

## *The Chapter of Mary*

The figure of Mary, mother of Jesus, looms very large in Qur'anic scripture, scripturalist exegesis, and popular Muslim piety. In the Qur'an, Mary is the only female identified by name, and her name appears far more frequently in the Qur'anic text than in the entire New Testament. Her name is also the title of a Qur'anic Sura (Sura 19). From birth she was surrounded by miracles of divine favor. As a young woman, she received the angelic annunciation of a child from God's spirit, a word from God cast into Mary, whose name was the Christ Jesus son of Mary, chosen to be one of God's righteous prophets. The angels also gave Mary glad tidings that God had chosen and purified her, had chosen her above the women of the worlds. And the Qur'anic revelation celebrates Mary as "an example for the believers" because of her chastity, obedience, and faith.

In the Qur'an, the story of Mary is intertwined with that of her guardian, the prophet Zacharia (Zakariyya). The Qur'anic accounts of Zacharia's prayer for a child in old age and the glad tidings of the birth of John (Yahya) (19:2–15; 21:89–90; 3:38–41) in all instances directly precede Qur'anic passages on Mary's sinless conception of the prophet Jesus (19:16–35; 21:91; 3:42–51); in Sura 3, Zacharia's story (3:38–41) is inserted between verses on Mary's birth and childhood (3:33–37) and the angels' annunciation of the birth of Jesus (3:42–51). The angels' words on the birth of John to Zacharia (3:39) are almost identical with those on the birth of Jesus to Mary (3:45). Both Zacharia (3:40) and Mary (3:47) question the message—"my Lord, how shall I have a son"—and both are told that God "does" (3:40), "creates" (3:47) what He wills. Fur-

thermore, the wording of God's praise and blessing of John (19:12–15) is almost identical to Jesus' words about himself, spoken in the cradle (19:30–33). In this manner, a strong affinity is established between the figures of Zacharia and Mary on the one hand and those of John and Jesus on the other (except that the Qur'an overall awards much greater prominence to Mary and Jesus). Zacharia's wife here remains a figure apart. It is only in Qur'anic exegesis and pious tradition that she is linked with Mary by ties of kinship, gender, and shared life experiences.

### *The Wife of the Prophet Zacharia and Mother of the Prophet John in the Qur'an*

The Qur'an renders the story of the motherhood of Zacharia's wife in Suras 19, 21, and 3.<sup>1</sup> The woman's name is not mentioned, but the revelation speaks of her righteousness and God's favor in restoring her from barrenness and granting her motherhood.

The aged Zacharia<sup>2</sup> prayed to God in secret in the *mihrab*<sup>3</sup> for a son who would be his successor and equal in righteousness (19:2–6; 21:89; 3:38). The prayer was answered, and God (19:7; His angels, 3:39) gave him tidings of a son named John (Yahya), a name not before given (19:7); he would witness to the truth of a word from God and be a lord, an ascetic, and a prophet (3:39). Zacharia doubted because his wife was barren and he himself had grown very old; God restored his wife for him, God's will was done, and the task was very easy for God (19:8–9; 21:90; 3:40). Zacharia asked for a sign, which God granted him; it was that he would not speak for three nights (19:10; three days, 3:41) and would communicate through motions or signs only (19:10–11; 3:41). Zacharia thus (silently) suggested to his people to celebrate God's praises in the morning and in the evening (19:11); he himself was commanded to celebrate God's praises in the evening and in the morning (3:41). The child John was given *hukm* ("jurisdiction;" in Islamic exegesis usually understood as "the wisdom of prophethood") even while still a young boy. He was compassionate, pure, and devout, kind to his parents, neither arrogant nor rebellious (19:12–14). God ordained "peace on him the day he was born, the day he dies, and the day he will be raised alive" (19:15). Zacharia, his wife and their son were a righteous family. They competed in good deeds, prayed to God in longing and fear, and were humble (21:90).

### *The Wife of the Prophet Zacharia and Mother of the Prophet John in Islamic Interpretation*

Islamic tradition has identified Zacharia's wife as Elisabeth (Ishba', daughter of Faqudh).<sup>4</sup> Zacharia,<sup>5</sup> before his prophethood a frugal and devout carpenter, is said to belong into the Solomonic line; indeed, he and Amram (Imran), father of Mary, are called the children of Solomon. Elisabeth is the sister of Mary's mother Anna (Hanna)<sup>6</sup> and also appears in some traditions as the sister

of Mary.<sup>7</sup> Information on this figure is scanty. She is seen as resembling Sara in that both were blessed with a child, a future prophet, in old age after life-long barrenness. Other traditions tell of her meeting with Mary when both were pregnant. The women embraced, and Elisabeth told Mary that her own unborn child was prostrating himself in obeisance before the child in Mary's womb. This, the commentators explain, was in fulfillment of the Qur'anic words that John would "testify to the truth of a word from God"(3:39),<sup>8</sup> and that the prostration meant obedience and glorification, as had the angels' prostration before Adam. It signified that the prophet Jesus stood above the prophet John "because God made him resurrect the dead and heal the blind and the leper."<sup>9</sup> In contemporary works on Qur'anic women figures including those of the *qisas al-anbiya'* genre,<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth is not mentioned; to my knowledge, she also plays no role as "example" in the contemporary pious literature for and about women.

