SHE IS EVERYWHERE!
AN ANTHOLOGY OF WRITING IN WOMANIST/FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY
Vol. 2

GATHERED BY ANNETTE LYN WILLIAMS, M.A., KAREN NELSON VILLANUEVA, M.A., AND LUCIA CHIAVOLA BIRNBAUM, PH.D.
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Mary in Islam

May Elawar

Introduction: Mary in Her Muslim Context

Visiting the main Marian shrine in Lebanon in the summer of 2003, it was interesting to note that nearly half of the people trekking up the steep spiral stairs to touch the statue of the Virgin were women covered by the traditional Muslim headscarf, the hijab. Islam holds Mary in honorable esteem both in sacred text and popular religious practice. In a religion devoid of imagery, Islam’s distinctive Mariology, its stories and practice, is grounded in Islamic scripture.

Whenever the topic of Mary is approached, whether in the Christian tradition, or as in this case, in Islam, a quandary arises as scholars, theologians, historians, sociologists, feminists, and others attempt to define Mary’s attributes and roles. In this paper, I present a narrative on the life of Mary from the Islamic sacred text (the Qur’an and the Hadith), highlighting two of the most hotly debated aspects of Mary within Muslim tradition: Mary as the “pure,” and Mary as the “prophet.” Towards this endeavor, I consult mainly the work of female scholars whose presentations include a broad spectrum of opinions regarding Mary. These women go beyond the customary androcentric traditional exegesis, to those opinions that portray the Virgin in her most exalted state in Islam. In particular, my paper is grounded in the work of Alia Schleifer. Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam; Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith’s “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition” published in the Muslim World Journal; and, Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective by Amina Wadud.

Any discussion of Mary in Islam directed towards a non-Muslim audience needs to address key theological aspects that affect the role and place of Mary within that tradition. It is essential to recognize that Islam accepts the two previous Abrahamic religions, placing Mary and her son Jesus in the lineage of ancient prophets that appear throughout the Qur’an. However, nothing distinguishes Christianity from Islam more than the
different understanding of the person of Jesus. Belief in one God stands at the core of the teachings of the Qur'an, and those who view any creation as God's son, thereby honoring as divine something besides God, commit an act of treason against the faith. Thus while the Qur'an gives Mary and Jesus a venerable place in the book, they are merely humans. The role of Mary as Theotokos, Mother of God, has no place in the Mariology of Islam. However, vehement denial of Jesus as the son of God makes him exclusively the son of Mary, who is held with the same if not more esteem as her son.

Furthermore, any role for Mary in human redemption and atonement through the death of Jesus can never be resonant for Mary in her Muslim context. While in Christianity God descends into history out of infinite love, and sacrifices himself to save humankind from sin, in Islam, the divine love conjoined with justice ensures that forgiveness is available to all who freely turn to God in penitence. The Qur'an represents a universal theophany which is not fallen, but merely forgotten and unread. Thus Mary's role in Islam is more of one who bears witness to the presence of God who need not come into the world because he has never been absent from it.

The concept of original sin also differs in the Qur'an from its Judeo-Christian predecessors in Genesis. While Mary in Christian tradition came to be viewed as the redeemer of the sins of Eve, this role is absent in the Muslim tradition as the story of creation implicates both male and female in the act of disobeying God. Thus insofar as the Qur'an in concerned, the negative implication that woman was the cause of evil and damnation does not exist. However, the ensuing traditions and narratives pick up the thread of the biblical Eve attributing the "defiling" character of menstruation squarely upon her shoulders, and an aspect to be considered when contemplating Mary's state of purity and virginity.

Mary's Story in the Sacred Text of Islam

The Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, is believed to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. It is the basis of faith in the Muslim religion, and is considered as an extra-historical text, moral and transcendental in nature. The Qur'an gives no indication of time and place regarding the life of Mary.

The other main texts that complete the narrative of Mary's story in Islam are the Hadith stories that together with the Qur'an constitute the Islamic sunna (the laws that shape Muslim values and ethics). Written over a period of 200 years following the death of the Prophet, by companions, wives, and acquaintances, this collection of narratives records in minute detail what the Prophet said and did. Basically, the Hadith serve the role of filling in the historical and contextual gaps that the Qur'an left out.

There is no question that Mary is the female figure to whom the greatest attention is given in the Qur'an. Haddad and Smith provide a detailed statistical account of Mary in this text: "There are 70 verses that refer to her, and she is named specifically in 34 of these (24 in relation to Jesus son of Mary). Only three other persons, Moses, Abraham, and Noah are mentioned by name more frequently than Mary. She enjoys the special honor of having one of the Qur'an's 114 chapters titled after her (Maryam, sura 19).

