 2:114 and Jerusalem," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 52 (1989): 215–38; Judith Koren and Yehuda D. Nevo, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," *Der Islam* 68 (1991): 97–107.

⁴See especially Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhilī Meccan Sanctuary," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 23–44;

evidence that the Qurʾānic text has drawn on the Kathisma traditions does not in itself establish that Islam originated in Palestine's southern deserts, it is certainly amenable to this interpretation. In the event that Islam may have actually originated in the Ḥijāz, as traditionally reported, the influence of the Kathisma traditions on the Qurʾān still must be understood as the work of Muḥammad's followers after their conquest of the Roman Near East. In any case, this new discovery presents considerable evidence that at least this portion of the Qurʾānic text originated after the early Muslims had come into contact with these local Christian traditions in Palestine, and thus by consequence the Qurʾānic story of Jesus' birth was almost certainly not taught by Muḥammad in the Ḥijāz.

Before proceeding, however, I feel compelled to offer something in the way of an "apology" for the article that follows. In the first place, I am not an expert on early Islam, as will perhaps be obvious to many readers. I am, however, a specialist in the religious traditions of the late ancient Near East, and more specifically in the areas of early Byzantine apocryphal literature and also the liturgical traditions of Byzantine Jerusalem. In this article, I bring knowledge from these areas of study to bear on the early history of the Qurʾān, and it is my hope that those more learned in the Islamic tradition will be able to excuse any potential ignorance on my part and appreciate the potentially valuable perspectives offered from this vantage. Furthermore, as should be quite obvious, this article is a work, in the words of Crone and Cook, "by infidels for infidels. . . which any Muslim whose faith is as a grain of mustard seed should find no difficulty in rejecting."⁵ It is far from my intent in this study to disrupt the faith of pious Muslims, just as much as my prior studies of the Christian tradition are certainly not designed with the purpose of undermining the faith of Christian believers. The arguments presented in this article are intended for others engaged in the modern tradition of scholarship, whose historically critical discourse they share. Faithful Muslims should of course find this view problematic and continue to follow instead the teaching of the Qurʾān as traditionally interpreted.

Finally, I also wish to add that I am not at all insensitive to the concerns about "Orientalism" that have recently become an important focus of modern academic discourse.⁶ The manner in which we choose to represent our "others," and particularly those cultures which have been victims of Western colonization, demands serious and constant reflection. Out of such concerns, many scholars from both the Islamic world and the West have argued that we must respect Islamic truth claims regarding Islam's most authoritative traditions, the Qurʾān

Yehuda D. Nevo, "Towards a Prehistory of Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 17 (1994): 108–41; Koren and Nevo, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," 100–6; see also the inscriptions published in Yehuda D. Nevo, Zemira Cohen and Dalia Heftman, *Ancient Arabic Inscriptions from the Negev*, New Sources for the History of the Byzantine and Early Arab Periods: The Negev, Fourth to Eighth Centuries AD, 3 (Midreshet Ben-Gurion: IPS Ltd., 1993).

⁵ Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, p. viii.

⁶ Owing primarily to Edward Said's important work, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

and the *sunna*, and refrain from challenging them with historical criticism. To do so, many would maintain, is to commit an act of intellectual colonialism.⁷ Although I deeply sympathize with the intent of this position, it is simply not an acceptable option in my view, at least from the vantage of the academic discipline of Religious Studies. The academic study of religions depends on the equal and consistent treatment of the different traditions being studied. It is therefore not intellectually defensible in my opinion to study the early histories of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., both critically and skeptically, and then for some reason to exempt early Islam alone from this type of analysis. It seems to me that if we wish to maintain the critical, historical study of religious traditions as a part of the modern (or postmodern) academy, then we cannot exempt Islam alone from the consequences of this method simply because some Muslims (and others) may not like the results. Otherwise, we must also adjust our current understandings of early history of Judaism, Christianity, etc., to comport more with the traditional accounts advanced by members of a given faith.⁸

The Qurʾānic Nativity Traditions

And so she [Mary] conceived him, and she withdrew to a remote place with him. Then labor pains drove her to the trunk of a date palm. She said, “Would that I had died before this and was completely forgotten!” Then one cried out to her from beneath her, “Do not be sad: your Lord has placed a brook beneath you. And shake the trunk of the date palm towards you: it will drop ripe dates on you. So eat and drink and be glad. And if you should meet any person, say, “Behold, I have vowed a fast to the Merciful one, so I will not speak to any person today.” And she brought him to her people, carrying him.⁹

The above passage represents more or less the sum total of the Qurʾān’s traditions concerning the events of Jesus’ birth. While the Qurʾān elsewhere relates the events of the Annunciation and certain other details from the birth narratives of the Christian gospels, including Mary’s virginity, this is the only place

⁷ See, e.g., Dale Stover, “Orientalism and the Otherness of Islam,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 17 (1988): 27–40. See also Muḥammad Abdul-Rauf, “Outsiders’ Interpretations of Islam: A Muslim’s Point of View,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Richard C. Martin, ed. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp. 179–88; Fazlur Rahman, “Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay,” in *Approaches to Islam*, pp. 189–202.

⁸ One alternative might be to adopt a “phenomenological” approach to the study of religions, as suggested by Stover, “Orientalism and the Otherness of Islam,” pp. 33–40; and Rahman, “Approaches to Islam,” pp. 191–98. Nevertheless, for the compelling reasons advanced in Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), I do not see this approach as presenting a viable alternative for Religious Studies.

⁹Qurʾān 19:22–27 (my translation).

where the Qurʾān specifically describes the actual birth of Jesus.¹⁰ At first glance, one might be struck by just how different the Qurʾān's account is from the traditional Christian accounts found in the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. On this basis more traditionalist Muslim interpreters might wish to argue that the Qurʾān here manifests its independence from earlier Jewish and Christian traditions, thereby affirming the Qurʾān's status as a pure revelation.¹¹ Nevertheless, as modern scholarship has long recognized, the Qurʾān depends heavily on Christian apocryphal traditions for most of its information concerning the lives of both Jesus and Mary, and the case of Jesus' birth is no exception.¹²

In its description of Jesus' birth, the Qurʾān draws primarily on two separate apocryphal Christian sources: a story long known only from the Latin *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* and, to a lesser extent, the traditions of the *Protevangelium of James*. Given the *Protevangelium's* impact on the Christian tradition, it is certainly no surprise to find that it has influenced the Qurʾānic text. The authority of this extra-canonical text was sufficient in early Christianity that in spite of the *Protevangelium's* incongruity with the canonical birth narratives, its version of Christ's Nativity affected early Christian liturgical practice and continues to determine the Nativity's representation in Eastern Christian iconography.¹³ Inasmuch as the *Protevangelium* is primarily concerned with the events of Mary's early life, this apocryphon is especially influential with regard to the Qurʾānic image of Mary. Yet in contrast to the *Protevangelium's* profound effect on the Qurʾānic representation of Mary, John the Baptist, and other figures borrowed from the Christian tradition, its impact on the Qurʾānic account of Jesus' birth is surprisingly minimal. The Qurʾān borrows from the *Protevangelium* only the tradition of Jesus' birth in a remote place (as opposed to the city of Bethlehem). This is a key point of contact, however, since it is precisely on this point that the *Protevangelium* alone diverges from the remainder of the early Christian tradition. Thus, while it may not be the case that the Qurʾānic traditions depend on an actual copy of the *Protevangelium*, it is nevertheless quite clear that the traditions of the *Protevangelium* were somehow known to the "compilers" of the Qurʾān.

According to the *Protevangelium's* second-century version of Christ's birth, Mary gave birth to Jesus before ever reaching Bethlehem. In their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph only made it to the half-way point, when "Mary said to him: 'Joseph, take me down from the ass, for the child within me presses me, to come forth.'" Joseph helps her down from the ass and

¹⁰ Regarding these other topics, see Qurʾān 3:42–48; 19:2–34; 66:12.

¹¹ This tendency is described in Hawting, "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism," pp. 26–27. For an example of this argumentation concerning the nature of the Qurʾān, see Abdul-Rauf, "Outsiders' Interpretations of Islam," pp. 185–86.

¹² See, e.g., *ET*², s.v. "Maryam"; Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 17–22; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qurʾān* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), pp. 72–75.

