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A SUFI COMMENTARY ON THE QUR'ĀN

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19

MARY
SŪRAT MARYAM



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

[19:1] *Kāf. Hā. Yā. Ayn. Šād.*

[19:2] [*A mention of your Lord's mercy to His servant Zachariah, [19:3] when he called out to his Lord a call in secret:*] it has been stated before that the one who calls upon his Lord only deserves a response if he calls upon Him with the voice of his true condition, and if he calls to Him with that Name of His which is the source of his desire (*maṣḍar maṭlūbihi*). This depends on the petitioner's preparedness (*istiḍād*) for this, whether he is aware of it or not, since the divine grace and emanation only come according to one's preparedness, and that preparedness pertains only to the implications of that Name. God then answers by manifesting that Name, healing the petitioner's blemishes and fulfilling his needs by granting his desire. Thus, when the sick man cries 'O Lord,' he really means 'O Healer,' since it will be through that Name that the Lord heals him. Likewise, when the poor man calls upon Him, He answers him with His Name the Rich, for He is his Lord. Zachariah (may God grant him peace) called upon his Lord pleading that He grant him an heir to inherit his religious station; and he invoked two matters—two extenuating circumstances—to support his plea. The first was his weakness and old age, which made him unable to continue his religious duties.

[19:4] [*He said, 'My Lord!' Indeed, the bones within me have become feeble, and my head is alight with grey hair:* He responded to him with His Name the All-Sufficient, compensating him for his weakness and giving him strength, and aiding him with a son. He then invoked the nurture which God had shown him in the past: *and I have never been in my supplications to You, my Lord, unsuccessful:* He answered this with His Name the Guide, and guided him to his desire with glad tidings and a sure promise. The

felicitous nurture born of success to which Zachariah alluded with these words was a reference to God's pre-eternal knowledge of a then-inexistent entity whose engendering would bring felicity: that is, His will of perfection for that thing upon its eventual arrival into existence. Thus, it was necessary that it be guided to him; and guidance requires grace, which means the arrangement of the means required for the desired thing to reach its target. Yet Zachariah did not observe those means to be in place, and so expressed his fear that his kinsfolk were not up to the task:

[19:5] [*And truly I fear my kinsfolk after me:*] God answered this with His Name the Protector, and protected him from their potential harms. Zachariah then invoked the apparent impossibility of an heir due to the absence of the necessary means: *and my wife is barren.*' God answered this with His Name the Knower, for He knew well of the absence of worldly causes that Zachariah invoked to the Causer Himself, and He knew well that this thing would come to pass even without them; and what He knows must surely come to pass, as the angels said to the wife of Abraham (may God grant him peace): *So has your Lord said. Indeed, He is the Wise, the Knower* [Q. 51:30]. Then, when He gave him tidings of the child and guided him to the object of His knowledge, he was incredulous at this because of his attachment to the material world of causality, and repeated his argument about the absence of the required means:

[19:8] [*He said, 'My Lord,] how shall I have a son when my wife is barren and I have reached infirm old age?'*] This is because he was pleading for a true son to be his heir and follow in his footsteps along his path, upholding the affairs of the faith, even if that heir was not from his own loins because of the unsuitability of his kinsfolk for such a task. The Lord then repeated the tidings to him and guided him to the truth of how easy such a matter was to Him given His omnipotence. Zachariah requested a sign of this, and He guided him to one and kept His promise through His Name the Truthful. Then, in His mercy, He gifted him John; for those four conditions in the moment of that promise and glad tidings required a response of mercy through the sum of those five Names. *Kāf Hā Yā 'Ayn Šād* in that case [entail the following]: the *Kāf* represents the Divine Name *al-Kāfi* ('the All-Sufficient'), as was required by Zachariah's weakness, old age and infirmity; the *Hā* represents the Divine Name *al-Hādī* ('the Guide'), as was required by God's nurture of him and His will to grant his desire; the *Yā*

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represents the Divine Name *al-Wāqī*¹ ('the Protector'), as was required by Zachariah's fears about his kinsfolk; the *ʿAyn* represents the Divine Name *al-ʿĀlim* ('the Knower'), as was required by his declarations about the lack of apparent means; and the *Ṣād* represents the Divine Name *al-Ṣādiq* ('the Truthful'), as was required by the promise. The sum of those five names is the Merciful, Who gifted him the son and granted his desire in the midst of all these circumstances. The invocation of these letters, and their arrangement in this sequence, is an allusion to how the manifestation (*tajallī*) of these Attributes, and consequently the actualisation of these Names, was in essence the manifestation of His mercy to His servant Zachariah when he called upon Him. In turn, this mercy was in essence the existence of John (may God grant him peace). Therefore, Ibn ʿAbbās said (may God be pleased with him), '*Kāf* refers to *al-Kāfi*, *Hā* to *al-Hādī*, *Yā* to *al-Wāqī*, *ʿAyn* to *al-ʿĀlim*, and *Ṣād* to *al-Ṣādiq*.' And God knows best.

On the level of spiritual correspondence (*taṭbīq*), one can say that Zachariah called upon the spirit in the station of the preparedness of the primordial intellect, with a call in secret, and complained of his weakness, appealed to its nurture, and complained of his fear of the kinsfolk of egocentricity and how the wife of the soul was barren and bereft of the child of the heart. '*So grant me from Yourself a successor, who may inherit from me and inherit from the House of Jacob—the active intellect—and make him, my Lord, acceptable*': adorned with the required perfections. Then came the response: *Indeed, We give you good tidings of a boy—the heart—whose name is John* because he is ever-living.²

[19:10] *He said, 'Lord, appoint for me some sign'*: by means of which I might reach him. '*Your sign is that you shall not speak*' to the hosts of the senses by occupying yourself with sensory distractions and involving yourself in natural matters.

