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From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam;  
((The Origin of the Palm tree Story concerning Mary and Jesus  
in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Qur'ān\*)

The palm tree story concerning an episode in the lives of Mary and Jesus is related in the Qur'ān and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.<sup>1</sup> The similarity between the two versions has been already noted in modern scholarship,<sup>2</sup> although each text places the story in a different setting – the Qur'ān associates it with Mary's labor, whereas Pseudo-Matthew relates it to Jesus' childhood. It is very problematic to identify which of the two religious texts is the source for the other, especially since the story does not appear anywhere else in ancient literature.

My research into the issue has led me to identify the source for both texts: the Greek myth of Leto's labor and the birth of Apollo. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to present the evidence for my hypothesis, to explain why the myth was transferred to Mary and Jesus, and to suggest why the Qur'ān and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew differ in associating it with different episodes of their lives.

The Qur'ān relates Mary's conception and delivery in chapter 19 (*Sūrat Maryam*), verses 2-33. The palm tree episode represents verses 22-26 and is supposedly the only part of the conception and delivery story that has no known Christian origin. The Qur'ān was composed in the first half of the

\* This paper was first read at the Greco-Roman Lunch Colloquium, Yale University, on 29 March 1999. I would like to extend my appreciation for the helpful remarks and comments that I received from the attending members. I would also like to thank John T. Fitzgerald for reading a draft of this paper and providing me with his valuable remarks. Certainly, all shortcomings are my sole responsibility.

1 Following modern scholarship, I will consistently refer to this apocryphal text as the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, a title first given to it by Constantin Tischendorf in 1853.

2 See, for example, Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 77; Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*, English translation edited by R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, and Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 1.456; and Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity: The Representation of Jesus in the Qur'ān and the Classical Muslim Commentaries* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 19.



seventh century CE,<sup>3</sup> supposedly taking its final textual form during the reign of the third Muslim caliph 'Uthmān (r. 644-656). The beginning of chapter 19 follows closely that of the Gospel of Luke as shown below:<sup>4</sup>

Gospel of Luke	Qur'ān
Annunciation of John (1.5-25)	Annunciation of John (19.2-15)
Annunciation of Jesus (1.26-38)	Annunciation of Jesus (19.16-21)
Hiding of Mary (1.39-56)	Hiding of Mary (19.22)
	Palm-tree story (19.23-26)
Presentation at the Temple (2.21-24)	Questioning at the Temple (19.27-33)

The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, on the other hand, was composed sometime between the middle of the sixth century – the date of Pope Gelasius' decree to ban the Protevangelium of James – and the end of the eighth century – the earliest manuscript evidence.<sup>5</sup> Jan Gijzel suggests the first quarter of the seventh century as the most probable date.<sup>6</sup> It is generally believed that Pseudo-Matthew was composed in order to recirculate, with some modification, the text of the Protevangelium of James,<sup>7</sup> which was composed in Greek in the Christian Near East in about the second half of the second century.<sup>8</sup> The latter was perceived to include material offensive to Mary, which explains why it was banned by Pope Gelasius.<sup>9</sup>

In 1853, Tischendorf produced what most scholars consider to be the full

3 The most recent and elaborate discussion of the date of the Qur'ān is in Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), 35-63.

4 I have discussed the similarity between and possible borrowing from Luke to Qur'ān 19 (Sūrat Maryam), and from the Protevangelium of James to Qur'ān 3 (Sūrat Āl 'Imrān), in my article "On the Qur'anic Stories about Mary and Jesus," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 1.2 (1999), 13-24.

5 For a comprehensive discussion of the date of Pseudo-Matthew, see Jan Gijzel, *Pseudo-matthaei evangelium textus et commentarius*, in *Libri de nativitate mariae* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 59-67. See also Schneemelcher, 1.458; and J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 86.

6 Gijzel, 67.

7 Schneemelcher, 1.457-458.

8 Schneemelcher, 1.423-425 and 457-458; Hock, 9-13; and Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press Ltd., and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 308-311.

