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THE VIRGIN MARY IN ISLAMIC TRADITION AND COMMENTARY

"She appeared on several nights, in different forms—sometimes in full body, at other times only half, surrounded by a halo of bright light. Sometimes [she would appear] in the domes of the church or above. She moved and walked and bowed before the cross. She blessed people. At times she appeared as a bright cloud of light, preceded by spiritual forms like doves"¹

This description of the appearance of the Virgin Mary, published in Cairo's widely-read *al-Ahrām* newspaper on May 5, 1968, was newsworthy precisely because Mary (Arabic, Maryam) is a figure with great and lasting appeal to Muslims as well as to Christians in the Middle East. Copts and Muslims flocked to witness these visions of the Virgin of Zeituna, many of them reporting miraculous healings and other spiritual experiences. Such occurrences are part of an ongoing tradition of Middle East folk religion in which the figure of Mary has continued to play a prominent role. Muslims over the centuries have looked to Mary, the pure one, as an exemplar of obedience and fidelity, a model of piety and, according to many, the first to attain paradise.²

Some persons within the Christian community, primarily Roman Catholics, have been turning recently to the figure of Mary the virgin as a common ground for conversation, appreciation, and understanding between Muslims and Christians.³ Such attempts cannot hope to achieve even limited success, however, unless they are grounded not only in good will but in an honest attempt to

¹ Al-Anbā Grigorios, *Al-ʿadhrāʾ fī al-Zaytūn* (Cairo, 1969), pp. 7-8. The light is said to have lasted one time for over two hours. Cf. René Laurentin, *Multiplikation des Apparitions de la Vierge aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), pp. 70-71, who reports that the Virgin appeared at Zeituna from 2 April 1968 to September of 1970, and that she has made frequent appearances also in the area of Shubra in Cairo, witnessed to by both Muslims and Christians.

² The Virgin of Zeituna was particularly significant in her role as a figure of comfort, her appearance coming after the devastating Arab loss to the Israelis in the 1967 Six Day War. Some perceived it as a sign that God had not abandoned the Egyptians. Mary's appearance at that time marks the beginning of the rise in Christian fervor among Copts, along with its counterpart in revivalist Islam.

³ "If the Muslims, so prayerful in their worship of the one true God, can come to see the Mary of the Koran fulfilled by the Mary of the Gospels, perhaps they will come to recognize the divinity of Jesus Christ. The message of Fatima points to the universality of the Church of Christ. Our Lady of Fatima may become our apostle to the Muslims." Robert D. Rodriguez, "Mary, The Muslims and Fatima," *The Marian Helpers Bulletin*, April-June 1984, p. 16. Bishop Fulton Sheen once wrote, "I believe the Blessed Virgin chose to be known as 'Our Lady of Fatima' as a pledge and a sign of hope to the Muslim people." Quoted by James Kroeger, "Mary, Bridge to Islam," *Maryknoll*, May 1988, p. 25. Kroeger notes, p. 23, that "While there are vast differences separating Muslims and Catholics, Mary is one point of agreement. Both religions esteem her holiness, humility, purity and miraculous conception of the Word of God."

understand how Mary has been viewed by Muslims from her treatment in the Qurʾān, traditions, and commentaries to the more esoteric presentations of popular piety and mysticism. The following materials are offered in the attempt to provide some of this context, with particular emphasis on the interpretations of contemporary Muslim exegetes of the Qurʾān.

There is no question that Mary is the female figure to whom the greatest attention is given in the Qurʾān. 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, noted respectively 169, 69, and 43 times—are mentioned by name more frequently than is Mary. She is, in fact, the only woman who is identified by name in the Qurʾān⁴ and she enjoys the special honor of having one of its 114 chapters titled after her (Maryam, Sura 19). This chapter includes the narrative about Mary and her family, leading to the annunciation and birth of Jesus. It is widely held that this chapter was given to the Muslims to take with them on their first emigration to Ethiopia, where they recited it to the Negus who recognized them as fellow believers in God and therefore refused to deliver them to their enemies, the Meccans. Some recent commentators, however, believe that this sura was revealed after the Prophet received a Christian delegation from Najran in 632, despite the fact that the delegates refused an invitation from the Prophet to convert to Islam.⁵ Most of the Qurʾānic narratives specific to Mary are found in Suras 3:35–47 and 19:16–34; occasional references are found throughout the Qurʾān, usually specifying her as the mother of Jesus. Revelations to the Prophet Muḥammad are generally ordered into three distinct periods following the chronology of his leadership of the new Muslim community: first Meccan, second Meccan, and Medinan. In the second Meccan period references to Mary tend to emphasize the fact that she was the virgin mother of Jesus—(“Remember also the woman who kept her virginity and into whom we breathed of our Spirit” [S. 21:91]). In the Medinan period, the references to Jesus as the son of Mary tend to focus on the negation of his divinity. Following is a synopsis of the major elements in the Qurʾānic narratives about the life of Mary.

In tracing this story as suggested by fairly sketchy references in the Qurʾān it is helpful to identify a series of chronological events. Before considering the ways in which Muslim commentators have interpreted these events, let us look briefly

⁴ There are references to the wives (unnamed) of Adam, Abraham, Lot, Noah, Pharaoh, Imrān, and Zakariah and to the Queen of Sheba.

⁵ See for a relatively recent example of the first interpretation Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qurʾān*, II (New York: Asian Publishing House, 1967), 313 who notes that when in the difficult early days of Islam a party of Muslims sought shelter in Christian Abyssinia, their ruler asked the Muslims to say some of the words of the Prophet. When they responded by reciting Sura 19 the ruler wept and exclaimed, “Aye! the same spirit is at work in the utterance of Christ himself!” For an example of the second interpretation—a much later dating—see ‘Abd al-Ghanī ‘Abbūd, *Al-Masīh wa’l-Masīhiyya wa ’l-Islām* (Cairo, 1984), p. 55, who suggests that the purpose of this sura is the affirmation of the oneness of God and resurrection on the one hand, and the denial of God’s having a son and partners on the other.

at the unfolding of the narrative of Mary as found in the Qurʾān and in the Ḥadīth, the traditions of the community.

A. Mary's nativity. Sura 3:35–37a relates that the wife of ʿImrān, an elderly and hitherto barren woman, suddenly found herself pregnant. (The parallel with the birth of John by Zakariah [Zechariah] and his aging wife as detailed in S. 19:2–11 is clear.) She consecrated the child in her womb as an offering to God. When she delivered she made special note of the fact that the baby was female, named her Maryam, and sought protection from Satan for her and her offspring. God accepted Mary fully, caused her to grow in purity and goodness, and appointed Zakariah as her guardian.

The mother of Mary is not mentioned by name in the Qurʾān but is referred to only as the wife of ʿImrān. Islamic tradition, however, has accorded her the name of Ḥanna (Anna). She is considered to be a sister to Elizabeth (Zakariah's wife and the mother of John the Baptist).⁶ Some commentators refer to an old Christian tradition which tells of Ḥanna, sadly barren, sitting at the foot of a tree. Seeing a bird feeding its young she became desolate and prayed intensely for a child (some versions say she asked her husband to pray, whereupon he told her to do it), a prayer that miraculously was answered.⁷ The Muslim narratives add a few other particulars to the tale of Mary's birth, such as the fact that Mary's father died while her mother was pregnant,⁸ and that her mother had hoped for a male.

Germane to the last point, of course, is the reality that in Jewish tradition women were not considered appropriate for servanthood in a house of worship, which related to Ḥanna's consecration of her child. This theme receives a good deal of attention in the Islamic traditions. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī, most famous of the classical commentators, renders Mary's vow this way: "I have made a votive offering of what is in my womb free for the worship of you . . . a hostage for your service and the service of your holiness in the house of worship . . . dedicated to you exclusively."⁹ Al-Ṭabarī himself notes that a woman cannot become a servant of the place of worship because of her menstruation,¹⁰ an observation repeated in a number of commentaries.¹¹ Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, a modern commentator, agrees that women are unfit for continued

⁶ J. M. Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie de Marie Selon le Coran et l'Islam" in *Maria*, ed. H. Du Manoir (Paris: Beauchesne, 1949), p. 190. Marina Warner in *Alone of All her Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 12, notes that in the Christian tradition Samuel's mother Hannah, the forbear of Mary, provides a prototype so close that by the second century it was believed that Mary's mother was called Anna, a form of Hannah.

⁷ Muḥammad b. ʿAbdullah al-Kisāʾī, *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, ed. Isaac Eisenberg (London: E. J. Brill, 1922) I, 302; Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie," *Maria*, p. 191.

⁸ Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (n.p., n.d.), p. 440. Ḥaqqī refers to Mary's father as "Abū Maryam al-Batūl" (the father of the virgin or chaste Mary). It should be noted that *batūl* is itself a Christian term, never used in the Qurʾān.

⁹ Abū Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl al-Qurʾān* (Cairo, 1954), VI, 329.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹¹ See Ḥaqqī, *Tafsīr*, pp. 440–41, who says that the female is unfit for service in the *masjid* because of menstruation, that the male is not like the female.

service in the place of worship because of menstruation and other female conditions, including the fact that males are better fit for such service because of their strength (the female is weak and unable to serve) and because females would be shamed by mixing with men in the course of service.¹² Another modern writer, Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, offers the opinion that Mary's mother lived in an environment in which people are proud of their children and live for them. Ḥanna renounced all this and sought a "liberated" child, one that is not bound to her. She was able to achieve this, says al-Sha'rāwī, because of her extreme self control. He also says that her having expressed surprise at the birth of a girl actually meant that God was telling her that this particular female was to have a greater role than that of males, proving the miraculousness of God's absolute power.¹³

In the same verse in which Ḥanna makes special note of the fact that her child is a girl she states that she has named the child Maryam and that she wants protection for her and her offspring from Satan. The name Maryam, the same as that used in Syriac and in Greek in the Bible, is understood by the commentators to mean pious or devoted, as well as servant (a confirmation of her mother's dedication of her). The result of Ḥanna's wish for protection is confirmed in a very often-cited ḥadīth, with a variety of versions: "Every descendant of Adam experiences the touch of Satan except Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān, and her son"; "Not a descendant of Adam is born but he is touched by Satan and he comes out crying, except Mary and her son."¹⁴ Some variation of this tradition is usually quoted in discussions of Mary's inherent purity as one preserved from all taint of imperfection. This matter will be raised again later.

