

Blessed Among Women:

The Role of Mary in the Bible and the Qur'an

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Introduction

Just how important is the life of Mary in the religious world? In the Christian faith, Mary the mother of Jesus is regarded as a very significant figure. She fulfills the role as the mother of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. The degree of importance is understood to have variance across denominations; yet her role in the story of Jesus remains central. However, what many may not recognize or fully understand, is the significant place that Mary also holds in Islam. She has become a model for how Islamic women should live their lives and in a way which greatly reflects the role she plays in the Catholic and Orthodox worlds. Within both Christianity and Islam Mary is viewed with a degree of importance often not offered to women at large. She has been put on a pedestal and used as an example of a holy woman which women from both religions and perhaps even men should strive to live out the virtues she emanates. Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in the world today and have a predominantly male presence in literature and historic context. Yet contrary to this tendency, both elevate Mary to an extremely high status as a religious figure and in doing so afford women a greater degree of importance and elevate Mary's beyond what we may have previously understood.

The idea that Mary affords women a greater deal of honor in each of these religions was especially important early on in history when women had few rights and were almost never lifted up as role models or icons. In the modern era that fact is often overlooked or undervalued as women have continued to be afforded more equality socially and religiously. In the earlier centuries women experienced periods of time where they could not go out in public without permission from their husbands or fathers. They also often could not take part in any governmental affairs. These kinds of restrictions held women in a subordinate position to their male counterparts. When Mary is understood through the lens of these the Bible and the Qur'an,

she exemplifies a higher degree of value for women, showing how an ordinary young girl with no husband could become one of the most important women in both religions. Mary occupies this position of great significance and has been “An inspiration to more people than any other woman who ever lived.”¹

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which Mary’s life demonstrates the importance of women across Christianity and Islam. Each religious text provides key aspects of her life which are then used to determine her role as a model figure for women. The language used to describe her in various places provides evidence for the attributes most sought after by the followers of these religions. This paper will provide a comparison of Mary between the texts but also looks to bring forth some of the more debated topics surrounding Mary including her role as a model for all people not just women, as well as the argument for and against her prophethood within Islam.

Historical Context and Background

Within Islamic history, it is believed that the Qur’an was revealed by Allah to the prophet Muhammad beginning in 610 CE: “Muslims believe that the Qur'an, which is preserved in highly protected Tablets, is the unaltered, eternal, and unchangeable Word of God.”² It is believed that Muhammad had been set apart and chosen by Allah to lead people back to Islam and to reveal the Qur’an so that people would know how to live their lives. The Prophet was born into the

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (Harrisonburg: Donnelly and Sons Company, 1996): 2.

² Tayyab Usmani, Abdul Rehman Khalid Madni, Muhammad Samiullah, and Muhammad Akhkaq, “Judo-Christian Non-Canonical Scriptures as Sources Of Qur’anic Stories: Historical Investigation,” *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 11 (December 25, 2022): 769.

Quraysh tribe and soon after, he became an orphan and was raised by his uncle for the rest of his childhood. His rise to importance occurred when a Christian hermit “noticed a cloud that hovered over the head of the boy Muhammad even as the caravan drove forward.”³ He would then examine the boy and find that he had a mark on him indicating he was the Prophet sent by Allah, who had been predicted to come by Jesus.⁴ The understanding came to be that Islam is a “religion that completes and corrects Christianity.”⁵ While Islam formally began with the arrival of Muhammad, Muslims claim that the Prophets earlier in history were part of the Islamic faith despite the lack of language to describe it then. Many of the stories exhibited in the Qur’an are parallel to those within the Bible. Christianity and Islam are Abrahamic religions meaning that they both include Abraham as a key component to their scriptures and view him as a crucial follower of God who would influence the future generations. The prophets of each set of religious texts overlap greatly, including Jesus. Jesus is regarded as a prophet in Islam. He is also regarded as a prophet in Christianity though this is only one of the titles he holds in this religion. This is where Mary’s life becomes a critical component, as Jesus is revered in both religions as a great religious figure.

Mary needs to be understood in the monotheistic context of Islam and Christianity in order to fully understand why her role is so significant. The monotheistic nature of these religions has also contributed to the similarities between them as well as allows for some degree of coexistence in certain time periods during the growth of civilization in the Middle East.⁶ The

³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 11.

