Ignorance, Dishonesty, or Both?
A Reply to the Christian Polemic
*Mary the Mother of Jesus: A Houri in Paradise?*

By: Aboo Ishaaq Rasheed Gonzales
The praise is for Allah, and it is sufficed. May peace be upon His slaves who He has chosen. As for what follows …

After painting a sexually explicit picture for his Christian readers with a long introduction in which he describes the Ḥūris of Paradise, their physical features, and other sexually oriented details pertaining to the pleasures of the Hereafter, this Christian polemicist presents his prized piece of evidence for his attack on Prophet Muhammad, Mary the Mother of Jesus:

A Houri in Paradise?: a (clipped) quote taken from Ibn Kathîr’s Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyâ’ which states,


Unfortunately, there have been a couple of ignorant Muslims who have tried to refute this polemic drafted by this Christian writer by referring to the available English translations of Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyâ’, which do not include this quote, or any of the similar narrations that Ibn Kathîr quoted along with it. Had they referred to the Arabic text of the work, or to the work it was originally taken from, al-Bidâyah wan-Nihâyah, they would have surely found the quote presented above as well as the necessary information to properly address this polemicist’s allegations. So in all fairness, he was not guilty of fabricating some made up ḥadîth or lying (at least in this instance) to support his claims.

One thing he is guilty of, however, is being ignorant—or perhaps not, but is dishonest enough to keep hidden from his readers—of the fact that Ibn Kathîr quotes a significantly important statement concerning this narration that directly effects the validity of his attack.

The above cited narration from Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyâ’ is quoted by Ibn Kathîr under his chapter on the story of Jesus, under the subheading, “Allah’s choosing Mary, peace be upon
her”. After mentioning a number of the authentic narrations concerning Mary’s high status among the women of Paradise, Ibn Kathîr states,

The purpose here is the mention of what is connected to Mary bint 'Imrân, peace be upon her. For indeed Allah purified her and chose her over the women of the worlds of her time, and it is conceivable that the favouring of her over the women [of mankind] is general, as we have presented. And it has been mentioned in a ḥadîth that she is from the wives of the Prophet r in Paradise—her and Āsiyah bint Muzâḥim¹—and in the Tafsîr we have mentioned from some of the predecessors that he [i.e., Prophet Muḥammad] said that and drew upon His statement, (widows and virgins) (66:5): he said thus the widow is Āsiyah and from the virgins is Mary bint 'Imrân; and we mentioned it at the end of the chapter of at-Taḥrîm [ch. 66]. So Allah is more knowledgeable.

at-Ṭabarānî said,

‘Abdullah bin Nâjiyyah narrated to us: Muḥammad bin Sa'd al-'Awfî narrated to us: Ubay narrated to us: my uncle al-Ḥusain informed us: Yûnûs bin Nafi' narrated to us from Sa'd bin Junâdah—he is al-'Awfî—who said, ‘Allah’s messenger r said, «Surely Allah will marry me to Mary bint 'Imrân, the wife of Pharaoh, as well as the sister of Moses in Paradise.»’

It was narrated by Abû Ja'far al-'Uqailî from the ḥadîth of 'Abdun-Nûr with it, and he ['Abdun-Nûr] added, “So I said, ‘[Be it] a pleasure for you, O Allah’s messenger!’” Then al-'Uqailî said, “It is not preserved.” [Emphasis mine; take note that al-'Uqailî’s statement, “it is not preserved,” is an indication of the ḥadîth’s weakness].

Ibn Kathîr then cites three narrations in which the Prophet r entered upon his dying wife Khadijah Z and mentioned to her that Allah will marry him in Paradise to Mary bint 'Imrân, Āsiyah bint Muzâḥim, and Kulthum the sister of Moses. He then comments,

The basis of the peace from Allah upon Khadijah and her glad tidings with house of pearls in Paradise that contains no noise or hardship is in the Ṣaḥîh. However, this context with these additions is very strange. Each of these ḥadîths, their chains [of transmission] contain a problem. [Emphasis mine].

Let us now take a look at what Ibn Kathîr said in his exegesis of the above mentioned verse (66:5) in his Tafsîr al-Qur’ân al-'Adhîm. Ibn Kathîr mentions,

In his al-Mu'jam al-Kabîr, Abul-Qâsim at-Ṭabarânî said,

¹ I.e., the wife of Pharoah.

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Abū Bakr bin Sadaqah narrated to us: Muḥammad bin Muḥammad bin Marzūq narrated to us: 'Abdullah bin Umayyah narrated to us: 'Abdul-Quddūs narrated to us from Sāliḥ bin Ḥayyān, from Ibn Buraidah, from his father: [concerning] (widows and virgins) (66:5), he said, ‘In this verse, Allah promised His prophet that He would marry him to the widow: Āsiyah, wife of Pharaoh, and with the virgins: Mary bint 'Imrān.’

In his biography of Mary, peace be upon her, Ḥāfiḍh Ibn 'Asākir mentioned from the route of Suwaid bin Sa'id: Muḥammad bin Ṣāliḥ bin 'Umar narrated to us from aḍ-Ḍaḥḥāk and Mujāhid, from Ibn 'Umar, he said,

Gabriel came to Allah’s messenger at the death of Khadījah and said, ‘Surely, Allah greets her with peace and gives glad tidings of a house of pearls in Paradise, distant from the fire, containing no hardship, nor noise, of hollow pearls between Mary bint 'Imrān’s house and Āsiyah bint Muzāḥim’s house.’

