

## MARY(AM)-MARY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND QURAN

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Mary(am) figures in both the Quran and Christian scripture. The four evangelists present her in late first-century Hebrew-Greco-Roman garb, while the Quran depicts her in seventh-century Arabian attire. A comparison between these two portraits will, perhaps, enlighten our understanding of Christian and Muslim attitudes toward the mother of Jesus.

Mary exists in all four canonical gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In Mark, the earliest gospel, “Mary’s role is minimal, and she belongs to that group closest to Jesus that persistently misunderstands his true nature.”<sup>1</sup> In Mark 3:21, Jesus’ family attempts to restrain him because people say, “He has gone out of his mind.” In 3:31-35, Jesus’ mother, brothers and sisters are standing outside of the crowd sitting around him. When Jesus is told his family is asking for him, he rebuffs his mother and siblings in favor of those surrounding him. Later, after Jesus teaches in the Nazareth synagogue, he is identified as the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Judas, Silas and some sisters (6:3). When his fellow Nazoreans take offense at Jesus, he replies, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house”(6:4). This is an even more caustic repudiation of his family than in 3:34 when he asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Thus, in Mark, the mother of Jesus is mentioned in only two pericopes, is portrayed as unable to comprehend her son’s mission, and is named Mary only one time (6:3), where her name is part of the phrase “the son of Mary.”

The designation, “son of Mary,” is quite unusual because of the Jewish patronymic tradition of naming the father of a son. For example, Matthew’s genealogy of

Jesus lists 42 generations of fathers and sons and includes 5 mothers who had “irregular” pregnancies, Mary among them (Matt 1:1-17). One explanation for the Markan Jesus’ identification as “son of Mary” is that some Jewish sources taught that Jesus was illegitimate and Mark does not bother to pursue the issue.<sup>2</sup>

In Matthew’s first chapter, the mother of Jesus is named “Mary” three times:

Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah  
(1:16)

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph (1:18)

Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife (1:20)

These descriptions firmly establish Mary as, first the betrothed, and later the wife of Joseph and the mother of Jesus, the Messiah. While Mark does not deal with the illegitimacy of Jesus issue:

Matthew is the only evangelist to make a clear statement about the virgin birth: he says unequivocally that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost *before* Mary and Joseph came together (1:18).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Matthean infancy narrative establishes Mary’s conception as the work of the Holy Spirit and not as the result of a physical union.

In Matthew 2, Mary’s name appears one time at 2:11: “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.”

Following this, in 2:13,14,20 and 21, she is “his mother.” Although Mary necessarily appears in the infancy narrative, it is Joseph who plays the prominent role. The angel appears to Joseph, advises him to marry Mary who has conceived by the Holy Spirit, and entrusts Joseph with the name of the child, Jesus (1:20-21). Then, Joseph is directed by an angel to take the child and his mother to Egypt to escape Herod’s massacre of the innocents (2:13-15). Finally, an angel informs Joseph of the death of Herod and tells him to take the child and his mother back to Israel (2:19-20). Joseph complies and “made *his* home in a town called Nazareth” (2:23).

The other two pericopes in which the mother of Jesus appears are 12:46-50, which parallels Mark 3:31-35 where Jesus repudiates his family, and the Nazareth rejection scene (13:53-58), the parallel to Mark 6:1-6. In Matthew 13:55, the question, “Is not his mother called Mary?” is asked. This is the fifth time in Matthew where her name appears, as well as the final reference to her at all. Clearly, her role in Matthew is the silent, compliant vessel of God’s will.

Luke includes Mary far more than the other three evangelists. In his infancy narrative, Mary is at the heart of the drama for the only time in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> We are first introduced to her as a virgin, and then learn her name, Mary, in 1:27. Gabriel addresses her as “favored one” (1:28) and informs *her* that she will conceive a child and that *she* will name him Jesus (1:31). Gabriel goes on to inform her of Jesus’ kingship and teleology (1:32-33). Then, for the first time in Christian scripture, Mary speaks. She poignantly protests the possibility of her pregnancy as a virgin, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (1:38). After Gabriel assures her that she will conceive by “the power of the Most High” (1:35), Mary speaks again, giving her assent to God’s plan (1:38). Mary

then visits her relative Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth addresses Mary as blessed among women and mother of my Lord (1:39-43). Mary then recites the ten-line Magnificat (1:46-55), one of the longest soliloquies in Christian scripture.

In the pericope of Jesus' birth (2:1-20), Luke emphasizes Mary's delivery of and care for the infant (2:6-7), the shepherds' finding Mary and Joseph with the child lying in the manger (2:17), and Mary's treasuring and pondering the shepherds' words about the child (2:19). At the presentation of Jesus in the temple when Simeon praises Jesus as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel," the child's father and mother are amazed (2:32-33). Then, Simeon predicts that Mary's soul will be pierced with a sword (2:35).