⁴ Reynolds, 12.

⁵ Reynolds, 12.

⁶ Vernon O. Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1750: The Making of a Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 49. Egger explains how there were periods of violence and conquest amongst religious groups attempting to maintain power; however, there were times where muslim leadership allowed a greater degree of leniency and peaceful coexistence with other monotheistic religions like Christianity.

ancient world contained predominantly polytheistic religions. In those religions, gods and goddesses existed as idols to worship. For instance the Greek pantheon included figures such as Aphrodite, Athena, and Poseidon. The religion of the Egyptians included Isis and Amun. Both male and female representation was present in these polytheistic practices. What allows Mary to stand out as a significant source of status for women is that there are no goddesses or females of higher power within the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Mary has taken on a great deal of importance within these religions which have historically taken a patriarchal form. This is especially significant for the eras in which each of these religions were forming as women had significantly fewer rights and far lower social rankings than in our modern context.

There is a great deal of Christian scholarship surrounding Mary. She is at the forefront of the birth narrative of Jesus. Many scholars have written about her importance as the mother of God and her role in raising Jesus. The importance of Mary was a key feature of early church theology, which has persisted in the Catholic tradition, but slowly faded with the advent of Protestant theology following the Reformation. Before the major split of the Christian church, most adhered to similar ideas surrounding Mary, following in line closely with Catholic thought. As Protestant theology developed following the reformation the importance of Mary diminished significantly. This happened for a number of reasons but one was that a number of the important Catholic doctrines regarding Mary are grounded in Catholic tradition rather than scripture, the only authority recognized by Protestants. The Catholic church, in particular, includes Mary within doctrine, other religious texts, and liturgies not found within the Protestant Church. When it comes to Mary as a model for women within the Protestant church, the idea of her elevating the status of women is much less prominently recognized but is nonetheless present behind the

scenes. More so, she is spoken of as a mother figure who was pious, obedient, humble, and faithful to God.

There is a great deal which can be taken from Mary's story and used to show that women have a significant place in God's eyes. However, emphasis on this has been historically lacking. In the Gospels, Jesus can be seen as a boundary breaker in many ways. Among them was the fact that he took the time to speak to women and include them in his work.⁷ However, at that time the societal culture around him was not friendly towards women. This is what made his actions stand out. Women had few rights outside of their husbands or fathers and were not often associated with the spiritual accomplishments of a significant religious figure like Jesus. Mary's incredibly important role in Jesus' story and the salvation story of humanity reframes how women should be looked at because based on this she has been an ultimate position of importance as the one who gave birth to Jesus, bringing God into this world.

The religion of Islam presents another instance where culturally women have in many cases been assigned a lower status than men. However, when reviewing the religious texts, one can find examples where a woman's value and importance is elevated. Mary's story is one of those scenarios. Her story, just like in the Bible, demonstrates how an ordinary woman could do a miraculous thing. Scholars in this field are quick to recognize the importance of Mary and often point out the ways in which she was spoken about by the prophet Muhammad.⁸ There is not as much existing scholarship among Islamic scholars exploring the relationship between Mary and the status of women as there is in Christianity.

⁷ He also broke boundaries by interacting with Gentiles, Samaritans, sinners and tax collectors and others deemed disreputable in his context.

⁸ Aliah Schleifer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1997): 60.

Hosn Abboud is one of the first scholars in this field to truly take on the work of examining Mary's life and position from a feminist perspective. She wrote of the difficulties surrounding sources in her dissertation, pointing out that, "Many scholars have contributed to gender issues and qur'anic studies in the context of women's legal rights; however, none has devoted a literary study to a qur'anic woman figure."⁹ There is a lack of scholarship in this area; however, Abboud is part of this growing area of interest, trying to understand Mary's role more clearly within the Qur'an. Most of the existing information regarding Mary comes directly from the Qur'an and Hadith. Aliah Schleifer wrote *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam* which covers the entirety of Mary's life from the perspective of Islam. This is a full account which provides a description and analysis of Mary's story and its meaning. Scholars such as Schleifer have laid the foundation for more study and research to be done.