### *Mary (Maryam) the Mother of the Prophet Jesus (Isa) in the Qur'an*

Mary<sup>11</sup> is the only female identified in the Qur'an by name. Her name appears in a large number of Qur'anic verses<sup>12</sup> and is also the title of a Sura (Sura 19). Most other personal names used as titles of Qur'anic chapters are those of prophets—for example, Sura 10: Yunus; Sura 11: Hud; Sura 12: Yusuf; Sura 14: Ibrahim; Sura 47: Muhammad; Sura 71: Nuh.<sup>13</sup> Before birth, Mary's mother consecrated her to God's service. After the baby was born, she invoked God's protection for her and her progeny from Satan. According to authenticated tradition, both Mary and her son Jesus thereby escaped "the pricking of the devil" at birth, which tradition is said to have played a role in the formation of the later Islamic doctrine of prophetic *'isma* (innate quality of "impeccability," "immunity from sin and error" of prophets).<sup>14</sup> Mary served in the *mihrab*<sup>15</sup>, where she received miraculous sustenance. While a virgin, God's angels spoke to Mary to give her glad tidings of a word (*kalima*) from God; God cast of His spirit (*ruh*) into Mary; He sent His spirit to Mary to give her a pure son. Was Mary, then, a Qur'anic prophet? Classical Islamic theology debated this issue, especially after it had been championed by the Zahirite school, a relatively marginal and in any case short-lived medieval *madhhab* ("school of scriptural interpretation and religious law"), whose focus on the literal (*zahiri*) meaning of the sacred text found proof for Mary's prophethood in the fact that God's angels had informed her of things to come. Neither consensus-based mainstream doctrine nor public piety, however, came to recognize Mary's prophethood. Exegetes have consistently extolled her high Qur'anic rank; but their images of Mary have also reflected the fact that she differs from other Qur'anic women figures in nature and life experiences and also, at least in part, from the Islamic ideal of womanhood as elaborated in Islamic law.

The Qur'anic story of Mary is related in three Meccan<sup>16</sup> and four Medinan<sup>17</sup> Suras. The earliest and longest account is found in Sura 19, the *Sura of Mary*, which relates the annunciation, Jesus' birth, and Jesus' first words, spoken before birth(?) and in the cradle. According to this Sura,

(16) Mary withdrew from her family to an eastern place.<sup>18</sup> (17) She took a screen [or, curtain, *hijab*] [to screen herself] from them. And We sent Our Spirit to her, and it took the shape of a well-proportioned human. (18) She said: I take refuge with the Compassionate from you. [Go away] if you fear God. (19) He said: I am only your Lord's messenger, to give you<sup>19</sup> a pure boy. (20) She said: How could I have a boy when no human has touched me and I am not a whore? (21) He said: Thus. Your Lord says: It is easy for Me, and so that We make him a sign for the people and a mercy from Us. It is a settled matter. (22) So she was pregnant with him, and she retired with him to a remote place.<sup>20</sup> (23) And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree. She said: If only I had died before this and were completely forgotten. (24) And he called her from below her<sup>21</sup>: Do not grieve, your Lord has placed beneath you a little brook. (25) And shake the trunk of the palm-tree toward you, so it will drop juicy fresh dates upon you. (26) And eat and drink and be joyful. And when you see a human being, then say: I have vowed a fast to the Merciful, and I will not speak with a human being today.<sup>22</sup> (27) Then she brought him to her people, carrying him. They said: Oh Mary, you have done something unheard-of. (28) Oh sister of Aaron,<sup>23</sup> your father was not a bad man nor was your mother a whore. (29) Then she pointed toward him. They said: How can we speak to someone who (as) a small boy is [still] in the cradle? (30) He said: I am God's slave. He has given me the Book and has made me a prophet. (31) He has made me blessed wherever I be and has charged me with prayer and almsgiving as long as I live,<sup>24</sup> (32) and filial piety toward my mother.<sup>25</sup> And He has not made me tyrannical and villainous. (33) And peace be upon me the day I was born and the day I die and the day I am resurrected alive.<sup>26</sup> (34) Such is Jesus, the son of Mary—to say the truth which they doubt. (35) It is not for God to acquire [or, take to Himself] any child.<sup>27</sup> Praised be He! When He decides a matter He only says to it: Be! and it is.

In the short verses of Suras 23 and 21, Mary and her son Jesus are revealed to be “a sign” (*aya*) from God: (23:50) “And We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign, and We granted both of them shelter on a hill with *qarar* [“fertile ground,” or, “a secure abode,” “a hollow”],<sup>28</sup> and spring water”; (21:91) “And she who guarded her chastity [literally, her shame]. Then We breathed into her of Our spirit, and We made her and her son a sign for the worlds.”

A second annunciation scene is related in Sura 3,<sup>29</sup> where it is preceded by the story of Mary's consecration to God's service, Zacharia's guardianship of Mary, and the miraculous sustenance she received while serving in the temple as a young girl.

(33) “God chose Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham and the family of Amram above the worlds. (34) Progeny one from the other. And God hears and knows. (35) [Then] when the wife of Amram said: My Lord, I have pledged [or, I herewith pledge] to you what is in my womb as consecrated.<sup>30</sup> So accept [it] from me. You are who hears and knows. (36) And when she had given birth to her, she said: My Lord, I have given birth to her, a female. And God was most aware of what she had borne. The male is not like the female. And I have named her Mary, and I place her and her offspring under

your protection against stone-worthy Satan. (37) And her Lord accepted her graciously and made her grow up in a goodly manner. And He put her charge with Zacharia. Whenever Zacharia entered upon her in the *mihrab*,<sup>31</sup> he found sustenance with her. He said: Oh Mary, from where do you have this? She said: This is from God. God provides for whom He wills, without accounting.<sup>32</sup> (42) And [then] when the angels said: Oh Mary, God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds. (43) Oh Mary, be devoutly obedient toward your Lord, prostrate yourself, and bow down with those who bow down.<sup>33</sup> (44) This belongs to the stories of what is hidden. We reveal it to you. You were not with them when they cast their reed-stalks as lots [to establish] who of them would provide for Mary. And you were not with them when they quarreled. (45) And [then] when the angels said: Oh Mary, God gives you glad tidings of a word from Him whose name is Christ Jesus son of Mary, highly regarded in this world and in the hereafter, and one of those brought close [to God]. (46) He will speak to the people in the cradle and as a grown man, and be of the righteous. (47) She said: My Lord, how shall I have a son when no human has touched me? He said: Thus. God creates what He wills. When He has decreed a matter He only says to it: Be! and it is. (59) Jesus is before God like Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him: Be! And he is.