And from the ḥadīth of Abī Bakr al-Hudhalî, from 'Ikrimah, from Ibn 'Abbās that the Prophet entered upon Khadījah while she was dying and said, «O Khadījah, if you meet your co-wives, then greet them with peace from me.» She said, “O Allah’s messenger, have you married me before me?” He said, «No, but Allah will marry me to Mary bint 'Imrān, Āsiyah wife of Pharaoh, and Kulfthum sister of Moses.» [It is] weak also.

Abū Ya'la said,

Ibrāhīm bin 'Ar'arah narrated to us: 'Abdun-Nūr bin 'Abdillah narrated to us: Yūnus bin Shu'āib narrated to us from Abī Umāmah, he said, “Allah’s messenger said, «I have learned that Allah married me in Paradise to Mary bint 'Imrān, Kulfthum sister of Moses, and Āsiyah wife of Pharaoh.» So I said: [be it] a pleasure for you, O Allah’s messenger!”

What is mentioned from Ibn 'Asākir in this quote is contained in one of the three narrations alluded to previously for which Ibn Kathīr said, “Each of these ḥadīths, their chains [of transmission] contain a problem.” The last narration was also quoted earlier and as was mentioned, al-'Uqailī viewed it as being weak; in Silsilah al-Abādīth aḍ-Ḍa'īfah (2/220/no.812), Shaikh al-Albānī elaborates further mentioning the criticisms of two narrators in its chain: Yūnus bin Shu'āib, who Imam al-Bukhārī declared was rejected in Ḥadīth and 'Abdun-Nūr bin 'Abdillah bin Sinān, who Imam adh-Dhahabī declared was a liar and accused of fabricating Ḥadīth.

With the narrations regarding the marriage of Mary to Prophet Muhammad in Paradise weak, the question is: where did this story originate? Enter Eulogius of Cordova, a Spanish Christian writer and (so-called) martyr who lived during the 800s in Muslim-ruled Andalusia (he was beheaded around 859CE). In his book, Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination (p. 93), John V. Tolan writes,
Eulogius deforms Muhammad’s biography to fit the standard biographies of Antichrist. He is certainly not ignorant of what Muslims say about their prophet; he simply chooses to present the elements of Muhammad’s life that fit the images of Antichrist. One of the favorite topics of Christian polemicists is sex: Muhammad’s wives, Muslim polygamy, and the celestial hours promised to the faithful [sounds quite a bit like this writer, no?] All this is foreign to the ideal of Christian celibacy and to Christian ideas of heaven, but it fits well with the doctrines traditionally attributed to Antichrist. Eulogius has more trouble explaining the Koran’s affirmation of the virginity of Jesus’ mother. Here, again, his solution is a gross deformation: “I will not repeat the sacrilege which that impure dog [Muhammad] dared proffer about the Blessed Virgin, Queen of the World, holy mother of our venerable Lord and Savior. He claimed … that in the next world he would deflower her.” [Eulogius, Memoriale sanctorum, 1:7 in Corpus Scriptorum Muzarabícorum. 376] This outrageous claim, it seems, is Eulogius’s invention; I know of no other Christian polemicist who makes this accusation against Muhammad. Eulogius fabricates lies designed to shock his Christian reader. This way, even those elements of Islam that resemble Christianity (such as reverence of Jesus and his virgin mother) are deformed and blackened, so as to prevent the Christian from admiring anything about the Muslim other.

The goal is to inspire hatred for the “oppressors,” and (as wartime propagandists have long known) there is little better way to do so than to accuse the enemy of murder and rape. If most Cordovans seem ready to tolerate Islam with a sort of ecumenical open-mindedness, Eulogius sets out to show that the Muslim is not a friend but a potential rapist of Christ’s virgins.

Here we have a more than likely origin for such a story. As it is known that some of the early narrators of Ḥadīth would also narrate Israelite traditions (Isrāʾīliyyāt; narrations originating from the People of the Book), as well as the fact at least one of the narrators of this hadīth was accused of fabricating ḥadīths, it is not entirely strange that this story could have (and probably did) originate from Eulogius (or other Christian polemicists in Andalusia during the third century of Islam). Add the fact that those who recorded the hadīth (al-Uqailī, ʿat-Ṭabarānī, Abū Yaʿlā, and Ibn ʿAsākir) were either young children or not even born yet by the time Eulogius was beheaded and the likelihood only increases.

This book by John Tolan is quite the read; it shows the lengths to which Christian polemicists and anti-Muslim writers of the past went in twisting facts, distorting truths, providing misinformation, or simply fabricating blatant lies in order to defend their religion and attack Islam; lengths we see the Christian polemicists and anti-Muslim writers of today (like this writer and his cronies) going to as well. What Tolan mentions above perfectly illustrates the high probability that many of the weak narrations found in early Islamic texts concerning the Biblical Prophets and other Biblical notables—which many Christian missionaries and polemicists use to attack Islam—were concocted and fabricated by Christians themselves.

And the last of our claim is that the praise is for Allah, Lord of the worlds; and may Allah send His salutations, prayers, and blessings upon our beloved Prophet Muhammad, upon his
family, his companions, and those who follow them upon charitable conduct until the establishment of the Final Hour.

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