Selected Passages from THE QUR’AN on Zachariah, John (the Baptist), Mary and the Birth of Jesus
(Quotes are from The Qur’an as translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem)

There are two passages in the QUR’AN which discuss Zachariah, John, Mary and the birth of Jesus. The 3rd sura, describes the birth of Mary and her mother’s commending “her and her offspring” to God’s protection from Satan. God, in turn, entrusts Mary “to the charge of Zachariah”. (36-37) Zachariah takes care of Mary, finds that God supplies her with provisions. When he asks Mary about this, she says “God provides limitlessly for whomever He will”. Hearing this Zachariah, who is old and has no (male?) child, asks God to “grant me a virtuous offspring”. Angels speak to him even while he is praying, telling him he will have a son, John, who will be “noble, chaste, a prophet, one of the righteous.” (38-39) Zachariah expresses doubt that he can have a child since he is old and his wife is barren, and he asks for a sign. The angel says “your sign is that you will not communicate with anyone for three days, except by gestures”. This passage then moves on to the Annunciation to Mary, which will be covered later, along with the birth of Jesus.

The second passage which discusses Zachariah is in the 19th sura (2-11). This is another account of Zachariah asking God for a successor. He is told, “Zachariah, we bring you good news of a son whose name will be John—We have chosen this name for no one before him”. As in the previous account, Zachariah expresses doubt, citing his age and his wife’s being barren. The angel responds by saying “This is what the Lord has said: ‘It is easy for Me: I created you, though you were nothing before’”. Zachariah asks for a sign and is told the same thing as in the previous account. Zachariah then “went out of the sanctuary to his people and signaled to them to praise God morning and evening”.

This passage (12-15) also cites God’s command to John to “hold on to the Scripture firmly”, adding that “while he was still a boy We granted him wisdom, tenderness . . . and purity. He was devout, kind to his parents, not domineering or rebellious. Peace on him the day he was born, on the day of his death and on the day he is raised to life again.”

Also, in sura 6 (84-89 ), God tells Muhammad that “We reward those who do good—Zachariah, John, Jesus and Elijah—every one of them was righteous . . . We favored each one of them over other people, . . . We chose them and guided them on a straight path. . . . Those are the ones to whom We gave the Scripture, wisdom and prophethood.”

Turning to Mary and the birth of Jesus, as it is written in sura 3 (42): “The angels said to Mary: ‘Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure: He has truly chosen you above all women.’ . . . (45-46) “Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah*, Jesus, son of Mary, who will be held in honor in this world and the next, who will be one of those brought near to God. He will speak to people in his infancy and in his adulthood. He will be one of the righteous.” (47-48) Mary asks the angel, “My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me?” [The angel] said, “This is how God creates what He will: when He has ordained something, He only says, ‘Be’, and it is.”
The following note appears in the Turkish QUR'AN after this ayet (verse) regarding the term Messiah: “Messiah [rendered in Turkish as “Mesih”] is a Hebrew word from the root “meşih”. It is one name/cognomen [lakab] for the Holy Jesus, and it means mübarek, which translates into English as blessed or sacred.”

Sura 19: 16-34 gives more detail concerning “the story of Mary”. As God explains to Muhammad: “She withdrew from her family to a place east and secluded herself away; We sent Our Spirit to appear before her in the form of a normal human.” When Mary warns him not to approach her, he says “I am but a Messenger from your Lord, [come] to announce to you the gift of a pure son. She said, ‘How can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste’, and he said, ‘This is what your Lord said: “It is easy for Me—We shall make him a sign to all people, a blessing from Us.” (16-21)

“And so it was ordained: she conceived him. She withdrew to a distant place and, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed ‘I wish I had been dead and forgotten before all this!’ but a voice cried to her from below, ‘Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet, and if you will shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you, so eat, drink, be glad, and say to anyone you may see: ‘I have vowed to the Lord of Mercy to abstain from conversation, and I will not talk to anyone today’.” (22-26)

When Mary goes back to “her people”, they say to her, “Mary, You have done something terrible!”, implying she has born an illegitimate child. She points to the child, as if to say, “Ask Him”. The people ask how they can converse with an infant, whereupon the babe speaks: “I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture, made me a prophet, made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless. Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.” “Such was Jesus, son of Mary.” (27-34)

Both accounts of Jesus’s birth—in sura 3 and sura 19—the story of Jesus’s birth is followed with affirmation that Jesus is not God’s son, is not divine. In sura 19: 35, God says that “it would not befit God to have a child. He [God] is far above that: when he decrees something, He says only, ‘Be’, and it is.” Sura 3 contains more a more extensive statement of Jesus’s relationship with God. Muhammad is told that God said to Jesus, “Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me: I will purify you of the disbelievers. To the Day of Resurrection I will make those who followed you superior to those who disbelieved. . . . I will make disbelievers suffer severely in this world and the next; no one will help them.” (55-56) However, God also tells Muhammad that “In God’s eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust, said to him ‘Be’, and he was.” (59)

In an apparent effort to get Christians to agree that Jesus is not divine, and to establish one understanding of Jesus that Christians, Jews and Muslims can all accept, God tells Muhammad (3:64): “Say, ‘People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.’”