

Maryam, Androtokos: The Qur'anic Mary, Her Origins, and Her Implications

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Most, if not all writing about Mary's role in the Qur'an begins with the statistic that the Qur'an mentions her more often than the Bible does—a fun fact for sure, though it somewhat ignores the history and intertextuality between the two scriptures that necessitates this to be the case. After all, the Qur'an has roughly 600 years of Marian arguments and exegesis to work with and therefore has to both establish a new interpretation of Mary while also contesting much of the existing Christian material about her, especially when it comes to theology. The Qur'an mentions Mary in a total of 6 surahs, but tells her story most extensively in the third surah, *Al-Imran* ("The House/Family of Imran"), following her birth, childhood, and the Annunciation, and the nineteenth surah, *Maryam* ("Mary"), covering the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus. The latter is especially notable, as it's one of eight surahs to be named after a person (along with *Yunus*, *Hud*, *Yusuf*, *Ibrahim*, *Luqman*, *Muhammad*, and *Nuh*) and the only one to be named after a woman. Its contents are also extremely interesting, as they seem to diverge sharply from the traditional Biblical or otherwise Christian stories of Jesus' birth. Where did this new narrative come from, and more importantly, what does it suggest about Mary and her theological implications? Throughout *Maryam*, Mary's character and role in Islamic theology are developed in dialogue with Christian beliefs, scripture, and Apocrypha, emphasizing some aspects while contradicting others, to create a uniquely Islamic view of Mary.

Although the Qur'an assumes familiarity with the Bible and various Apocrypha,¹ the presence of similarities between the texts does not necessarily imply that the Qur'anic narrative of Mary is directly derived from these sources. The Arabs of Pre-Islamic

¹ Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: the Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

Hijaz—the region where the Qur’an originates—were an oral culture² leading to stories becoming more mutable.³ With the advent of the Qur’an, this culture transitioned into a highly literate one,⁴ and with it, the once-Biblical stories solidified into their Qur’anic forms. It’s important to emphasize that the stories within the Qur’an aren’t derivative borrowings, but different variants influenced by their own cultural contexts.⁵ However much the Qur’an might borrow or be inspired by Christian stories, it is also intent on challenging Christian, specifically Orthodox and Syriac, theology,⁶ especially about Jesus, and therefore Mary. For example, the Qur’an refers to Jesus as the son of Mary (rather than the Biblical son of God) and compares him to Adam, who is similarly created, not fathered, by God,⁷ negating Mary’s status as Theotokos (God-bearer), a popular Marian title in Eastern Christianity. This cultural context must be kept in mind when analyzing *Maryam*.

The majority of Mary’s story within *Maryam* does not appear in any Gospel verse or Apocryphal text.⁸ The section of the surah concerning Mary begins with a depiction of the Annunciation, the second in the Qur’an.⁹ After Mary has left the temple for “an eastern place”, God sends to her “Our Spirit” (most likely Gabriel) in “the likeness of a perfect man”, who has come to “bestow upon [Mary] a pure boy.”¹⁰ She asks how she’ll have a child if she’s a virgin, and the angel replies that it’s easy for God to create new life and that Jesus will be a “sign unto mankind” of God’s power as the Creator.¹¹ She conceives and withdraws even further from the temple, eventually going into labor in the desert, crying out in agony, “Would that I had died before this and was a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!”¹² An unidentified voice calls “to her from below her” that God has sent her a stream under a date palm to “eat and drink and cool thine eye”, and asks that she take a vow of silence in return for this help.¹³ After giving birth to Jesus, she returns to the Temple and is chastised by “her people” for bearing a child out of wedlock, to whom she can’t reply due to her vow of silence.¹⁴ The infant Jesus answers in her stead, saying he is “a servant of God”, “a prophet”, and “dutiful towards [his] mother.”¹⁵ The text then identifies him as “Jesus son of Mary” before shifting its focus onto Jesus and his place among the other prophets of Islam.¹⁶ Much of this new material develops or disputes many of the Marian characteristics established in the Gospels and various Apocrypha on top of introducing new elements to weave into the narrative.

Unlike the rest of the Surah, the Qur’anic account of the Annunciation is very similar to that of the Bible. As in the Bible,¹⁷ Mary asks “How shall I have a boy when no

² Firestone, 15.

³ Firestone, 16-17.

⁴ Firestone, 17.