Sura 66 establishes Mary's status as "example for the believers" because of her chastity, faith, and obedience. (11) "And God has given an example to those who believe . . . (12) (in) Mary the daughter of Amram who remained chaste [literally, protected her shame] and We blew into it of Our spirit. And she testified to the truth of her Lord's words and His books and was of the devoutly obedient."<sup>34</sup>

Suras 4 and 5 emphasize Mary's chastity but also her and Jesus' full humanity; here the language includes the refutation that Jesus and Mary formed part of a "trinity":

(4:156) [Among the sins the Jews committed were . . .] their unbelief and their uttering of an enormous slander against Mary.

(4:171) Oh people of the Book! Do not go too far in your religion, and do not assert against God, except the truth. Christ Jesus son of Mary is only God's messenger and His word which He conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. Therefore believe in God and His messengers and do not say: Three. Cease. It is better for you. God is only one God. Glory be to Him. [He is exalted above] that He should have a son. To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth. And God is the best caretaker.

(4:172) Christ does not disdain to be the slave of God, nor [do] the angels brought close [to God]. He who disdains His worship<sup>35</sup> and is arrogant, He will gather them all together to Himself [for judgment].

(5:19) Unbelieving are those who say that God is Christ the son of Mary. Say: Then who would prevail against God if He wished to destroy Christ the son of Mary and his mother and all who are on earth? God has the dominion of the heavens and the earth and what is in-between. He creates what He wills. And God is capable of everything.

(5:75) Unbelieving are those who say: God is Christ the son of Mary.

And Christ said: Oh children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord. He who ascribes partners to God, God has forbidden him paradise. His abode is the fire, and the sinners have no helpers.

(5:78) Christ the son of Mary is only a messenger. Before him have the messengers passed. And his mother is a woman of truth. The two of them used to eat food. See how We clarify the signs for them, then see how they are turned away?

(5:119) And [then] when God said: Oh Jesus son of Mary, did you say to the people: beyond God, take me and my mother as gods? He said: Praise be to you. It is not for me to say what is not my right. If I said [or, had said] it, you knew it. You know what is in my mind, while I do not know what is in your mind. You are the knower of hidden things. (120) I only said to them what you commanded me, to worship God my Lord and your Lord, and I was a witness over them as long as I was among them. And then when you took me unto you, it was you who watched over them. You are witness over everything.

### *Mary the Mother of the Prophet Jesus in Islamic Interpretation*

The medieval Hadith<sup>36</sup> relates different “occasions of revelation” of the story of Mary.<sup>37</sup> The verses of Sura 19 are said to have been revealed before the first Muslim migration to Abyssinia, where they impressed upon the Negus Islam’s status as a monotheistic faith and, consequently, his obligation to protect the Muslim migrants in his realm against their pagan Meccan compatriots.<sup>38</sup> Conversely, the verses of Sura 3 are said to have been revealed during meetings that the by then victorious Prophet held in Medina with a large delegation of sixty horsemen from the Yemenite Christian community of Najran. “These began to argue about God and the Messiah, and God revealed the beginning of Sura 3 (*Al Imran*) about that and clarified that Jesus was created, as was his mother before him.”<sup>39</sup> These traditions may give an inkling not only of the chronology of the sequential Qur’anic segments of Mary’s story but also of early Muslim perceptions of the unfolding story’s import. Post-Qur’anic Islamic exegesis, however, came to perceive the main purpose of all of the revelations on Mary<sup>40</sup> as divine clarification of the true natures of Jesus and Mary in order that their creaturehood be but another sign of God’s Oneness and Omnipotence. In contemporary exegesis, the reading of Mary’s story in terms of *tawhid*, unicity of God, is even more clearly stated.<sup>41</sup>

Hadith and Tafsir have dealt with the figure of Mary in several different ways. Firstly, the miraculous events surrounding her birth and childhood, the annunciation and the birth of Jesus were developed and expanded upon in the hagiographic mode. Secondly, the scholars of Islam found in the Qur’anic text a number of theological problems for debate and dogmatic formulation. Among these has been the meaning of “spirit” (*ruh*) and “word” (*kalima*) that the virgin received from God. The debate has also involved the question of whether Mary was one of God’s prophets, and how her Qur’an-proclaimed qualities of purity and obedience should be defined. The Hadith has probed Mary’s relationship with Eve and, in consideration of her Qur’an-established rank “above the

women of the worlds" has asked if she was, indeed, superior to earlier figures, such as Pharaoh's wife, or later ones, such as Khadija, Fatima, and A'isha. Thirdly, as with all other exemplars in Qur'an and/or Sunna, the religious authorities have attempted to define the social applicability of Mary's qualities, that is, the facets of her model status suited for emulation by the Muslim woman. Modern interpretations show some change from the classical on all three themes. The old hagiographic dimension (based in part on Bible-related Hadith materials) is now largely eliminated. Scholastic probings into the dogmatic significance of key issues in Mary's story are of low priority compared to exegetic emphasis that the story's core is the affirmation of God's Oneness and unlimited power. And while the problematic of Mary's model status for emulation by Muslim females is now addressed with greater purpose and vigor, modern theological efforts in this latter area have not been "pervasive" in that the figure of Mary remains *sui generis* and thus presents problems for Islamic paradigmization.