9 Elliott, 50-51. Despite this charge, the Protevangelium of James had a tremendous effect on the development of Mariology in the Christian world: see Schneemelcher, 1.425; and Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 27-28.



text of Pseudo-Matthew.<sup>10</sup> The palm tree story appears in chapter 20 and belongs to that part of Pseudo-Matthew which did not originate in the Protevangelium of James.<sup>11</sup> The story is placed in the context of the flight of the holy family to Egypt following the events described in the Gospel of Matthew as the Massacre of the Innocents (2.13-18).

The palm tree story in Qur'an 19.22-26 reads:

She (Mary) conceived him (Jesus) and retired to a remote place. Labour pain brought her to the trunk of the palm tree. She said, "I wish I had died before this and was forgotten." Then he (Jesus) called from beneath her, "Do not grieve. God has caused underneath you a stream. Shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe dates. Eat and drink and be satisfied."

In Pseudo-Matthew 20.1-2, it is reported as follows:

And it came to pass on the third day of their journey, while they were walking, that Mary was fatigued by the excessive heat of the sun in the desert; and, seeing a palm-tree she said to Joseph, 'I should like to rest a little in the shade of this tree.' Joseph therefore led her quickly to the palm and made her dismount from her beast. And as Mary was sitting there, she looked up to the foliage of the palm and saw it full of fruit and said to Joseph, 'I wish it were possible to get some of the fruit of this palm.' And Joseph said to her, 'I am surprised that you say so, for you see how high the palm-tree is, and that you think of eating its fruit. I am thinking more of the want of water because the skins are now empty, and we have nothing with which to refresh ourselves and our cattle.' Then the child Jesus, reposing with a joyful countenance in the lap of his mother, said to the palm, 'O tree, bend your branches and refresh my mother with your fruit.' And immediately at these words the palm bent its top down to the very feet of Mary; and they gathered from it fruit with which they all refreshed themselves. And after they had gathered all its fruit it remained bent down, waiting the order to rise from him who had commanded it to bend down. Then Jesus said to it, 'Raise yourself, O palm, and be strong and be the companion of my trees which are in the paradise of my Father; and open from your roots a vein of water which is hidden in the earth and let the waters flow, so that we may quench our thirst.' And it rose up immediately, and at its root there began to gush out a spring of water exceedingly clear and cool and sparkling. And when they saw the spring of water, they rejoiced greatly and were all satisfied, including their cattle and their beasts and they gave thanks to God.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously the story as it appears in the Qur'an is shorter than the one of Pseudo-Matthew, reflecting a stylistic system common in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the story takes place while Mary is in labor with Jesus, and the setting is identified only as a remote place. In Pseudo-Matthew, Jesus is already born, and the incident occurs during the flight to Egypt. It is very likely, then, that

10 Tischendorf's judgement that chapters 25-42 belong to the original text of Pseudo-Matthew is now shown to be erroneous: see Gijzel, 39-40. These chapters (25-42) rely heavily on the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

11 Only chapters 1-17 derive from the Protevangelium of James: see Elliott, 85. For a more detailed comparison between both texts, see Gijzel, 50-59.

12 Elliott, 95-96; also Schneemelcher, 1.463.



one is dealing here with two stories stemming from the same origin: one story places the palm tree incident in the context of Mary's labor, and the other puts it in the context of the flight to Egypt. Common to both is the miracle which causes the palm tree to provide fruit and the appearance of water from its roots.

One might expect the tale told in Qur'ān 19.22-26 to pre-date the version in Pseudo-Matthew 20.1-2. The need to circulate the birth story of Jesus reflects a time when the gospels' assertion that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 1.18-25 and Luke 2.1-7) was not yet accepted, or simply not widely known, as authoritative. Once it indisputably became the canonical birth story, it seems that the alternative birth story had either to be dropped or simply reworked to fit another aspect of the life of Mary and Jesus: namely Jesus' childhood. After all, the canonical Gospels provide very little information about his early years.