⁵ Firestone, 21.

⁶ Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (2nd ed. London: Continuum, 2010), 35.

⁷ Qur’an, 3:59.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, “The Heroine of the Qur’ān and the Black Madonna.” in *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, (Yale University Press, 1996), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bk7v.9>, 73.

⁹ Qur’an 3:42-47.

¹⁰ Qur’an 19:16-19.

¹¹ Qur’an 19:20-21.

¹² Qur’an 19:22-23.

¹³ Qur’an 19:24-26.

¹⁴ Qur’an 19:27-29.

¹⁵ Qur’an 19:30-32.

¹⁶ Qur’an 19:35.

¹⁷ Luke 1:34.

man has touched me, nor have I been unchaste?"¹⁸ emphasizing her virginity. Even though the Qur'an provides reasons other than her virgin birth to revere her—she is said to be twice-chosen, once from birth and the second to bear Jesus¹⁹—Mary's purity is one of her defining characteristics. Additionally, the Qur'an never once mentions Joseph. Though it is impossible to know if he was deliberately left out of the Qur'an or removed from the story during oral dissemination, his absence implies that, at some point, his presence was interpreted as a threat to Mary's virginity.²⁰ However, the Qur'anic account of the Annunciation does differ theologically from that of the Bible, as Jesus is not the son of God. Instead of Gabriel declaring that Mary's son "will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end,"²¹ the angel just calls him "a pure boy,"²² undermining the idea of Mary as the Theotokos.²³ This, combined with the emphasis on her virginity, means that the Qur'an celebrates her not just for the importance of her son, or even her son's piety, but for her own devotion to God as well.

After the Annunciation, Mary withdraws herself from the Temple and into isolation,²⁴ bringing back the theme of loneliness established throughout *Al-Imran*. Mary's life leading up to the Annunciation is quite solitary and tragic. Soon after her birth, she is dedicated to the Temple,²⁵ growing up without her father and mother, whom many Qur'anic commentators believe to have died before and after her birth, respectively.²⁶ Her withdrawal from the Temple is justified later by the community's reaction to seeing Jesus when Mary returns from the desert, calling Mary evil and unchaste.²⁷ Her self-imposed isolation was to protect herself from the scorn of her community—after all, according to Johanna Marie Buisson, through her pregnancy and single-motherhood, "she not only broke with the religious rule of the Temple, but she also broke with the social rules of her community."²⁸ While the Biblical Mary has the support and help of Joseph and Elizabeth, both are absent from the Qur'an, meaning the Qur'anic Mary doesn't have anyone who supports her throughout her pregnancy despite her cultural transgression. This leads her to spend her pregnancy alone, highlighting her resilience in the face of hardship and societal rejection. Her pain and isolation are at their highest when she goes into labor in the desert, calling out "Would that I had died before this and was a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!"²⁹—her labor is so painful that she wishes for death. While Mary's emotional pain accentuates her strength, her physical pain during her labor emphasizes her vulnerability and therefore her humanity. Many Syriac hymns and texts claim that Mary's labor was painless and easy because of her purity, also confirming her holiness and the divinity of Jesus³⁰ In the Qur'an,

¹⁸ Qur'an 19:20.

¹⁹ Qur'an 3:42.

²⁰ Jonathan M. Reck, "The Annunciation to Mary: A Christian Echo in the Qur'ān," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 4 (2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24754391>, 370.

²¹ Luke 1:32-33.

²² Qur'an 19:19.

²³ Leirvik, 34-35.

²⁴ Qur'an 19:22.

²⁵ Qur'an 3:35.

²⁶ Johanna Marie Buisson, "Subversive Maryam or a Qur'anic View on Women's Empowerment," *CrossCurrents* 66, no. 4 (2016): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26605776>, 451.

²⁷ Qur'an 19:27-28.

²⁸ Buisson, 455.

²⁹ Qur'an 19:23.

³⁰ Autumn DeLong, "A Shared History: Representations of Mary in the Christian and Muslim Traditions," *Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies* 8, (2020): 2.

however, Mary gives birth like every other woman, stressing that both her and Jesus are still human and that her importance comes not from Jesus' (or her own) godhood but from her role in the miracle of a virgin conception and birth.