B. Mary's retreat into the temple. In S. 19:16–17a and S. 3:37b and 42–44 we read of Mary in the temple or sanctuary under the guidance of Zechariah, receiving food miraculously from God. She was clearly chosen and purified by God and enjoined to obedience. These references are fairly sparse and give only clues to a fuller story.

It is in the elaboration of the traditions that one finds actual stories relating to Mary's childhood. Because her father died when she was very young (as did her mother, according to some reports) it was necessary to select someone to take care of her. After a casting of lots her uncle Zakariah was chosen. (Others, as we will see, interpret the casting of lots mentioned in S. 3:44 to have resulted in the selection of Joseph. Sometimes both Zakariah and Joseph are included in the narrative.) Zakariah built a cell for Mary in the temple (often referred to by the

¹² Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr al-Qāsimī* (Cairo, 1914), IV, 834.

¹³ Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, *Maryam wa'l-Masīḥ* (Cairo, 1983), pp. 11–14. It is important to note in this context that while Roman Catholics tend to understand purified as a possible reference to an immaculate conception (i.e., sinlessness) Muslims understand *tahāra* as the opposite of defilement (i.e., menstruation).

¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jamīʿ*, VI, 337. He gives another version (339) in which Satan squeezes the newborn several times and another (341) in which he says that a curtain is placed between them and him and Satan cannot penetrate the curtain. Cf. Ḥaqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 441; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *Saḥīḥ Muslim* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1976), IV, 1261.

commentators as a *mihrāb*)¹⁵ to which there was access only by stairs. The special room seems to be conceived as a way of separating her physically from the place of worship. Reference to *mihrāb* is probably to emphasize her life as spent in devotions, rather than to suggest a place of confinement as such. Her location to this room also verifies that she had no access to men.

Zakariah was the only one to see her in this special place, and presumably was the only one to bring her food. In an incident that has evoked considerable commentary (recorded in S. 3:37) he was greatly surprised to discover (on at least one occasion) that she had been provided ample abundance of food that he himself had not given her. This provision became elaborated in the traditions as the fruits of winter in the summer and the fruits of summer in the winter, further indication of their special character.¹⁶ (Some reports note that in fact Mary actually had no need of nourishment at all.)¹⁷ When he questioned her as to their source she assured him that they were directly from God,¹⁸ another proof of her exceptional status. This reference to abundance of food is proof of God's bounty and provision, and of His special approval of Mary.

Islamic tradition does not specify much of what occupied Mary in these childhood days except to say that she was generally busy with the kinds of service possible for a pious young woman. It is clear from S. 3:43 that God instructed Mary to pray with others in a group ('prostrate yourself and bow down with those who bow down . . .'). Question has been raised about the nature of that common prayer experience and whether it could have taken place within the confines of the temple. Some have asked whether it would have been legitimate for her to pray in the place where congregations of men were gathered praying, others believe that the prescriptions of Jewish law at the time were not exactly the same as those of the Islamic community and thus that she probably would have been able to pray in the temple.¹⁹ In any case it is clear that Mary was considered to have been *muḥarrara*, free from the taint of worldly associations.²⁰

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibrāhīm al-Ḥumaydī notes that *mihrāb* in this case does not mean the indicator of prayer direction but a protected room where Mary was able to worship. *Khawāriq al-ʿādāt fi 'l-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Jiddah, 1982), p. 203. Haqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 443, adds that it is an upper room to which one ascends by ladder, the noblest section of the house of worship.

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, pp. 353, 355.

¹⁷ Abd-el-Jalil, 'La vie,' *Maria*, p. 195.

¹⁸ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿarāʾis al-majālis* (Cairo, n.d.), pp. 371–72. Modern commentators sometimes add a bit of perspective to this narrative. Ghulam Ahmad Parwiz in *Maʿārif al-Qurʾān*, III, 489, says that this verse does not necessarily mean that the food, appeared miraculously without human intervention, and Ṭanṭāwī al-Jawharī in *al-Jawāhir fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, II, 107, acknowledges that thinking people will interpret this merely as a way of praising God for sustenance (cited in J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968], pp. 22, 65–66).

¹⁹ Cf. 'Abd al-Ghanī 'Abbūd in *al-Masīh wa 'l-Masīhiyya wa 'l-Islām* (Cairo, 1984), p. 60, for reference to Jesus as engaged to her cousin Joseph at age 15.

²⁰ See Maḥmūd al-Sharqāwī, *al-Anbiyāʾ fi 'l-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Cairo, 1970), I, 336, who defines *muḥarrara* as freed to serve the place of worship, liberated from having to be mixed up with any worldly matters. See also Paul Nwiya, *Exegèse Coranique et Langage mystique* (Beyrouth: Imp. Catholique, 1970), pp. 49–50, who cites Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, ms. Ḥamidiyya 58) as having

The spare details of the story of Mary's childhood become amplified a bit more as we move to the period of her adolescence. In a few reports it is said that after Zakariah got too old to take care of Mary lots were cast and Joseph the carpenter got the job. Every day Joseph brought her some of what he had earned to help with her maintenance. But each time God multiplied it. When Joseph came and saw provisions greater than what he had brought he asked her, 'O Mary, where did you get that?' She answered, 'That comes from God, because He gives to whomever He wants without measure,'²¹ a variation of the S. 3:37 story about Zakariah.

It is important to note the role Joseph plays in the traditions in the overall care and nurture of Mary, a matter about which the Qur'an is silent. Joseph is generally understood to have been Mary's companion in devotion. Occupied with the affairs of the temple, Joseph and Mary zealously attended to prayer. The commentators are extremely careful not to suggest that this association was in any way compromising. In fact a number of them make much of the story of Joseph's amazement and horror at finally having to acknowledge, with extreme reluctance, the fact that Mary was pregnant.

C. The annunciation. The set of narratives describing this important event in the life of Mary is treated in S. 19:16–21 and S. 3:45–51. According to the Qur'an (condensing the two narratives into one) when Mary reached a certain age she withdrew from her people to "a chamber looking east" or "an eastern place" (*mashraqa*)²² in seclusion from them. It was in this eastern place, what- or wherever it was, that Mary was told by an angel that she would have a son, and that he would speak to humankind while still in the cradle as well as in manhood, and would be righteous and without fault. Mary demurred that she had never been unchaste and was told that such a feat was easy for God who has only to decree what He wills. God then sent His spirit in the likeness of a man. At the sight of him Mary sought refuge from God and questioned how she, as virgin, could conceive. She was assured by the angel(s) that all is possible with God.

This is the Qur'anic story. It comes as little surprise to find that traditionists and commentators have been quite fascinated with postulating details as to how this conception actually might have taken place.

One interesting commentary from the pen of a contemporary writer focuses on the purpose of Mary's seclusion: "When confronted with physical developments, those that impact females when they reach puberty, she went into seclusion in the eastern part of the temple and put on the veil—the veil of the face, for she was the most beautiful of women. . . . She protected her chastity by distancing herself from things that arouse and by busying herself in obedience of God."²³

said that *muharrara* (purified) refers to one who does not work for this world but is connected to the works of the above and beyond, attending to the sanctuary in order to worship God. And in that time, attested Muqātil, only young men were purified.

²¹ Al-Thaḡlabī, *Qīṣaṣ*, p. 373.

²² Helmut Gätje, *The Qur'an and its Exegesis*, ed. A. Welch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 121, cites Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī in commenting on S. 19:16 as having said that some say that her withdrawal was so that she could purify herself from menstruation, after which she returned to the house of her aunt. Cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, XV, 60.

²³ 'Abd al-Mu'izz Khattāb, *Ishrūn imra'a fi 'l-Qur'an al-Karīm* (Cairo, n.d.), p. 47.

It is the matter of the conception itself, however, that has generated the greatest interest. Al-Ṭabarī offers several possibilities. In reference to S. 19:21 ("Then we sent to her our spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man") he cites traditions confirming that God's spirit (as the angel Jibrīl or Gabriel) appeared to Mary as an average human being. After reassuring her that he would do her no harm, he (1) blew in the fold (pocket) of her covering until the breath reached her womb and she conceived; or (2) blew in her sleeve and in the fold of her covering; since it was ripped in the front the breath reached her chest and she conceived; or (3) caused the spirit to enter through her mouth, after which God made it into the spirit of Jesus.²⁴ Contemporary commentators generally agree that Gabriel came in the form of a handsome man so that Mary would not be repulsed by him,²⁵ and that he blew in the opening of her shirt from the top. (This insistence on the direction could only be related to ideas of propriety.) When the breath reached her belly she became pregnant by the permission of God.²⁶

An interesting interpretation of the mode of conception by the thirteenth-century exegete Abū Bakr al-Qurṭubī bears noting in full for its portrayal of Mary as a kind of hermaphrodite: "Some say that it is not possible for creation to come out of the blowing of Gabriel because the infant would be part angel and part human. The truth is that when God created Adam and took the covenant with his progeny, He made some of the liquid in the backs of the fathers and some in the uterus of the mothers. When the waters join, a child is formed. God made both waters in Mary, part in her uterus and part in her back. Gabriel blew in order to arouse her desire. The woman cannot conceive unless her desire is aroused. When her desire was aroused with the blowing of Gabriel, the water in her back descended to the uterus, and became mixed and then became fertilized."²⁷

²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, VI, 36; XV, 60–62. He notes in the latter that the spirit of Jesus is one of those with whom God made a covenant prior to creation. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr al-tibyān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb Qāsim al-ʿĀmilī (Najaf, 1966) 7:114. Cf. Maḥmūd al-Sharqāwī, *al-Anbiyāʾ fī al-Qurʾān* (Cairo, 1970), p. 259.

²⁵ ʿĀl-ʿĀmilī, *Tafsīr al-bayān* (Cairo, n.d.), p. 114; Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ḥamza, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Cairo, 1960), p. 35. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr al-Qurʾānī li'l-Qurʾān* (Cairo, n.d.) 2:730, argues that it was a host of angels that really appeared to Mary, represented by one who does the talking. Many centuries earlier al-Zamakhsharī noted that had he appeared in his true form as an angel Mary would have been so frightened that she would have fled (Gätje, *The Qurʾān and its Exegesis*, p. 121). Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm ʿAnbar, *Bayn ʿIsā wa-Muḥammad* (n.p., n.d.), p. 37, remarks that the angel appeared as a shadow flooded by light and addressed her in a deep, gentle and comforting voice. He adds that Mary had blue eyes and fine black hair.