The comparison of Mary within each of the following texts seeks to illustrate how women across both Christianity and Islam have received a significantly lesser degree of equality and quantity of acknowledgement than men throughout literature and discourse. By looking at the textual evidence, it becomes clear that Mary holds an important position which advocates for women as she is a model for people to live their lives after. If women are told to strive to live as Mary did, they too should also be acknowledged with a higher degree of importance. Mary was highly revered, so women should be viewed as capable of being part of God's greater design.

⁹ Hosn Abboud, "Mary, Mother of Jesus and the Qur'anic Text: A Feminist Literary Study" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2006), ii, <https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/items/deb1c64a-4486-43c3-bdc3-9817d863bf3b>.

Mary in the Bible

Mary's life prior to the birth of Jesus is not recorded in the Bible. In fact, little information is presented about who she was or where she came from: "The canonical Gospels say not a word about her parentage, her birth- nor even about how she met her husband Joseph."¹⁰ What we do know is primarily derived from her involvement with the birth and life of her son. This is why it "is often surprising to the reader of the gospel that so little information is found about the Virgin Mary in the biblical Scriptures and the many interpretations and latter apocryphal material that serve as a basis for the flourishing of the Marian cult."¹¹

It is interesting to note that although Joseph is a key figure in the birth narrative of Jesus, he never speaks in the Bible, but Mary does. She is the one who has been given a voice in scripture. How did someone with such little information presented about her become so revered? The answer to this question is that her role, however small, had an immense part in the story of Jesus. In the Christian tradition Jesus is the Son of God who was sent down to die for the sins of all people. Mary, a young girl of around thirteen or fourteen years, became pregnant before she was married to Joseph, to whom she had been betrothed.¹² The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and spoke to her, explaining that she would birth a son, and she was to call him Jesus and that he would be the son of God. She was the recipient of an angelic visitation, an uncommon distinction in itself. Further she was told by the angel that she had found favor with God, something again reserved for a select few. Finally and most importantly Mary faithfully accepts God's call without reservation unlike some men such as Moses and Gideon. She also accepted God's call despite the issues it would create. In doing so she would experience accusations of adultery or having

¹⁰ Jacques Duquesne, *Women of the Bible*, (New York: Flammarion, 2010), 150.

¹¹ Sonia Kraemer, "The Divine Feminine in Christianity," *Feminist Theology* 32, no. 1 (January 1, 2023): 34.

¹² The Bible does not explicitly mention the age of Mary, but many scholars have come to the conclusion that she was a young girl most likely between 13-15.

become pregnant before her wedding. Either of these accusations could bring lifelong shame on Mary and her family.

The virgin birth here indicated that Jesus' life was set apart, utterly different from any other birth. Mary had been chosen by God to carry out this critical part of the Biblical narrative. Mary appears in a few other stories in the New Testament; however, it is within the birth narratives that she receives the greatest focus and attention by far. Despite this fact, Mary has emerged as a central figure in several Christian denominations.¹³

Mary's role in the Christian church varies considerably depending on the tradition or denomination. Many hold the view that Mary stands as a symbol of female power and independence, while others see her in more of a maternal role as a virtuous woman raising her son Jesus. On the other hand, there are some who see her as a model of ultimate submission to her son Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The ways in which her character is viewed in terms of a woman's place in the church and society depends on which denomination or group a person subscribes to. Textually, Mary's role is of great significance as she birthed the living God. There is evidence of this significance throughout the Bible. In Luke 2:42, it is written that "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"¹⁵ In this verse the voice of Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, is heard as she spoke with Mary upon hearing the news of her pregnancy. Mary is described in this passage as blessed and chosen for this role.

Women within the Christian tradition have had varying expectations placed upon them across the different sectors of the church. What is true for all is that Mary is an example of the important role of women in the eyes of God. The attributes of Mary bring about a sense of

¹³ Mostly in the Catholic and Orthodox church, and less so in most Protestant churches.

¹⁴ Pelikan, 3.