¹³ Concerning the influence on early Christian liturgical practices, see below. On the representation of the Nativity in eastern Christian art, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, s.v. "Protoevangelium of James."

asks, ‘Where shall I take you and hide your shame? For this place is a desert.’¹⁴ Joseph then locates a nearby cave where he takes Mary, and it is in this cave, three miles outside of Bethlehem and in the middle of nowhere, that Mary gives birth to Jesus.¹⁵ This early Christian tradition of Christ’s birth in “a desert” is almost certainly the source of the Qurʾānic tradition of Jesus’ birth in a “remote place.” Aside from a handful of later witnesses, all of which stand under the *Protevangelium*’s direct influence, the early Christian tradition unanimously proclaims the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, in fulfillment of prophecy.¹⁶ Later Islamic tradition appears to have attempted, at least occasionally, to harmonize this remote location with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, much as the Christian had done before it. Some sought an explanation for the Qurʾān’s indication of remoteness in Bethlehem’s distance from either Jerusalem or Nazareth, but neither of these options presents an entirely satisfactory solution. The stream and date palm seem to imply (but certainly do not demand) a rural location, and there is no indication in the text of the Qurʾān that this birth takes place in Bethlehem or any other city: this information is presumably supplied from the Christian tradition by later interpreters.¹⁷ The Qurʾānic verses immediately following the birth account (19: 27–28) further indicate Jesus’ birth in some sort of isolated area, from which Mary and her child returned only to be confronted by her “people.” Seeing that the *Protevangelium* has exercised a great deal of influence on the Qurʾānic representations of Mary, John the Baptist, and other figures who were imported from the Christian tradition, we are not surprised to find that the Qurʾān has also borrowed the tradition of Jesus’ birth in a remote location from this source as well.

The second and more significant source of the Qurʾānic Nativity story, however, is somewhat puzzling. Modern scholars of the Qurʾān have long acknowledged that the Qurʾānic account of Jesus’ birth is based largely on the reworking of a relatively obscure, apocryphal Christian tale, which is now known in several versions. This early Christian legend describes certain miraculous events that were imagined to have transpired during the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt. According to these traditions, while Mary and Joseph were travelling to Egypt with their newborn son, the Holy Family came into a remote, desolate area. In the midst of this desert, Mary expresses her hunger to Joseph, and in response, her infant son causes a tall date palm to bend and offer her its fruit. Then, in some versions of the story, Mary also drinks from a spring that her son miraculously provides. The parallels between this legend and Mary’s feeding from the date palm and stream in the Qurʾānic Nativity account are obvious. The only problem is that the original Christian version of this story takes place some time

¹⁴ *Protevangelium of James* 17.3 (Constantin von Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, 2nd ed. (Lipsiae: H. Mendelssohn, 1876), p. 33; trans.: Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), vol. 1, p. 433).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–20 (Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, pp. 33–39).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, new updated edition, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 513–16.

¹⁷ Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qurʾān*, p. 76.

after Jesus' birth and is not at all connected with the events of the Nativity. The story of Mary and the Palm is never, to my knowledge, directly associated with the events of the Nativity in the Christian tradition. Thus we are left with a need to explain why, if in fact the Qur'ān has borrowed this earlier Christian legend, the Qur'ān has altered the legend's original setting, thereby transforming it into a Nativity tradition.

This Christian story of Mary's feeding from the date palm originated as an expansion on the Gospel according to Matthew's birth narrative, which reports that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had to flee Bethlehem shortly after Jesus' birth, in order to protect the infant from King Herod.¹⁸ According to Matthew's gospel, when Herod learned from the visiting "wise men" that a new ruler of Israel had been born in Bethlehem, he ordered the slaughter of all the male children in Bethlehem, a massacre that Jesus escaped only because Joseph had been warned in a dream to leave town quickly and take his son to Egypt. Biblical scholars have long recognized the historical improbability of Herod's "slaughter of the innocents" and the flight into Egypt, both of which were likely invented to demonstrate Christ's fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy.¹⁹ The early Christians, however, innocent as they were of modern biblical criticism, felt the need to fill in the details of these important events from Jesus' early life, and they expanded on the brief reference in Matthew's gospel with the legend of Mary and the Palm, a story that was long known only from an apocryphal gospel composed in Latin during the early medieval period, the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*.

The *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* is primarily a reworking of the *Protevangelium of James*, to which *Ps.-Matthew* adds some "unique" material, including in particular the story of Mary's encounter with the date palm during the flight into Egypt.²⁰ It was long thought that the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* was quite late, having been composed only in the eighth or ninth century,²¹ but more recent study has shown that this apocryphal gospel was probably composed in the late sixth or seventh century.²² In view of *Ps.-Matthew*'s combination of these early Christian apocryphal traditions, it might at first glance be tempting to identify this apocryphon as the primary source of the Qur'ān's borrowed Christian traditions: most of the traditions that appear in the Qur'ān are found in some form or another in *Ps.-Matthew*. Unfortunately, however, the solution

¹⁸ These events are described in Matthew 2.7–23.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, pp. 202–30, esp. 225–29.

²⁰ The most recent edition of this text has been published in Jan Gijssels and Rita Beyers, *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, 2 vols., Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 9–10; the episode with which we are presently concerned may be found at pp. 458–70.

²¹ For a general discussion of the text, see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 84–86. An eighth or ninth-century date is suggested on p. 86 and also in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, p. 458. Schneemelcher gives only a few brief selections from the text, and Elliott represents its contents much better, summarizing those portions that are very similar to the *Protevangelium* and translating all of *Ps.-Matthew*'s "unique" passages in full: Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 88–99.

²² The arguments for this earlier dating may be found in Gijssels and Beyers, *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, vol. 1, pp. 59–67.

is not so simple. In the first place, the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* was probably composed a little too late to have such an impact on the Qurʾānic text, and, more importantly, this apocryphal gospel was first composed in Latin somewhere in the Christian West and was completely unknown in the Christian East.²³ Thus we must look elsewhere for an early Christian source, perhaps even a “non-literary” source, that may have inspired the Nativity traditions of the Qurʾān.

The improbabilities of any literary contact between the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* and the world of the Qurʾān might at first glance appear to offer some support for the traditional Muslim view of the Qurʾān as a “pure revelation,” whose contents are not dependent on borrowings from earlier sources, but revealed directly from God.²⁴ Nevertheless, scholars of early Christian apocrypha have long recognized that *Ps.-Matthew* relies on earlier sources for many of its traditions, including the story of Mary and the palm in particular.²⁵ While we may never identify the exact source from which the author of *Ps.-Matthew* has borrowed this story, we may now at least be certain that this legend was known in early Christianity, and more specifically in the Christian East. Recent efforts by the present writer have shown that the story of Mary and the date palm circulated in the Christian Near East perhaps as early as the third century, and beyond any doubt by the early fifth century. The earliest extant version of this legend is found among the ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption, a collection of narratives that describe the events of Mary’s departure from this life. As I have demonstrated in my recent book on these traditions, the narrative that best preserves the story of Mary and the date palm was first composed by the early fifth century at the latest, although the peculiar theology reflected in this narrative very strongly suggests its formation sometime in the third century, if not even earlier.²⁶ Several Syriac fragments copied in the later fifth century form the earliest witness to this narrative, and by the end of the sixth century, this version was widely dispersed throughout the cultures and languages of the Byzantine Near East. In contrast to the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* then, the ancient Dormition traditions present clear evidence that the story of Mary and the date palm circulated widely in the pre-Islamic Near East, providing favorable circumstances for its usage in the Qurʾānic account of Jesus’ Nativity.

Mary’s desert encounter with the date palm and spring is described near the beginning of this Dormition narrative. As the narrative opens, Christ, who is also identified as a “Great Angel,” appears to his mother to announce her impending death. When Mary expresses some uncertainty at her interlocutor’s identity, the Christ-Angel reassures his mother by reminding her of their journey

²³ Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 84

²⁴ See n. 11 above.

²⁵ See Gijssels and Beyers, *Libri de nativitate Mariae*, vol. 1, p. 11.

²⁶ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), esp. ch. 3. This volume also includes a complete translation of the earliest Dormition narrative preserving this legend in appendix A. See also Stephen J. Shoemaker, “The (Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antique Palestine,” *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* 2 (2001): 21–72, esp. 29–36.

through the desert into Egypt, when he miraculously fed her from the date palm. He then recapitulates for her the story of Mary and the date palm, which is related in the ancient Dormition traditions as follows.

5) And he said, “My mother, you did not understand my power. I first revealed it to you at the spring, where I led Joseph. He was crying, the child who is glorified because he is greater than everything, and Joseph was angry with you, saying, ‘Give your breast to your child.’ At once you gave it to him, as you went forth to the Mount of Olives, fleeing from Herod. And when you came to some trees you said to Joseph, ‘My lord, we are hungry, and what do we have to eat in this desert place?’ Then he rebuked you, saying, ‘What can I do for you? Is it not enough for you that I became a stranger to my family on your account; why didn’t you guard your virginity, so that you would [not] be found in this; and not only you, but I and my children too; now I live here with you, and I do not even know what will happen to my seven children.’

6) I say this to you Mary: know who I am and what power is upon me. And then he said to you, ‘There is no fruit that you could eat in the trees. This date-palm is tall, and I cannot climb it. I say to you that there is no one at all who has climbed, and there is nothing that a person will find in this desert. I have been afflicted from all sides because of you, because I have left my country. And I am afflicted because I did not know the child that you have; I only know that he is not from me. But I have thought in my heart, perhaps I had intercourse with you while drunk, and that I am even worse because I had determined to protect [you]. And behold, now it has been made known that I was not negligent, because there were [only] five months when I received you in [my] custody. And behold, this child is more than five months; for you embraced him with your hand. Truly, he was not from your seed, but from the Holy Spirit. And he will not leave you hungry, but he will have mercy on you; he will provide for me, and he will remember that I am a sojourner, as you are a sojourner with me.’