Muḥammad ʿArif Muṣṭafā Fahmī, *Yasūʿ al-masīḥ wa'l-Imām ʿAlī* (Cairo, 1971), I, 14, cites a lengthy passage by ʿAbd al-Munʿim ʿAbd al-Salām in *Al-Dīn al-muqāran*, I, in which there is defense of the appropriateness of an angel having intercourse with a mortal woman, and describes the angel as being neither too tall nor too short, too fat nor too thin, with a beautiful face and beguiling eyes. Fahmī remarks that he does not know where ʿAbd al-Salām gets these strange ideas!

²⁶ Muḥammad Maḥmūd Hījāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-wāḍiḥ* (Cairo, 1966), p. 18; cf. al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, p. 4133 (al-Qāsimī also indicates the spirit has blown directly into her pudendum).

²⁷ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān* (Cairo, 1937), p. 93. See al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, pp. 4139–40, who discusses the confusing physiological technicalities of sperm that separated from Mary's right kidney being hotter than those from her left kidney and that they joined in her uterus to create the child. The reader will have sympathy for his conclusion that "God knows best."

Considerable interest has been shown in the matter of precisely how an angel can take the form of a human. Since it is clear from the Qurʾān that angels are created of fire while humans are made of clay, the question arises as to the possibility of a transition from one form to another. Al-Qāsimī, for one, says that an angel could become human without the angel disintegrating or dying after it enters the body. Just as God moves the spirits of martyrs into green birds in paradise, so the angel can take a human form.²⁸ Citing the famous eleventh-century theologian al-Juwaynī (Imām al-Haramayn) that Gabriel could return to his original form, al-Qāsimī says it is similar to the circumstance of wool which appears larger when carded though its essence does not change. That the angel appeared as a man does not mean that he turned into a man, but that he appeared in that image for familiarity.²⁹ Khaṭṭāb says that the “good news” descended on her repeatedly while she was at devotions, and the angelic messengers no doubt used to visit her in the form of women, which is why she was frightened when Gabriel came as a man.³⁰ The discussion of angelic possibilities in this context has to do not only with what an angel can and cannot do, but with a further defense of Mary’s purity in not having lain with a real man.

Much discussion has been held over the matter of Mary’s having responded to the words of the angel that she will conceive by saying, “How can I have a son when no man has touched me and I have not been unchaste?” (S. 19:20). Here we have one of the most important theological issues to be raised in reference to Mary. Is it possible that Mary, the obedient one, in this instance was compromising that obedience to God? Or was she doubting God’s power? Her willingness to submit absolutely to God’s will, seen as the equivalent of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son as the ultimate act of compliance, would certainly seem to preclude such an act of disobedience, even apostasy. One story that appears in the traditions seems to support the notion of Mary’s complete acceptance of God’s will. Joseph, horrified to discover Mary pregnant, as we saw above, tried to confront her with what was too obvious to deny by raising a series of questions. Can wheat grow without seed? Can the trees blossom without rain? Can one have a son without a father? To his surprise, Mary answered each of these questions by saying yes. In each case, of course, she pointed to the fact that it is God who makes growth and development possible. Citing various of the miracles by which God causes a kind of spontaneous generation to take place, including that of the original couple Adam and Eve, Mary assures him that it is sufficient for God to say “Be!” and a thing comes into being (see S. 3:47). After that Joseph understood that Mary’s state was indeed the result of divine intervention.³¹

²⁸ Al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, p. 840; cf. Maḥmūd al-Sharqāwī, *Al-Anbiyāʾ fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Cairo, 1970), pp. 258–60.

²⁹ Al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, p. 4141.

³⁰ Khaṭṭāb, *Ishrūn*, p. 48.

³¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, XVI, 43; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-iʾrākh*, ed. C. I. Tornberg (n.d., n.p.) 1:218–19; Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ*, p. 382. Abd-el-Jalīl (“La vie,” *Maria*, p. 201) notes that certain classical authors (whom he does not identify) indicated that the angel took the form of Joseph.

The commentators are quick to come to Mary's defense. "Mary questioned how she could conceive when she had not been touched by a human," says al-Ṭabarsī. "She did not say this in denial or thinking it far fetched, but rather in seeking information and in wonder at the power of God."³² And according to the contemporary exegete Hījāzī, Mary did not deny God's power to give her a baby but merely expressed her wonder at how this was to come about. Was it to be through marriage in the future, or would God create the baby *ex nihilo*, so to speak, at that very moment?³³

The Qurʾān does not give any detail about Mary's age at the time of conception, nor about the length of her pregnancy. This has led to speculation by the early commentators, who report her variously to have been 13, 15, 17 or 20, and say that her pregnancy lasted anywhere from eight, seven or six months or possibly just three hours or one hour.³⁴ There are even references to her having conceived and given birth instantly.³⁵ One set of traditions acknowledges that Mary and Jesus actually conversed with each other while Jesus was in the womb. Mary is reported to have said: "Each time that someone came and I talked with him, Jesus in my womb was making divine praises. But when I was alone, and no one was with me, I spoke to Jesus and he spoke to me, as long as he was in my womb."³⁶ The contemporary writer Haqqī goes so far as to cite the tradition that Jesus memorized the Torah while in his mother's belly and that Mary used to hear him study there.³⁷ These narratives are undoubtedly a variant on the Qurʾānic insistence that Jesus spoke at birth (S. 19:29–33, discussed below).

D. The birth of Jesus. This sequence of events is described in S. 19:22–26. After withdrawing to what is called "a far place" Mary experienced such birth pains that she clung to the trunk of a palm tree and cried, (Would that I had died and been forgotten before this!) Then a voice cried from beneath her, reassuring her and telling her to shake the tree and receive the juicy fruit of which she should eat, and that she should make a vow of fasting and of silence.

The matter of the far away place has been treated with somewhat desultory interest by the commentators—opinions range from saying it means the other side of her country, to behind Mount Zion, to the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to

³² Al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥaṣan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Beirut, 1956), III, 83.

³³ Hījāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, p. 18. The defense of Mary in this context has a kind of parallel in the defense of her mother Hanna when she registered surprise at having conceived a female (S. 3:36). Al-Qāsimī, for example, proposes several reasons for her saying "My Lord! I have given birth to a female . . .": (1) to inform God of her sex (which al-Qāsimī acknowledges of course would not be necessary), (2) to glorify God for the grandson who will come (though she is unaware of it), (3) to express regret to God since she cannot fulfill her vow, (4) to comfort herself that perhaps God knows that a female child is better than a male. Al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, p. 834.

³⁴ Al-Ṭabarsī, *Jāmiʿ*, 16:44. Cf. Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie," *Maria*, p. 203.

³⁵ ʿImād al-Dīn Abī al-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Aẓīm* (Beirut, 1966), 4:447. Ibn Kathīr does acknowledge that such an event would have been strange. Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr*, p. 120, in giving the range of pregnancy from one hour to six months to eight months, comments as have many of the classical authors that no other child besides Jesus born after eight months has lived.

³⁶ Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī, *Hilyat* (Cairo, 1932–38) 3:294; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, I, 220.

³⁷ Haqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 449.

the edge of Egypt where she and Joseph were fleeing.³⁸ Much more engaging has been the discussion of her cry that she wished she were dead. Given the general acceptance of Mary as the model of absolute obedience to the divine will, how could she have committed what at first might seem to be an act of disobedience, of not being willing to accept with gratitude the state into which God had put her? Even death, one might argue, is determined absolutely by God³⁹ and should not be either challenged or desired. Various exegetes of the Qurʾān have provided a range of responses as a kind of line of defense of Mary:

1. She was actually expressing pity for her kin because she knew they would accuse her of adultery and would be punished for not having faith in her purity.⁴⁰

2. Had she been given a choice between death and public disgrace through conception, she would have chosen death.⁴¹

3. She feared that someone might call Jesus the son of God and the son of Mary, with the blasphemous implication that Mary was somehow the wife of God.⁴²

(The recurrent theme of menstruation appears again in this context in the passing and unexegeted reference in al-Ṭabarī's commentary that Mary's having said "I wish I were dead and forgotten" is somehow a metaphor for the used cloth of menstruation.)⁴³

Also of great interest to modern commentators has been the matter of the shaking of the tree and the vindication of Mary against those who would accuse her of perfidy. In each case the concern again is to defend the very special qualities that have come to be acknowledged in Mary. Among the reasons given for her instruction to shake the tree are the following:

1. It was not because she needed food or drink, but rather a miracle to prove the truth of her purity. She could not have been in need of sustenance because we know that such was provided for her through divine intervention when she was in earlier seclusion. It was rather a matter of relationship. When she was devoted completely to God she did not need to labor in order to get food. But once she had a baby such effort became necessary, with the clear implication that relationships involve a form of suffering.⁴⁴

2. She needed to have the sustenance for strength in pushing the child from the womb. This is interpreted as proof that Jesus was born in a natural manner as all humans are born, just as Mary had carried him in a natural manner until the time came for his birth. In other words, Mary was not given any special favors after her pregnancy.⁴⁵

³⁸ Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie," *Maria*, p. 203; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qurʾān* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), pp. 76-77.

³⁹ It is Muslim doctrine that the length of each person's life (*ajal*) is set by divine decree and nothing can change it.

⁴⁰ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr*, p. 119.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Al-Imām al Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-Ishārāt* (Cairo, n.d.), IV, 96.

⁴³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 15:66. Cf. Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr*, p. 117.

⁴⁴ Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb, *al-Tafsīr al-Qurʾānī li-al-Qurʾān* (Beirut, n.d.), p. 731.

3. Mary was given the assurance that she could eat what is fresh and appetizing and therefore be happy (with the implication that she need not fear the retribution of her relatives).⁴⁶

4. God will indeed provide for His devoted servants when they are in need.⁴⁷

Lest it appear contradictory that Mary be told both to shake the tree for fruit and to vow a fast, the exegetes agree that fasting actually meant not engaging in any human conversation for a period of time.⁴⁸ Of considerable interest to the contemporary commentators is the question of exactly who it was that spoke from beneath her with these instructions. Some are convinced it was Jesus, others that it was Gabriel, and still others are unsure. To say that it is Gabriel who spoke, of course, is to question a miracle of Jesus that has a long tradition. It may in fact represent an effort to contain Jesus in an unquestionably human form, rather than to invest him with supernatural qualities. The arguments in any case are not substantive and the evidence is too slim for a conclusion.