### *The Story in Hagiographic Extension*

#### *Mary's Consecration, Birth, and Childhood in the Temple*

Traditions report that Mary's mother Anna (Hanna),<sup>42</sup> wife of Amram (Imran), was longing for a child. The sight of a bird brooding over its young moved her to tears, and she entreated her husband to pray for a child. Both prayed, and Amram dreamed that he should lie with his wife. He did and she conceived.<sup>43</sup> Else, Anna began to menstruate (i.e., she was once again awarded the physical state of women who can conceive); having been purified from her menstruation, she conceived from her husband.<sup>44</sup> Assuming that she was carrying a boy, Anna consecrated her unborn child to God's service in the temple, and God accepted the offering even though the child was female.<sup>45</sup> Anna named her daughter Mary.<sup>46</sup> Because of Anna's prayer that God protect Mary and her offspring from Satan, neither Mary nor her son Jesus were "touched," or "pricked," or "kicked," or "squeezed," or "pierced in the side" at birth by Satan, which is what happens to all other human beings and explains why babies cry when they are born.<sup>47</sup> After the infant was weaned, Anna took Mary to the temple. Then Amram died,<sup>48</sup> and lots were cast for the privilege of the child's care. Of the reed stalks cast into the well of Seloam (or, other bodies of water), only that of Zacharia consistently floated on the surface (or, against the current), and therefore it was he to whom was awarded the privilege of her care.<sup>49</sup> Mary grew up in the temple a beautiful young girl. She worshipped day and night, her feet swollen and oozing with pus, until her unequalled piety and righteousness became known among the Israelites.<sup>50</sup> She lived in the *mihrab* to which only Zacharia had the key. He would lock her into the room, but whenever he visited her, he found wondrous provisions: winter fruit during summertime, and summer fruit during wintertime. Mary gave some of these to Zacharia, and it was then that he lay with his wife and she conceived John (Yahya); else, Zacharia prayed to God, provider of "fruit out of season," to give him "a son out of season."<sup>51</sup> When Mary had attained

the age of puberty, she told Zacharia that "she had seen a horrible thing," (i.e., she had begun to menstruate), and from then on Zacharia removed her from the place of worship to his wife's (her maternal aunt's) care until she returned to a state of purity.<sup>52</sup> Among the people who served with Mary in the temple, mention is made of Joseph son of Jacob,<sup>53</sup> a carpenter, who is identified as Mary's cousin on her mother's side.<sup>54</sup>

### *Annunciation, Pregnancy, and the Birth of Jesus*

In Tafsir literature, the annunciation of the angels (Sura 3) is generally interpreted in light of Mary's visitation by God's spirit in the form of a man (Sura 19), and both instances are said to refer to the angel Gabriel (Jibril).<sup>55</sup> When the angel(s) approached, Mary was alone. Some traditionists say that this was at a well in the wilderness ("desert") to which Mary and Joseph had walked to fill their water jugs.<sup>56</sup> According to others, Mary had withdrawn to an isolated place for the duration of her menstrual period, as was her habit, and that she had just cleansed herself when the angel(s) appeared. Else, she is said to have sought solitude in order to pray.<sup>57</sup> God's spirit, that is, the angel Gabriel, approached her in the form of a handsome, beardless young man who had a pure face and curly hair.<sup>58</sup> Other traditions maintain that God's spirit (Gabriel) took the form of Mary's companion Joseph.<sup>59</sup> Mary's surprise at the annunciation is explained by the fact that she had no husband.<sup>60</sup>

Identification of the spirit with the angel Gabriel, however, presented the interpreters with a textual problem in that the Qur'anic "spirit" speaks to Mary in the first person, announcing "I am only your Lord's messenger, that I give you a pure boy" (19:19).<sup>61</sup> Exegesis solved the problem by making the angel Gabriel the medium, or means, or instrument, of God's "blowing of His spirit" into Mary (as established in 21:19 and 66:12). "Gabriel could not create life in her, because he himself was a created body."<sup>62</sup> The theme of Gabriel's blowing, however, was thereafter elaborated with the loving detail of popular legend. Exegesis ponders at length whether Gabriel blew into the *jayb* ("breast-pocket," or "fold," or "neckline") of Mary's chemise, or whether he blew at its hem, or into its sleeve. Some say that the fold of her chemise was ripped in the front, so that the breath reached her breast. Else, the breath entered through her mouth.<sup>63</sup> In any case, the breath reached her womb and she conceived her child.<sup>64</sup> Traditions go on to tell that Joseph was the first to notice Mary's pregnancy, and that he was much astonished and troubled. Eventually, he confronted her by asking whether a crop could grow without seeds, and a child without a father? Mary answered yes, since God had created the first crop from nothing, just as He had created Adam without father or mother. Her answer convinced Joseph that Mary's child was also the result of God's creative power beyond the customary course of nature.<sup>65</sup>