A series of events in the third and nineteenth chapters of the Qur'an prepare Mary spiritually for her ultimate role in the annunciation. These events unfold with Mary's prenatal dedication to worship by her mother, and her establishment as part of the genealogy of ancient Israelite prophets through her father Imran.

Upon delivering Mary, her mother exclaims "My Lord I am delivered of a female" (3:36). Some translations differ slightly: "O Lord I have delivered but a girl," thus a whole different meaning grounded in pre-Islamic patriarchal Arabia conveys a sense of disappointment on the part of Mary's mother at having begotten a girl instead of a boy. At that time, only boys were consecrated to the service of God at the temple, and other Qur'anic scholars regard this statement by Mary's mother as a request to God to excuse her from the vow she made. Reading the Arabic myself, there is no sense of disappointment, it is just an informative statement that is followed by God stating "A boy could not be as that girls as," again emphasizing the special role awaiting Mary.

The next step in Mary's spiritual journey is a request made by her mother asking God "to preserve Mary and her children from Satan the ostracized." (3:36) God's fulfillment of this request is confirmed in an often cited Hadith that describes how every human is born with the touch of satan except for Mary and her son. Here, Mary is bestowed with one of her key attributes in Islam, that of inherent purity.

Following the casting of lots with quills to determine who would take care of Mary (3:44), we find her confined to a mibrab with Zachariah (John the Baptist's father) as her guardian. The mibrab which is translated as a chamber or sanctuary, in Arabic signifies a place accessible only through stairs, a place that is physically separated for the purpose of worship. Thus rather than confinement, the word emphasizes a life of devotion. In later exegesis it is said that her location in this room also verifies that she had no access to men.
In the mi'raj, Mary's unique relationship to the divine unfolds as she receives food miraculously from God (3:37). This act has been interpreted as a sign of her exceptional status, as proof of God's bounty, and his special approval of Mary. In the mi'raj, Mary is also visited by angels and it is here that she is told she is chosen and purified by God and enjoined to obedience and prayer (3:42). Traditions have arisen about the intensity of Mary's devotional practices as she is described standing in prayer until her ankles became swollen, prostrating until perspiration pours from her feet, emphasizing the fact that during this period of her life Mary existed solely for this purpose.

The first mention of the annunciation (3:45) take place in the mi'raj following the angel's entreatment of Mary into a life of prayer and obedience. The story of the annunciation is picked up in Mary's own chapter 19, with Mary's withdrawal into an “eastern place” that is secluded. She is then told by an angel that she would have a son who would speak to humankind while still in the cradle, and in manhood would be righteous with no faults. Mary demurred that she had never been unchaste, and was told that such a feat was easy for God who only has to decree what he wills. God then sent his spirit in the likeness of man, and at the sight of him, Mary sought refuge from God and questioned again how she a virgin could conceive. She was assured by the angel that all was possible with God. Mary's willingness to submit to God's will is seen as an equivalent act to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in compliance to God.

It is important to note here that Mary is not engaged or married in the Qur'anic version of the miraculous conception. Joseph is not surface until later exegetical traditions that are based in Christian sources. The Qur'an repeatedly affirms that Jesus was born only to Mary by the pure will of God with no human father. Mary's chastity is unquestioned, and various explanations on the details of her conception all agree, to some extent, that the angel came in the form of a handsome man so Mary would not be repulsed by him, and he blew either into her pocket, her sleeve, or her mouth.

Early commentators of the Qur'an (the first 300 years following the prophet's death) bestowed Mary with the title of al-batul to describe her chastity. This word implies more than her physical virginity. The root of the Arabic word batul is severance, the original meaning being a palm shoot which has separated itself from its mother tree. Thus the phrase used to describe Mary as “batul among women” suggests a woman who has separated herself from men, having no desire or need for them. While Muslim Arabs call Mary “Maryan al-Batul,” Christian Arabs refer to her as the al-adhra which is the Arabic word for the physical state if virginity.

(Both Maryam and Batul are popular Moslem female names.)

Mary conceives and goes to a distant place. The Qur'an tells of labor pains driving Mary to the trunk of a date-palm tree and crying, "Would that I have died before this." A voice form beneath her reassured her and told her to shake the tree and eat and drink and "cool thine eyes." Next she was told to make a vow of fasting and silence (19:26). Following this, the narrative shifts into a testimonial about the special nature of Jesus. Mary returns to her people carrying her baby and when they accuse her of terrible wrongdoing, having taken a vow of silence, she points to Jesus. Despite the exclamations of the onlookers that a baby cannot talk, Jesus proceeds to affirm his own status as a prophet reaffirming his dutiful respect towards his mother (19:32).