The association of the palm tree with divine persons is not unique to Mary and Jesus. In Greek mythology, one finds the palm tree associated with the worship of Apollo:<sup>13</sup> in particular, the holy palm tree found by the temple of Apollo on the island of Delos. The veneration for that palm tree derives from the legend describing Leto sitting by its trunk while in labor for Apollo.<sup>14</sup> Leto was desperate and trying to hide herself from the angry Hera. She sought the remote and rocky island of Delos, where she sat, aggrieved and distressed, by a palm tree alongside the Inopus River and delivered Apollo. There are several presentations of that myth in Greek lore, the three that follow represent important stages in its development:

And as soon as Eilithyia the goddess of sore travail set foot on Delos, the pains of birth seized Leto, and she longed to bring forth; so she cast her arms about a palm tree and kneeled on the soft meadow while the earth laughed for joy beneath. Then the child leaped forth to the light, and all the goddesses raised a cry.<sup>15</sup>

13 Beside many references in the literary heritage, the association of the palm with the worship of Apollo is also attested in several examples from Greek art from all over the Hellenistic world, especially the relief from Syria dated to the end of the second century CE: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Zurich and Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1981-1997), 2.2.221 (no. 478) explanation 2.1.244. For other examples, see *Lexicon Iconographicum* 2.2.190 (no. 83), 211 (no. 343), 221 (no. 478), 234 (no. 639), 238 (no. 673b), 239 (no. 687), 245 (no. 734), 246 (no. 746), 250 (no. 768), 263 (no. 890) explanation 2.1.200, 227, 244, 263, 267, 268, 275, 276, 279, 293 respectively.

14 It is generally believed that Leto delivered the twins Apollo and Artemis, however, this point is not always made in the different versions of Apollo's birth. For simplicity's sake, I shall not mention Artemis.

15 *Homeric Hymns (Hymn to Delian Apollo)*, 3.115-119, possibly by Kynaithos (fl. eighth century BCE).



Lord Phoebus, when the lady Leto gave you birth, gripping the palm-tree with her slender arms, you loveliest of the immortals, by the circle lake, fair Delos was pervaded end to end by an ambrosial fragrance, and the vast earth smiled, and the deep salty white-flecked main rejoiced.<sup>16</sup>

So didst thou speak, and gladly ceased from her (Leto's) grievous wandering and sat by the stream of Inopus, which the earth sends forth in deepest flood at the season when the Nile comes down in full torrent from the Aethiopian steep. And she loosed her girdle and leaned back her shoulders against the trunk of a palm tree, oppressed by grievous distress, and the sweat poured over her flesh like rain. And she spake in her weakness: "Why, child, dost thou weigh down thy mother? There, dear child, is thine island floating on the sea. Be born, be born, my child, and gently issue from the womb."<sup>17</sup>

The first of these stages – the Homeric Hymns (eighth century BCE) – is the most elementary one. Leto comes to Delos and sits by the trunk of the palm tree where she delivers Apollo. The second stage – represented by the anonymous Theognidea (a collection of elegiac poetry dating to the sixth and early fifth centuries BCE)<sup>18</sup> – is slightly more sophisticated. The theme of water – the circle lake – is introduced into the story as further elaboration on the birth site. The third stage – Callimachus (d. ca. 240 BCE) – is even more complex. The theme of water is much elaborated on: now it is the river Inopus that flows seasonally with the flooding of the Nile.<sup>19</sup>

Apollo's birth by the trunk of a palm tree on the island of Delos was widely known in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. For many, the simple allusion to it was enough, as in Homer's *Odyssey*,<sup>20</sup> Euripides' *Hecuba*,<sup>21</sup> Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*,<sup>22</sup> Cicero's *Laws*,<sup>23</sup> and Pliny's *Natural History*.<sup>24</sup> Moreover,

16 M. L. West, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 125 (vs. 5-10); see also *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days; Theognis: Elegies*, trans. by Dorothea Wender (Penguin Books, 1982), 97 (5-10); and *Theognis, Poèmes Élégiques*, ed. and trans. by Jean Carrière (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1948), 1.5-10.

