Mary in Islam

“No Man Could Have Been Like This Woman”

Bahar Davary

The Islamic tradition has a rich perception and diverse history of interpretation of Mary. Here, one Muslim scholar offers her reflections on the Qur’an’s presentation of Mary, her prophetic qualities, and the role of Mary in popular piety.

The Qur’an 19:16-21 reads: “Mention in the Qur’an the story of Mary when she withdrew from her family to a place in the east and secluded herself away. Then We sent to her Our spirit, who came to her in the form of a person. He said: ‘I am a messenger from your Lord, to announce to you the gift of a holy son.’ She said: ‘how shall I have a son, when no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?’ He said: ‘Thus it will be. Your Lord says, that is easy for me, and We will make him a sign to the people as a mercy from Us. It is a thing ordained.’”

One of the most significant roles of Mary, as Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, is her interreligious appeal. Throughout history, she has served as a bridge between religions (namely, between Christianity and Islam). A Jewish girl born in Palestine about two thousand years ago remains to this day a powerful force for strengthening and maintaining harmony between Christians and Muslims. It is because of this that the concepts of the virgin birth and purity of Mary can be drawn upon as “a hermeneutical tool for Catholic-Muslim dialogue” (Hearden, 18). Although the purity of Mary is highly emphasized in Islam, Muslim Mariology does not

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Mary is mentioned more than thirty times in the Qur’an.
sentiments. In patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl was always seen as a disappointment. How could a woman be the promised Messiah, considering the prevalent belief that God’s law forbade her from even entering the synagogue?

The Qur’an tells us that Hanna is surprised when she gave birth to a girl, but that God knew fully well what she brought forth, and that no male child could have been like this female (Q 3:36). She named her Maryam and asked protection for her and for her offspring against Satan. God accepted her and made her grow with good manners, purity, and beauty. At a very young age, she was under the care of Zechariah, a prophet and a carpenter who taught her the Torah. When she was six years old, she was taken to the temple to serve the Lord (just as her mother had vowed). We also learn from other sources that despite objections by the majority of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Mary lived in a secluded room that Zechariah had built for her. She suffered the maltreatment of the patriarchs of the Temple, yet did not find fault in them and did not make a complaint.

The popular Iranian television series depicting the life of Maryam-e Moghadas (or “Saint Mary”) directed by Shahriar Bahrani depicts Mary not only as an obedient woman, but also as defiant. In one of the scenes, Mary is praying in her seclusion when she receives a message from God. A verse from the Qur’an states that she is called by the Divine command to be devout, to prostrate, and to bow with others who are performing the prayer (Q 3:43).

Since Mary lives in the Temple, she leaves her room and walks toward the Holy of Holies, as if she were drawn to it with a magnetic force. She opens the door and walks in. Those in prayer, all of them men with religious authority, interrupt their prayer with shocked expressions on their faces as they watch Maryam shining with delight at what she later explains is the angels prostrating to her and glorifying her. While she is punished for her entrance in the space “reserved for men alone,” she remains unfazed as she tells the story to Zechariah.

Mary’s reputation as the saint of the temple grew gradually. Women would go to the temple to see Mary and to have her touch them as a blessing (often in order to heal ailments). She would give her food to others and remained steadfast in prayer and fasting in spite of going weak from hunger. Yet every time Zechariah visited her chamber, he found her supplied with food sent from the heavens. When asked where the food came from, Mary replied: “from God, for God provides to whomsoever God pleases, without measure” (Q 3:35-37).

Mary: The Prophetic Connections of the Qur’an

Commentators of the Qur’an explain that it was this response from Mary that inspired Zechariah’s renewed faith and hope, and that his longing for a child would not be for naught (in spite of its improbability, both he and his wife being at an old age). It was shortly after this exchange that the “barren” Elizabeth—who
Islamic tradition counts Mary among the most praiseworthy women of history, and the only woman protected from sin at birth. The Qur’anic names twenty-five prophets (although the tradition specifies the total number of prophets as at least numbering 124,000). This list includes Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, as well as Jesus, John, and Mary. Classical Muslim theologians debated the issue of the prophethood of Mary.

