

# 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

*Bahar Davary is an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego where she teaches courses on Islam, world religions, and gender. She also teaches a course on religion and conflict transformation for the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice. Her book Women and the Qur'an: A Study in Islamic Hermeneutics was published in 2009 by Mellen Press.*

begin with the conception of Jesus, but rather with attention to the genealogy of Mary and the line of the prophets from which she comes, her Immaculate Conception, her birth, her early years spent in the service of the synagogue, and finally the virgin birth.

The figure of Mary is highly venerated not only in popular Muslim piety, but within the Islamic sacred text (the Qur'an) as well as the tradition of the Prophet. However, reverence toward Mary—especially among Muslim women—exceeds the scholarly and textual exposition of her status within Islam. This is in fact true of all things regarding all matters that have to do with women. Mary is known as the epitome of virtue and a model for all people—both men and women—to aspire to. The Qur'an refers to her as a woman “chosen by God above all other women” (Q 3:42), and that “no man could have been like this woman” (Q 3:36). The sacred text of Islam holds Maryam (Arabic for Mary) in highest regard while making reference to other exceptional women: the wife of pharaoh, the wives of the Prophet, the wife of Adam, the mother of Moses, the Queen of Sheba, and the mother of Mary (Saeed, 69). Sometimes, the mother of Isaac and the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad [Fatima] are also added. Mary, however, is the only woman mentioned in the Qur'an by her proper name as opposed to being associated with a male figure.

Mary is mentioned more than thirty times in the Qur'an; in fact, her name appears more frequently in the Qur'an than in the New Testament (Stowasser 1994, 67). She is one of only eight people who has a chapter named after them (chapter 19). The story of Mary's birth can be found in the third chapter of the Qur'an, which is named “Al 'Imran” (the family of Amram), after the family of Mary.

The complete qur'anic Mariology can be found in seven chapters of the Qur'an, (3, 4, 5, 19, 21, 23, 66) including “Mary” (partially quoted above), “Al 'Imran,” “al-Anbiya',” and four other chapters. These stories include, not only the annunciation of Jesus' birth, but also the conception of Mary and the divine favors toward her.

The qur'anic account of Mary begins by mentioning her father 'Imran (Amram) and his wife, known traditionally as “Hanna.” Muslim commentators note that there is no confusion here between Amram the father of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Amram and Hanna were longing to have a child. When Hanna became pregnant—to everyone's surprise due to her old age—she dedicated the child in her womb to the service of the Lord. Amram did not live to see the birth of his child. According to the tradition, he was so respected within his small Jewish community (ruled by the pro-Roman king, Herod) that the people were proclaiming that this unborn child would be the promised Messiah. It further explains that Herod, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees were highly fearful of these increasingly popular views and

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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

was taunted for this very reason by the women of the community—conceived Yahya (John). As such, Mary was not only instrumental in the virgin birth of Christ but also played a role in the birth of another prophet, John (later known as John the Baptist). In fact, throughout the Qur'an, the story of Mary is intertwined with the birth of Yahya to Elizabeth and Zechariah (see Q 3, 19, and 21). In fact the Qur'anic announcement of the angel regarding the birth of John (Q 3:39) is almost identical with that of the birth of Jesus (Q 3:35). The words of Zechariah and Mary in questioning the possibility of such extraordinary birth situations are also very similar (Q 3:40 and 3:47). It is this close connection in the Qur'anic story of Mary and Zechariah that Stowasser believes “establishes a special place for Mary in the Qur'anic context of prophetic history” (2003, 289). Another similarity between the two stories is the three-day silence that both Mary (after the birth of Jesus and her return to her people) and Zechariah (after the revelation of the angel that he would have a son) were instructed to undertake.

Islamic tradition counts Mary among the most praiseworthy women of history, and the only woman protected from sin at birth. The Qur'an 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).

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However, Loren Lybarger aptly proposes that not only does Maryam take on qualities of a prophet in the Qurʾanic 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 Qurʾan, 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 Qurʾan, 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 Qurʾan 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 Qurʾan (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 (Thurkill, 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

her with the title, *Maryam al-Kubra*, Mary the Greater (McAuliffe, 23–24). Studies in early and medieval Christianity and Shi'a Islam reveal similarities between Mary and Fatima. Both figures are holy women who were instrumental in producing a pure male progeny: Mary gave birth to Isa, the promised Messiah; Fatima was the link that gave birth to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, the impeccable Imams. In both cases, hagiographers controlled the image making by emphasizing the domestic skills and homey miracles of these holy women and “both women experienced superhuman parturitions, multiplied food, and interceded for their spiritual offspring” (Thurkill, 120).

Fatima and Mary are also manifestations of the holy sufferer. Shi'a hagiography draws the parallel between Hussein (the son of Fatima and grandson of the Prophet) and Jesus in that they both suffered great persecution and hardship (Ayoub, 35). Hussein was killed along with seventy-two of his family members and companions as he resisted the tyrant Caliph Yazid in the seventh century CE. Although Islamic Christology does not include the crucifixion and resurrection, it does recount the suffering of the righteous prophet and his mother under an unjust military occupation as well as the pressures and false religion of the authoritarian religious figures of the society of his time. Both Mary and Fatima lost their sons to *kufr* (disbelief, literally “covering of the truth”). While Fatima was not living at the time of the death of

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Hussein, the tradition implies that she had seen during her son's childhood that he was destined to suffer greatly. Fatima and Mary both “signify female independence and agency and submission and chastity” (Thurkill, 122). Yet their deepest ties can be found in their joint image of the mistress of sorrows (Ayoub, 27; 39).

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.

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