E. Mary's defense against her accusers. While in one sense about Mary, this sequence, found in S. 19:27–33, is really a transition to testimony about the special nature of Jesus. When Mary returned to her people carrying the baby they did indeed, as she feared, accuse her of a terrible wrongdoing. Having vowed silence, she pointed to Jesus, who despite the exclamation of the onlookers that a baby cannot talk, proceeded to affirm his own status as a prophet appointed and blessed by God. The last we hear of Mary in this context is Jesus' affirmation that he will be dutiful toward his mother. "[He] has made me dutiful toward her who bore me and has not made me arrogant, unblest. Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!" [S. 19:32–33]). There was in fact a kind of triple purpose in the words of the young Jesus: he confirmed that Mary was innocent of any misdemeanor, he proclaimed his own mission, and he provided a counter argument, corroborated in the next several verses of the Qurʾān, to Christian claims of his divinity.

This is all we know from the Qurʾān about the life of Mary. There has been some speculation as to a possible flight to Egypt, based on S. 23:52 (And we made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and we gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks, and water-springs.) Historians and exegetes have ventured a variety of opinions, with little consensus, as to the cause, time, and length of this flight, although it is often said that after twelve years they returned. The specifics that are offered have to do with Jesus in his youth rather than with Mary, with the exception of the notation that she lived a life of poverty while in Egypt in keeping with her nature and with her understanding that her son had been created for something other than riches.⁴⁹ Some have posited that Mary died at age 51, six or eight years after the death of Jesus. A. J. Wensinck notes an interesting narrative of Mary going to Rome to speak with John (the disciple) and Shimʿūn [Si-

⁴⁶ Hijāzī, *al-Taḥfīr*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif*, p. 97.

⁴⁸ Parrinder, *Jesus*, p. 78, notes that this is the only mention of fasting in the suras considered as Meccan.

⁴⁹ Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie," *Maria*, p. 109.

mon] (the coppersmith) in front of Nero. Shim'un (along with someone named Tadawus [Thaddaeus?]) was crucified upside down, after which Mary and John fled. When they were caught and persecuted the earth opened to offer them protection, resulting in the conversion of Nero.⁵⁰

With this synopsis of the outlines of Mary's life as gleaned from the Qur'ān and commentaries, it is now important to return to some of the issues and themes emerging as particularly significant in the history of Muslim piety. We can suggest a number of categories, often overlapping, under which questions about Mary, her nature and condition, have been addressed. These are the matter of Mary's purity,⁵¹ Mary's virginity, Mary as the true believer, whether or not Mary can be considered to have been a prophet, the identification of Mary with the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima in the context of the controversy over the hierarchy of holy women in Islam, and Mary in relation to the first woman Eve. In general these grew out of what is communicated in two key verses of the Qur'ān, revealed to Mary in that period of her life when she was in retreat in the temple: "And the angels said, O Mary! God has chosen you and made you pure, and has preferred you above the women of the world. O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself and bow with those who bow in worship" (S. 3:42-3).

1. Mary's purity. We noted above that the ḥadīth indicating that Mary and Jesus are the only persons not touched by Satan at birth is one that is cited with great frequency in the commentaries. It is used, of course, as a testimony to Mary's purity. *Ṭahāra*, purity, is a concept basic to Islam as a human quality and as a prerequisite for acts of worship. As such it has both theological and juridical implications. As we will see, blood, especially menstrual, is understood to be defiling and in itself destructive of a state of purity. Therefore a very important question, sometimes ignored and sometimes dealt with directly by the commentators, is whether Mary's purity is to be understood as spiritual or physical or both. Specifically the question has been raised as to whether or not Mary shared with (virtually) all women the condition of a menstrual cycle:

—God has chosen and purified her for obedience. . . . He has purified your devotion (*dīn*) from the defilement which is part of the *dīn* of the daughters of Adam.⁵²

⁵⁰ A. J. Wensinck, "Maryam" in *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, eds. H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 330. No reference is given in the article and we were unable to locate the source of this tradition.

⁵¹ See George Anawati, "Islam and the Immaculate Conception" in *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, ed. E. D. O'Connor (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1958), pp. 447-61 in which he discusses in detail the reasons why this specific Christian dogma can not be equated to the much vaguer Islamic doctrine of Mary's purity. A key difference, he notes, is that Islam does not have a doctrine of original sin. Cf. R. J. McCarthy, "Mary in Islam," in Alberic Stacpoole, ed., *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1982), pp. 205-208.

⁵² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 6:393. Jane McAuliffe, "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Qur'ānic Exegesis" (*Islamochristiana*, VII [1981]), 20, insists that al-Ṭabarī sees Mary's purification as strictly non-physical, referring not to her body but to her behavior. That point is not entirely clear in this reference.

—Purified you has two meanings: (1) Purified you of *kufr* (rejection of God) and (2) purified you of all defilement (e.g., menstruation, the period of bleeding after childbirth).⁵³

—Purified for the service of the house of worship, from all defilement which would keep you from dwelling in it.⁵⁴

—Purified you from *kufr*, from childbirth, and menstruation.⁵⁵

—He purified you from *kufr* and from disobedience and from reprehensible acts and repulsive habits and the touch of men and from menstruation and from bleeding after childbirth.⁵⁶

—You are numbered among men because of the perfection with which you have been endowed (cited from Baqa'i); this verse (S. 3:43) points to the fact that a woman can lead the prayer.⁵⁷

The last reference, by al-Qāsimī, to the opinion of the highly respected classical theologian al-Suyūṭī that because of Mary women are qualified to lead the prayer suggests the possibility for an interesting discussion on female leadership. The image of Mary as an *imām* could become an engaging model for opening up the ranks of religious leadership to women. Those who might wish to pursue this possibility, however, should note that most contemporary opinion agrees with al-Qāsimī, who in reference to S. 3:43 ("prostrate yourself [O Mary] and pray with those who are praying") says it means that it is not as a woman that she is given such a directive from God. "Because of the perfection that God has apportioned to you, you are counted as among the men!"⁵⁸

In any case, it is apparent that the question of Mary's menstruation is key in most understandings of purity. That purity is understood by many to be both spiritual, in terms of her own religious acts and responses (*dīn*), and physical, as mentioned specifically in relation to bleeding and secondarily to other female conditions considered to be defiling as well as to physical contact with men. Throughout the history of human religiousness female menses generally have been seen as defiling; this is certainly no less true of Islam. "The blood of menstruation and of childbirth is *najis* (defiled) according to the agreement of the 'ulamā'," says one contemporary writer. "There is no difference between a small amount and abundance."⁵⁹ We have already noted the problem raised in connection with Ḥanna's dedication of her child to the service of the house of worship when the child turned out to be female. "The female is unfit for service of the *masjid* because of menstruation."⁶⁰

Is it to be assumed, then, that Mary actually was free throughout her life from this defilement? The evidence is inconclusive. Some exegetes, especially those

⁵³ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr*, II, 456.

⁵⁴ Ḥijāzī, *al-Tafsīr*, p. 58.

⁵⁵ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1937), IV, 82.

⁵⁶ Haqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 446.

⁵⁷ Al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, pp. 841–42; 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibrāhīm al-Ḥumaydī, *al-Ādāt fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Jeddah, 1982), p. 200.

⁵⁸ Al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, p. 841.

⁵⁹ Aḥmad al-Ghandūr, *Al-Ibādāt min al-Qur'ān wa'l-Sunna* (Cairo, 1969), p. 103.

⁶⁰ Haqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 440.

writing before the modern period, have been unwilling to grant this kind of immunity. Ibn Kathīr quotes the biographer of Muḥammad, Ibn Ishāq, as having said that when Mary conceived she stopped menstruating and began to have morning sickness.⁶¹ Al-Kisāʿī in *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* (Stories of the Prophets) says that when Mary reached the maturity of women, Zachariah came to see her and she told him that she had seen an ugly thing, i.e., her menstruation. So he ordered her to stay with her aunt until she was purified.⁶²

Al-Alūsī, however, writing in the nineteenth century, is typical of more recent writing when he concludes that there are several ways in which to look at the matter. Either God purified Mary from all the uncleanness common to women, including periods and bleeding after birth, or her purity was related specifically to the virtue of obedience, or it was in terms of lack of fault in the soul and the character. The best interpretation, he concludes, is to take the word purification in its broadest sense and say that God gave Mary the privilege of being pure from all uncleanness in the literal and the figurative senses, both of the heart and of the body.⁶³

Mary's freedom from defilement is, of course, what is generally termed her immaculate conception (see note 51). It is interesting to note in this connection that Muslim popular piety affirms the notion of the immaculate conception in relation to both the Prophet and his parents as being very much like that attributed to Mary. Kenneth Cragg cites the Damascene Yūsuf al-Nabahānī [d. 1932] as saying in a popular devotional manual that both the Prophet's parents and his grandparents were immaculately pure.⁶⁴

Tapper and Tapper in an article on rituals in modern Turkey surrounding the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad relate an interesting account in which his mother Emine (Āmina in Arabic) is said to have had the miraculous experience of being visited by three *ḥourīs* (maidens of Paradise affirmed by the Qurʾān as companions of the faithful). These supernatural creatures describe to Emine the qualities that her son, who is about to be born, will have.⁶⁵ Tradition in fact identifies these three *ḥourīs* as Eve, Āsiya and Mary (sometimes Eve is omitted and it is said that only Āsiya, wife of Pharaoh, and Mary are in attendance at the birth of the Prophet). Annemarie Schimmel cites Suleyman Chelebi's popular *mevlut* in which the birth of the Prophet is recounted and upon which the above account undoubtedly is based. In Āmina's (Emine's) words: "Suddenly the walls were split apart and three houri entered my room. Some have said that of these charm-

⁶¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, IV, 448.

⁶² Al-Kisāʿī, *Qīṣaṣ*, p. 303.

⁶³ Al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* (Cairo, 1927), III, 137, as cited in Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie," *Maria*, p. 192. Rashīd Riḍā, author of the famed modern *Manar* commentary, agrees in saying that freedom from the defilement of menstruation was a necessary prerequisite for not defiling the temple. (McAuliffe, "Chosen," p. 122); cf. Aḥmad al-Ghandūr, *al-Ibādāt min al-Qurʾān wa-al-sunna* (Cairo, 1969), p. 103, where he says, "The blood of menstruation and of childbirth is *najis* (defilement) according to the agreement of the ulema. There is no difference between a little or a large amount."