The miracle of the date tree that answers Mary's cry of anguish further stresses her resilience by reinterpreting a story that makes her appear somewhat weak, and in the process turns Mary into a role model to be emulated. According to the Qur'an, the pain of labor drives Mary to the trunk of a date palm for support, and:

He called out to her from below her, "Grieve not! Thy Lord has placed a rivulet beneath thee. And shake toward thyself the trunk of the date palm; fresh, ripe dates shall fall upon thee. So eat and drink and cool thine eye. And if thou seest any human being, say, 'Verily I have vowed a fast unto the Compassionate, so I shall not speak this day to any man.'"³¹

Whom this voice belongs to is very ambiguous within the text, and while some interpretations favor Gabriel, many consider it to be the voice of the yet-unborn Jesus.³² This, along with the date palm and the stream, suggests that this plot point may have been inspired or derived from a similar scene in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, taking place during the flight into Egypt. In the story, as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are walking in the desert, Mary is "fatigued by the excessive heat of the sun in the desert" and sits under a palm tree, "full of fruit" which she cannot reach.³³ At hearing his mother wish she had some of the fruit, Jesus asks the palm tree to bend so that they can gather the fruit.³⁴ The Qur'an makes two major changes to this story, both of which have a great impact on how Mary is characterized: the timing of this particular episode, and how Mary gets the dates. The story takes place as she goes into labor, at her most vulnerable, instead of during travel. Rather than framing Mary as weaker than her husband and young child—the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew specifies that only Mary was tired—the Qur'an makes Mary's need for the dates and water literally life-and-death, as she needs them to sustain herself and calm down as she gives birth alone. Additionally, in the Qur'an Mary is told to shake the tree, rather than the palm bending down so she can pick the fruit as in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Therefore, Mary is asked "to be proactive even in the midst of pain and exhaustion; she still has to shake the tree so that God may help her."³⁵ It's no wonder, then, that women are often told to read this surah in times of vulnerability, and especially during pregnancy³⁶—the moral of these particular verses is that God will always help in times of need and hardship, but your own fortitude and resilience are still necessary and important. In this way, Mary is shown to be a figure to emulate, not just because of her virginity and her piety, but for her strength.

As mentioned above, when Mary gives birth to Jesus and takes him back to present him to the Temple, her community calls her unchaste and accuses her of adultery. Due to her vow of silence, Mary cannot answer them, and instead "point[s] to him [Jesus]" to

³¹ Qur'an 19:24-26.

³² Karl-Josef Kuschel, "The Birth of Jesus in the Qur'an," in *Christmas and the Qur'an* (London: Gingko, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5vddnz.9>, 102.

³³ "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume VIII Fathers of the Third and Fourth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), <http://gnosis.org/library/psudomat.htm>, 20.

³⁴ The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, 20.

³⁵ Buisson, 452.

³⁶ Mona Siddiqui, "Reflections on Mary," in *Christians, Muslims and Jesus*, (Yale University Press, 2013), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bxdr.8>, 149.

answer.³⁷ Although the Temple is incredulous at being told to speak to an infant, Jesus comes to his mother's defense, saying "Truly I am a servant of God. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I live, and [has made me] dutiful toward my mother."³⁸ Only after this does the Qur'an finally identify him, calling him "Jesus son of Mary—a statement of the truth, which they doubt."³⁹ While these verses are mainly about Jesus and his (lack of) divinity, they are still important to the story of Mary in that they portray her rewards for her struggle, as well as once again denying the Theotokos title. A talking infant Jesus also shows up in the Arabic Infancy Gospel, where "said to Mary His mother: I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world."⁴⁰ Given that the Arabic Infancy Gospel is traditionally dated to the fifth or sixth century, but its first mention doesn't occur until the ninth century,⁴¹ it is impossible to tell if the Qur'an might have been influenced by the Arabic Infancy Gospel, the Arabic Infancy Gospel by the Qur'an, if the two stories derive from the same original oral source, or if a talking baby Jesus was just a popular regional motif. Still, what these talking baby Jesuses say and their context within their stories is revealing. The Apocryphal Jesus declares his own identity as the Son of God, a blessing upon the whole world, while also summarizing the story of the Annunciation, showing that he is also the all-knowing God. The Qur'anic Jesus identifies himself as "a servant of God", blessed wherever he goes, and "dutiful to [his] mother"—in other words, a blessing upon Mary. Furthermore, by asking her to be silent and therefore giving himself a chance to speak, Jesus lifts Mary's burden of having to explain and defend herself against accusations of adultery. To extend the moral of the date tree and Mary's labor, Jesus' duty towards his mother, and his literal first act alive being to help and defend her, shows women that at the end of every hardship (pregnancy and labor) is a gift (a child, duty-bound to support you for the rest of your life), making the hardship worth it. Finally, naming Jesus "the son of Mary", and following it with "a statement of truth, which they doubt",⁴² along with Jesus identifying himself as a "servant of God"⁴³, reaffirms that Jesus is strictly human and that Mary is not the Theotokos but a highly-devout mother to an important prophet.