Luke concludes his infancy narrative with the disturbing scene of the 12-year-old Jesus staying behind at the Temple instead of leaving Jerusalem with his parents after the Passover festival (2:41-52). Neither Mary nor Joseph are named in the pericope, but are called "his parents" (2:41,43,48). In the fourth and last time that the mother of Jesus speaks in Luke, and the first time in the canon that Jesus and his mother have a direct conversation,<sup>5</sup> the mother chastises her son for causing Jesus' father and her great anxiety (2:48). It is astonishing that the virgin who received Gabriel's revelation about her son's future (1:26-38), the new mother who pondered the shepherds' praise (2:16-19), and the devout Jewess who heard Simeon's prediction of Jesus' importance to the world (2:29-35) does not understand why Jesus was in his Father's house among the teachers (2:49). Thus, in the Lukan infancy narrative, Mary's intelligence and importance are

progressively undercut in favor of her son, who emerges in the Temple scene as the wise figure, at the expense of the wise woman who raised him.<sup>6</sup>

Luke continues the marginalization of the mother of Jesus in 4:22. Unlike Mark's "son of Mary" (6:3) and Matthew's "his mother called Mary" (13:55), Luke's amazed Nazoreans ask, "Is not this Joseph's son?" While this omission of Mary may be explained as an apology for the issue of Jesus' illegitimacy,<sup>7</sup> it appears to be a deliberate attempt by Luke to downplay Mary because he could have easily included her name with that of Joseph. Jesus' rebuff of his mother and brothers at 8:19-21 is essentially the same, yet curter, than in Mark 3:31-35 and Matthew 12:46-50. The final Lukan reference to the mother of Jesus mentions only her womb and breasts (11:27). Jesus' retort, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (11:28), while signaling a spiritual, rather than physical emphasis, nevertheless dishonors his mother.<sup>8</sup>

Luke also includes Mary, the mother of Jesus, with the apostles praying in Jerusalem in Acts 1:14. Presumably, she is present at Pentecost to experience the gift of speaking in tongues, but Luke does not confirm this. All in all, while Luke does give Mary far more attention than the other synoptic writers, it is a very ambivalent presentation, one that ultimately does not applaud her bravery and faith.

In John's gospel, the second and last Biblical interlocution between Jesus and his mother occurs at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11). When the mother of Jesus tells him, "They have no wine," he answers, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (2:3-4). The addressing of his mother as "Woman," coupled with the harshness of his response, demonstrates that John's Jesus is of a different breed. While "Woman" is the term of address that Jesus uses exclusively for females in the

fourth gospel (cf. 4:21, 8:10), it is striking that he does not differentiate his mother from other women. This is possibly due to his nature as the “Word” of God in John and the writer’s dissociation of Jesus from physicality.<sup>9</sup>

The only other appearance of Jesus’ mother in John is at the foot of the cross (19:25). This is the only gospel that places her at Jesus’ death; she is not named but is accompanied by her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother’” (19:26-27). While this signals Jesus’ imminent physical death, it also demonstrates that Jesus loves his mother enough to plan for her future care. Also, if we remember that Jesus changed the water into wine at Cana (2:9) at his mother’s behest, we must conclude that although John deliberately downplays the physical bond between Jesus and the *woman* who is his mother, she is important because she initiates Jesus’ first miracle and witnesses the end of his earthly ministry.

In contrast to the 57 verses in the four evangelists’ work that include Mary, the Quran<sup>10</sup> offers 70 verses that refer to Maryam, including 34 which specifically use her name.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, she is the *only* woman named in the Quran and one of only 8 figures for whom one of the Quran’s 114 chapters is named. Six of the others are named as prophets and one is a sage.<sup>12</sup> Most of Maryam’s story occurs in chapters 3 and 19, which present her life prior to the Annunciation, the birth of Jesus, and her presentation of Jesus to her family. The majority of the other verses honor her in the phrase, “Jesus the son of Maryam.”

In 3:35-37, Maryam's mother, a member of the family of Imran, who were among those chosen above all others by God (3:33), dedicates her unborn child to God's service. In Hebrew scripture, Imran is known as "Amram," father of Moses, Aaron and Miriam (Ex 6:20). Upon delivery, she names her daughter "Maryam" and asks God to protect Maryam from the Evil One. Maryam grows in purity and beauty and is entrusted to the care of Zakariya, a priest and future father of Yahya (John). When Zakariya sees that Maryam receives sustenance that does not come from him, he inquires about its source. Maryam responds, "From God: for God provides sustenance to whom He pleases, without measure" (3:37).

At this point, the promise of a son is made to Zakariya (3:38-41). Zakariya prays for a son and is assured by angels that Yahya, "a Word from God, one noble, chaste, and a prophet" (3:39), will be born. Zakariya asks how this can happen to an old man with a barren wife, and he asks for a sign. For his sign, Zakariya is ordered not to speak for three days, after which he is to praise god.

Maryam's story continues in 3:42-47. The angels tell her that God has purified and chosen her above women of all nations. They direct her to bow down in prayer with others who do so. They also inform her that she was not present when lots were cast to determine who would care for her, nor was she there at the ensuing dispute over her designated caretaker. Then, the angels announce glad tidings of a Word from God, whose name will be Christ Jesus the son of Maryam, "held in honor in this world and the hereafter and of those nearest to God" (3:45). When Maryam asks how she could bear a child when never touched by a man, she is told that God creates what He wills, and that "God will teach him the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel" (3:48).