¹⁵ Luke 2:42.

strength and ability to engage in the salvific story: “Mary, exalted as a goddess, receives the acknowledgment of a series of holy qualities and traits, such as purity, obedience, humility, and wisdom, to become the living symbol and a model made flesh of the Christian faith and by extension of the Church, always faithful to Christ and his teachings.”¹⁶

In the Christian faith, all people are understood to have been created in the image of God, meaning that there is a sanctity to every human life and that everyone is loved by him no matter their life choices or circumstances. In society, women have often been excluded from many areas of power and have been told they are less than their male counterparts. This has also been true in the Christian church historically, although this has changed today to varying degrees in different traditions and denominations. Mary as the mother of Jesus, the mother of God, shows how in the eyes of God, even women can play the most crucial of roles. Mary comes into the New Testament as the “new Eve” as she represents “the overcoming or sublimation of women’s inferiority, represented by Eve.”¹⁷

Mariology Across Christian Denominations

Both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions hold Mary in a much higher regard than most Protestant denominations of Christianity. There is an added layer of emphasis placed on her piety and virtues. She is the center of many prayers and practices which do not show up in other Christian sects. Images of Mary appear in both Christianity and Islam. Iconography of Mary is much more prominent in Christianity, mostly among the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Islam

¹⁶ Kraemer, 39. The use of the word goddess shows up in various feminist theologies, but is used in a metaphorical sense and does not prescribe the actual role of a goddess to Mary.

¹⁷ Kraemer, 39.

too, has throughout history had times where Mary was depicted in art, showing her piety and role as Jesus' mother. Artistic representations of Mary again show her significance culturally.

The Middle Ages mark the era responsible for an abundance of religious art, including depictions of Mary from both Christianity and Islam. Mary's virgin birth is something that has been grasped tightly by Catholicism.¹⁸ This branch of the church claims the perpetual virginity of Mary and views her as sinless. Within the Catholic church, "Pope Pius IX declared the catholic doctrine about the Immaculate Conception of Mary in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* on 8 December 1854, in which it was promulgated that the Virgin was born free from original sin and its consequences."¹⁹ While the immaculate conception of Jesus is accepted across Christian denominations, the claim of Mary's perpetual virginity remains a predominantly Catholic ideology. Most denominations would claim that Mary did not remain a virgin throughout the rest of her life and certainly would not claim her to be sinless, as most see Jesus as the only person to have ever existed without sin.²⁰

¹⁸ There is a great deal of emphasis placed on the idea of Mary's virginity. Sonia Kraemer explains that "Mary's purity was, nonetheless, a fundamental matter for the primitive Church. In those times, sexuality represented the gravest peril: the path for humanity to the world of sin." This is part of the larger argument of Mary's perpetual virginity in some churches.

¹⁹ Kraemer, 34.

²⁰ Many would cite Romans 3:23 which states, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This to most makes the clear argument that all humans are sinful including Mary.



Figures 1 and 2: Iconography of Mary

Another distinction of Mary's importance within Catholic doctrine is surrounding the Assumption. This is the idea that Mary, rather than dying, was taken to heaven by God. The Bible provides accounts for two characters being taken up to heaven, Enoch and Elijah.²¹ Beyond this there is no Biblical narrative of this sort of action occurring elsewhere. The Catholic church believes that Mary was taken up to heaven by God and did not die a bodily human death on Earth.²² There have been debates surrounding various verses in scripture which scholars have

²¹ The story of Enoch can be found in Genesis 5:24, and the story of Elijah can be found in Second Kings 2:11.

²² The assumption of Mary is part of the Four Dogmas of Mary, a Catholic belief system pertaining to the truths of Mary's life. The four dogmas include divine motherhood, perpetual virginity, immaculate conception, and the assumption. The dogma of The Assumption was declared under Pope Pius XII and can be read about here: "Defining the Dogma of the Assumption," *Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius* (November 1950) https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html.

made claims in their reference to Mary's assumption; however, there is no clear statement of this occurrence which has left much room for skepticism from outside of the Catholic tradition. The belief of the Assumption of Mary elevates her status within Catholicism as it removes yet another human element from her story and allows her to be viewed in closer proximity to the divine. At the end of Jesus' life, he ascended to heaven, meaning that the assumption of Mary adds a Jesus-like quality to her story from the Catholic perspective.