17 Callimachus, *Hymn to Delos* in *Hymns and Epigrams, Lycophron, Aratus* (Loeb Classical Library), 205-214.

18 West, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, xv. Most of the Theognidea, in particular the part on Apollo's birth, is not by Theognis. Also on Theognis and the Theognidae see Thomas J. Figueira and Gregory Nagy (eds.), *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

19 It is possible that Callimachus had borrowed this theme from Pausanias (d. ca. 470-465 BCE), who mentioned that he had heard the Delians saying that the "Inopus comes to them from the Nile": Pausanias, *Description of Greece* (Loeb Classical Library), 2 (Corinth).5.3.

20 Homer (fl. ninth or eighth century BCE), *Odyssey* (Loeb Classical Library), 6.163-164.

21 Euripides (d. 406 BCE), *Hecuba* (Loeb Classical Library), 455-461.

22 Thucydides (d. after 404 BCE), *Peloponnesian War* (Loeb Classical Library), 3.104.

23 Cicero (d. 43 BCE), *Laws* (Loeb Classical Library), 1.1.

24 Pliny (d. 79 CE), *Natural History* (Loeb Classical Library), 16.89.



the story is also depicted on several Hellenistic vases and on other artwork dating as early as the sixth century BCE.<sup>25</sup>

These were not the only versions of Apollo's birth story that were known to the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. And the above three stages do not depict the only stages in the development of that story. Some variations speak of Delos as a floating island until Leto came to it to deliver Apollo.<sup>26</sup> Others replace the palm tree with the olive tree.<sup>27</sup> Tacitus (d. 120 CE) not only replaces the palm with the olive but also moves the setting from Delos to Ephesus.<sup>28</sup> A third version introduces the olive tree into the story, without eliminating the palm. Aelian (d. ca. 235 CE), for instance, speaks of a Delian tradition that Leto delivered Apollo between an olive tree and a palm tree:

Note the Delian tradition that the trees which flourish on Delos are the olive and the palm. When Leto took hold of them she immediately gave birth, which she had not been able to do before.<sup>29</sup>

This theme of two trees between which Leto delivered Apollo seems to go back further than the time of Aelian. It was already depicted in Greek art by 440-430 BCE.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Plutarch (d. after 119 CE) reports that Delos is a mountain, not an island, and that the olive and the palm are two springs, not trees:

A little below the marshes stands the temple of Apollo Tegyraeus. Here according to the story, the god was born; and the neighbouring mountain is called Delos, and at its base the river Melas ceases to be spread out, and behind the temple two springs burst forth with a wonderful flow of sweet, copious, and cool water. One of these we call Palm, the other Olive, to the present day, for it was not between two trees, but between two fountains, that the goddess Leto was delivered of her children.<sup>31</sup>

The replacement of the palm tree with the olive tree, or their mention together,

25 *Lexicon Iconographicum*, 6.2.130 (no. 10), explanation 6.1.258 (no. 10); also the example from the fourth century BCE in 6.2.130 (no. 6), explanation 6.1.258 (no. 6).

26 Pindar (d. ca. 438 BCE) *On Delos* (Loeb Classical Library), 563; Virgil (d. 19 BCE), *Aeneid* (Loeb Classical Library), 3.73-79; Strabo (d. after 23 CE), *Geography* (Loeb Classical Library), 10.5.2; Seneca (d. 65 CE), *Tragedies* (Loeb Classical Library), 15 and 453; and idem, *Agamemnon* (Loeb Classical Library), 384. See also on the theme of a floating island, Propertius (d. after 16 BCE), *Elegies* (Loeb Classical Library), 4.6.27; and Hyginus (fl. first century CE), *Fables*, ed. and trans. by Jean-Yves Boriaud (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997), 53 and 140.