These characterizations of Mary, as well as opposition to her Christian interpretations, are not exclusive to *Maryam* but are spread out throughout the Qur'an. Other than mentioning her isolated upbringing, *Al-Imran* also features Mary's unnamed mother praying to God, "seek[ing] refuge for her in Thee, and for her progeny, from Satan the outcast"⁴⁴ and God "accept[ing] her with a beautiful acceptance",⁴⁵ reinforcing the theme of motherly hardship leading to a great reward—though in this case, the reward is Mary's protection, not her mother's. *Al-Imran* also holds the other account of the

³⁷ Qur'an 19:29.

³⁸ Qur'an 19:30-32.

³⁹ Qur'an 19:34.

⁴⁰ "The Arabic Infancy Gospel," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume VIII Fathers of the Third and Fourth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), <http://www.gnosis.org/library/infarab.htm>, 1.

⁴¹ Elliott, J. K., "The Arabic Infancy Gospel," in *The Apocryphal New Testament: a Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009), 100.

⁴² Qur'an 19:34.

⁴³ Qur'an 19:30.

⁴⁴ Qur'an 3:36.

⁴⁵ Qur'an 3:37.

Annunciation, corroborating the many events in *Maryam*, such as the angel explicitly tells Mary that “he will speak to people in the cradle”,⁴⁶ explaining why she pointed to him without having any (definitive) indication that he could speak. Mary’s conception of Jesus is also explained in further detail, where it is explained that “God create[s] whatsoever He will. When He decrees a thing, He only says to it, “Be!” and it is.”⁴⁷ *Al-Imran* also makes it clear that Mary would be a significant figure in Islam whether she was the mother of Jesus or not, as the angels tell her that “God has chosen thee and purified thee, and has chosen thee above the women of the worlds”,⁴⁸ which is often interpreted as Mary being chosen once from birth—likely meaning for the Temple, only young boys could receive a religious education⁴⁹—and then again to bear Jesus. Elsewhere in the Quran, Mary is said to have conceived by the angel “breathed into her”,⁵⁰ paralleling the creation of Adam.⁵¹ Mary “preserving her chastity” contributes to her status as one of the most pious women in the Islamic tradition (along with the wives of Noah, Lot, and the Pharaoh from the Exodus story),⁵² and disputations of her virginity and purity are condemned by the text itself.⁵³ Finally, the Qur’an disputes Jesus’ godhood and therefore the Theotokos title every time it refers to him by the title “son of Mary”—making up fifteen of the twenty-five mentions of Jesus by name.

Islamic interpretations of Mary don’t stop at the Qur’an—much like early Christians, early Muslims used the scriptural depiction of Mary as a foundation rather than the final, unchanging product. Every commentator seems to have their own explanation for certain aspects of her depiction, and some elements, like Joseph, are even added back into the narrative within these extra-Qur’anic stories. However, the depiction of Mary within the Qur’an, as well as its similarities and differences with Christian sources like the Bible and various Apocrypha, is still revelatory. *Maryam* is a prime example of this because of the vastness of its potential influences, what Marian ideas it chooses to include, and what elements of Christian theology it chooses to refute or leave out. Analyzing not just which Christian writings may have inspired the Qur’an, but also which ones were ignored and discarded creates a fuller picture of the types of questions early Muslims were asking about Mary, both in her depiction and her role in theology.

⁴⁶ Qur’an 3:46.

⁴⁷ Qur’an 3:47.

⁴⁸ Qur’an 3:42.

⁴⁹ Buisson, 453.

⁵⁰ Qur’an 21:91.

⁵¹ Qur’an 15:29.

⁵² Qur’an 66:12.

⁵³ Qur’an 4:156.

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