Figure 3: The Assumption of the Virgin

A topic of great debate among theologians throughout the centuries, is the argument surrounding the siblings of Jesus. The Bible makes mention of Jesus' siblings in various places, one of those being Mark chapter six where there is dialogue about Jesus in the Synagogue, "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"²³ This indicates that Mary would have in fact had children other than Jesus, disproving her perpetual virginity. However, many Catholics would argue that these were not siblings, but rather that they were cousins, while most Protestant scholars do on the other hand argue that the Greek word for brother, adelphos (ἀδελφός), used in the instances referring to these siblings means "of the same womb."²⁴

The modern-day Protestant position was not held by early church scholars, in fact, "It was only with the rise of the Enlightenment that the idea that the brothers and sisters were biological children of Mary and Joseph gained acceptance among 'mainline' Protestants. With the exception of a few 'High-Church' Protestants, this is the common view in Protestant churches today."²⁵ Regardless of whether or not someone views Mary as sinless or sinful, the Bible textually provides a narrative in which a young girl was given the high honor of being the mother of Jesus. This role allows for a female figure to be seen as prominent and important in the Christian tradition.

²³ Mark 6:8.

²⁴ Walter Bauer, "ἀδελφός," In *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition, Translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 16. This is a topic widely discussed in theological debate. Some argue that the word adelphos translates in a way which insinuates people born of the same mother; however, there is also an interpretation of the word which is believed to translate more along the lines of a cousin connection. There is however, evidence which shows how there is a completely separate word for "cousin" in Greek which is never used in the Bible. The argument is that if the meaning was meant to refer to a cousin relationship, the writers would have likely used the actual word for cousin rather than the word adelphos which usually refers to full or half brothers. The word "Adelphe" (sisters) is also used in the same context, see: Strong's Lexicon, Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/greek/79.htm>.

²⁵ John P. Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus in Ecumenical Perspective," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 1.

Protestants in various respects view Mary in a much more ordinary light. The vast majority of these denominations do not come to see Mary as a perpetual virgin or as a sinless woman.²⁶ While it is understood that she partook in a great miracle, she was still a human and in the eyes of God humans are not perfect. The popular belief is that Jesus was and is the only one to walk the Earth who is without sin. This does not mean however, that Mary is altogether unimportant to Protestants, but it does convey that the attention placed on her story is much less than that of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

Mary's relevance within the Catholic church is at the forefront of their traditions and writings; however, like many branches of Christianity, there are times where women have been denied the opportunity to experience and explore the fullness of their importance and potential. There are many who have commented on this topic from within the religion in the last decade. There has been a stronger push from the perspective of feminism within Catholicism to understand that women play an important role and Mary shows how that can be an influence for all. One Catholic writer expressed, "Catholics don't hold up Mary as the model for Christian *women*, we hold her up as the model for *Christians*. Women *and* men are asked to look at Mary and follow in her footsteps. Not only are men called to honor all women out of respect for Our Lady, but they are called to imitate her example themselves."²⁷ It is the work of more modern thinkers that are helping to reframe how women should be perceived and revered within Christianity.

²⁶ There are, however, some Protestant scholars who would make the claim that Mary's perpetual virginity is possible, but this would be a very small minority.

²⁷ Hailey Stewart, "Empowering Women Through Mary," Catholic Exchange, <https://catholicexchange.com/empowering-women-through-mary/>. This is not an academic source; however, it provides the ideas of someone who is within the Catholic church wrestling with the ideas of Mary and feminism. This is a blog post from a woman who converted to Catholicism from the Protestant church. She is writing from the perspective of someone who has witnessed the conversation from both sides and further expresses how those within the chaotic church need to do the work to appreciate women in the way they are praised in their Biblical context.

Theotokos

The language of Theotokos has become a prominent way of defining Mary in Christian theology. This word has been used to describe the role of Mary in Jesus' birth which can be translated to mean "God-bearer" or "Mother of God."²⁸ This title accentuates Mary's significance in the greater church as it serves as a reminder of her unique and important role in Jesus' story. The determination of this title stems from a long-standing debate over the trinitarian role of Jesus, specifically sparked by the work and arguments of Nestorius. Nestorius had been greatly concerned by the use of the term Theotokos as he felt this word "seemed to deny the humanity of Christ" and instead preferred the term "Christotokos" which translates to "bearer of the Christ."²⁹ Scholars explain:

