

## **HOLY MARY'S BIRTHPLACE:**

Exhaustively and largely the sacred part of the Christianity religion, Virgin Mary is one of the most esteemed and respected women in Islam too. There is a **full Chapter in the holy Qur'an titled 'Al-Maryam'** which describes Allah's liking for holy Mary who fulfilled her covenant with God Whom she worshiped with full submission. She was pious, chaste, and devout; the woman chosen to be the mother of Jesus. Another **Chapter 3** titled as **'Aal-e Imran' in the Qur'an** specially describes about the noble history of Mary's father Imran – conveying a message to all human generations that how God loved this family.

The family of Imran are from the descendents of Nabi Abraham AS – in turn descendants of Noah and then of Adam. The family of Imran also includes many people known and respected in the Christian traditions – **Prophets Zachariah** [Zakarya in Arabic] AS and **John** [Yahya in Arabic] AS, also known as **the Baptist**, Prophet and holy Jesus's mother, Mary. In Arabic the name **Mary / Maryam** means the maidservant of God.

To see the birthplace of holy Mary, the travellers enter the Old City through the Herods Gate or Damascus Gate and walk through the cobbled streets and stone-steps towards the Haram Sharif. At one place they hit the Via Dolorosa. Here, instead of going into the Haram premises, they follow the Via Dolorosa towards the Lions Gate. Just short of the Gate, they'll see on their left an old building's door where on its face it is written as **'holy Mary's Birthplace' – St Anne's Church**. There one finds a separate entrance to holy Mary's birthplace at the main street though the premises are internally linked to the Church.

**St Anne's Church** is the best preserved Crusader-age church in the Old City of Jerusalem. It marks the traditional site of the home of Jesus' maternal grandparents, Anne and

Joachim, and the birthplace of the Virgin Mary. Located just 50m from the Haram Plaza, the church stands with a courtyard having large excavation area of the **Pools of Bethesda**, where Christ healed sick persons [Ref: **John 5:2-9**].

**The New Testament** says nothing about the birthplace of Mary. However, an ancient tradition, recorded in the legendary Gospel of James [dates from 150 AD] places the house of Her parents, Anne and Joachim, here around. A church built around 450 AD on this site and was dedicated to **'Mary - here She was born'**.

Thick walls give **St Anne's Church** a fortress-like appearance; and unusually asymmetrical in its design: Opposite columns do not match, windows are all different sizes, and walls differ in thickness and height. It is renowned for its remarkable acoustics and loud echoes; the voices of even a small choral group can sound like a large assembly.

The present basilica was built by the Crusaders just before 1140 AD. Its **cellar** was the cave where the Crusaders believed Mary had been born. Shortly after its construction, the Church of St Anne was enlarged by moving the facade forward. Like other churches in Jerusalem, St Anne's was also not destroyed after the Muslim conquest by Saladin Ayubi in 1189 AD though it was turned into an Islamic law school by him – the Christians claim. However, Saladin's name still appears in the Arabic inscription above the main entrance.

After two or three centuries, the building was abandoned; however, the Sultan of Istanbul in 1856 offered the site to the **French** government in gratitude for its help during those days' battles. By then the building was in ruins but now it is described as **'certainly the loveliest church in the city'** because France undertook its extensive restoration, returning St Anne's as closely as possible to the original basilica.

A flight of stone steps descends from the south aisle to the **crypt**. This cave is believed to be the remains of the house of Anne and Joachim, and the Virgin Mary's birthplace. Here, in a tiny chapel with domed ceiling, an altar is dedicated to the **birth** of holy Mary.

In Islam, Holy Mary is known as Maryam, mother of Isa [Jesus]. She is often referred to with title sayyidatuna [meaning our honourable lady]. A related term of endearment is Siddiqah [meaning she who confirms the truth]. Another title for Mary is Qānitah, which signifies both constant submission to God and absorption in prayer and invocation. She is also called Tahira [meaning one who has been purified – [and the only woman] not touched by Satan at any point.

The Christianity has no explicitly written literature about the birth of holy Mary but the holy Qur'an informs the whole humanity unambiguously. Thus Muslims know about holy Mary more than any other religion in fact. Through the Islamic literature and the Qur'an, all Muslims [at least] know that who was holy Mary's mother Anne [Hanna in Islam], father Joachim [Imran in Islam], on what promise with God Anne conceived her child, how Mary was born, how Prophet Zachariah AS was chosen to be the guardian of holy Mary – and got arranged a separate room for holy Mary so that she was able to worship the God at her will.