7) Is this not everything that Joseph said to you? And the child stopped [nursing from] your breast, this one who is greater than all things, and he said to Joseph, ‘My father, why don’t you climb this date-palm and bring it to her, so that my mother might eat from it, as was said about it. And I will feed you: not only you, but also the fruit that comes forth from it. I will not be hungry even for one day.’ And the child turned and said to the date-palm, ‘Incline your head with your fruit, and satisfy my mother and father.’ And it inclined immediately. And who made it incline? Is it not because I have power, which was because of me? And you and Joseph were satisfied, because the date-palm’s branches were placed as a wave

of the ocean on the shore, because I [had] joy and happiness in my body as it appeared.”²⁷

The narrative continues with the Savior’s praise for the palm tree’s obedience, and he rewards the tree by transferring it to the garden of Paradise, as also reported in the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew’s* account.

There is much that is downright shocking in the Dormition traditions’ early version of this legend, including Joseph’s accusation that Mary failed to guard her virginity, and his considerations as to whether perhaps he impregnated Mary one night while drunk. It is also particularly interesting, if somewhat less salacious, that this ancient version fails to mention a miraculous spring that gushes forth from the date palm’s roots at the Christ-Angel’s command, as described in the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* and supposedly in the Qurʾānic Nativity account. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the Dormition narrative’s version, the Christ-Angel reminds his mother that these events took place at a spring, to which he had led her and Joseph. Thus, this version too connects Mary’s feeding from the date palm with a desert water source, albeit with considerably less drama,²⁸ in what is probably the earliest known form of this legend. The rather astonishing irreverence displayed for the Holy Family in this version of the palm legend suggests that it is particularly early, perhaps even older than the narrative in which it is embedded. On this basis we may speculate that what was originally the setting of the story, a desert oasis, later was transformed into a miraculous event in itself, resulting in the belief that a spring suddenly gushed forth in the desert at Christ’s command, as the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* describes.

Nevertheless, if we have identified historical conditions that make possible the Qurʾān’s borrowing of this early Christian legend, we still have not offered any explanation for the Qurʾān’s somewhat unlikely transformation of this event associated with the flight into Egypt in the Christian tradition into the basis of its account of Jesus’ Nativity. The dependence of the Qurʾānic Nativity account on these earlier Christian traditions of Mary and the date palm is all but certain: as modern Qurʾānic scholarship has frequently recognized, the similarities are just too striking to be mere chance. But how are we to explain the very different setting of Mary’s encounter with the date palm and spring in the Qurʾān? At present there is no evidence of any literary sources that can account for this transformation: in this regard one could only speculate that some now lost Christian text or oral tradition was the source of this alteration, or that perhaps it was for some reason invented by the early Islamic tradition

²⁷ The complete Ethiopic narrative, entitled the *Liber Requiei*, has been published in Victor Arras, *De transitu Mariae apocrypha aethiopice*, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vols. 343, 352, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, t. 67, 69 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973), vol. 1. I have translated the passage above from pp. 3-4 of this edition. There is also a Georgian fragment of this narrative that records this story in its entirety, in a nearly identical version; this has been published in Michel van Esbroeck, “Apocryphes géorgiens de la Dormition,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 92 (1973): 55–75. A complete translation of the Ethiopic narrative, including this Georgian fragments and all the other fragments will appear in Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition*, appendix A.

²⁸ *Liber Requiei* 5 (Arras, *De transitu*, vol. 1, 3 [Eth] and 2 [Lat]).

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

The Church of the Kathisma and Its Traditions

There is yet another pre-Islamic witness to the legend of Mary and the date palm that I have so far held off from discussing, primarily because it is associated specifically with the ancient church of Mary's Kathisma ("seat") on the outskirts of Jerusalem, a monument which will be our primary focus for the remainder of this article. In a pilgrimage guide composed sometime between 560–570, an anonymous writer, generally known as the "Piacenza pilgrim," briefly reports the story of Mary and the palm. Recalling the event in its traditional context of the flight into Egypt, this pilgrim identifies its location with the site of the Kathisma church:

On the way to Bethlehem, at the third milestone from Jerusalem, lies the body of Rachel, on the edge of the area called Ramah. There I saw standing water which came from a rock, of which you can take as much as you like up to seven pints. Everyone has his fill, and the water does not become less or more. It is indescribably sweet to drink, and people say that Saint Mary became thirsty on the flight into Egypt, and that when she stopped here this water immediately flowed. Nowadays there is also a church building there.²⁹

On the one hand, this pilgrimage guide offers additional confirmation of this legend's circulation in the Christian Near East on the eve of the Arab conquests. Much more important, however, is the guide's specific association of these events from the flight into Egypt with a church standing at the midpoint of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road. As we will see, the connection between this church, the Kathisma church, and the Holy Family's flight into Egypt appears to hold the key to deciphering the Qur'an's peculiar combination of Christian traditions in its Nativity story. A better understanding of this early Christian shrine and its history will make this relationship clear.

The church of the Kathisma or "seat" of Mary owes its existence to the Nativity traditions of the *Protevangelium of James*, the same second-century Christian apocryphon that was discussed above.³⁰ As we have already briefly noted, the story of Jesus' birth in the *Protevangelium* differs markedly from the canonical birth narratives of the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. In contrast to the canonical versions, the *Protevangelium* locates the birth of Christ

²⁹ (Ps.-)Antoninus Placentius, *Itinerarium* (P. Geyer, ed., *Itineraria et alia Geographica*, CCL 175 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1965], p. 137; John Wilkinson, trans. *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* [Warminster, Eng.: Aris & Phillips, 1977], p. 85); for the date, see Celestina Milani, *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini: Un viaggio in Terra Santa del 560–570 d.C.* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1977), pp. 36–38.

³⁰ See nn. 14 and 15 above.

not in Bethlehem, but instead some three miles to the north in a remote area: the child suddenly decides to come forth as Mary and Joseph are in the midst of transit between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Nor is there any search for suitable accommodations or eventual recourse to a stable: instead, Joseph frantically locates a nearby cave where Mary gives birth. Later Christian tradition has made some effort to harmonize the two early birth narratives, particularly by incorporating a grotto, supposedly a part of the stable, into the traditional Bethlehem site.³¹ Nevertheless, as the Christian iconographic tradition bears witness, with its depiction of the Nativity in a rural cave, these two traditions were never completely merged with success.

Although the Nativity traditions of the *Protevangelium* were undoubtedly the inspiration for the existence of this important early Christian shrine, there is nothing in the *Protevangelium*'s account that would suggest either a seat or Mary's sitting. The full significance of this church is known only from later Palestinian liturgical, hagiographical, and pilgrimage texts from the sixth and seventh centuries, all of which identify this church with the place where the Virgin Mary sat to rest before giving birth nearby, as is described in the *Protevangelium*.³² Some pilgrimage accounts additionally specify the existence of a large rock at this location, which served as Mary's seat while she rested. The most important of these is the pilgrimage guide of Theodosius, written sometime between 520-530, the first source to specifically identify this spot with a rock that once was Mary's "seat."³³ Oddly enough, Theodosius also reports that this holy rock had been removed by the time of his visit: after an unsuccessful attempt to bring it to Constantinople, it was carved into an altar and placed in the church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Theodosius saw it during his visit. Nevertheless, later pilgrims, including the Piacenza pilgrim, continued to report the existence of some sort of a rock in connection with this church.³⁴

The liturgical history of this shrine and its feast date is itself quite complex, and in a previous article I have addressed this subject in some detail.³⁵ No

³¹ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*, 4th ed., Oxford Archaeological Guides (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 199-200; Eugene Hoade, O.F.M., *Guide to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1984), pp. 402-4.

³² Theodore of Petra, *Vita Theodosii* (H. Usener, ed., *Der heilige Theodosius, Schriften des Theodoros und Kyrillos* [Leipzig: Teubner, 1890], 13-14); Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Theodosii* (Eduard Schwartz, ed., *Kyrillos von Skythopolis*, TU 49.2 [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1939], 236); Michel Tarchnischvili, *Le grand lectionnaire de l'église de Jérusalem*, 2 vols., CSCO 188-89; 204-5, *Scriptores Iberici* 9-10; 13-14 (Louvain: CSCO, 1959-60), vol. 2, 29-30 (Geor) and 26 (Lat).

³³ Theodosius, *De situ terrae sanctae* (P. Geyer, ed., *Itineraria et alia Geographica*, CCL 175 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1965], p. 119); Johann Gildemeister, *Theodosius de situ Terrae Sanctae im ächten Text und der Brevarius de Hierosolyma vervollständigt* (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1882), p. 9; for the date, see John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Warminster, Eng.: Aris & Phillips, 1977), p. 5.