The name of "Theotokos", given by the council of Ephesus, is a Christological dogma, promulgated against Nestorius because without denying the divinity of the Second Person of the Trinity, he refused to believe that God could dwell in a woman's womb. The church, considering the affirmation of the unity of the divine hypostasis, saw that, if Mary were to receive Nestorius's preferred title, Christotokos, Mother of Jesus, this would divide the personality of the Lord.³⁰

The Nestorians did not view Jesus as God in the flesh and therefore did not see Mary as the Mother of God.³¹ Rather, they saw Jesus as a being separate from God but still united with him. This influenced the conversation surrounding the role of Mary significantly. However, at the council of Ephesus in 431 CE, it was decided that Mary should be called Theotokos, affirming her position as the mother of God.³² Scholars argue, "According to certain Patristic thought, the

²⁸ Pelikan, 55.

²⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 340.

³⁰ George Metr Khodr, "The Mother of God, the Theotokos, and Her Role in God's Plan for Our Salvation," *The Ecumenical Review* 60, no. 1-2 (December 31, 2008), 29.

³¹ Nestorians are followers of Nestorius.

³² Pelikan, 56.

image of God is the freedom of man, a freedom that reveals human nature saved and perfected in Mary. In this sense, the Theotokos makes the synergy of man and God possible, a divine-human cooperation that allows God to realize the hypostatic union.”³³ By calling Mary “Theotokos” it acknowledges her submission to and cooperation with God and furthers the narrative of the greatness of her role in the salvific story.

Gregory of Nazianzus was an early Christian theologian born in 330 CE. His work primarily focused on the Trinity and emphasized the role of each of the three parts.³⁴ He commented on the idea of Mary as the mother of God stating the importance of this belief as a follower of God. He wrote:

If anyone does not believe that holy Mary is the mother of God, he is severed from the Godhead. If anyone should assert that he passed through the Virgin as through a channel, and was not at once divinely and humanly formed in her (divinely, because without the intervention of a man; humanly, because in accordance with the laws of gestation), he is in like manner godless.³⁵

This shapes the view of Mary into a salvific issue. Nazianzus argued that one must view Mary as the mother of God, and also as part of the creation of God as a human being. This act completes the Trinity by bringing Jesus into the world. While the term Theotokos was not confirmed until later on, the scholarly emphasis placed on Mary’s as the God-bearer is seen throughout a great deal of theological work. To argue that one must believe in Mary as the mother of God in order to remain in union with the Godhead, further elevates the significance of Mary in Christian ideology and practice.

³³ Khodr, 32.

³⁴ Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 114.

³⁵ Hardy, 216-217.

In the years following the death of Jesus, scholars were forming the theological basis for the significance of Mary in the Bible. Ignatius of Antioch in a letter to the Ephesians where he wrote “For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan.”³⁶ This provides evidence of the importance of building the image of Mary as the mother of God to later confirm that the title of Theotokos would be correct and appropriate. These writings counter the ideas presented in the thoughts of Nestorius who tried to discredit Theotokos altogether.



Figure 4: Theotokos

³⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, “To the Ephesians,” in *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*, edited by Henry Bettenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 41.

Mary in the Qur'an

The Qur'an serves as the religious text of the Islamic faith. Within it are chapters known as surahs which detail instructions and stories of how to live a Muslim life that serves Allah. In the Qur'an there are one hundred and fourteen surahs. One of those surahs, surah nineteen, is dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is also one of the longest chapters in the Qur'an which, in itself, may highlight her importance.³⁷ One key aspect which stands out about this surah is the fact that it mentions Mary by name. This is quite significant as Mary is the only woman who is mentioned by name in the entire Qur'an.³⁸ While other women are talked about, they remain unnamed. Mary's importance in Islam may come as a great surprise to many who are unfamiliar with the religion. In fact, Jesus is also viewed as a very important prophet in Islam. Much of the information within the Qur'an surrounding Mary's life also comes from the third surah which is called Al- Imran. This surah expands upon the life and role of Jesus as a prophet, which includes the narrative of his birth through Mary.

Much of what is known about the Islamic perspective of Mary's qualities is derived from the Hadith. The Hadith is part of the Islamic religious texts, separate from the Qur'an. This details the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Much of what he spoke and the ways in which he lived his life were written down by those around him and have become part of the collection of what is taught as the expectations of Muslims. In the Hadith, the Prophet spoke of Mary numerous times often saying, "The best of the world's women is Mary (at her lifetime), and the best of the world's women is Khadija (at her lifetime)."³⁹ There were instances where the

³⁷ Pelikan, 68.