Most Sunni scholars suggest that women were not appointed as prophets. They base their arguments on Qur’anic verses 12:109, 16:43, and 21:7, in which the word *rijal* (men) is used to refer to prophets. The Zahiri school, a marginal and short-lived school of interpretation and law, focused on the literal interpretation of the Qur’an. They argued that Mary was indeed among the prophets (Stowasser 1994, 69). They used the following verse from the Qur’an to support their claim: “And remember the one who guarded her chastity, then we breathed into her from our spirit and made her and her son a sign to the worlds” (Q 21:91). Ibn Hazm of Cordoba was one of the Zahiri scholars who argued that the Qur’an alludes to the existence of female prophets (Mattson, 218). He pointed to the reference to Mary as “a woman of truth” (Q 5:75), just as the prophet Joseph was called “man of truth” (Q 12:46) (Stowasser 1994, 77). In his *Understanding of the Qur’an*, Muhammad Abdel Haleem comments that in the Qur’an only prophets are referred to by name. The exception to this rule is Mary (the only woman referred to by her name), owing to the miraculous birth of Jesus (Abdel Haleem, 132). Mainstream Muslim doctrine does not count Mary among the prophets nor does Muslim popular public piety (Stowasser 1994, 69).
However, Loren Lybarger aptly proposes that not only does Maryam take on qualities of a prophet in the qur’anic story about her, but that “her experience is fundamental to constituting and projecting prophetic authority” (Lybarger, 243). This position holds that the subtextual metaphor shifts the profile of prophecy from a male-centered image to a gynocentric one (Lybarger, 241–242).

**Muhammad and Maryam: A Prophetic Connection**

According to early interpretations of the Qur’an, Mary—having found comfort in the words of the angel—accepted the ruh (spirit); the angelic breath that reached her womb and conceived Jesus. The interpretations generally identify the angel Gabriel as the one who appeared to Mary. Zamakhshari and Razi maintain: “God’s spirit (Gabriel) took the form of Mary’s companion, Joseph” (Stowasser, 74). Most Muslim theologians indicate Mary’s age at the time of pregnancy to have been ten, thirteen, or fifteen. Her pregnancy is said to have lasted nine months, eight months, or six months depending on the account. Others determine the length of her pregnancy as having been three hours, one hour, or even an instant (Gätje, 122). From a scientific perspective, perhaps the instantaneous conception and birth is no more impossible than the virgin birth itself. However, there are many traditions that refute the claim of instantaneous conception and birth. For example, there is a narration stating that Mary and Elizabeth (Zechariah’s wife) were pregnant at the same time and that when the two women embraced John prostrated himself in his mother’s womb before the unborn Jesus (Stowasser 1994, 74). There are also many references to the scandal that Mary’s pregnancy had aroused, suggesting that the child was either Zechariah’s or Joseph’s. While Joseph is not mentioned in the Qur’an, tradition suggests that he was one of the people working at the service of the synagogue during the same years that Mary served, and that he, in consultation with Mary, became a student of Zechariah. The above statements suggest that Mary must have been pregnant for some time (Stowasser 1994, 75).