³⁴ The issues surrounding the history of this rock in the local traditions of Jerusalem are in fact rather complicated, and I would refer readers to my discussion of them in Shoemaker, "(Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church," 23-36. See the quotation from the Piacenza pilgrim above.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-72.

doubt much of this complexity is due to the non-canonical, indeed, one might even say, anti-canonical, nature of the traditions that determined its origin. Inasmuch as the shrine's liturgical history is of particular importance for our understanding of the Qur'anic Nativity traditions, it will be necessary to repeat briefly some of my previous conclusions in the present article. Most significant for the matter at hand is the fact that the Kathisma church originated as a Nativity shrine, and this remained its primary significance, on some level at least, for the remainder of its history. Although many of the earliest traditions connected with this shrine would later be transformed into a commemoration of the Virgin's Dormition and Assumption, the shrine itself seems always to have retained a strong association with the Nativity, and particularly Mary's role therein. As we will come to see, however, later in its history, this shrine was also identified with the traditions of the flight into Egypt, an oddity which appears to hold an important key to deciphering the Qur'anic Nativity traditions.

The earliest direct evidence of Jerusalemite liturgical practice comes to us in the form of a early lectionary, now known only in an Armenian version that preserves the liturgical practices of the Holy City during the period between 420-40. This lectionary specifies the liturgical readings for each of the annual feasts observed in Jerusalem, including a feast of Mary the Theotokos that was celebrated on August the 15th at the mid-point of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road.³⁶ This feast of the Memory of the Mary (also sometimes called the Memory of the Theotokos and the Memory of the Virgin) was celebrated throughout the eastern Roman Empire in the early fifth century. Although the date on which this feast was observed varied throughout the empire at this early stage, in all instances, our sources indicate that this feast was a commemoration of the Nativity and the Virgin's role in the incarnation and birth of Christ.³⁷ The readings designated for the feast in the Jerusalem Armenian lectionary make this focus quite clear, as do several fifth-century homilies for this feast that were delivered in or near Jerusalem.³⁸ This, of course, should not at all surprise us, given the inspiration for the Kathisma shrine in the *Protevangelium's* deviant Nativity traditions.

Thanks in particular to Walter Ray's recent work on the feast of August the 15th in the earliest Jerusalem liturgies, we now have some idea of the significance of both this date and the Kathisma church in the period before that described by the Jerusalem Armenian lectionary.³⁹ The Armenian lectionary identifies the subject of this feast specifically as "of Mary the Theotokos," making this

³⁶ A. Renoux, ed., *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, 2 vols., PO 35.1 and 36.2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), vol. 2, pp. 354-7. For the date, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 166-72.

³⁷ See Simon C. Mimouni, *Dormition et Assomption de Marie: Histoire des traditions anciennes*, Théologie Historique, 98 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), pp. 378-432, esp. 429-32.

³⁸ In addition to the Armenian Lectionary, see the early fifth-century homilies of Hesychius of Jerusalem: Michel Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, 2 vols., Subsidia Hagiographica, 59 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 118-205; and the mid-fifth-century homily of Chrysippus of Jerusalem: Martin Jugie, *Homélies mariales byzantines: textes grecs (II)*, 19.3 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1926), pp. 336-43.

³⁹ Walter D. Ray, "August 15 and the Development of the Jerusalem Calendar" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2000).

one of the earliest known Marian feasts. Nevertheless, the shape of the service described by the lectionary, as well as the nature of the lectionary's calendar reveal a different, more primitive subject for the feast. Ray identifies this earlier theme first by examining the readings that the early fifth-century lectionary mandates for the feast of August the 15th feast, all of which indicate that the subject of this feast was originally the Nativity. Through comparison of these readings with the earliest liturgical practices of other major Christian centers, including Constantinople, Rome, Syria, Spain, and Gaul, Ray demonstrates convincingly that the primary focus of the feast of August the 15th was the celebration of Christ's birth. More specifically, Ray is able to determine through this comparison that "the structure of readings of the feast of August the 15th in the Jerusalem calendar replicates the Western, Roman Nativity feast."⁴⁰ By way of contrast, the readings for the feast of the Epiphany on 6 January, which until the middle of the sixth century was the primary celebration of Christ's Nativity, reflect the standard Eastern pattern of Nativity readings.⁴¹ On this basis, Ray reaches the following conclusion and raises some additional questions which his dissertation proceeds to answer:

In the feast of August the 15th, it looks as if the Jerusalem church has adopted a Roman Nativity feast alongside its own native Nativity feast. That the Jerusalem church understood that they were adopting a Nativity feast is suggested by the way they have adopted the Roman set of readings to the structure of their own Nativity feast through the use of their Nativity psalms. The station, too, suggests the Nativity, for it is the place where, in one narrative with possibly Jerusalem roots [i.e., the *Protevangelium*], Christ is born. Moreover, the presence of Psalm 109 suggests that the feast was not originally intended to be a celebration of Mary. But if we accept the possibility that this feast is intended as a second feast of the Nativity, then the question is all the more acutely raised: Why August the 15th? Another question is also raised: Why is the feast "of Mary" as its title declares? To answer these questions we turn now to the question of the feast's place in the Jerusalem liturgical year.⁴²

At this point Ray turns to the structure of the Armenian lectionary's calendar itself, and through careful and convincing analysis, he isolates a more primitive layer within the lectionary's structure, which he persuasively identifies as the liturgical calendar of the fourth-century Jerusalem church. This more primitive calendar divides the year into three different liturgical sections. The first part of this liturgical year commemorates figures and events from the Hebrew Scriptures, which is then followed by a period celebrating figures from the New Testament. The year then concludes with the climactic feasts of the Lord, progressing from his birth, observed in the feast of the Epiphany, to his resurrection and ascension, and coming to a close with the feast of Pentecost; at this point the calendar recapitulates its memorialization of time by returning to the feasts connected with the Hebrew Scriptures. Within this calendar, Ray is able

⁴⁰Ibid., 93.

⁴¹ Ibid. See, e.g., the discussion of the Epiphany's significance in the early Jerusalem liturgy in Mimouni, *Dormition et Assomption*, pp. 433-38.

⁴² Ray, "August 15," pp. 94-95.

to identify yet another level of structure in the two periods of “ordinary time,” that is the two intervals commemorating figures from the two Testaments.

As we have noted, the two seasons of “ordinary time” create a historical sequence from Old Testament to New Testament. The group of feasts from August the 15th to September 14th [namely, the feasts of Mary, John the Baptist, and the Cross], however, should be further distinguished from the group beginning November 15 because of the two month gap between them, and because of their character. Mary and John the Baptist bear a different relationship to Jesus than do the apostles— Mary as the one who gave birth to him, John as the one who baptized him. They are boundary figures between the Old Testament and the New. Together the feasts from August the 15th to mid-September present another rehearsal of the events of Christ’s life in addition to that presented by the season from Epiphany to Easter. The feast of August the 15th has the character of a Nativity feast. The memorial of John the Baptist would certainly recall the baptism of Jesus. (It is noteworthy that, with the possible exception of this feast, there is no commemoration of Christ’s baptism in the Jerusalem calendar.) And the commemoration of the Cross on September 14 would recall the other significant event in Christ’s life, his crucifixion. But unlike the sequence of feasts from Epiphany to Pentecost, which is “time outside of time,” the second presentation of Christ’s life is placed within a historical context, preceded by the period of the Old Testament, and followed by the period of the apostles, that is, the time of the Church.⁴³

With this observation Ray is able to explain the dual commemoration of the Nativity in fourth-century Jerusalem, as well as accounting for the relative placement of the second feast of August the 15th within the liturgical calendar. The Roman structure was no doubt borrowed in order to avoid simply duplicating the primary Nativity celebrations in January.

Nevertheless, Ray is not content to rest here in his efforts to further understand both this specific feast and the nature of the earliest Jerusalemite liturgical calendar. Rather, he attempts to uncover the reasons behind the association of the Nativity with the precise date of the 15th of August, and although his arguments are (necessarily) somewhat more speculative in this section, they are nonetheless persuasive. At this point Ray takes us back even further in the history of Jerusalem’s liturgies, identifying traces of earlier practices that predate even the more primitive fourth-century structure that he has isolated from the Armenian lectionary. In the first place, he mounts a very convincing argument that the earliest celebrations of the Nativity in Jerusalem, prior to the fourth century, took place in the middle of May and were only later moved to January and then, finally, December. Although he is not the first to argue this position, Ray adds considerable new evidence to support it.⁴⁴

Why the middle of May, he asks, and what does this date have to do with the feast of August the 15th? Ray proposes to have identified the answer in earlier Jewish traditions, and more specifically in the sectarian calendar pre-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–29.

served by the book of Jubilees. According to Jubilees' calendar, the feast of Pentecost occurred in mid-May and celebrated the renewal of the covenant and, more importantly, the birth of Isaac, whose birth is understood to secure that covenant. Drawing on the work of numerous other scholars, Ray demonstrates the influence not only of the Jubilees calendar (or some similar sectarian, Jewish calendar) on early Christianity, but he also highlights the important influence that Jewish traditions concerning Isaac exerted on the early Christian understanding of Jesus.⁴⁵ On this basis, Ray suggests that the mid-May celebration of Christ's Nativity owes its existence to the Christian use of Isaac as a type of Christ, and more specifically to the Jewish tradition of Isaac's birth in mid-May at Pentecost. Most intriguing then is the solution that this hypothesis presents for understanding the origin of the feast of August the 15th. According to the Jubilees calendar, the visitation of Sarah and the conception of Isaac took place in the "middle of the sixth month," which is August, followed by his birth in the "middle of the third month," which is May.⁴⁶ As number of scholars have recently argued, the earliest Christians frequently viewed Isaac as a type of Jesus, occasionally reworking earlier Jewish traditions concerning Isaac in their efforts to understand Jesus. On this basis Ray suggests that Jerusalem's second Nativity feast on August the 15th had its origin in a commemoration of Christ's conception that was molded on earlier Jewish traditions concerning the conception of Isaac.