⁶⁴ Nancy and Richard Tapper, "The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam," *Man*, XXII (1987), 85.

⁶⁵ Tapper and Tapper ("The Birth," *Man*, 74) describe the belief in the birth of Muḥammad as parthenogenesis.

ing three one was Āsiya of moonlike face, one was Lady Mary without doubt, and the third a houri beautiful. Then these moonfaced three drew gently near and they greeted me with kindness here; then they sat around me, and they gave the good tidings of Muḥammad's birth. . . .'⁶⁶ Popular literature records a number of these miraculous appearances by Mary long after her death.

2. Mary's virginity. In the contemporary period question has been raised in some quarters—generally not by Arab writers—about Mary's virginity. We recall Mary's protestation (S. 3:47) that she cannot conceive a child when she has not been touched by a man.⁶⁷ Clearly the vast majority of commentators feel that this means that Jesus was born without a human father, and the consensus is that Mary retained her virginity throughout her life. "He who denies the birth of Jesus from Mary while a virgin is on the same level as an apostate; his faith is of no use to him, nor will his religion or Islam vouchsafe for him. . . . whoever [questions Mary's honor] deserves the suffering of hell."⁶⁸

A few modern writers, however, have chosen to see it differently. The Indian exegete Sayyid Ahmad Khan, for example, flatly denies Mary's virginity, saying that the Qur'ān does not mean that she never had relations with any man but that she only had intercourse with her husband.⁶⁹ It is important to note that this material comes out of the context of intensive and aggressive Christian missionary activity in India which depicted Jesus as superior to Muḥammad, even citing the Qur'ān as proof. Thus the denial of the virginity, although not in the tradition of Islam, may well be seen as part of the apologetic to defend the faith against its Christian detractors.

Ghulam Ahmad Parwez, the influential Pakistani commentator, is less definitive, but does argue that the Qur'ān does not say explicitly that Jesus was born without a human father, citing the fact that the Qur'ān does not normally mention the name of the fathers of the prophets. It was perfectly normal for Mary to have protested the news of her pregnancy, he says, because she was leading a reclusive life in the temple. The Qur'ān, by affirming God's power to create simply by saying "Be!", was attesting to the fact of creation through God's initiation, a normal occurrence. It was not necessary, he argues, for the Qur'ān to detail how Mary got pregnant, as everyone is familiar with that process.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 154. Cf. Louis Massignon, "La notion de voeu et l'dévotion Musulmane à Fatima," *Studi orientalistica in onore de Georgio Levi de Della Vida*, II (Rome: Istituto per l'Orient, 1956), 112: "Dans le *Mawlid* de Sulayman Celebi (fin XIVE siècle), les trois femmes qui aident Amina à la nativité du prophète étaient Eve, Asiya et *dirêrî Maryam sadafden Sâfiya*."

⁶⁷ Marina Warner (*Alone*, pp. 32–33) notes the problem that many Christian commentators have had with the vow of Mary to remain a virgin, originating in the apocrypha. It would have been unlikely, they argue, for a young Jewish girl to have vowed chastity given the great stigma placed on barrenness in that culture.

⁶⁸ Muḥammad Majdī Mirjān, *Al-Masīh: Insān am Ilāh* (Cairo, 1970), pp. 28–29.

⁶⁹ *Tafsīr*, II, 38, cited in J. M. S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1949), p. 82.

⁷⁰ *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān*, III, 547–53 as cited in Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, pp. 69–70. Baljon notes the contention of Abū'l-Kalām Āzād (*Tarjuman al-Quran*, II, 444 sq.) that those who have tried to argue for the virgin birth have simply taken verses of the Qur'ān out of context. Parrinder in

More important than arguments that might be marshalled to call into question the virginity of Mary, which in any case have never held sway, is the crucial nature of that virginity to the understanding of Mary as a model of purity. This role has been of particular importance in Muslim mystical piety, as will be seen below.⁷¹

3. The true believer. Several of the Qurʾānic narratives have served as the occasion to raise the issue of whether or not Mary may have questioned (or worse, possibly denied) the will of God. She wondered how as a virgin she could be pregnant, as we have seen, and when she experienced the pangs of childbirth she expressed the wish that she might have died before it happened. Since it is incumbent on the true Muslim believer to accept with gratitude and praise whatever God determines, the question has been raised whether these utterances on Mary's part could have constituted unbelief.

The answer, of course, has been a clear no. In regard to the pangs of childbirth incident, for example, a brief look at the remarks of several commentators is sufficient to illustrate the "protection" they offer to Mary in defending her honor. Qushayrī, for example, says that she may have wished for death out of pity for her kin who would no doubt accuse her of adultery and themselves risk punishment for denying God's power; or that she feared someone might utter the ultimate blasphemy of calling Jesus God's son and Mary His wife; or that, somewhat more humanly, she was shamed at having gotten into such a difficult situation.⁷² And al-Ṭūsī provides the same kind of explanation in saying that her wish for death came from a concern that people would disobey God by condemning her, or that being human she was afraid of being scandalized, or that had she been given the choice between death and public disgrace she would have chosen death.⁷³ The interesting issue is the tension these authors express, characteristic of the history of commentary about Mary (especially that coming out of the Arab world), between affirming Mary's unquestioning obedience to the divine will (thereby giving her deathwish a very altruistic interpretation) and her horror of being accused of the ultimate act of moral shamefulness, i.e., illicit sex (thereby putting her lamentation into a very human framework).⁷⁴

Jesus in the Qurʾān (pp. 72ff.) observes that two points are relevant to the question. The first is the strong similarity of the words spoken to Mary about her impending pregnancy to those spoken at the annunciation of the birth of John (S. 3:40, 19:8). The argument can be made, and has been that because the Qurʾān does not suggest that John was born without a human father there is no reason to assume that the process was different in terms of Jesus. The second point is that the Qurʾān is so insistent in its denial of the possibility of God's taking offspring that it raises serious question about the process of divine intervention in terms of Jesus' birth.

⁷¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 218.

⁷² Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif*, IV, 96.

⁷³ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr*, p. 119.

⁷⁴ This issue, though approached differently, has of course not been absent in Christian reflection. In an interesting article on Eastern Christian views on the eucharist, Sebastian Brock observes that while people are given the potential for sanctification in the eucharist this can only take effect if they allow the Holy Spirit to work freely, unquestioned and accepted. This he likens to the unquestioning acceptance of Mary of the fact of her pregnancy with Jesus. ("Mary and the Eucharist: An Oriental Perspective" in *Sobornost*, I [1979], 54).

Mary the true believer has served as a model for the faithful through the ages and has been a much revered figure in popular piety. Annemarie Schimmel, who has introduced Western readers to so many of the realities of Muslim devotional life, has pointed to frequent images of Mary in Sufi poetry and writing. She notes that in parts of the subcontinent the longing soul, so rarely envisaged as female, is seen in feminine terms and likened to the Qur'anic instance of the longing soul of Mary.⁷⁵ And she cites her beloved Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in the *Mathnawī* (5:1188) concerning the power of true prayer: "He ((who?)) turns the dried-up seed of prayer into a marvelous date-palm, just as in Mary's birth pangs her pain was rewarded by a shower of dates . . .", noting that images of Mary and Jesus are more frequent in Rūmī's works than any other comparable Muslim poetry.⁷⁶ In the *Mathnawī* (4:2142) Rūmī plays out his common theme of identifying the internal and the external by saying, "If you see an ugly face, that is you; and if you see Jesus and Mary, that is you."⁷⁷ It has been observed that for Rūmī in the *Mathnawī* men are often symbols of saints and women of the unbelievers, part of this theme of the intellect as male and the ego as female. It is particularly interesting, then, to see what he does with the imagery of the great Persian warrior Rustam, likened to the one who is heroic in spiritual combat: "Since women never go out to fight the holy war, how should they engage in the Greater Holy War [the *jihād* against the base inclinations of the human soul]? Except rarely, when a Rustam is hidden within a woman's body, as in the case of Mary" (6:1882-84).⁷⁸

4. Mary as a prophet. Sura 3:42 cited above in which God indicates that He has (1) chosen, (2) purified, and (3) preferred Mary above the women of creation has engendered considerable discussion through the history of Islam. We have already considered the matter of purification and how that has been interpreted. Related to the issues of choice and preference is the question of whether or not Mary could be considered to be a prophet in the line of the prophets of Islam.

R. J. McCarthy in a brief article entitled "Mary in Islam" says that the "chosen by God" phrase means that Mary was chosen as the prophets were chosen, and that although she was not an apostle (*rasūla*) because she was not sent to a people, "The commentators [uncited] in general regard her as a prophetess (*nabiyya*), since God spoke to her."⁷⁹ This generalization, however, is not supported in the literature consulted for this study. Most commentators in fact neither make the distinction between *nabiyya* and *rasūla* nor credit the possibility that Mary could have been a prophet. The reason for the latter, of course, is basically that she is female.

⁷⁵ Schimmel, *Mystical*, p. 168.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 160, 318.

⁷⁷ Cited in W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 145. Cf. Reynold Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 133, who cites Book Two of the *Mathnawī* (no vs.): "If you hit the mirror, you hit yourself. If you see an ugly face in it, 'tis your own, and if you see a Jesus there, you are its mother Mary."

⁷⁸ Chittick, *Sufi*, pp. 164-65.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, "Mary," *Mary's Place*, p. 206. He goes on to note that Mary was twice elected by God—once when she was received in the service of the temple and once when chosen to be the mother of Jesus.