Mary's pregnancy is said to have coincided with that of her maternal aunt Elisabeth, Zacharia's wife. When the two women met and embraced, John prostrated himself in Elisabeth's womb before the unborn Jesus.<sup>66</sup> When Mary was alone, her unborn child would speak with her, and when she was among people, she could hear him praise God in her womb.<sup>67</sup> Most traditions relate that Mary



carried Jesus for nine months, “as women carry.” Some assume a shorter pregnancy, such as eight, seven, or six months, nine or three hours, one hour, or no time at all, with the delivery occurring immediately after conception.<sup>68</sup> That Mary was generally thought to have been pregnant for some time is affirmed in the stories involving Joseph and Elisabeth. Furthermore, exegesis perceives Mary’s withdrawal “to a remote place” (19:22) as selfprotection against “the heretics among the Israelites,” the gossipers and slanderers who would accuse her of an immoral relationship with Joseph, or even Zacharia.<sup>69</sup>

It was then that the birthpangs drove Mary to the trunk of a palm tree and she wished that she had died before any of this happened, and to be completely forgotten.<sup>70</sup> God’s favor and blessing then came to her in the form of fresh dates and clear drinking water. Some say that the date palm in that place was a dried-up tree that miraculously began to sprout; others say that it was a living tree that bore no fruit, because these events took place in winter when fruit are not in season. The gifts, when miraculously provided, gave Mary the nourishment “most appropriate for women in labor,” and also confirmed the noble status the date palm holds in God’s creation. A number of traditions, however, see God’s gifts to Mary as greater than physical nourishment in that God’s creation of fresh dates in the winter “without pollen” was, primarily, miraculous proof of Mary’s sinlessness.<sup>71</sup> Mary stayed with her child in the place of his birth for forty days, that is, until she had regained physical purity.<sup>72</sup>

According to medieval scholarly Qur’an interpretation, Mary then returned home to her people. The more popular and hagiographic *qisas al-anbiya’* genre of pious legendary tales here records some additional events. Some traditionists “who transmitted from the *ahl al-kitab*” relate that a search party went out for Mary.<sup>73</sup> When they came upon Mary and her newborn child, they found them both surrounded by lights.<sup>74</sup> According to Wahb ibn Munabbih,<sup>75</sup> the idols East and West collapsed on that day and the satans were confused until Iblis told them about Jesus . . . and they found Jesus lying in his mother’s lap, while angels stood all about him. A brilliant star rose in the sky. The priests of the Persian king took this as the sign of an important birth. The Persian king then sent his emissaries to Jesus with gold, myrrh, and frankincense. The Syrian king, however, planned to kill Jesus. When Mary was informed of his intentions, she fled with Jesus to Egypt, where they stayed until Jesus was twelve years old.<sup>76</sup> Medieval scholarly Tafsir rejects this story by denying that anyone went out in search of Mary. Modern exegesis, much more critical of hagiographic detail in general and Bible-related lore (*isra’iliyyat*) in particular, has labeled tales of this nature “fables and legends” which obscure the main Qur’anic issue, that is, God’s reminder to the faithful that He is One and His power is absolute.<sup>77</sup>

When Mary returned to her family, she left her defense to her child. The interpreters here speak of the anger of Mary’s people at the suggestion that a mere infant would speak to them to exonerate his mother.<sup>78</sup> The effectiveness of Jesus’ defense is seen in the fact that his (Qur’an-recorded) words concerned himself as God’s prophet and thereby established Mary’s virtue within the parameter of prophetic veracity.<sup>79</sup>

### *Some Doctrinal Issues in the Qur'anic Revelations on Mary*

#### *Spirit (ruh)*

Suras 19:17; 21:91; and 66:12 state that Mary was impregnated by "Our spirit."<sup>80</sup> Jesus is identified as "God's prophet, His word that He cast into Mary and a spirit from Him" (4:171). Jesus was supported with the holy spirit (*ruh al-qudus*) (2:87, 253; 5:113).<sup>81</sup> The casting of God's spirit into Mary recalls the gift of God's spirit to Adam shaped from clay (15:29; 32:9; 38:72),<sup>82</sup> while Jesus' support by means of the holy spirit recalls the strengthening of those in whose hearts faith is firmly inscribed "with a spirit from Himself" (58:22). In addition, the Qur'an speaks of "the trusted spirit" (*al-ruh al-amin*) as the agent of God's revelation (26:193; cf. 16:102). The spirit is further mentioned together with, but separate from, the angels (97:4; 70:4; 78:38), and also as something conveyed by the angels to God's chosen servants (16:2). In its role as conveyor of revelation, the spirit is identified as Gabriel (*Jibril*) (2: 97).<sup>83</sup>

In Mary's story, the spirit is life-creating force of, or from, God. To this day, however, Islamic exegesis has differentiated between "Our [God's] spirit" sent to Mary in the form of a man (19:17) and "Our [God's] spirit [of] which We breathed into Mary" (21:91; 66:12). While the former has been "personalized" by way of identification with Gabriel,<sup>84</sup> the latter is understood as the life substance with which God (directly) awakened Adam to life from clay, just as it (directly) awakened Jesus to life in Mary's womb.<sup>85</sup> Classical exegesis established that Gabriel was the means, or instrument, of God's creative power. But contemporary thinkers perpetuate the notion that, "somehow," "God's spirit in the form of a well-shaped human" *qua* Gabriel in human form was a different "entity" than the spirit which God breathed (directly) into Mary.<sup>86</sup> The issue, however, has not attracted much further attention. On the whole, the conservative shaykhs familiar with the medieval rationalist tradition are merely imitative of medieval authorities. Others find little use in the scholastic tradition since their attention lies with social, economic and political issues, the new agenda of defining Islam in the modern world.