Although much of this is admittedly speculative, and the latter part especially, the details of the argument as presented by Ray are quite compelling. In any case, there can be absolutely no doubt that the feast of August the 15th and the location of the Kathisma church were primitively connected with the Nativity. Only later on, in the early fifth century, did this feast eventually come to be a specifically Marian feast. Even in this new guise, however, the feast maintained its original association with the Nativity: instead of being a general celebration of the Nativity, as it had been in the fourth century, during the fifth century and perhaps part of the sixth century, the 15th of August continued to commemorate the events of the Nativity, but now more specifically Mary's role therein.⁴⁷ By the middle of the sixth century, the 15th of August had become a celebration of Mary's death, her Dormition and Assumption, which it remains unto the present day.⁴⁸ Also at this time, the feast's observance was transferred from its ancient location at the Kathisma, halfway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, to the church of Mary's tomb in Jerusalem, just next to the garden of Gethsemane. Nevertheless, the feast of the Memory of Mary and its commemoration of Mary's role in the Nativity did not disappear. In the early seventh century, the Memory of Mary continued to be observed at the Kathisma church, where it remained primarily a celebration of the Nativity and Mary's

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 129–37, 144–61, 162–248.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 135–37.

⁴⁷ Shoemaker, "(Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church," 51–54.

⁴⁸ The transformation of this feast by this time has been demonstrated in Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, ch. 2.

role therein.⁴⁹ Eventually this feast too was absorbed into five-day liturgical cycle from the 13th to the 17th of August which focused on Mary's Dormition and Assumption, but as I have demonstrated elsewhere, themes from the Nativity continue to figure prominently in the early medieval traditions connected with this mid-August liturgical cycle. Even with this dramatic shift in the 1515th of August's liturgical significance then, its origins as a Nativity feast continued to be manifest, particularly with regard to the events of this cycle that continued to be celebrated at the Kathisma church.⁵⁰

As for the church of the Kathisma itself, literary sources continue to identify it (and its location, after its eventual destruction) with the events of the Nativity, and more specifically, with the location where Mary sat to rest before giving birth nearby. Only the Piacenza pilgrim, who composed his pilgrimage guide between 560-570, presents an alternative interpretation of the site, as noted at the beginning of this section. As the Piacenza pilgrim describes the holy sites along the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road, he first describes a place called "Ramah," at the third mile from Jerusalem, where Rachel's body lies.⁵¹ Just beyond Rachel's grave, the Piacenza Pilgrim reports the presence of a large rock in the middle of the road, from which poured forth an inexhaustible supply of sweet water. This miraculous rock, his guidebook explains, owes its origin to the Virgin's presence, but in this instance the context is the flight to Egypt, and not the *Protevangelium's* account of the Nativity and the traditions of Mary's rest that it spawned. As the Holy Family was fleeing to Egypt, the pilgrimage guide explains, Mary rested in this spot, and when she grew thirsty, the rock poured forth water for her to drink. The wonder was believed to have continued until the later sixth century, when the Piacenza Pilgrim visited the miraculous waters, along with a church standing at the midpoint of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road in commemoration of the rock and its miracle.

It is peculiar that the Piacenza pilgrim fails to mention the date palm in his account, much as the version of this legend preserved in the earliest Dormition traditions almost neglects to include the water source. It is clear, however, that we are dealing with three versions of the same literary tradition in the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*, the earliest Dormition narratives, and the Piacenza pilgrim's guide; in spite of their minor differences in detail, all three record essentially the same events. The Piacenza pilgrim's decision to focus on the spring rather than the palm tree is presumably a result of the fact the miraculous spring could still be found at the shrine: he had visited it and drunk of its holy waters, as could others who might read his guide. The palm tree, on the other hand, was no longer there. As the versions of this legend found in both the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* and the early Dormition narratives report, Christ rewarded the date palm for its obedience by transferring it to Paradise. Thus, unlike the spring, the palm tree was no longer a part of the shrine that could be visited and venerated. From this point of view, the Piacenza pilgrim's focus on

⁴⁹ Shoemaker, "(Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church," 51-71.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-65.

⁵¹ (Ps.-)Antoninus Placentius, *Itinerarium* (Geyer, *Itineraria*, p. 137). On the confusion regarding the location of Rachel's tomb, see n. 57 below.

the spring at the expense of the palm makes a great deal of sense: the genre of the text determines this orientation. Early Christian pilgrimage literature naturally reflects the interests of its audience, namely, pilgrims. As Paulinus of Nola notes in a letter written in 409, “The principal motive which draws people to Jerusalem is the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was present in the body.”⁵² The palm tree was gone: it could no longer be seen or touched. The miraculous spring, however, not only remained to be touched and seen, it poured forth water that the pilgrims could collect and take home with them, enabling them to continue seeing and touching the holy places even after their pilgrimage had ended.⁵³ Thus we should not be surprised that the Piacenza pilgrim has “edited” this legend in a manner that focuses attention what actually could be seen and touched, including in particular the miraculous spring from which pilgrims could collect holy water, as he and his companions did during their visit.

The tradition of a sacred “spring” at this location is persistent throughout the middle ages, but later authors estimate its significance variously, many identifying the spring as the “Well of the Magi,” or the “Bir al-Qadismu,” as the site is known to modern Palestinian Christians, who identify it as the place where the “wise men” of Matthew’s Nativity account again saw the star that had guided their journey from the East.⁵⁴ This tradition undoubtedly had its origin in medieval Palestine, sometime after the destruction of the Kathisma church and when Greek had yielded to Arabic, thus transforming the Greek “kathisma-seat” into the Arabic “qadismu-holy.”⁵⁵ As memories faded and buildings disappeared, the name of the Kathisma church apparently shifted its association from the ancient church to the related sacred “spring,” whose name “kathisma” was eventually understood as “qadismu” by the local Arabic speaking Christians. Thus these ancient Marian traditions were transformed by accidents of language into the more recent tradition of the ‘Well of the Magi’.

Although the Piacenza pilgrim’s interpretation of this site is unique, we certainly should not discount it for this reason alone. Even if this was not the predominant view of the Kathisma shrine’s significance, it seems clear that in the sixth century there were some who adhered to this interpretation, and as we

⁵² Paulinus of Nola, *Letter 49* (written in 409); cited in Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, p. 40.

⁵³ The collection of *eulogia*, blessed “souvenirs,” from the holy places was an important aspect of late ancient pilgrimage: see, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

⁵⁴ The various medieval and early modern witnesses to this tradition may be found scattered among the sources collected in Donatus Baldi, O.F.M., *Enchiridion Locorum Sanctorum* (Jerusalem: Typis PP. Franciscanorum, 1935), pp. 119–207. See also Hoade, *Guide to the Holy Land*, p. 375.

⁵⁵ The relation between the ancient and modern place names was first discussed by K. von Reiss, “Kathisma Palaion und der sogenannte Brunnen der Weisen bei Mar Eljas,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 12 (1889): 19–23. It should be noted, however, that “qadismu” is not a proper Arabic word, and it appears that the modern tradition has had to make a little bit of a stretch in order to reinterpret the church of the “kathisma” as a site connected with the “wise men.” The transformation relies on making a connection with the Arabic *qiddīs* (*qiddīsūn*) – “holy man” or “saint,” which is certainly applicable to these holy men from the east, even though they are more routinely identified in Arabic as *majūs*.

will see in a moment, the archaeology of the site offers important confirmation of this fact. As Walter Ray suggests, it seems rather likely that this alternative tradition was invented to resolve the difficult situation presented by the existence of two ancient Nativity sites and traditions.⁵⁶ Only one of them could be “true,” and consequently a different significance had to be found for the Kathisma shrine. The story of Mary’s rest during the flight into Egypt presented a very workable alternative to the tradition of her resting before childbirth. It had not yet been assigned to any alternative location, and the connection of the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt with Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem may have suggested the localization of these events nearby. In particular, the Gospel according to Matthew explicitly associates both of these events with Rachel’s lamentations in Ramah (Matt. 2:18; citing Jer 31.15). Although the actual site of Ramah, where Rachel died in childbirth, almost certainly lay just to the north of Jerusalem, the Hebrew Scriptures preserve an alternative tradition locating Rachel’s death and tomb between Jerusalem and Bethlehem (Gen 35.16-20). The early Christian and Jewish traditions consistently opt for this latter tradition, locating the tomb of Rachel (and Ramah) to the north of Bethlehem, toward Jerusalem.⁵⁷ As already noted, the Piacenza pilgrim also locates Ramah in this area, in close proximity to the Kathisma church and its miraculous spring. In light of Matthew’s connection between the flight into Egypt and the region north of Bethlehem, an early Christian tradition seems to have developed that the Holy Family first fled to the north when they departed Bethlehem. Admittedly, it does seem a bit odd for the Holy Family to have initially fled north, Egypt of course lying to the south of Bethlehem; perhaps we must assume, as this early Christian tradition may have, that rather than opting for a “fast getaway,” Mary and Joseph had to “sneak out the back” in order to avoid the notice of Herod’s henchmen.