Wishing for death when she was suffering from the pain of childbirth seems to be contrary to the submissive and devoted Mary. Her death wish has been given an altruistic interpretation as stemming from Mary's fear for her people who stand to suffer from slander associated to her alleged adultery.

In the Qur'an Mary is mentioned alongside other prophets such as Noah, Moses and Aaron in Chapter 23, entitled True Believers. She is also mentioned with Zachariah, John, Ismael, Enoch, Jonah, Job, Solomon, David, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Lot, Abraham, Moses and Aaron in Chapter 21, entitled the Prophets. Mary is also mentioned alongside other prophets in Hadith narratives. The “Prophet said: If I were to swear an oath that no one shall enter paradise before the early members of my Umma (community of Muslims), except a few, among whom are Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and Jesus and Mary the daughter of Imran. Another Hadith recounts Mohammad inquiring about radiant light she saw in his spiritual night journey to the Haram Mosque in Jerusalem. Gabriel told the Prophet: the one on the right is the mi'raj of your brother David, and the one on your left is the grave of your sister Mary.

Standing alone, without interpretation, without historical or geographical context, one can discern from the discussion above that the Qur'an presents Mary as one among the chosen, the pure, and the prophets. However, debates on the nature and role of the Virgin Mary in Islam were carried on in regions stretching from central Asia to Spain from the eighth century to the present. In the following section, I will address some of the major controversy regarding Mary's stature in Islam: Is Mary to be considered merely an example, a role-model of devotion and submission to God, or so she to be considered as one among the prophets?
Commentary on Interpretations of Mary in Qur'an

Schleifer, Haddad, Smith, and Wadud present a broadly inclusive scope of scholars in their commentaries on the role of Mary in Islam. They combine traditional Islamic scholarship that emerged in the few centuries following the death of the Prophet with mystical Sufi writing that presents Mary as an exalted luminous light. They also include more contemporary Qur'anic scholarship that interprets Mary in the androcentric manner that has come to typify Islamic exegesis. Somewhere, in between these conflicting opinions, these female authors make the case for Mary as a spiritually pure prophet and luminary in Islam. In the following section I will discuss the debate surrounding Mary's highly debatable implications of purity, and prophethood.

Purity: Did Mary Menstruate?

In the third chapter of the Qur'an, the angels tell Mary "Indeed God has favored you and purified you and chosen you from all the women of the world" (3:42). A debate has arisen as to whether this signifies spiritual purity which connotes being purified from rebellious disbelief, or, physical purity which has been explained as purification from menstruation and the blood of childbirth.

Purity is a concept basic to Islam as a prerequisite for acts for worship. Blood, especially menstrual blood, has come to be understood as defiling of a state of purity. According to feminist sociologist and Qur'anic scholar Fatima Mernissi, this might not always have been true. She describes stories of Aisha, the Prophet's wife, that were circulated by early Islamic scholars such as ibn Saad (840 CE). Aisha washed Mohammad's hair for his purification before prayer while she was menstruating. Based on information from early Islamic sources, Mernissi explains that Aisha was concerned following the Prophet's death by the emerging beliefs on female purification that were rooted in pre-Islamic Arabia's superstitions about menstruating women as a source of pollution. Mohammad vehemently condemned superstitious beliefs and for this reason, early scholars that took part in the debate on the subject of menstruation, which is recorded at length in the religious literature, agreed with Aisha. A Prophet who tried by all means to struggle against superstition in all its forms, could not condone the superstitious belief that linked menstruation to pollution.

The question of Mary's menstruation has become a key issue in the discussion about her purity. Early Qur'anic commentators seem to agree that Mary had menstruated twice before the annunciation. It is not until after the nineteenth century that the trend seems to espouse the belief that Mary's purity must necessarily imply that she was free from menstruation throughout her life. Haddad and Smith write that contemporary scholars think it best to take purity in its broadest sense to include both purity of heart and body and to assume that God gave Mary the privilege of being pure from all bodily uncleanliness.

Shifting the debate towards Mary's physical purity de-emphasizes the importance and significance of her spiritual purity. Schleifer writes, "Mary's purity is one of her key characteristics. It is the dimension of her being that made her a possible receptacle for the miraculous conception. And the purity of her spiritual striving is found as a symbolic goal for others, awakening them to a pristine vision of the meaning of devoutness, obedience, and worship."