A look at the reflections of some of the classical commentators illustrates that. Mary is not a prophet, says Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, citing S. 12:109 ("We have not sent anyone to you [as prophet] but men to whom we have given revelation . . ."). If any proof of prophethood is involved, he says, it is that of Jesus and not Mary.⁸⁰ Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, citing the same verse, insists that Mary's having received this communication from God through the angel does not suggest that she is a prophet, a status clearly reserved for men.⁸¹ And the contemporary exegetes generally agree. Gabriel's conversation with Mary was not a revelation, says Haqqī, because the Qur'ān only talks about prophethood as a profession for males and it cannot be for women. This communication, then, while miraculous, is only a foretelling of Jesus' prophethood. "God has purified her from apostasy and sin and evil deeds and repugnant customs and the touching of men and the bleeding of menstruation and childbirth," but He has not, according to Haqqī, made her a prophet.⁸² The contemporary Shi'ite commentator 'Allāmah Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī notes that the fact that Mary was mentioned before Jesus (in S. 21:91) is a temporal reference and not one of ranking, and confirms that since Mary is not a prophet she is honored simply by being mentioned in relation to one.⁸³

There have been, however, a few dissenting voices. Ibn Ḥazm of Cordova seems to have been the most prominent of the classical writers to affirm Mary's prophethood. (Ibn Ḥazm, it should be noted, has not been without detractors who seriously question his "orthodoxy".) He states without equivocation that God's having sent Gabriel to Mary means that "this is a true Prophethood with a true revelation and message from God." His argument, quite different from that cited by others, is that the Qur'ān does attest to the fact that angels have come to women and have given them messages from God. The mother of Jesus was informed about his coming, as was the mother of Moses who was told to throw her son into the sea. (Ibn Ḥazm notes that this act of faith is equivalent to the obedience of Abraham in offering his son as a sacrifice.) Therefore, he concludes, there is nothing unusual about Mary's having received a revelation and thus being designated as a prophet.⁸⁴

Another exception is al-Qurṭubī, mentioned above for his remarkable interpretation of the hemaphroditic conception of Jesus. On the issue of prophethood he agrees with Ibn Ḥazm that Mary is indeed a prophet because God revealed to her by the same means that He revealed to the rest of the prophets. He concludes with his opinion on the much debated issue coming from the last phrase of S. 3:42 about God's preference of Mary above the women of creation. "It is evident from the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth," he says, "that Mary is the best among the women of the world from Eve to the last woman up to the coming of the hour [of

⁸⁰ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tafsīr*, II, 457.

⁸¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, VIII, 45 cited in McAuliffe, "Chosen," p. 21.

⁸² Haqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 446.

⁸³ Muḥammad al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mizān*, XIV, 317, cited in McAuliffe, "Chosen," *Islam*, VII (1981), 26.

⁸⁴ Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Faṣl fi'l-milal* (Cairo, 1317/1320), V, 88.

resurrection].’’⁸⁵ Others are less clear that this unequivocal preeminence should in fact be given to the mother of Jesus, as we shall see in the upcoming section.

5. The hierarchy of holy women (Maryam and Fāṭima). It is interesting to see how much discussion has been engendered concerning this matter of the hierarchy of holy women in Islam. While for al-Qurṭubī the issue is clear and Mary is at the pinnacle, for others the problem is more complex, especially in connection with the role of the Prophet’s daughter Fāṭima in Islamic tradition.

A tradition often cited is that in which the best women of the world are identified as Mary, daughter of ʿImrān; Khadīja, wife of the Prophet (daughter of Khuwaylid); Fāṭima, daughter of Muḥammad; and Āsiya, wife of Pharaoh.⁸⁶ This identification of the four as equal in status, or at least not differentiated, sometimes is modified so that it is Mary and Khadīja alone who are the best⁸⁷ or Mary and Āsiya who are so identified. ‘‘Many men have attained perfection. Among the women, only Mary and Āsiya, wife of the Pharaoh, have attained a perfection that no other has had.’’⁸⁸

Ḥaqqī comments that Mary is superior to all the women of the world, but concentrates on the four indicated above as being more virtuous and knowledgeable than any others. He says that there is no question of prophethood for women because that is predicated on being visible and making public proclamation, while the condition of women is naturally one of concealment. He concludes with this observation: ‘‘Among women are some who are perfect and knowledgeable and who attain the standard of men [in this case Mary, Khadīja, Fāṭima and Āsiya]—they are in a real sense men.’’⁸⁹

There is also, however, a significant body of persons who argue that Mary and Fāṭima, daughter of the Prophet, are the only two who should be considered superior to all women. Mary’s prerogative is her miraculous conception of Jesus, Fāṭima’s her status as daughter of the Prophet (whom she is sometimes said to resemble).⁹⁰ For those (both Sunni and Shiʿite) who have difficulty acknowledging that Fāṭima is not alone in the category of superior, the argument is put forward that while Mary was chosen above all the women of her generation, Fāṭima is in fact the chosen woman of all time.⁹¹ Or, the reasoning is sometimes turned around to say that while Fāṭima is the chief of the women of this time or community (*umma*), the chief of the women of the world is Maryam because of the description in S. 3:42.⁹² And in some cases Mary and Fāṭima seem almost to be abstracted into one person.

⁸⁵ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, IV, 83; cf. Hajāzī, *Tafsīr*, III, 58.

⁸⁶ See Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad* (Cairo, 1955), 2:233 and 3:135; Sharqāwī, *al-Anbiyāʾ*, 1:340; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 4:83.

⁸⁷ See Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (Cairo, 1313 H.), III, 641, 928, 1109, 1211; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, IV, 1296.

⁸⁸ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, IV, 132. See also Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, IV, 1296–97.

⁸⁹ Ḥaqqī, *Tafsīr*, p. 447.

⁹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, VI, 393–4; al-Tūsī, *Tafsīr*, II, 456; al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-qadīr* (Cairo, 1250 H.), I, 340.

⁹¹ McCarthy, ‘‘Mary,’’ *Mary’s Place*, pp. 206–207.

⁹² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, IV, 1307.

This matter of the comparisons drawn between Mary and Fāṭima, leading in some cases to a virtual identity of experience between the two, is an exceptionally interesting phenomenon in Muslim hagiography.⁹³ Louis Massignon sums up what he sees as a kind of absorption into Fāṭima of the qualities attributed to Mary:

On sait assez combien, pour la Chrétienté, Maryam a été préservée: *Virgo prius ac posterius*, sans aucune des impuretés légales dont souffrent les femmes et les mères. Il est extrêmement remarquable de constater le travail de la pensée des Musulmanes qui les a amenées à envisager pour Fāṭima, graduellement, les privilèges de Maryam. L'ensemble de l'Islam féminin pense que Fāṭima a été exemptée de règles (*ḥayḍ*) et de perte de sang à l'accouchement (*nifās*) afin que sa prière puisse être *perpétuelle*.⁹⁴

A number of traditions can be cited showing that the "miracles" that we have seen acknowledged in relation to the figure of Mary are also understood to have been part of Fāṭima's experience. Thus as Mary's sustenance in the temple was miraculously multiplied by God each day, so Fāṭima found God providing food for her and her family.⁹⁵ As Mary was considered (at least by some interpreters) to have been free from menstruation, so Fāṭima is said not to have menstruated and in fact to have stopped bleeding an hour after childbirth, according to one account, so that she would not miss any of her prayers.⁹⁶ Fāṭima is also called *batūl* (chaste, virgin), an epithet used repeatedly of Mary, and in fact is referred to in many places as Maryam al-Kubrā, Mary the Greater.⁹⁷ Like Mary, Fāṭima is said to have been visited by angels, although she did not become impregnated through that experience. And like Mary it is said that Fāṭima set herself apart from contact with other people while pregnant and like her was given sustenance from heaven.⁹⁸

⁹³ Several works have been devoted to just this subject, including the above mentioned article by Jane McAuliffe and the unpublished essay by Kelly del Tredici, "Fatimah and Mary: Sorrowful Mothers and Mediators" (Harvard Divinity School, 1984); cf. note 3 above.

⁹⁴ Louis Massignon, "La notion du voeu," *Studi orientalistica*, II, 111.

⁹⁵ "The Prophet of God spent days without food. So he toured the houses of his wives and did not find food in any of them. He went to Fāṭima and asked her if she had anything to eat. She said no. Later, a neighbor sent Fāṭima two loaves and a little bit of meat. She covered it and sent Ḥasan and Ḥusayn to call their grandfather [Muḥammad] and when he came she uncovered it and it was full of bread and meat. She realized that it was a blessing from God. When he asked her where it was from, she said it was from God who gives to whomever he wills. The Prophet praised God and said, 'He has made you the best of the women of Banū Isrā'īl.'" (Al-Tha'labī, *Arā' is al-majālis*, p. 373.)

⁹⁶ Yūsuf b. Ismā'īl al-Nabahānī, *Al-Sharaf al-Mu'abbad li-āl-Muḥammad* (Cairo, 1961), p. 109. Cf. Abū al-Futūḥ Rāzī (11th c.) and Rashīd Riḍā (20th c.) as cited in McAuliffe, "Chosen," *Islam*, VII (1981), 22-23.

⁹⁷ There are even instances in which similarities between the births of Jesus and 'Alī, Fāṭima's husband and the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, are elaborated. One reads, for example, that the mother of 'Alī gave birth to him in the Ka'ba on a night in which there was a bright star that will not occur again. As Jesus was from a pure genealogy and from a virgin, so 'Alī was from a pure genealogy and born in a pure place. As Jesus was born under the blessed tree, so 'Alī was born in the blessed Ka'ba (Muḥammad 'Arif Muṣṭafā Fahmī, *Yasū' al-Masīḥ wa'l-Imām 'Isā* [Cairo, 1971], p. 16.)

⁹⁸ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), p. 72.

This conjunction between Mary and Fāṭima has long been part of popular Muslim piety. Hossein Nasr notes that in Syria many Arab women pray through both Mary and Fāṭima at such occasions as the illness of a child to the point that "the sanctity of Mary and Fāṭima are related and even identified."⁹⁹ And one cannot neglect mentioning the designation of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition as "Our Lady of Fatima," after her appearance in 1917 in a little Portuguese village by that name.¹⁰⁰

Part of the discussion in terms of "priority" between Mary and Fāṭima has to do with preeminence in the Garden of Paradise. Often it is said that Fāṭima is the mistress of the women of the Garden except for Mary,¹⁰¹ which does little to clarify things, and at other times Eve, Āsiya, Mary and Fāṭima (Eve here substituted for Khadīja) are all put on equal rank in Paradise.¹⁰² Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, perhaps best known of the biographers of the saints of Islam, quotes 'Abbās of Tūs as saying that when the summons comes for the Day of Resurrection "the first person to set foot in that class of men [persons entering Paradise] will be Mary . . ."¹⁰³ Shi'ite persuasions of the preeminence of Fāṭima as the mistress of the Day of Resurrection notwithstanding, both women clearly play a very important role in popular piety in relation to the reality of the last day.¹⁰⁴

Mary's miraculous appearances occur also in connection with Fāṭima. The "mistress of sorrows," by which name the daughter of the Prophet is known in Shi'ite tradition,¹⁰⁵ suffered greatly in the process of a miscarriage. First God is said to have consoled her by saying what he said first to Mary, that he had purified her and chosen her above all women. After Fāṭima's intense pains began, God sent Mary to her to console her and to take care of her in this period of extreme illness.¹⁰⁶ And in another account both Fāṭima and Maryam are said to have come to bless the marriage of the twelfth *imām*, direct descendant of Fāṭima and leader of the Ithnā 'Asharī Shi'ites.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁹ Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 262.