The annunciation and birth of Jesus can be viewed as God’s revelation [to Mary]. Revelation is often considered as a linguistic concept (Izutsu, 152). Mary accepted the ruh (spirit). In this context, the conception and birth of Jesus can be compared to the revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad on the night of power. While the revelation to the Prophet was in the form of spoken language, revelation to Mary was through virginal conception and birth. The virginal conception of “the Word of God—Isa” is juxtaposed with the revelation of the Qur’an (the miracle of Islam) to the illiterate Prophet. Just as kalam Allah (the “speech” or “word” of God) was revealed to Muhammad, kalimat Allah (the Word of God, Jesus) was revealed to Mary through virgin conception.
Mary was instructed by God to make a vow to not speak for three days and to direct all concerns or questions regarding her pregnancy and birth to the infant Jesus in order to undo what had become a scandal from the point of view of the community. Jesus, who was in the cradle, spoke and exonerated his mother by declaring that he was a prophet of God. This contrast between Maryam’s silence and Isa’s miraculous speech reveals a male-centered metaphor of qur’anic prophecy (Lybarger, 241). The scandal of pregnancy outside marriage is explained by an appeal to prophecy which “trumps traditional patriarchal expectations about women’s bodies” and moves Mary toward a “more ambiguous, transgendered image” by considering “Mary and her son as a continuous prophetic figure” (Lybarger, 241).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the Egyptian theologian and commentator, makes a comparison between Jesus and the Qur’an. He argues that the text of the Qur’an itself refers to both Jesus and the Qur’an as kalam Allah (Word of God). The good news is conveyed to Maryam regarding God’s Word whose name is Isa: “and God gives the good tidings of a Word, his name is Messiah, Jesus son of Mary” (Q 3:45). The Qur’an as word of God was sent to Muhammad just as Jesus was conveyed to Mary (Q 4:171) (Abu Zayd, 195–196).

Mary and Fatima: Popular Piety

In the hearts and minds of Muslims, especially the Shi’a, the figures of Mary and Fatima are closely associated. The tradition has it that, when Fatima was being born, Mary was one of the four women who miraculously assisted Khadija, the wife of the Prophet throughout the birth (McAuliffe, 26–7). Both Mary and Fatima are also vested with significance beyond piety. Whether under her numerous titles or in relation to her various apparitions, for Catholic Christians, the experience of Mary bears significance that carries political, ethnic and pious implications. For example, the appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917 was interpreted as one of the signs associated with the eventual demise of communism, in an address by Pope John Paul II (Thurlkill, 122). Similarly, during and after the 1978–79 revolution in Iran, Fatima became the model for the revolutionary woman. In the works of Ali Shari’ati, Fatima was no longer the traditional, homey mother of the Imams, but an avant-garde woman who gave fiery speeches at the mosque and who was far more outspoken than her husband ‘Ali, one of the candidates to succeed the Prophet. Christian and Muslim women in Egypt, Syria, and other parts of the world who pray to both Fatima and Mary and appeal to them as intermediaries do so without regard to their image created in various domains of politics.

While many traditions reported from the Prophet award Mary and Fatima an equal rank, Shi’a authorities occasionally rank Fatima above Mary by addressing
Fatima and Mary were both referred to as Tahira (the pure one). The emphasis on the purity of Mary transforms the stigma attached to what is viewed as an apparent transgression and creates a “tension between prophecy and patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality” (Lybarger, 243). The quality of ‘isma is often defined as freedom from menstruation and bleeding at childbirth; but more importantly, it means “sinlessness.” ‘Isma, an attribute of the prophets, is more correctly translated into English as impeccability rather than infallibility. Impeccability does not negate the notion of free will and agency. The example of Mary’s obedience and submission (Q 3:35) is employed by Aisha Abd al-Rahman (known as Bent al-Shati’, 1913–1998), to explicate the concept of women’s emancipation within the Islamic framework. Women’s emancipation, she argues, must be understood in light of its moral foundation. For Bent al-Shati’, an Islamic model of feminine virtue includes piety, devotion, modesty, sacrifice, heroism, loyalty, and
patience. Her argument is based on a theological premise that if women do not have free choice, their moral and religious responsibilities cannot be guaranteed (Mohammed and Rippin, 186–7).

**Rich History of Interpretation**

Just as Catholicism has and continues to interpret Mary in varying ways, the Islamic perception of Mary also has a rich history of interpretation. The majority of Muslim scholars have rejected counting Mary among the prophets; however, the Qur’anic story plays out in a way that on the one hand, strikes at the foundations of a patriarchal understanding of prophecy, and on the other hand, contributes to prophetic authority that is shared by a woman (Maryam) and a man (Isa). This insight suggests a prophetic authority that is no longer exclusively androcentric but gynocentric as well.

**References**


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