#### *Kalima, God's Word Bestowed upon Mary*

In Sura 3:42, the angels announce to Mary that God gives her glad tidings of a word from Him whose name is Christ Jesus, son of Mary. Sura 4:171 speaks of Jesus as God's apostle and His word bestowed upon Mary. Classical Qur'an exegesis has recorded different interpretations of the meaning of Jesus as "a word from God" (3:42) or "God's word" (4:171).<sup>87</sup> Once again, the richest formulation is found in the work of the medieval rationalist theologian Razi<sup>88</sup> and is reiterated, with little change, by the nineteenth century modernist theologian Muhammad Abduh. To these authorities, use of the term "word" is mainly metaphorical. The term can be interpreted as:

1. God's creative power and His act of creation of Jesus.
2. "word" indicates the gospel, essence of Jesus' prophetic mission.

3. Else, Jesus himself is figuratively referred to as “God’s word” in order to define his mission, which is to clarify God’s message to the world and cleanse the record of past revelations from [Jewish] distortion.
4. The “word” means God’s message to Mary *about* the birth of Jesus.<sup>89</sup>

The fundamentalist Sayyid Qutb sums up the lack of interest of many modern and contemporary religious thinkers in the whole scholastic rationalist tradition when he places the notion of Jesus as God’s word among the Qur’an’s “implicit” or “obscure” (*mutashabih*) teachings, “a matter above human understanding and, therefore, none of man’s concern.”<sup>90</sup>

### *Prophethood*

Was Mary a prophet? Some Muslim theologians, especially of the Zahirite (“literalist”) school, have argued that Mary mother of Jesus, Sara mother of Isaac, and the mother of Moses are to be reckoned among God’s prophets because, according to the Qur’an, angels spoke to them (or God otherwise inspired them). In a controversial tract, the Zahirite Ibn Hazm of Cordova (d. 1064) argued in favor of women’s prophethood but distinguished *nubuwwa* (prophethood) from *risala* (messengerhood), the latter restricted to men.<sup>91</sup> According to Ibn Hazm, the knowledge the mothers of Isaac, Jesus, and Moses received from God (through word or inspiration) was as true as the knowledge received by male prophets (through revelation). Ibn Hazm further likens the “inspiration” of Moses’ mother (to throw her son into the river) to Abraham’s “inspiration” (to sacrifice his son). Both would have been crazy as well as sinful in acting on the inspiration unless they trusted its divine source.<sup>92</sup> According to Ibn Hazm, Mary’s prophethood is further clarified in that the Qur’an also calls her “a woman of truth” (5:75) just as it speaks of the prophet Joseph as “a man of truth” (12:46). Finally, the authenticated prophetic tradition that Asya (the Pharaoh’s wife) and Mary are “the two perfect women” prompts Ibn Hazm not only to include Asya among the prophets of Islam but also to rank Mary and Asya above the other female prophets in the manner that Muhammad and Abraham are ranked above the male.<sup>93</sup>

Consensus-based Sunni theology rejected this doctrine and labeled it “heretical innovation” (*bid’a*) on the authority of Suras 12:109 and 16:43 (“We sent not before you other than men whom We inspired”). Critical to the argumentation, however, was also the consideration of “purity” as aspect of *’isma* (“innate quality of immunity from sin and error of prophets”). In orthodox definition, purity includes (constant) physical purity, a state unattainable to women because of menstruation. This legalistic notion has informed scripturalist interpretation of the issue of Mary’s prophethood and also the definition of Mary’s Qur’an-proclaimed purity.

### *Purity, Sinlessness, Virginity*

In Islamic usage, the terms “purity”<sup>94</sup> (*tahara*) and “purification” (*tathir*) with relation to women usually signify the physical state marked by absence of menstruation, and the ritual (major ablution, *ghusl*) preceding it. In the Qur’an,

the angels announce to Mary that God has “purified” her (*tahhara*) (3:42). The Qur’anic text does not indicate whether this signified a physical state. The Hadith, however, has generally insisted that in the physical sense Mary was a woman like all others. She is said to have begun menstruation during the time of service in the place of worship, from which she was then removed until purification. Most interpreters add that Mary was ten or thirteen or fifteen years old at the time of the annunciation, and that she had completed two menstrual cycles at that time.<sup>95</sup> The forty days of isolation Mary is said to have observed after her delivery “until she was healed of childbirth” further indicate that Jesus’ birth was considered ordinary in its physical symptoms.<sup>96</sup>

Conversely, some interpreters have recorded traditions and/or their own scholarly opinions that Mary’s purity included freedom from menstruation just as it did “freedom from the touch of men.”<sup>97</sup> The modernist Muhammad Abduh speculates that it was this quality that enabled Mary to serve in the temple.<sup>98</sup> In modern as well as classical sources, however, these readings have remained marginal to consensus-based doctrine that defined Mary’s purity in ethical terms. While physically a woman like all others, Mary is said to have been excised of all lowly character traits, also disbelief and rebelliousness/disobedience against God, that is, sin.<sup>99</sup> In this context, exegesis has awarded prominence to the Prophet’s words, enshrined in several authenticated traditions, that of all humans only Mary and her son escaped Satan’s touch at birth. These prophetic traditions are generally linked with Anna’s prayer that God protect her daughter and the daughter’s offspring against Satan (3:35).<sup>100</sup>