¹⁰⁰ Rodriguez, "Mary, the Muslims, and Fatima," *The Marian Helpers Bulletin*, April-June 1984, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰¹ Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, II, 233; III, 64, 80. See the interesting volume by L. Massigon, *La Mubahala de Medine et l'Hyperdulie de Fatima* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955), p. 20, in which he notes that in some Shi'ite works Fāṭima is presented as the co-spouse of Maryam in Paradise.

¹⁰² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, VI, 393-94.

¹⁰³ Cited in Margaret Smith, *Rābi'a the Mystic*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ That relationship has not been drawn theologically anywhere near as clearly with regard to Mary as it has in the Shi'ite tradition with regard to Fāṭima. Cf., however, the importance of Mary in Eastern Christian eschatological discussions: "Mary's role is both a historical one and an eschatological one: Historical, in that she gave birth to God in the flesh in time; eschatological, in that proleptically she represents humanity as a whole raised up to its proper relationship to God at the end of time." Brock, "Mary," p. 59.

¹⁰⁵ "Weeping for Hussain opens the gates to Paradise, and Fatima, like Mary the mother of Jesus, will intercede for those who shed tears for her son" (Schimmel, *Muhammad*, p. 20).

¹⁰⁶ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, p. 239.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

6. Mary in relation to Eve. Somewhat more complex than the comparisons between Mary and Fāṭima, though far less numerous, are references that somehow link Mary and the first woman Eve, evidenced above in the story of the three houris appearing to the Prophet's mother Āmina. In some cases a similitude is struck in relation to creation, cited as a defense of the possibility of Mary having given birth to Jesus while a virgin. In such cases Eve and Adam are said to have been created apart from the normal procedures, i.e., at the pure will and discretion of God just as Jesus was created.¹⁰⁸ In other instances the reference is directly to the association of Eve with the origin of evil in the world because of her supposed disobedience. In this sense she is a kind of mirror opposite or antitype of Mary, who is of course the pure and the obedient one.¹⁰⁹ Despite the fact that the Qur'anic narratives of Adam and his unnamed mate assign culpability for disobeying God equally to both partners, the aḥādīth [sing. ḥadīth] obviously based on Jewish and Christian tradition place blame especially on Eve with the result that certain narratives attribute the cause of menstruation which all women experience directly to her.¹¹⁰ This gives even more significance to the reports of Mary as never having menstruated or suffered the bleeding after childbirth.

On a more esoteric level, the link between Mary and Eve is drawn in some mystical interpretations in which Mary is equated, as the prototype of the true believer, with *sophia* or wisdom. In a marvelous tribute to the writing of the famous Andalusian mystic entitled *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*,¹¹¹ Henri Corbin has captured the Sufi's expression of what he calls the *devotis sympathetica*. It is Mary who thus holds the *sirr al-rubūbiyya*, the secret of the divine godhead. As Sophia she is identified as the creative imagination or "imaginative dignity" (*ḥaḍrat khayālīyya*), that which forms a link between human and divine. She both veils and reveals God, providing the medium by which he comes into concrete existence in terms of human perception.¹¹² Corbin then explains the mystical concept of the quaternity of Adam-Eve and Maryam-Jesus.

¹⁰⁸ See, e.g., al-Qāsimī, *Tafsīr*, p. 4133.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. the reference in the apocryphal Gospel of Bartholomew (3:6) in which Peter is said to have told Mary "You made good the transgression of Eve, changing her shame into joy." Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), I, 495. See also Robert Murray, "Mary, the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers", *Eastern Churches Review*, III (1971), 3732-84, in which he quotes such sayings as that of Ephrem in his Diatessaron commentary, "Death entered by the ear of Eve: therefore life entered by the ear of Mary" (p. 374) and of Cyrillona, "The legless serpent crippled Eve; Mary became as feet for her mother" (p. 377). Cf. Brock, "Mary," p. 57, citing Ephrem ("Hymns on Unleavened Bread" 6:7) as having said that "Mary has given us the bread of rest in place of that bread of toil which Eve provided."

¹¹⁰ See Carol Delaney, "The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate," *Man*, XXI, 499, who talks about Turkish villagers believing that women suffer menstruation specifically because of Eve's disobedience. The background of such belief is clear from traditions that became part of popular Islam in which the Qur'anic figure of Eve underwent very significant interpretation. See Y. Y. Haddad and J. I. Smith, "Eve: Islamic Image of Woman," Azizah al-Hibri, ed., *Women and Islam* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 135-44.

¹¹¹ Henri Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 136 sqq.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 145-53.

In the figure of Mary (Sophia) the feminine principle is invested with the function of creativity. Maryam thus becomes a kind of Adam, and Jesus, created from her, is equated with Eve.¹¹³ Corbin reflects that this substitution of the figure of Mary for Eve “announces the ultimate fruition of the dialect of love.”¹¹⁴ And, as the Virgin Mary is identified with Sophia, the soul in which Jesus as the son of the intellect finds birth, so Fāṭima comes to symbolize the light of the divine through her function as mother of the line of Imams.¹¹⁵

These matters, however, are not the stuff of everyday piety but the philosophical-theosophical imaginings of some of the world's most spiritually advanced souls. And they find their reflection in much mystical writing in which Mary is taken far beyond the Qur'anic description of a young girl entrusted to the service of the temple and with the motherhood of Jesus. Typical of this genre is the tribute given her by the eleventh-century mystical commentator al-Baqlī in his exegesis of S. 1:7:

the substance of Mary is the very substance of original sanctity. Brought up by the Real in the light of intimacy, she is in each of her respirations “magnetically drawn” by the signs of nearness and intimacy towards the source of the divine lights. She was on the lookout at every instant for the rise of the sun of Power in the east of the Kingdom. She withdrew far from all created beings by her lofty aspiration penetrated with light of the hidden mystery. She turned herself towards the horizon whence flash the gleams of [God's] Essence and Attributes, “breathing in” the breezes of union blowing from the world of eternity. To her came one of the breezes of the eternal encounter, and upon her rose the sun of the contemplation of holiness. When she had contemplated the manifestation of the orient bursting forth from the eternal, its lights invaded her and its secrets reached the inmost depths of her soul. Her soul conceived by the breath of the hidden mystery. She became the bearer of the Word most high and of the light of the Spirit most lofty. When her state became grandiose by the reflection in it of the

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 163. “Just as a Feminine had been existentiated by a Masculine without the mediation of a mother, namely, Eve created by Adam and standing in a passive relation to Adam, so it was necessary that a Masculine should be borne by a Feminine without the mediation of a father; and so Jesus was borne by Maryam.” (See Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Futūḥāt*, I, 136 [ch. 10], 2:31 and 4:24.) Cf. Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), p. 142: “Since there is a world which is relative, the root of this world must exist in the principal order itself and this root is none other than the Divine *maya* which veils and manifests the One upon all planes of reality. She is the Feminine, at once Mary and Eve. Evil issues from the interiorizing activity of *maya* but Existence which remains pure and good finally prevails over evil as Eve was forgiven for her sins by the spiritual inviolability and victory of Mary.”

¹¹⁴ Corbin cites Rūmī's *Mathnawī* (III, 3706 sq. and 3771–80) in describing the visit of the angel to Mary, in which he has Gabriel say, “Before my visible Form you flee into the invisible. . . . But truly my hearth and swelling are in the Invisible. . . . O Maryam! Look well, for I am a Form difficult to discern. . . . I am like the true dawn, I am the light of your Lord. . . . You take refuge from me, and I am the Refuge” (*Creative*, p. 171).

¹¹⁵ Nasr, *Knowledge*, pp. 207–208.

beauty manifesting the eternal, she hid herself far from creatures, putting her joy in the nuptials of the Reality.¹¹⁶

Here, then, we have at least an initial sketch of some of the ways in which Mary has been viewed by Muslims over the centuries. As one seen to have been pure, obedient, and chosen, she has served as the symbolic justification for everything from unquestioning faith in God's power and action, to either an affirmation or a denial of the possibility of women as prayer leaders, servants in God's house or prophets, to a reaffirmation of the impurity of (female) bodily processes.

We began with a brief notation of recent common experiences of Muslims and Christians in Egypt witnessing visions of the Virgin. As was evident on the occasion of that vision at Zeituna, dividing lines between the two faith traditions often are blurred in the veneration of Mary. Many Muslim women pray to the Virgin in Christian churches and sanctuaries.¹¹⁷ Devotion to Mary is evident at shrines visited by members of the two communities in various parts of the Middle East.¹¹⁸ Muslims and Christians have even referred in recent times to their reverence for Mary as a means of affirming common ground in the effort to oppose godless Communism. (A high government official in Egypt, whose lineage goes back to the earliest caliphs, reportedly showed with great pride to some visitors in his home an image of Mary on his wall. Not only had he not removed the image, placed there by an earlier inhabitant, but he had specially illuminated it as a symbol of the holy alliance between Christians and Muslims that serves as a vanguard of resistance against atheism.)¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Al-Baqlī, *Tafsīr*, II, 7, as cited by McCarthy, "Mary," *Mary's Place*, p. 205. It is noteworthy that the notion of Mary as the possessor of knowledge of great mysteries is also very much a part of Christian apocryphal literature. See, e.g., the Gospel of Bartholomew (2:4-5): "You, who are highly favored, tabernacle of the Most High, unblemished, we, all the apostles ask you. . . . Tell us how you conceived the incomprehensible, or how you carried him who cannot be carried or how you bore so much greatness. But Mary answered: Do not ask me concerning this mystery. If I begin to tell you, fire will come out of my mouth and consume the whole earth. . . ." Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963-1966), I, 492.