³⁸ Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," *The Muslim World* 79, no. 3-4 (October 1989): 162. This article explains how seventy Qur'anic verses were written about Mary, which very few people in this text have such a high volume of verses.

³⁹ Sahih Bukhari Volume 5, Book 58, Number 163.

Prophet referred to Mary as the most perfect woman in her lifetime. There were also other occasions where he called her the most perfect woman of all time, and the first who will enter paradise.⁴⁰ In either case, it is abundantly clear that Mary is held up as the ultimate example of a perfect woman and is set apart as a model of piety for people striving to replicate as they abide by Islamic practices. Despite the fact that she is not the mother of God as she is in Christianity, she is still seen as a perfect woman in the Islamic tradition.

Men and women in Islam are called to a life of piety devoted to Allah. For women, “Mary is, in fact, one of the great symbols of devoutness, sincerity, and submission in Islam precisely because of her absolute trust and faith in the miracle of her lord.”⁴¹ Within Islam Mary holds the title of “perfect women” which shows how women can have such an important role. This affords them a greater amount of credibility equality than historically granted to women within and outside of Islam.⁴² Jusuf Salih provides an account of the language used to describe Mary. Often, she is spoken of in a way which brings out her characteristics of piety and faithfulness:

When discussing Mary, the Qur’an uses various attributes that show her high level of piety and devotion, such as: (1) Siddīka: meaning “just,” “pious,” and “truthful”—qualities also assigned in the Qur’an to Abraham, Idris (biblical Enoch), and Joseph. It is attached to Mary in 5:75 and 66:12.16 (2) Qānitin: meaning “obedient” and “worshiper with devotion.” She is called this in 66:12. (3) Mathal: meaning “example” and “a paradigm”; this reference can be found in 66:11-12. (4) Tahhara: meaning “to purify” and “she who was purified”; it is mentioned in 3:42. (5) Mustafia: meaning “she who was chosen,” which can be found in 3:42. In popular Muslim culture, Mary is also regarded as Batūl, a symbolic title of pure, chaste, and virtuous virgins.⁴³

⁴⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 55.

⁴¹ Aliah Schleifer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1997), 60.

⁴² Many Islamic scholars often debate whether or not Mary could be called a prophet. Those who argue yes, believe that this elevates her to the highest status. The differing arguments can be read in an article written by Younus Mirza, where the various Islamic scholarly cases are presented. Younus Y. Mirza, “The Islamic Mary: Between Prophecy and Orthodoxy,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 23, no. 3 (December 31, 2021): 70–102.

⁴³ Jusuf Salih, “Mary as a Paradigm of Muslim Piety,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 52, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 443.

These words used in reference to Mary show how she was intended to be set apart and stand as a model of how to live a life devoted to worship. She is described using language which has been prescribed to other very important prophets such as Abraham which affirms her significance in the Islamic tradition. This allows for women to be on the same level as greatly revered men within this religion.

While Mary's involvement in the Qur'anic story of Jesus' birth is significant, another important factor is the mention of Mary's own birth. She is the only woman whose birth story is included within the Qur'an. Al- Imran details her nativity story as it leads into her life set apart to worship Allah. When her mother found out she was with child, she promised the lord to dedicate the baby to him. The verse containing Mary's birth reads, "My Lord, surely I have delivered her, a female' - God knew very well what she had delivered, (since) that male is not like the female' and I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her with You, and for her descendents, from the accursed Satan."⁴⁴ This part of the narrative shows some confusion surrounding Mary's gender. Mary's mother had already promised to devote her to the Lord and have her live a life of service. She was born a female, yet God already knew this and had a plan for her to take part in something bigger.⁴⁵ She was sent to live under the care of Zechariah. She lived a life of prayer and piety. An angel later was sent to her and gave her a message that she would birth Jesus the Messiah.⁴⁶

Mary was scared but she trusted God. She gave birth to Jesus under a date palm and said, "I wish I had died before this and was completely forgotten."⁴⁷ As these words left her mouth the newborn baby spoke to her saying "Do not sorrow! Your Lord has made a stream beneath you.