It is, perhaps, because of Mary’s holiness (rather than physical purity) that some interpreters have even considered Mary a man, “because of the perfection apportioned to her,” (since) “among women are some who are perfect and knowledgeable and who attain the standard of men—they are in a real sense men.”<sup>101</sup> The question remains, however, whether such reckoning of (holy) women among men is, or has been, thought to carry true ritual and other legal implications, that is, whether such women are acknowledged full status in the community of believers. Of interest in this context are the scholarly interpretations of 3:43, God’s command to Mary to “bow down [in prayer] with those [males] who bow down.” According to Smith and Haddad, the modern Qur’anic commentator Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi was one of the few Muslim authorities who established the connection between female holiness and women’s right to lead the prayer.<sup>102</sup> Traditional exegesis, though acknowledging Mary’s sinlessness, interpreted 3:43 as God’s call to Mary to pray *with* the congregation, that is, the male members of the community, but nothing more.<sup>103</sup>

According to classical as well as modern Islamic consensus, Mary was virgin (*batul*)<sup>104</sup> when she conceived her child from God’s spirit. (The question of whether Mary’s virginity prevailed after Jesus’ birth is largely disregarded).<sup>105</sup> Clearly controversial (within the Islamic context), then, is the rejection of the notion of virgin birth as advanced by some modernist Qur’an interpreters from among the radical avant garde of modernism on the Indian subcontinent. The nineteenth-century Indian exegete Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) interprets

the Qur'anic texts on Mary's chastity ("guarding her shame") as the chastity of a married woman who only has sexual intercourse with her husband, while the twentieth-century Pakistani exegete Ghulam Ahmed Parwez argues that lack of Qur'anic detail on Mary's marriage and the identity of Jesus's father is doctrinally insignificant in that such details are also missing in the Qur'anic histories of other Qur'anic prophets; he adds that the words of the angels' annunciation to Mary (3:47) are identical to those given to Zacharia concerning John (3:40), while John was clearly created in the ordinary way, from a father and a mother. Jesus, then, is here perceived as the legitimate son of Joseph and Mary, and the Qur'an-recorded slander of the Jews concerning Jesus's birth is understood as the unfounded Jewish accusation that Jesus was an illegitimate child.<sup>106</sup> Islamic consensus, however, has upheld the tenet of the virgin birth.<sup>107</sup>

### *Obedience*

The Qur'an proclaims Mary as among the devoutly obedient (*qanitin*) of God's servants (66:12). In this context, Mary's questioning of the angel on how she could have a child "while no human has touched me" (19:20), and her outcry at the onset of childbirth, "if only I had died before this and were completely forgotten" (19:23), have attracted exegetic attention in that both could potentially be perceived as rebellious. Exegesis has uniformly upheld the tenet of Mary's obedience. Her words to the angel are seen as the mark of chastity, not doubt in God's omnipotence.<sup>108</sup> Concerning Mary's (more problematic) wish for annihilation, the interpreters emphasize that the very pious are given to such expressions of their unworthiness in situations of distress.<sup>109</sup> Mary neither rejected God's verdict nor did she lose faith in her innocence. Her words of anguish had to do with anxiety about her reputation in that the shame of returning to society with a son would destroy her fame as ascetic servant in the house of worship. Else, she unselfishly worried that her people would fall into sin by doubting the veracity of her story.<sup>110</sup> Some interpreters, however, add that for ordinary human beings and under ordinary circumstances, such behavior would be reprehensible, since "it is a sin to wish for death because of sickness or poverty."<sup>111</sup>

### *Chosen . . . Chosen Above the Women of the Worlds*

In 3:42, the angels inform Mary that God has chosen her, purified her, and chosen her above the women of the worlds. Exegesis interprets the "first choosing" as God's acceptance of Mary for His service, her maintenance in the temple with sustenance from paradise that freed her from all labor, and her miraculous ability to hear the angels' words. The "second choosing" is said to have consisted in God's gift of Jesus without a father, the child's words in Mary's defense from the cradle, Mary's and Jesus's status as a sign (*aya*) for the world, and God's guidance of Mary.<sup>112</sup> This leaves the question of Mary's status "above the women of the worlds," and here the exegetic debate is remarkable both for its intensity and also the lack of consensus. At stake is Mary's ranking among Qur'anic women figures but also, and more importantly, in relation to the elite women of Islam, especially the Prophet's wives Khadija and A'isha and the

Prophet's daughter Fatima. The problem is addressed by questioning whether Mary's preeminence is absolute (over all other women and for all times) or relative (over the women of *her* time). The larger number of traditions recorded in Tafsir and *qisas al-anbiya'* literature establish, on the authority of the Prophet, that Mary and Fatima, Khadija and Asya (the Pharaoh's wife) are the best women of the world and also the ruling females in heaven; traditions on A'isha's inclusion in this group are fewer in number. While Asya's and Mary's merit is established on the basis of the Qur'an (66:11–12), Khadija's merit is seen in her great service to the Prophet's mission, and that of A'isha in her status as Muhammad's most beloved wife and a prominent authority on his legacy after his death.<sup>113</sup> Popular piety has, in some fashion, settled the question of Mary and Asya, Khadija and A'isha by making all four Muhammad's wifely consorts in paradise. Indeed, it is said that Khadija's heavenly mansion will be between the houses of Mary and Asya.<sup>114</sup>