¹¹⁷ "Et parce que cette dévotion se trouve, chez leurs voisins chrétiens, encouragée, dirigée, organisée par une maternelle Eglise, musulmanes et musulmans vont d'instinct aux sanctuaires consacrés à Marie s'agenouiller devant ses images, lui amener des malades, se lier par des vœux, pèlerins isolés ou mêlés parfois aux foules chrétiennes attirées, ignorants des scrupules de *communicatio in divinis*, avec la candide assurance de la syrophénicienne se prosternant sous la table du divin Thaumaturge pour manger des miettes des enfants." Paul M. A. Mulla, "Comment certains milieux islamiques on réage au stimulant de quelques manifestations récentes de la doctrine et de la piété concernant la personne privilégiée de Marie mère du Jésus." *Virgo Immaculata*, XVII (Rome: Accademia Mariana Internaz., 1957), 269. See R. Barkai, "Une invocation musulmane au nom de Jesus et du Marie," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, CC, 3 (1983), 257-68 in which he translates and discusses a 15th-16th century syncretistic Islamic text said to have been "écrit par la main de notre maîtresse Marie. . . ." (p. 259). Barkai notes that it is a Muslim text which presents the message of Jesus and of Mary as being the principle element of the faith (pp. 259-60).

¹¹⁸ Michael O'Carroll, "Islam", in *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982), p. 192.

¹¹⁹ Mulla, "Comment certains milieux islamiques," *Virgo Immaculata*, XVII, 270. The author (p. 275) cites various efforts in Turkey to compare the Qur'anic and Biblical versions of Mary as a source of common veneration.

Despite the instances of common appreciation of the Virgin at the level of popular piety, however, Christians and Muslims for many centuries have also used her as a vehicle for the expression of their mutual deep mistrust and misunderstanding.¹²⁰ Mary often has been at the center of polemical controversies between Christians and Muslims. Missionaries and Orientalists have attempted to use the story of Mary to cast doubt on the authenticity of the Prophet Muḥammad.¹²¹ Insofar as Christian veneration of Mary might be seen to carry overtones of recognition of the divinity of her son, it moves into a realm in which common interfaith appreciation is no longer possible. The message of the Qurʾān is an abject denial of the divinity of Jesus.¹²²

For centuries Christians have tried to read into the Qurʾānic passages a reference to Theotokos, mother of God. Catholics continue to believe that her role in the Qurʾān can allow her to serve as a bridge between Christianity and Islam. Some see it as the means of unlocking Muslim resistance to conversion to Christianity. Nilo Geagea, for example, in a comprehensive study of the figure of Mary in the Qurʾān,¹²³ provides a theological commentary on Qurʾānic exegesis in the attempt to prove that references to Mary can be interpreted basically as they have been interpreted in the history of Catholic Christianity. In some cases the hope is expressed rather baldly that Mary might serve to lead Muslims to a more Christian perspective, as in Bishop Fulton Sheen's comment in *The World's First Love*, "I believe that the Blessed Virgin chose to be known as 'Our Lady of Fatima' as a pledge and a sign of hope to the Moslem people, and as an assurance that they, who show her so much respect, will one day accept her Divine Son, too."¹²⁴

Generally, however, the approach suggests rather the attempt to find in Mary a kind of link between the two faith traditions, "a bridge builder between peoples."¹²⁵ The very name of Nilo Geagea's aforementioned book, *Mary of the Ko-*

¹²⁰ See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1960), pp. 175–84, for a detailed study of medieval Christian assessments of the role of Mary in the Qurʾān.

¹²¹ The Qurʾān (S. 3:33), for example, identifies Mary with Mīriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Christians have cited this as proof that the Qurʾān was fabricated by Muḥammad in that he clearly confused Aaron's sister with the mother of Jesus. T. J. O'Shaughnessy in *Eschatological Themes in the Qurʾān* (Manila: Atena de Manila University, 1986), pp. 111–12, notes the possible influence of Muḥammad's Jewish contacts as leading to this confusion, and observes that Mary Magdelene in early Jewish polemical writings was actually called the mother of Jesus. Muslims, of course, have strongly denied this kind of accusation, offering such explanations as the fact that the Qurʾān is drawing a similitude between the two or that Mary had a brother called Aaron. (See Abd-el-Jalil, "La vie," *Maria*, p. 189): "Quoiqu'il puisse en être du Coran, il faut s'abstenir d'accuser l'Islam de faire une telle confusion; il faut renoncer à une argumentation facile et vaine et à des insinuations inefficaces et déplaisantes." Cf. Muḥammad ʿIzzat Darwaza, *al-Tafsīr al-ḥadīth* (Cairo, 1962), III, 48.

¹²² Parrinder, *Jesus*, pp. 134–35, cites in reference to S. 5:116 ("Did you say unto humankind: Take me and my mother for two gods besides God?") the argument that such exaltation of Mary may well refer to a heretical practice in early Arabia. "The Collyridians, an Arabian female sect of the fourth century, offered to Mary cakes of bread (collyrida), as they had done to the great earth mother in pagan times. . . . The Qurʾān may well be directed against this heresy."

¹²³ Nilo Geagea, *Mary of the Koran: A meeting Point Between Christianity and Islam* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1984).

¹²⁴ Rodriguez, "Mary," *The Marian Helpers Bulletin*, April–June, 1984, p. 15.

¹²⁵ Kroeger, "Mary," p. 23. He notes that "While there are vast differences separating Muslims and Catholics, Mary is one point of agreement."

ran: A Meeting Point Between Christianity and Islam, gives a strong clue as to his motivations in preparing this material. R. J. McCarthy, in his article "Mary in Islam," while appropriately cautious about noting the limitations of such efforts as commonality, says that "Mary, though she may not be a touchstone, may well be a stepping-stone."¹²⁶ And on the occasion of Ramadan, 1988, Francis Cardinal Arinze of the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians addressed a greeting to his Muslim friends whom he called brothers and sisters in God. Over two-thirds of his message dealt with Mary, "the Mother of Jesus, whom both Christians and Muslims—without according her the same role and title—honour as a model for believers. . . ."¹²⁷

Clearly the material presented in this essay is insufficient to draw firm conclusions about the legitimacy or efficacy of such attempts to see Mary as a link, a bridge or a model. It would seem, however, that the extent to which she can profitably serve as this kind of common ground is fairly limited. The role that Mary plays in the Islamic tradition is, in fact, so particular to that tradition that attempts to draw out commonality actually could put in jeopardy the very understanding for which they claim to be seeking.

To elaborate direct comparisons is the task of another study. At a very minimum, however, it seems fair to say that unlike what is true of Roman Catholic Christianity, Mary as a person really has *not* played an extremely significant part in the history of Islamic thought or, with the exception of Sufi devotion, even in Islamic piety. If it can be granted that Christians have valued Mary specifically for herself, there seems to be a difference to the extent that Islamic tradition has often used her as a kind of foil for making points about human behavior and individual response to God. Marina Warner, for example, identifies Mary's questioning of the angel Gabriel concerning her pregnancy as the "most precious speech in Mariology, for it implies her innocence and virginity."¹²⁸ While Muslims clearly affirm that Mary was innocent and virginal, they have used this protest of Mary's as the occasion to defend her against charges not only of immoral behavior but of a lack of trust and faith in God. The very defense serves as the occasion to clarify what is, in fact, proper religious response. It is clear that whatever role she may or may not have played in the lives of Muslims, Mary has proved quite useful for contemporary commentators as they prescribe the proper task and role for women.

We have seen that in the Islamic tradition Mary has been classed with such figures as Eve, Pharaoh's wife Āsiya, and Fāṭima. Except for Fāṭima, however, these figures are not real in the sense that they have not been a known part of the history of the Islamic community from the time of the Prophet. Persons such as the Prophet's wives Khadija and ʿĀ'isha, as well as his daughter Fāṭima, are exemplars for ideal womanhood and one finds them invoked with frequency in contemporary writings. The only person with whom Mary is seriously compared

¹²⁶ McCarthy, "Mary," *Mary's Place*, p. 211.

¹²⁷ Francis Cardinal Arinze, "Message for the End of Ramadan," 1988.

¹²⁸ Warner, *Alone*, p. 8.

(and in fact even put in a kind of competition, no doubt for political-sectarian reasons) is Fāṭima, and here the comparison is with the supra-natural rather than the human qualities of the Prophet's daughter. The Fāṭima who is a role model for women is the pious, suffering, and ultimately human person.

And so what of Mary? With the exception of some mystical writings and practice, Mary is not and by definition cannot be a model for human aspiration in Islam because she is clearly recognized, and treated, as unlike anyone else. Whether or not one acknowledges that she had miraculous abilities or even was in a state of perpetual purity (i.e., lack of menstrual or post-partum bleeding), Mary was virginal and thus in fact categorically opposed to the ideal of a Muslim woman whose virginity is prized but ultimately sacrificed to allow her to play the role for which she was created, i.e., wife and mother.

The qualities that Mary and Fāṭima share are those which female Muslims can never achieve—first among women, mistress of the day of judgment, afterdeath visitor, perpetual (in some understandings of Fāṭima) virgin. A Muslim woman now cannot hope to be superior to the women of the world (or even among the very select group of chosen), ultimately pure (i.e., never menstruating), the mother of a prophet (a role others have played but which is no longer a possibility), a prophetess (status that only a few, as we have noted have acknowledged even for Mary), or a worker of miracles. As women are destined to bleed, so they will suffer a periodic state of impurity which will, in the view of most commentators, define them out of the possibility of leadership in a house of worship (a point conveniently made in the discussions about Mary in the temple).

Women can, however, be admonished through reference to Mary's virtue in two limited but very significant ways. While ultimately not pure as she was, they are expected to aspire to this ideal to the extent to which they reserve themselves for their husbands and come to them untouched and undefiled. And as Mary was the embodiment of perfect obedience, Muslim women are enjoined to be obedient not only directly to God, but indirectly through the obedience that they show to the men to whom they are unquestionably responsible.

To understand Mary in the Islamic tradition one must look not only at her Qur'anic role but at the ways in which she has been viewed, valued, used, and even overlooked by Muslims. When considerably more ethnographic as well as literary study is undertaken and when more information is available than is presently the case, the scholarly community will be in a better position to formulate its conclusions, and the Christian community to see if Mary indeed might serve as a basis for interfaith understanding.

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