[19:11] *So he emerged before his people from the sanctuary and signalled to them, 'Make glorifications'*: that is, 'Be about your own personal worship, each one of you, and devote yourselves to it and forsake your curiosity.'

[19:12] '*O John—O heart—hold on to [the Book firmly]*': the book of knowledge called 'the discriminating intellect'. *And We gave him judgement—meaning wisdom—while still a child*: while still fresh from the spiritual birth. [19:13] *And compassion from Us*, meaning mercy with the

1 *Al-Wāqī* begins with the letter *wāw*, but the letters *wāw* and *yā* are often considered to be identical or interchangeable since they both represent the same root letter under different morphological circumstances.

2 The Arabic name for John, *Yahyā*, means 'he lives'.

perfection of the manifestations (*tajaliyyāt*) of the Divine Attributes, and *purity*, meaning sanctification and purity by isolation; and *he was God-fearing*: he avoided the attributes of the ego. [19:14] *And dutiful to his parents*: the spirit and the soul.

[19:15] *And peace be upon him*: he was purified and sanctified from the garb of materiality; *the day he was born, and the day he dies* by annihilation in Unity, *and the day he shall be raised* by subsistence after annihilation, *alive* in God.

[19:16] *And mention in the Book Mary when she withdrew from her family to an easterly place*: the easterly place was the realm of the holy, because of her connection to the Holy Spirit when she isolated herself and withdrew from the plain of nature and the locus of the ego; her family were the impulses of I-ness (*anā'iyya*) and nature.

[19:17] [*Thus, she veiled herself from them*:] the veil she adopted was the protecting wall of holiness that barred the way to the folk of the realm of ego—the veil of the heart, which is the limit of the reach of material knowledge and its farthest extent. The Holy Spirit could only be sent to her when she entered the realm of the holy by isolating herself, as He says, *We sent to her Our Spirit, [and he assumed before her the likeness of a well-proportioned human]*. The reason he took on this form was so that her soul would be influenced and feel at ease, and she would be stirred in the natural way, and this vision would rouse her natural appetite (*shahwa*) as happens in a passionate dream (*al-manām min al-ihtilām*), so that her drop of fluid (*nuqṭa*) would be awakened in the womb and from it the child would be formed.¹ As was noted earlier, revelation (*wahy*) is similar to true dreams in how the body's strength is frozen while receiving it, so that it is unable to act just as it is when asleep. When images appear during inspiration to the sapient soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*)—which in our convention is called 'the heart'—and it connects to the holy spirits, they flow through the animal (*ḥayawāniyya*) and natural (*tabī'iyya*) soul and cause the body to react.

¹ Whilst it is common for commentators to interpret Mary's encounter with the angel in the form of a *well-proportioned human* 'so that she would not be overcome with fear and recoil from him' (SQ, p. 768, paraphrasing Zamakhshari), Kāshānī's sensual-biological explanation has some precedent in conventional *tafsīr* literature. For example, Qurṭubī spoke of how Gabriel's blowing of the Spirit into Mary 'aroused her appetite' in order for the 'two waters' of child conception to mix in her. In recent times, this explanation has been rejected as being in opposition to the Sacred Law and intellectually deficient. See Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī et al., Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2006, vol. v, p. 142 (commentary of Q. 3:47, together with Turkī's footnote). [Ed.]

The only reason the child could be formed from a single drop of fluid was that, in natural science, it is established that the male fluid plays the role in the creation of the child that rennet does in the production of cheese, while the female fluid plays the role of the milk.¹ In other words, the male fluid has a greater propensity to cause coagulation, while the female's fluid has a greater propensity to be coagulated—it is not that the male fluid is entirely coagulating and the female fluid entirely coagulated, but that the male side is more active and the female side more receptive, because otherwise they could not be united into one thing.

The male fluid is not coagulated until it becomes a part of the child. What this means is that if the woman's constitution is particularly strong and masculine—as is the case with noble women with strong souls—and the constitution of her liver is hot, then the fluid that comes from her right kidney will be hotter than what comes from her left kidney. When they meet in the womb and the womb has a powerful grasp and attraction, the fluid from the right kidney will fulfil the role of the male fluid with respect to its coagulating propensity; and the fluid from the left kidney will fulfil the role of the female fluid with respect to its propensity to be coagulated, and the embryo will be formed. Now in the special circumstance that the soul of the woman in question is aided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, the influence of her connection to it will flow into her physical body and alter its constitution, linking all of its active power to this spiritual aid, so that it will become capable of doing extraordinary things for which no suitable analogy can be found. And God knows best.

[19:21] *And so that We may make him a sign for people: a sign of the Resurrection; and a mercy from Us to them in how he will perfect for them their Divine Laws, wisdoms and knowledge, and guide them; for this reason have We done it, and he will be the embodiment of the spirit of divine mercy. And it is a thing [already] decreed: in the Preserved Tablet, ordained from pre-eternity.* Ibn 'Abbās is related to have said, 'She became at ease when he said, *I am only a messenger of your Lord, that I may give you a boy [who shall be] pure* [Q. 19:19], and he approached her and blew into her sleeve'—that is, into her body. This is why she experienced her emission, as we described before, in the same way as lustful feelings or embraces can cause premature emissions. It has been said that the spirit which appeared to her was the spirit of Jesus himself (may God grant him peace), and that

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¹ The 'cheese analogy' of conception was a widespread belief discussed by Aristotle in *The Generation of Animals*. See Sandra Ott, 'Aristotle Among the Basques: The "Cheese Analogy" of Conception', *Man* (New Series), vol. xiv, no. 4, 1979, pp. 699–700.