The similarities between the Quranic and Lukan scriptural accounts of the promise to Zakariya and the Annunciation are striking because they not only contain nearly identical scenes, but also share the same structural interweaving of the circumstances and portents of these two miraculous births. The Quran's account of Maryam's childhood and casting of lots for her care, which are not part of the Christian canon, correspond very closely to chapters 7-10 of a 2nd-century<sup>13</sup> apocryphal gospel, *The Protevangelium of James*.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 19, entitled Maryam, is a more detailed version of the Annunciation and births of Yahya and Jesus. The first 15 verses equate with Zakariya's story in chapter 3, with the additional information that Yahya will be kind to his parents and not overbearing or rebellious (19:14). In verses 19:16-26, we learn that Maryam withdraws from her family to a place in the East, screens herself from them and receives an angel who appears as a man. When the angel announces that Maryam will receive the gift of a holy son, she protests that no man has touched her and that she is not unchaste. The angel responds that God has decreed that her son will be a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us. Maryam conceives, retires to a remote place and experiences childbirth pains. The pain drives her to the trunk of a palm tree and she cries out, wishing for death, "Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight" (19:23). Then, a voice tells her not to grieve, for God has provided a rivulet of water and ripe dates to be shaken from the palm tree. Maryam is then told that if she sees any man, she is to declare that she has vowed to fast and refrain from speaking.

In the following verses (19:27-29), Maryam presents her infant to her people. Amazed, they ask how a sister of Aaron (of the family of Imran), whose father is not evil

and whose mother is not unchaste, could have a child. In response, Maryam points to the baby, and her family protests that they cannot talk to a child in the cradle. At this point (19:30-33), Jesus begins to speak, revealing that he is a prophet whom God has made kind to his mother and not overbearing or miserable. This is quite similar to the kind of child Yahya is (19:14). Jesus declares: “So Peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life” (19:33). This pericope concludes with: “Such was Jesus the son of Mary: it is a statement of truth, about which they dispute” (19:34). Maryam then disappears from her chapter; the rest of its 98 verses are devoted to the refutation of Jesus’ divinity and the hailing of Hebrew and other prophets.

The differences between the Christian and Islamic scriptural accounts of the Annunciation to Mary(am), the birth of Jesus, and the presentation of him in chapter 19 of the Quran are remarkable. First, in the Quran, Maryam does not assent to her pregnancy; it is decreed. Second, there is no Joseph; she is totally bereft during childbirth except for the voice that assures her of food and water while she is experiencing the pangs of labor. The physical need for human comfort and support is supplanted by divine aid. Third, Maryam is told not to talk to any man. Fourth, Maryam is accused by her people of shaming her ancestors, father and mother by bearing a child out of wedlock. Fifth, Maryam does not speak for herself, but recedes so that her baby son can defend her.

Of the 70 Quranic verses in which Maryam appears or is referred to, 24 are in relation to Jesus son of Mary.<sup>15</sup> For example, in chapter 5, verses 19,75,78,81,113,115,117, and 119 all contain either the phrase “Christ son of Maryam” or “Jesus son of Maryam” as assertion that Jesus is a non-divine prophet (5:75) or that

Jews and Christians disobeyed and rejected Faith (5:81). Thus in such verses, while Maryam is recognized, it is not for herself, but for her position as the mother of a divinely conceived prophet. “According to Islamic exegesis, this matronymic name derived from the fact that Jesus has no creaturely father, and is therefore an honorific title.”<sup>16</sup>

The Quran also extols Maryam as a Sign (23:50) and specifically in 21:91 for guarding her chastity, “. . . her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of Our Spirit.” In 66:12, Maryam is an example to Unbelievers (66:10) because she guarded her chastity, God breathed his spirit into her, and she devoutly testified to the truth of her Lord’s words and Revelations.

In conclusion, while the Quran extends to Maryam more importance and recognition than does the Christian canon to Mary, it is not for her accomplishments beyond the role of a daughter in the family of Imran and mother of Jesus. Christian scripture emphasizes the divinity of Jesus; the Quran stresses the humanity of Jesus. Thus, Mary’s role as a physical mother is downplayed in Christianity and esteemed in Islam. In both traditions, she never stands alone.

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<sup>1</sup>Gail Paterson Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 149

<sup>3</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.), 1976), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Corrington, p. 164-5.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>8</sup>Warner, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Corrington, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> The translation used is by A. Yusuf Ali, with the exception of my substitution of "Maryam" for "Mary."

<sup>11</sup> Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," *The Muslim World* 79 (1989), p. 162.

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<sup>12</sup>Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Quran, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.155, n. 13.

<sup>13</sup>Corrington, p. 179.

<sup>14</sup>Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), "Protevangelium of James," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 361-367.

<sup>15</sup> Haddad and Smith, p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> Stowasser, p. 156, n. 17.