27 Callimachus, *Iambi*, 4.83-84 and 8.62; and idem, *Hymn to Delos*, 4.262 and 321-323. See also Hyginus, 53 and 140.

28 Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. M. Grant (Penguin Books, 1989), 148.

29 Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* (Loeb Classical Library), 5.4.

30 *Lexicon Iconographicum*, 3.1.368-369.

31 Plutarch, *Lives* (Loeb Classical Library), Pelopidas: 16.3-4.



clearly reflects perceptions of the olive as equally precious to, or holier than, the palm.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, Herodotus (d. ca. 430-420 BCE) records the most important variation of Apollo's birth story to be encountered in classical texts. He reports an Egyptian belief that Apollo (Horus) was taken by Leto, his nurse, to the island of Chemmis to be hidden there from the angry Typhon. Herodotus states:

Thus then the shrine [of Leto at Buto] is the most marvellous of all things that I saw in this temple [of Apollo and Artemis]; but of things of lesser note, the most wondrous is the island called Chemmis. This lies in a deep and wide lake near to the temple at Buto, and the Egyptians say that it floats. For myself I never saw it float, nor move at all, and I thought it a marvellous tale, that an island should truly float. However that be, there is a great shrine of Apollo thereon, and three altars stand there; many palm trees grow in the island, and other trees too, some yielding fruit and some not. The story told by the Egyptians to show why the island moves is this: when Typhon came seeking through the world for the son of Osiris, Leto, being one of the eight earliest gods, and dwelling in Buto where this oracle of hers is, received Apollo in charge from Isis and hid him for safety in this island which was before immovable but is now said to float. Apollo and Artemis were (they say) children of Dionysus and Isis, and Leto was made their nurse and preserver; in Egyptian, Apollo is Horus, Demeter Isis, Artemis Bubastis. It was from this and no other legend that Aeschylus son of Euphorion stole an imagination, which is in no other poet, that Artemis was the daughter of Demeter. For the aforesaid reason (say the Egyptians) the island was made to float. Such is the tale.<sup>33</sup>

The story told by Herodotus is definitely an Egyptian variation of Apollo's birth story. Leto is identified as a goddess and Apollo's nurse, not his mother, and Apollo was not delivered on the island of Chemmis but simply taken there to be hidden from the angry Typhon. But everything else seems to match with the Greek story. Typhon was chasing the son of Osiris, and Hera the son of Zeus. Chemmis and Delos were floating islands at some point. Both places – and both tales – were associated with the palm tree.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Chemmis is in the Nile, whereas the Inopus River in Delos comes from the Nile.<sup>35</sup>

Herodotus would have been a more helpful source had he contrasted the Egyptian myth with the Greek one. It is clear that he had been to Delos before his trip to Egypt.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, it is very likely that he knew Apollo's birth story. The details provided in his Egyptian version of the tale – especially

32 According to Greek lore, the olive tree was associated with Athena, who, as patroness of Athens, gave that tree to the Athenians.

33 Herodotus, *History* (Loeb Classical Library), 2.155-156.

34 Pausanias, 9 (Boeotia).19.8.

35 Pausanias, 2 (Corinth).5.3.

36 See W.W. How and H. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.251 (section 170.2).



the point that Horus (Apollo) is the brother of Bubastis (Artemis), which is not an Egyptian belief – reflect his awareness of either the Delos version or a local Greek version which he heard in Egypt.<sup>37</sup> In any case, there seems to be no grounds to argue for an Egyptian origin to the Greek myth of Apollo's birth on Delos.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, the story in Herodotus, as well as the various Greek and Latin variations of the original myth of the birth of Apollo, all reflect the borrowing and adaptation of a given myth by groups who reshaped it for their own objectives and needs.<sup>39</sup> Appropriations of ancient myths were common in the ancient world.