By the later sixth century then, two previously unrelated traditions had been

⁵⁶ Ray, “August 15,” p. 58.

⁵⁷ The actual location of Rachel’s tomb is disputed. In the first place, there are two conflicting traditions from the Hebrew Scriptures, one locating her tomb near its traditional site, outside of Bethlehem, and another (more accurate) tradition locating the tomb to the north of Jerusalem (where ancient Ramah was in fact located: for more on this matter, see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Rachel’s Tomb”). G. Lombardi (*La tomba di Rahel*, Pubblicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio minor, 11 [Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1971]) discusses the history of the traditional tomb near Bethlehem, as well as claiming to identify Rachel’s actual tomb to the north of Jerusalem, near ‘Ain Farah (which Lombardi identifies as the biblical Ephrathah). Nevertheless, from the first century C.E. onward, both Jewish and Christian sources agree that Rachel’s tomb lay somewhere between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, following the biblical tradition that (incorrectly) located the site of ancient Ramah between the two cities. The tomb’s precise location within this area, however, varies somewhat in the early Christian pilgrim literature. Epiphanius Hagiopolita (ca. 800), for instance, locates Rachel’s tomb at the second mile from Jerusalem (but without reference to ‘Ramah’): *Itinerarium* 4 (Herbert Donner, ed., “Die Palästinabeschreibung des Epiphanius Monachus Hagiopolita,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 87 [1971], 70 [Grk] and 84 [Germ]). Adamnan (ca. 685), on the other hand, describes a site that agrees with the tomb’s traditional (and present) location: Adamnan, *De locis sanctis* 2.7 (Denis Meehan, ed., *Adamnan’s De locis sanctis*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 3 [Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1958], pp. 78–9).

brought together at the Kathisma church. This church, or more correctly, its location, was initially invested with significance in the events of the Nativity, as recorded by the *Protevangelium of James*. The very precise details of the *Protevangelium* and the overwhelming testimony of the early liturgical traditions of Jerusalem leave no doubt that this shrine and its feast were originally conceived as memorials of the Nativity. As time passed, both the Kathisma church and its feast of August the 15th came to be associated with different events from Christian sacred history, including the death of the Virgin Mary and a well once used by the Magi during their journey to Bethlehem. On the eve of the Arab conquests, however, at least some Christians identified the site of the Kathisma and its sacred spring with the place where Mary had rested during the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, and through her newborn son's miraculous powers she was fed there by a date palm and refreshed by the spring waters. As Walter Ray correctly observes, this reconfiguration of the Kathisma's traditions comes as no surprise: "Such a transformation could be anticipated after the location of Christ's birth had been fixed at the cave in Bethlehem by Constantine's construction and the Jerusalem liturgy. New significance would have to be found for any other spot which claimed the same distinction, if the spot were to be retained as a site for pilgrimage."⁵⁸ It would appear that an effort was made to dissociate the Kathisma church from its hoary Nativity traditions and to reinvent it as a shrine commemorating Mary's rest during the flight into Egypt. As a result, the legend of Mary and the date palm, as reported in the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew* and the earliest Dormition narratives, was brought together at this shrine with the *Protevangelium's* tradition of Christ's birth in a remote area, outside the city of Bethlehem.

With this attempt at transforming the Kathisma's significance, for the first and only time in the history of the Christianity (at least to my knowledge), the two early Christian traditions of Christ's birth in a remote location and Mary's encounter with the date palm and spring are brought together. This fact alone warrants our consideration of the Kathisma church as a likely source of the Qur'anic Nativity traditions. Nevertheless, archaeological discoveries made during the last five years have considerably strengthened the case for identifying the origin of the Qur'anic Nativity account in the local Palestinian traditions associated with the Kathisma. Recent excavations at the site of the ancient Kathisma church not only confirm the site's association with the legend of Mary and the palm during the sixth and seventh centuries, but they have also brought to light convincing evidence that the Kathisma church and its traditions exercised a major influence on early Islam in other areas as well.

The Kathisma Church and Its Significance in Formative Islam

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

⁵⁸ Ray, "August 15," p. 58.

quickly determined that they had uncovered remains of the long lost Kathisma church and monastery.⁵⁹ Their decision was quite reasonable: the site lies just east of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road, approximately 4 km from both ancient cities, which our sources identify as the location of the ancient Kathisma church. Furthermore, the stratigraphy of the structure isolates its construction sometime during the fifth century, in agreement with Ikelia's reported foundation of the Kathisma church around 450.⁶⁰ The architecture of the building finds parallels in a number of other fifth-century churches, and its mosaic pavements exemplify a common decorative pattern of this period.⁶¹ Consequently, for almost half of a century, the identification of this structure with the ancient church of the Kathisma stood unchallenged.

A recent discovery, however, has cast doubt on this once rather easy assumption. In 1992, efforts to widen the Jerusalem-Bethlehem highway led to a salvage excavation in which the foundations of a large, octagonal church (43m x 52m) were uncovered, approximately 350 meters north of the monastery of Mar Elias.⁶² Work on the new church was unfortunately suspended before its remains could be fully excavated, until the fall of 1997, when construction workers laying pipe for the controversial settlement at Har Homa damaged the church's foundation, necessitating a rescue excavation. This time, archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority were able to excavate a significant portion of the church, which they date to the fifth century, revealing a large rock, about 2 x 4 meters, in the center of the church.⁶³ While the architecture of this new church is somewhat more unusual than that of the Ramat Rahel church, the design of three concentric octagons finds very close parallels in the fifth-century churches at Mt. Gerazim and Capernaum.⁶⁴ Based on their discoveries, the

⁵⁹ See the excavation reports published in Y. Aharoni, "Excavations at Ramath Rahel, 1954: Preliminary Report," *Israel Exploration Journal* 6 (1956): 102-11; 137-57, esp. 107-11; idem, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*, 2 vols., Serie archeologica, 2 & 6 (Rome: Universita degli studi, Centro di studi semitici, 1962 & 1964), esp. P. Testini, "The Kathisma Church and Monastery," vol. 1, pp. 73-91, and idem, "The Church and Monastery of the 'Kathisma,'" vol. 2, pp. 101-6.

⁶⁰ Pottery from the fourth century was discovered in the church's foundation and a coin from the reign of Anastasias I (491-518) in the church itself (Aharoni, "Excavations at Ramath Rahel," 110; 155-6). The excavators' conclusions have recently been reconfirmed by Jodi Magness, *Jerusalem Ceramic Chronology, circa 200-800 CE*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament/American Schools of Oriental Research Monographs, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, Ltd., 1993), pp. 116-17. Magness also identifies the presence of pottery from the late fifth century in the monastery, indicating a *terminus ante quem* for the church and monastery: *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶¹ Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel*, vol. 1, pp. 77-86.

⁶² The report for this first season has been published by Rina Avner, "Jerusalem, Mar Elias," *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 13 (1993): 89-92.

⁶³ The report for this second season has been published by Rina Avner, "כנסיית הקת'יסמה — מר אליאס, ירושלים," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot*, 108 (1998): 139-42. An English translation appears in *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 20 (2000): 101*-103*. Note also that a third season of excavation took place in Winter 1999-2000, and Avner has informed me that during this most recent (and final) season, coins from the fifth century were found beneath the lowest of the three floors, and sixth century coins above, thus confirming the date.