This leaves the question of Mary's ranking in relation to Muhammad's daughter Fatima. In Muslim piety, and here especially Shi'i piety, the connection of Mary to Fatima is such that the two figures at times appear collapsed into one. Mary was one of four miraculous midwives who assisted Khadija in Fatima's birth,<sup>115</sup> and Mary also appeared to Fatima to console her during her last illness.<sup>116</sup> Both were visited by angels, received miraculous sustenance during childhood and also during the isolation preceding the birth of their children, and both are believed to have shared the same miraculous qualities of freedom from menstruation and bleeding at childbirth.<sup>117</sup> What most deeply binds Mary and Fatima together is the joint image of mistress of sorrows. In Sunni tradition, Fatima's suffering is mainly linked with the Prophet's death, whom of all of his children she alone survived. In Shi'i piety, she is also, and primarily, the grieving mother whose short and hard life was made bitter by the foreknowledge of the future martyrdom of her son Husayn, an event of divine redemption and cosmic significance.<sup>118</sup> Although, according to the Qur'an, Jesus was persecuted and rejected by his people but not slain, Shi'i hagiography has recognized strong affinities between Jesus and Husayn<sup>119</sup> as, also, between their holy mothers. Mary and Fatima, holy figures of solace and hope, are at times revered simultaneously.<sup>120</sup> While some traditions reported on the authority of the Prophet award Mary and Fatima equal rank as the two reigning females in the celestial realm hereafter, most Shi'i authorities rank Fatima above Mary; indeed, Fatima is sometimes referred to as *Maryam al-Kubra*, "Mary the Greater."<sup>121</sup>

### *Creaturedom*

Muslim exegetes have consistently seen the affirmation of God's Oneness as central issue and purpose of all of the revelations on Mary. Mary, God's handmaiden, and Jesus, God's slave and prophet, are not "gods" (5:78; cf. 5:19). The refutation of the notion of "three" (trinity) (4:171) is interpreted as divine correction of blasphemous Christian association of Mary "the female consort" and Jesus "the son" with God in a "family setting."<sup>122</sup> It is likened to the Qur'anic refutation of equally blasphemous pagan Arabian allegations that the angels

are God's "daughters" whom God begat with the jinn (in interpretation of 37:149–159; cf. 43:19–20), or that pagan deities were God's "daughters" (53:19–23).

### *Mary and Eve*

In clarifying that the nature of Jesus is fully human, the Qur'an likens Jesus to Adam in that both are God's creations, brought forth by the might of divine speech and decree. The Hadith has expanded this equation into a creatural tetragram where Mary parallels Adam and Jesus, Eve. "Just as Eve was created from Adam without a woman, so was Jesus created from Mary without a man."<sup>123</sup> The Qur'an-based Islamic doctrine that Adam's and Eve's disobedience was but a "slip" (or, "error"), repented and forgiven (essentially in the divine gift of prophethood) precludes linkage of Eve and Mary in any other way within the Islamic context.<sup>124</sup>

### *Mary as Model for Emulation by the Righteous*

The Qur'an acclaims Mary "an example for the righteous" (66:12). Exegesis has, of course, affirmed her obedience to God, devoutness in His service, and truthful testimony to His revelations as exemplary qualities that the Muslim woman is called upon to emulate. However, given that the Hadith teaches that "marriage is one-half of the believer's faith," important aspects of Mary's nature and history remain beyond what the Muslim woman can, or should, strive to equal. Exegesis, then, has used some parts of the Qur'anic narrative to draw moral lessons and omitted others. The Qur'anic dictum that, prior to the annunciation, Mary had withdrawn to a place of isolation (19:16–17) has been interpreted as Mary's desire for gender-based segregation at the onset of puberty, and here she is also said to have donned the face-veil (means as well as symbol of Muslim female morality in that it hides the beauty of its wearer).<sup>125</sup> Mary's words to the angel who appeared to her in the form of a young man while she was alone have served as exemplar of female selfprotective virtue at its best.<sup>126</sup> Mary's Qur'an-proclaimed qualities of chastity and obedience have also occasioned exegetic emphasis on the duty of women to come to their husband's bed as virgins, to maintain marital fidelity, and to realize obedience to God through obedience to their husbands in whose charge they are placed by God.<sup>127</sup>

But Mary's importance to Muslims, especially Muslim women, is far different and far greater than what these scholarly formulations might suggest. Recitation of "her Sura" (Sura 19) is a favorite especially with women circles throughout the Muslim world, believed to confer special blessings on reciter and listeners alike. Many women in Syria are said to pray through Mary (and Fatima) in moments of anguish,<sup>128</sup> as women elsewhere pray through (other) female saints. And sightings of Mary, such as were witnessed by throngs of Copts and Muslims in Old Cairo in May 1968 when many reported miraculous healings,<sup>129</sup> further attest to the high status and lasting importance of Mary in Muslim piety.

*Conclusion*

The preceding has discovered a multiplicity of meanings for the Qur'anic women of the sacred past, both in scripture and also interpretation. From the beginning, the women figures signify themselves and also something else. Actors in Qur'anic history, they function as images, or metaphorical extensions, of that historical reality which God revealed to His Prophet. Thus their stories are specifically Qur'anic, in the casting of the individual tale and also its larger message. Muslim interpretation extended the images' symbolic range to accommodate a variety of later readings that often changed their first, Qur'anic, didactic import. Though differing among themselves, the later formulations share in the fact that they were, and are, culturally determined. In different moldings, the images of the Qur'an's women have thus acted as signs of, and for, cultural self-understanding.

Both the concept of Qur'anic history as "real," that is, "factual," history, and also the place of the female actors within that history represent religious "symbols" in the Geertzian sense. Within this shared worldview, Muslims past and present have developed a number of "paradigms,"<sup>130</sup> that is, specific models that structure perception and also serve as agenda for the future. From Eve to Mary, the interpretations presented above show some measure of internal consistency as to paradigms and paradigmatic shifts on questions of doctrine and ethics. With the modern period, the latter dimension rose to prominence, especially as relating to sociopolitical change in the Islamic world. Like their Qur'anic blueprint, the women of sacred history are still models of guidance and warning, but in a number of new ways. As those of the past, their modern images are occasioned by the need of each generation of Muslims to make sense of the world in light of God's revelation.