In this connection, the birth story of Buddha shares similar themes with that of Apollo. According to Buddhist belief, Mahāmāyā delivered the Budhisatta beneath a sāl tree as described in the following quote from the *Nidānakathā*:

Queen Mahāmāyā bearing the Bodhisatta for ten months ... desired to go to her relatives' house. ... Between the two cities ... is a pleasure grove of sāl-trees named the Lumbinī grove. ... When the queen saw it, a desire to sport in the grove arose. ... She went to the foot of a great sāl-tree, and desired to seize a branch. The branch like the tip of a supple reed bent down and came within reach of her hand. Stretching out her hand she seized the branch. Thereupon she was shaken with the throes of birth. So the multitude set up a curtain for her and retired. Holding the branch and even while standing she was delivered.<sup>40</sup>

Buddha was also born by a tree – in his case, a sāl tree, more holy in India than the palm. Mahāmāyā longs to hold a nice branch of it and, as she expresses her wish, the branch bends down. As soon as she touches its leaves, she delivers Buddha. This miracle of the tree bowing down is encountered in the palm tree story in Pseudo-Matthew. May one argue, therefore, that the Christian account was somehow influenced by the Buddhist rather than the Greco-Roman myth? This possibility would require further research beyond the scope of the present paper, but the possibility cannot be totally dismissed.<sup>41</sup>

In any case, the palm tree story in Qur'ān 19.22-24 is an obvious reworking of Leto's labor in the Greek tradition. It is about a distressed pregnant woman (Leto/Mary) who seeks an isolated place (Delos/a remote spot), sits by the

37 See How and Wells, 1.245 (section 156.5).

38 See J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1960), 95.

39 Even if one argues that the Egyptian story is actually the original version from which the Greek story was derived – a possibility that lacks any support – the issue does not change. In both cases, it is an appropriation of a foreign story that is reworked for relevant ends.

40 Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., and New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 32-33.

41 For a discussion of a possible influence of Buddhism on Christianity, see Thomas, 237-248.



*trunk* (Greek: *πρεμνον*, Arabic: *jiz'*) of a palm tree next to a river (Inopus/stream), and delivers a holy child (Apollo/Jesus).

Nevertheless, one cannot expect Apollo's birth story to have been the direct source for Qur'ān 19.22-26. As mentioned above, the concise version found in the latter has two parts: Mary's labor and delivery, and the miracle. One might therefore expect that there was a stage when Apollo's birth story was borrowed by Christians and applied to the birth of Jesus. This would reflect an attempt by a Christian group – probably converts who had previously worshipped Apollo – to modify Apollo's birth story by replacing Leto and Apollo with Mary and Jesus. After that, the appropriated story was appended with a miracle typical of Jesus: the palm tree is made to bend down and provide fruit, and water is made to spring from its roots. The theme of water might have been elaborated from the Greek original, since it tells of Leto sitting by the trunk of a palm tree next to the Inopus River. According to the myth, the Inopus ran seasonally, only gushing forth at the time of the Nile flood. So the water miracle might have been inspired by the reference to Inopus River, and reflected the close association that early Christians made between Jesus and miracles.

As for the other part of the miracle encountered in Pseudo-Matthew and to which the Qur'ān alludes – namely, the palm tree providing its fruit – it may have been inspired by Buddha's birth story, especially the bending down of the branch. The palm tree story in Pseudo-Matthew seems to be an obvious later reworking of the version that found its way, in concise form, into the text of the Qur'ān. It preserves the second element, namely the palm tree miracle, but deletes the association of the birth-place of Jesus with the palm tree.