⁶⁴ Yitzhak Magen, "The Church of Mary Theotokos on Mt. Gerazim," in *Ancient Churches*

excavators have concluded that this new church was in fact the church of the Kathisma, rather than the church at Ramat Rahel, just few hundred meters to the north. This identification is supported, they argue, by the large rock at the center of this church, which, as we have already noted, certain accounts identify as an important feature of the Kathisma traditions.⁶⁵

The result of this new discovery is that we are now confronted with two fifth-century churches, within a few hundred meters of each other, in the approximate location of the ancient Kathisma church, both of which have been identified as this church by their excavators. Both churches also lie near the old cistern identified by local tradition as the “Bir al-Qadismu,” or the “Well of the Magi.”⁶⁶ In a previous article, I have considered the various possibilities presented by these two structures for resolving the identity of the Kathisma church, and the weight of the literary and liturgical evidence connected with this shrine actually favors identifying both of these churches with the ancient church of the Kathisma.⁶⁷ There is strong indication that there were two such churches: an “Old Kathisma,” a church and monastic community constructed sometime before 450, and a “New Kathisma,” built sometime around 450. On the basis of both the literary evidence and the archaeology, I have argued that the smaller church and monastic community at Ramat Rahel were likely the Old Kathisma, while the newly discovered church is almost certainly the New Kathisma. It is with the latter church exclusively that we will be concerned for the remainder of this article, since this was undoubtedly the pilgrimage shrine that the Piacenza pilgrim and others visited. In fact, as I have elsewhere suggested, the New Kathisma was in all likelihood intentionally built as a pilgrimage shrine, in order to meet the needs of the increasing number of pilgrims that traveled to the Holy Land in late antiquity.⁶⁸

Of particular importance is the fact that the material remains of the New Kathisma church offer clear confirmation of the Piacenza pilgrim’s identification of this shrine with the legend of Mary and the date palm. The Kathisma’s floor is elaborately decorated with mosaics, most of which are geometric, but one of which, the only pictorial mosaic uncovered, depicts of a large date palm, flanked by two smaller palms, all of which are laden with fruit.⁶⁹ This is almost certainly a representation of the date palm from which the Virgin Mary was

Revealed, Yoram Tsafrir, ed., (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), pp. 83–9; Virgilio Corbo, O.F.M., “The Church of the House of St. Peter at Capernaum,” in *ibid.*, pp. 71–6.

⁶⁵ Avner, “ירושלים, מר אליאס — כנסיית הקתיסמה”; eadem, “Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road (in Hebrew),” *Judea and Samaria Research Studies: Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting 1998* (Kedumim-Ariel: The Research Institute, College of Judea and Samaria 1999), pp. 155–60; English summary, xviii–xix.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., A. M. Schneider, “Die Kathismakirche auf Chirbet Abu Brek,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 14 (1934): 230–1, which enlists the nearby well as evidence in favor of the Ramat Rahel church’s identification with the ancient Kathisma.

⁶⁷ Shoemaker, “(Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church,” 23–36.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁹ Avner, “Jerusalem, Mar Elias,” 89–92; eadem, “ירושלים, מר אליאס — כנסיית הקתיסמה”; eadem, “Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road.”

miraculously fed during the flight into Egypt.⁷⁰ Since this is the church's only pictorial mosaic, we may surmise its representation is particularly important for determining the building's significance, and on this basis we should expect to find that a fruit-laden palm somehow figures in the traditions associated with this building. The image of course resonates strongly with the literary traditions of the flight into Egypt that the Piacenza pilgrim associates with this location, thus providing important archaeological confirmation of this author's seemingly unique testimony.

The only potential problem with this interpretation is that the mosaics in the Kathisma church date from the time of its conversion into a mosque. Although it was initially reported that the mosaic floors were installed during the structure's service as a church,⁷¹ more recent finds have led the excavators to conclude that these mosaics were installed near the beginning of the eighth century, at which time the church of the Kathisma was converted into what we might call the "Kathisma mosque."⁷² Nevertheless, this fact does not limit the importance of this mosaic for confirming the Piacenza pilgrim's report; on the contrary, the prominent representation of the miraculous date palm attests to the endurance of the tradition associating this site with the legend of Mary and the palm. As Rina Avner, the site's excavator has noted, "the iconography of this mosaic [i.e., the one depicting the palm trees] suggests that the Muslims adopted the Christian tradition and identification of the site as the place where Mary rested."⁷³ What Avner does not make entirely clear here, however, is that in this representation the early Islamic tradition adopted not just one, but *two* separate traditions of Mary's rest. In her article, Avner rather curiously argues that the mosaic reflects the tradition of Mary's rest described in the *Protevangelium*, without any reference whatsoever to the traditions of Mary and the palm. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the primary inspiration for the mosaic lies in the tradition of Mary's rest during the flight into Egypt, since the *Protevangelium* does not mention any palm trees. It would seem then that, judging from the remains alone, we cannot be certain that the early Muslims had similarly embraced the *Protevangelium*'s traditions of the Nativity: while we might infer this from the prior history of the site, only the Qur'an makes the connection between these Nativity traditions and the palm mosaic explicit. On the other hand, however, this palm mosaic offers not only important confirmation of the Piacenza pilgrim's identification of this site with the legend of Mary and the palm, but it also alerts us to the importance of this tradition in formative Islam.

⁷⁰ Avner, "כנסיית הקתיסמה — מר אליאס, מר אלילים, מר אלילים"; eadem, "Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road." The best published photograph of this mosaic appears on the cover of *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 108 (1998).

⁷¹ Avner, "Jerusalem, Mar Elias," 89.

⁷² In the second season of excavation, it was recognized that the floor had three different levels: two as a church, and a third floor that was put in place when the church was converted into a mosque: Avner, "כנסיית הקתיסמה — מר אליאס, מר אלילים, מר אלילים." Avner has informed me that coins from the early Islamic period have been found beneath the uppermost level of the floor, dating the present mosaics to the time of the church's conversion into a mosque.

⁷³ Avner, "Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road," XIX.

When this shrine came into Muslim hands around the turn of the eighth century, it would appear that its associations with both the Nativity and the legend of Mary and the palm were still strong. At the time of the Kathisma church's conversion into a mosque, when its present mosaics were installed, it seems rather likely that the two early Christian traditions had already been merged by the Islamic tradition into the single Nativity tradition known from the Qur'ān. Thus, Avner is essentially correct in identifying the mosaic as a reference to the *Protevangelium's* traditions as well as the legend of Mary and the date palm. The mosaic refers to neither of these traditions individually, but to their conflation in the Qur'ānic Nativity story. In fact, although it is admittedly speculative, it is, nevertheless, quite tempting to suppose that this early mosque served as an Islamic Nativity shrine intended to honor 'Īsā and Maryam through a commemoration of the former's birth. When the conquering Arabs took this shrine from Christian hands, they no doubt retained its ancient associations with the birth of Jesus, whom they too revered as a great messenger of Allah. The conversion of the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem into a mosque was most likely out of the question: this would have been too inflammatory to the Christian majority that the conquerors sought to govern. On the other hand, the Christians of late antiquity appear relatively uncertain as to exactly what they should make of the Kathisma shrine, now that the events of the Nativity were firmly established in Constantine's Bethlehem shrine. Although the Kathisma's associations with the Nativity proved tenacious, it seems that in the later sixth century an alternative tradition developed identifying this church instead with Mary's rest during the flight into Egypt. Given the complicated history of this shrine and its potential challenge to the "official" traditions of Bethlehem, Muslim control of the Kathisma would hardly stir up the emotions that seizure of the Bethlehem church would have.

Thus 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 as well. In adopting this Christian shrine and its Nativity traditions, it appears that the early Muslims simultaneously embraced the shrine's association with the miraculous date palm and spring from the flight into Egypt. Rather than preserving the two traditions separately, however, the Islamic tradition fused them into what has become the Qur'ānic version of Jesus' Nativity. It seems likely that in this manner the early Muslim encounter with the church of the Kathisma gave rise to the Qur'ānic account of Jesus' Nativity. The dependence of this Qur'ānic tradition on the two earlier Christian traditions is, from a historical point of view, undeniable. Yet until now, there was no indication that these two traditions were ever joined in antiquity, leaving us with no clear source from which the Qur'ān would have drawn its traditions. It is admittedly possible that the Qur'ānic story of Jesus' Nativity had already formed in its present state before the invading Arabs had ever even seen or heard of the Kathisma church. Perhaps it is just mere good fortune that they met with a shrine in Jerusalem that so uniquely fit the peculiarities of their sacred traditions. Nevertheless, it admittedly remains possible that the early Muslims independently combined these two Christian traditions into a Nativity tradition

of their own before reaching the Holy Land, and that the correspondence of the Qurʾān with the traditions of the Kathisma shrine is simply a happy coincidence. Although this sequence of events is not inconceivable, it is less likely than the alternative, that the Kathisma traditions influenced the formation of the Qurʾānic traditions of the Nativity. This is particularly so when we consider the significant impact that the church of the Kathisma exerted elsewhere on early Islamic culture, specifically in regard to the Dome of the Rock.