Nabi Zechariah AS used to see fresh fruit in holy Mary's room – how the Qur'anic verses replied that; - It is from God. Verily, God provides sustenance to whom He wills without limit; [**Al-Qur'an** 3:37]. Holy Mary's devotion to God was unparalleled – Muslims know from the Qur'an that how an angel in human robe appeared before Mary and conveyed a delighted message of Allah about **the gift of a righteous son**; [for more details see **Al-Qur'an** 19:17-19]. How holy Mary got amazed and puzzled as she was not married – then the divine revelation to keep Mary calm (**Al-Qur'an** 3:47); and God's assurance that: **"....We breathed into it through Our Spirit, and she testified to**

**the truth of the Words of her Lord ..."** (**Al-Qur'an** 66:12)

The story of holy Mary in the Qur'an and in the Bible has many aspects in common. Then, as the time came for her to give birth; how Mary travelled to **Bethlehem**; how the process of delivery came up amidst distress and fear – then again God's assurance; for details see **Al-Qur'an** 19:24. Appearance of sudden stream of water, dates and the divine direction [**not to speak**] – accusations from around - then how a newborn baby, Jesus, the Prophet of God performed his first miracle – spoke and confirmed that: *"Verily! I am a slave of God. He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet; and ..."* see **Al-Qur'an** 19:30-34 for full details.

Astonishing for the tourists is that just next door to St Anne's Church, there is another door of another building over which it is inscribed '**Mary's Birthplace**'. When tourists go inside they are guided towards a set of dark, squeezed and spiral stairs ending at a set of rocky natural caves. In one of those caves, amidst very dim light, one can see a photodrama of Holy Mary's parents. The indications are there that it is the actual birthplace of Holy Mary.

However, nothing to worry or dispute because from inside this cave comes very close to that chapel or bigger cave which the tourists visit from inside the St Anne's Church – might there be only a stony wall between the two caves.

#### **POOLS OF BETHESDA:**

[means *house of mercy*] in Old City of Jerusalem and within the premises of St Anne's Church are identified as the scene of one of the Jesus' miracles; the **healing** of the paralysed man who had waited for 38 years for someone to help him into the pool in which water was believed to have curative powers. The Gospel account says holy Jesus told the man, "Stand up, take your mat and walk", and

immediately he was made **well** [John 5:2-18]. John describes the pool as having five **porticoes** [*a series of reservoirs and medicinal pools*] in which lay many invalids — blind, lame and paralysed.

The history of the pool goes back to the 8th century BC, when a dam was built across the short Beth Zeta valley, turning it into a reservoir for rain water; a gate in the dam allowed the height to be controlled, and a rock-cut channel brought a steady stream of water from the reservoir into the city — called as the *Upper Pool*. Around 200 BC a second pool was added on the south side of the dam; its depth was 13m. In the 1st century BC, natural caves to the east of the two pools were turned into small baths one of which was named after the goddess of fortune. In mid 1st century AD, Herod Agrippa expanded the city walls, bringing the whole premises into the city.

Truth lies in the narrative that the pools and baths at Bethesda were believed to have healing powers - evidence of a pagan healing **sanctuary** has been found east of the pools, including marble representations of healed organs, such as feet and ears. That was why, the Byzantine empress Eudocia had an enormous **basilica** constructed over here in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Its central **aisle** covered the central rock wall, the side aisles extended above the two basins and the front part covered the site of the ancient healing sanctuary. However, this basilica was also destroyed by the Persians in 614 AD and its masonry ended up in the pool.

Crusaders built a small chapel, the **Church of the Paralytic**, over a part of the same ruined basilica; its façade, main entrance and apse of the Crusader chapel can be seen standing high over the pools, giving a clear example of the practice of building one church over another; building new temple over the old temple's ruins.

In the 1900s, however, archaeologists at Bethesda unearthed two large **water** reservoirs separated by a broad rock embankment. They

were rectangular in shape, with four colonnaded porticos around the sides and one across the central barrier. The purpose of the reservoirs was to collect rainwater, principally for Temple use.

So nice job has been done by the archaeologists and in such details that this part of St Anne's Church has become a treasure trove for the tourists. The downstairs with reeling prompt the tourists to go down and touch the stones of walls, pools, columns and they can go even further down into the pools which still have water there — but no clue of entrance and exit of water course — no one is there to guide.