The canonical gospels are almost silent about the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. All that is known comes from Luke 2.1-20, which mentions nothing about Mary's labor other than the following:

While they were there [in Bethlehem], the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.<sup>42</sup>

It is not unlikely, then, that some early Christians, ignorant of the Gospel of Luke or unconvinced by it, circulated a story that was meant to describe the circumstances of Mary's labor and delivery. Indeed, early Christian communities may well have done this. The Gnostics are perceived to have developed an interest in infancy stories about Jesus.<sup>43</sup> A possible group might be the Christian

42 Gospel of Luke 2.6-7.

43 Schneemelcher, 1.418 and 453-454.



community of Najrān, in West Arabia, who used to worship a palm tree before converting to Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Changing the Leto/Apollo palm tree story to fit Mary/Jesus would have permitted them to keep part of their belief, yet give it a Christian tone.

But the circulation of an account of Mary's labor and Jesus' birth could only have posed a challenge to the Christian groups that had already expanded the birth story in Luke, such as the ones responsible for the version found in the Protevangelium of James, especially chapters 17-20. For them, no other story could be acceptable. Under such circumstances, it would have been necessary to rework the palm tree miracle in such a way as to fit Jesus' childhood, as is done in Pseudo-Matthew, instead of his birth, as related in the Qur'ān. The new setting for the reworked account is Joseph taking Mary, who already had delivered Jesus, to Egypt to escape the Massacre of the Innocents.

### Conclusion

The tale of Leto's labor and the birth of Apollo on Delos was widely known in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. It is evident from the familiarity of most Greek and Roman historians with that myth that it had become a part of popular lore in both cultures. There is no doubt that the variations represent the interests of groups who reworked an original story, or versions of it, to comply with their own beliefs and expectations. Clear examples of this may be found in the Egyptian adaptation recorded by Herodotus, where Apollo is identified with Horus and Delos with Chemmis, and the versions that replace the palm tree with the olive tree as found in Callimachus.

The motives of the Christians who appropriated Apollo's birth story to Jesus were not any different. First, it was adapted to Jesus' birth – hence the Qur'ānic version. But because it was perceived to contradict the canonical birth story, reference to the actual birth had to be dropped – hence, the Pseudo-Matthew version.

It is plausible to assume that the Christian group(s) who developed the version recorded in the Qur'ān were heretical. It is equally possible that they

44 For the earliest account on the practice of worshipping a palm tree by the people of Najrān before their conversion to Christianity, see Ibn Ishāq (d. 767 CE), *al-Sira al-nabawiya* (The Biography of the Prophet), ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Khayr, 1990), 1, 29. The same account is repeated in Ṭabarī (d. 922 CE), *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901), 1, 922; and idem, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Vol. 5: trans. by C. E. Bosworth (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 198-199.



may have been mainstream Christians. The Qur'ānic account of the palm tree provides no clear clue about their beliefs, though the accompanying verses (19.2-21), which originated from the Gospel of Luke, point to a mainstream Christianity.

One cannot dismiss altogether the possibility that the version in Pseudo-Matthew was a different, unrelated appropriation of Apollo's birth story unconnected to the one found in the Qur'ān. Yet the assumption that both must have depended upon a common source is more congruent with the evidence in hand, especially due to the major similarity between them – the palm tree miracle – which is not present in any of the known versions of Apollo's myth. Indeed, it seems unlikely that the two versions are unrelated. On the other hand, one cannot point to a precise textual source for the Qur'ānic and Pseudo-Matthew versions of the tale; most probably it stems, like the many other adaptations from the Greco-Roman heritage, from popular lore. But once the Leto/Apollo myth, and probably the Mahāmāyā/Buddha story, were appropriated to Mary/Jesus, irrespective of the Christian group(s) involved, the new myths became part of the Christian heritage. What followed was a simple reworking to harmonize the appropriated accounts with Christian perceptions. In the case of Pseudo-Matthew, the tale had to conform with the canonical birth story. The version recorded in the Qur'ān was not subjected to the same process simply because the redactors of the Qur'ān were not primarily concerned with the compatibility of the story with Christian canonical texts.