Experts on early Islamic art and architecture have long maintained that the Dome of the Rock is an architecturally unique edifice.⁷⁴ Although all of its architectural forms belong to “the language of Late Antique era in the Mediterranean area,” the particular combination of elements in the Dome of the Rock is held to be unparalleled. Numerous Byzantine churches, including several in Palestine, for instance, were constructed as concentric octagons, but “all of these buildings were planned according to standard ratios.”⁷⁵ By way of contrast, as Oleg Grabar explains, “the plan of the Dome of the Rock is distinguishable from the plans of most comparable buildings by its inordinate size and by the perfection of its symmetries around multiple axes without visible focus or direction.”⁷⁶ Similar claims have been advanced with regard to the Dome’s mosaics. Although the motifs present in these mosaics are drawn from the “rich visual repertory of Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean and Iran,” Grabar writes of these mosaics that “the uniqueness of the Dome of the Rock undermines even the best instances of logical reasoning or artistic history.”⁷⁷

With the recent discovery of the Kathisma church, however, the Dome of the Rock’s uniqueness has suddenly come into serious question, and much of latter’s significance will now need to be reconsidered. Rina Avner, the Kathisma church’s primary excavator, has demonstrated persuasively that this fifth-century church served as the primary architectural model for Abd al-Malik’s construction of the Dome of the Rock at the close of the seventh century.⁷⁸ At the most superficial level, there is the not insignificant coincidence that this church, about an hour’s walk from the Temple Mount, is architecturally almost identical with the Dome of the Rock, right down to the enormous, sacred rock at its center. Approximately the same size as the Dome of the Rock, the Kathisma consists of two concentric octagons, centered on a large rock which

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 104–10; K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2nd ed. 2 vols., vol. 1, *Umayyads, A.D. 622–750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 101–29.

⁷⁵ Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 110.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷⁸ This has been most convincingly demonstrated by Avner in her paper on this subject at 1998 meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature in Orlando. Hopefully this will be published sometime in the near future. In the meantime, see Avner, “ירושלים, מר אליאס - כנסיית הקתיסמה”; eadem, “Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road.” Further explorations regarding the relationship of this new Kathisma church and the Dome of the Rock have recently been made by Michel van Esbroeck in “Die Quelle der Himmelfahrt Muhammads vom Tempel in Jerusalem aus,” a paper delivered at the Deutscher Orientalistentag in Bamberg in March 2001 (I thank Professor van Esbroeck for sharing this unpublished talk with me before its publication).

is itself enclosed by a third octagon. Although this rock is considerably smaller than the one in the Dome of the Rock, there is some evidence to suggest that the Kathisma's rock was once larger, but still probably not as large as the rock on the Temple Mount.⁷⁹

Yet there is much more to the relationship between these two structures than these very obvious similarities alone would indicate. As Grabar has already noted, there are numerous parallel structures from Christian late antiquity that employ the design of concentric octagons; what has long distinguished these earlier buildings from the Dome of the Rock are the unique proportions of the latter.⁸⁰ Unlike the many previously known architectural parallels, however, the Kathisma church was constructed with the same proportions that are seen in the Dome of the Rock, as Rina Avner has convincingly demonstrated.⁸¹ Moreover, Avner has also shown that the mosaic floors of the Kathisma mosque are particularly unusual, with the only known parallels being found in the wall mosaics of the Dome of the Rock. More specifically, the Kathisma's palm mosaic, which we have already discussed, is identical to a mosaic from the Dome of Rock, which has the only known parallels to this composition.⁸²

There is, then, very convincing evidence that the ancient church of the Kathisma was the architectural model for the construction of the Dome of the Rock. Only three miles from the Temple Mount, this church was based on the plan of two concentric octagons, constructed around an enormous sacred rock, which was itself surrounded by a third octagonal ring. Moreover, the Kathisma church shares the proportions of the Dome of the Rock, and the mosaics of the two buildings are strikingly similar and in one important case identical. Finally, we know that the Kathisma church came into Muslim hands very shortly after the conquest of Palestine, as demonstrated by the church's conversion into a mosque in the early eighth century. All of this suggests that the Dome of the Rock is not the unique building that it once was thought to be. The Kathisma church, which had stood for centuries before the construction of Abd al-Malik's shrine, very likely served as the architectural model for the Dome of the Rock. The Kathisma's mosaics, which were installed only after the Dome's construction, further attest to the connection between these two buildings in the early Islamic mind. Again, while it is not impossible that the close relationship between these two buildings is a mere coincidence, given the close proximity of the two structures, their striking similarities, and the early Muslim possession of the Kathisma church, it seems almost incontestable that the Kathisma inspired the Dome of the Rock. From this we can be certain that the Kathisma shrine

⁷⁹ See Shoemaker, "(Re?)Discovery of the Kathisma Church," 35.

⁸⁰ Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, pp. 107–9.

⁸¹ This was most carefully demonstrated in Avner's paper at the 1998 meetings of the Society for Biblical Literature, but for now, see Avner, "כנסיית — מר אליאס ירושלים, הקתיסמה"; eadem, "Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road." This point is also made in van Esbroeck, "Die Quelle der Himmelfahrt Muhammads."

⁸² Avner, "כנסיית הקתיסמה — מר אליאס ירושלים"; eadem, "Birth Pangs on the Bethlehem Road." There are several representations of palm trees in the mosaics of the inner face of the Dome's octagon; the one identical to the Kathisma mosaic occurs at 292°: see Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 93.

was an important monument in formative Islam, whose design provided the model for the Dome of the Rock and whose mosaics demonstrate a continuing connection between the two buildings. Given the Kathisma's visible influence on the earliest and one of the holiest Islamic monuments, we may be further justified in assuming that the religious traditions associated with the Kathisma had an impact on formative Islam. Since we know that this monument had a major influence on early Islam in other important areas, we should not be at all surprised to discover that the Kathisma's peculiar combination of the traditions of Christ's Nativity and Mary's encounter with the Palm have generated the Qur'ān's unique account of Jesus' birth.

Conclusions

The Qur'ān's rather surprising mixture of two otherwise independent early Christian traditions can now be explained by the early Islamic encounter with the Christian shrine of the Kathisma, the sole place outside of the Qur'ān where these two traditions intersect. The Kathisma was originally an important Nativity shrine in Christian Jerusalem, which owed its significance to the account of the Nativity related by the second-century *Protevangelium of James*, a Christian apocryphon whose traditions have strongly influenced the Qur'ān. Once the basilica of the Nativity in the city of Bethlehem had emerged as the dominant Nativity shrine, with the authoritative support of the canonical gospels, new significance had to be found for the church of the Kathisma that would supplant its dissonant, and yet ancient, Nativity traditions. It would seem that this was the reason behind the later attempt to identify the Kathisma with the tradition of Mary and the palm tree from the legend of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. The Kathisma's Nativity traditions did not evaporate, however, and they continued to attach themselves to this shrine even after this effort to redefine its significance. Thus we have in the Kathisma church a likely source for the Qur'ānic tradition of Jesus' Nativity: not only is it the only place in the Christian tradition where the two legends that were the Qur'ān's sources meet, but the importance of Jerusalem in earliest Islamic history provides a likely context for their adoption by the Muslim invaders. Nevertheless, we can do much better than this. We know that this Christian shrine was converted into a mosque rather soon after the Arabs took control of Jerusalem, sometime before the early eighth century, indicating that the Kathisma was important to the early Muslims. Moreover, the impact of the Kathisma church on the formation of Islamic culture is dramatically seen in the Kathisma's connection with the Dome of the Rock; not only does the Kathisma appear to have served as the Dome of the Rock's architectural model, but the unusual mosaics found in both shrines attest to the strong links between them. In view of the Kathisma's significance for early Islam, we should not be surprised at all to find that its traditions have influenced the Qur'ān.

Nevertheless, if one continues to adhere to the traditional model of the Qur'ān's composition and formation, then most of what we have proposed in this article will likely seem almost completely preposterous. We do not expect

that many pious Muslims will find this argument very persuasive, but it is our hope that this reconstruction will add to the mounting evidence that modern scholarship must radically rethink our understanding of the Qur'ān's origin. It must be admitted that we have not completely eliminated the possibility that these two Christian traditions were somehow known to Muḥammad, who combined them independently in the Ḥijāz, as the traditional understanding would have it. Nonetheless, we have demonstrated a significant probability that things were otherwise, and that the combination of two early Christian traditions at the Kathisma led to the peculiar formation of the Qur'ān's Nativity tradition. Given the growing body of evidence that the Qur'ānic text, or at the very least, significant parts of it, developed only after the Arab conquests of the Near East, the influence of the Kathisma church and its traditions on the Qur'ān seems not only possible, but likely. While many scholars who remain loyal to the traditional narrative of the Qur'ān's formation may reject our proposal, we would ask them to present equivalent evidence demonstrating the likelihood, or even possibility, that Muḥammad would have encountered the combination of these two traditions in the Ḥijāz. Again, while we cannot completely eliminate this possibility, the burden rests on those who wish to make this claim to provide a more compelling explanation for the origin of this Qur'ānic tradition than we have here. Other scholars of Islam will no doubt want to compare this hypothesis with the early Islamic tradition, in particular to see if the early *tafsīr* tradition or some other source might shed light upon the Qur'ānic Nativity traditions as we have presented them here. We have not undertaken this task at all, but we would welcome the efforts of others who might pursue this matter and look forward to whatever results they might uncover.