Was Mary a Prophet in Islam?

Perhaps the most contested role for Mary in Islam has been that of Prophet. This controversy over her precise spiritual status has been debated at large in the Muslim world through the medieval period and into contemporary times.

There is no human distinction above prophet in Islam. The basic theme for contention over Mary as a Prophet, is whether any woman can be named a prophet in Islam. Various readings and interpretations of the Qur'an can make the case for or against ranking Mary among the prophets.

Presenting the case in favor of the title of Prophet for Mary, Schleifer, Haddad, and Smith all mention the work of Cordoban medieval Qur'anic scholars and writers, Qurubu and ibn Hasm, who define the term prophethood/prophesy in Arabic as originating from the root which means "granting perception." Therefore, prophet consists of a message which comes from God in order to inform the recipient of something. Mary is a prophet as she receives revelation from God by means of an angel.

The case can also be made for Mary's prophet-hood through her repeated appearance in the Qur'an and Hadith alongside male prophets. Writing on the social origins of Islam, social theorist Mohammed Bamyeh explains the pattern in the Qur'an of resurrecting the prophets of ancient history to link them through traditional tribal relations to Mohammed, in order to testify in one voice to their coming from the same divine source. The divine revelation goes through Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Imran,
and thus as the daughter of Imran, the Qur'an places Mary in the line of the great prophets. This perspective holds Mary as a symbol that brings together all revelation: as a descendent of the great Israelite prophets, the bearer of the word, the mother of Jesus, and as the Qur'an's chosen woman of all the worlds (3:42). She is the embodied symbolism of the Qur'anic message that revelation has not been confined to one particular people.34

Those contesting the status of Mary as prophet discount the discussion above by quoting a line from the Qur'an in which God tells Mohammed: “We sent not before thee save men” (12:109, 16:43, and 21:17) thus disqualifying Mary as female from having been considered a prophet. Yet, when it is extracted from its androcentric interpretations, this line does not preclude Mary from being a prophet. In this case, God is believed to be commenting on the role of Mohammed as messenger, not prophet.35 The prophet is one who receives revelation, while the messenger is one who has been singled out to warn, guide or convey a divine message to a community. By making a distinction between these two roles, a distinction that is often ignored by those that would diminish Mary based solely on her gender, the aforementioned line from the Qur'an does not deny Mary the title of prophet.

I would like to end this section with what I believe to be one of the most accurate readings of Mary in the Qur'an. Sufi scholar Ruzbihan (1209) who acknowledges that Mary's great spiritual achievement preceded the miraculous conception of Jesus describes Mary not only as a mother of a prophet, “but as one who is chosen to be a spiritual luminary in her own right, through divine guidance, spiritual exercise, the awareness of blessings which drew her closer and closer into the reflection of the light of her lord, and the ability to act on such perception.36

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have approached the subject of Mary in Islam exclusively through a text based method. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that popular Islamic religious practice extends greatly beyond my presentation of Mary. Media reports describe Muslims flocking to Marian apparition sites and shrines. A tradition of identifying Fatima, the prophet's daughter, with Mary has emerged, in particular among Shiite Islam. I believe that the important question to ask at this point is whether Marian devotion can create a common ground between Islam and Christianity, given Islam's distinctly different approach towards Mary and Jesus as human luminaries and not the mother and son of god. One woman's journey to heal her mother opens a magical door into the underworld where she transforms through the teachings of the Black Madonna, the modern day embodiment of the Great Mother.

Notes
1 Martinson, Paul Varo, ed. Islam: An Introduction for Christians (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1994) p. 188.
2 Schleifer, Aliah Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam (Fons Vitae: Louisville, KY, 1997) p. 11
3 Ibid., p.11.
4 Ibid., p.11.
8 Haddad & Smith, op cit, p. 162.
9 Schleifer, op cit, p.24.
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15 Schleifer, op cit, p.56.
16 Haddad & Smith, op cit, p. 168.
17 Schleifer, op cit, p. 21.
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19 Schleifer, op cit, p.66.
20 Ibid., p. 66.
21 Haddad & Smith, op cit, p. 170.
22 Schleifer, op cit, p. 43.
23 Ibid., p. 63.
24 Ibid., p. 18.
When quoting from the Qur'an, the references are placed following the quote. The first figure denotes the number of the chapter in the Qur'an and the second figure denotes the line number in the chapter.

Bibliography