⁴⁴ Al- Imran 3:36.

⁴⁵ Gabriel Reynolds, *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2010): 131.

⁴⁶ Al- Imran 3:45.

⁴⁷ Maryam 14:23.

Shake the trunk of the date palm toward you, and it will drop on you fresh ripe dates. Eat and drink and be comforted.”⁴⁸ Mary then took her baby to her people. They were confused how she had been pregnant despite her situation. Again, the baby spoke explaining to them “Surely I am a servant of God. He has given me the nook and made me a prophet.”⁴⁹ The notion that a newborn baby would speak is quite out of the ordinary, meaning this baby and his mother must be of great importance.

Jesus is not viewed as God or the son of God in Islam. While this does not give Mary the same role as in the Christian faith, it appeals to the idea that her position elevates the status of women. She is revered in Islam as a great and pious woman for not only birthing a man who is not of divine status, but living out a daily life of submission towards God as, “Every opportunity she found at the temple was spent in self-building and acts of worship. She was virtuous, chaste, and far from Satan.”⁵⁰

The Gospel of James

Within the Christian faith there are a plethora of books which have not been canonized as part of the New Testament. The canonized books of the New Testament are accepted across virtually every denomination while the non-canonical books have been either discarded or viewed as scripture by only a few obscure groups. These books were not included in the canon for many reasons, such as having not been written by an Apostle or close associate of an Apostle

⁴⁸ Maryam 14: 24-26.

⁴⁹ Maryam 14: 30.

⁵⁰ Zahra Kashaniha, “Lady Mary as a Role Model in the Qur’an and Bible,” Translated by Fatima Sultan, *Al Islam*, 10.
<https://al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-12-no-2-summer-2011/lady-mary-role-model-quran-and-bible-zahra-kashaniha/lady>.

and not having been recognized and used in the church as scripture.⁵¹ Ultimately, most of these books were written much later than those canonical books, under pseudonyms, and by groups such as the Gnostics who were considered theological opponents of orthodox Christianity.⁵²

One non canonical book of importance in regard to Islam is The Infancy Gospel of James, often referred to as the Protoevangelium which was written around 145 CE. The Protoevangelium provides an alternative version of Mary's life which varies substantially from the canonical gospels yet is aligned with the story found in the Qur'an. This Gospel tells of Mary's birth and upbringing as her life leads to the birth of Jesus, who in the Islamic faith, serves as a prophet, and is not understood to be the son of God or divine.

This Gospel recounts that Mary was born to Joachim and Anna. Once she was born and reached three years of age, she was brought to the temple to be consecrated. She would then live there at the temple under the care of Zechariah until the age of twelve. Here she lived out a life of prayer and devotion to God. Just as in the Bible, in this account an angel appeared to Mary and said, "Thou has found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shall conceive of his word."⁵³ This story is almost identical to the one found in the Qur'an. The Protoevangelium is known to have shown up as early as the second century and was around during the founding of the Islamic religion.⁵⁴ This was a period of oral tradition, meaning many stories across Abrahamic religions were shared and included in religious texts as well as related to future generations. This is one reason the stories might share similarities despite being geared towards separate religions.

⁵¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988): 260.

⁵² Bruce, 260.

⁵³ *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses*. Translated by Montague Rhodes James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 43.

⁵⁴ *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 38.

Joseph does have a significant place within this Gospel. Here, he is described as having been chosen to “Take the virgin of the Lord and keep her for thyself.”⁵⁵ Rather than a betrothal already in place, like in the Bible, Joseph was chosen to care for Mary. The Protoevangelium described how the priests would look for a sign from the Lord that they had found the right husband. Every aspect of Mary’s life in this narrative is carefully designed by God, showing her importance as the mother of Jesus. Considering there has been no mention of Joseph Qur’anically in relation to Mary, it is interesting to note that his role as chosen for Mary seems significant in the Protoevangelium.



Figure 5: Mary’s Consecration in the Temple

⁵⁵*The Apocryphal New Testament*, 42.

Although the Protoevangelium would ultimately not be canonized and recognized as representing orthodox Christian belief, it still illustrates the beliefs of some within the greater sphere of the Christian world at that time. It therefore stands as another example of the previously stated narrative in which the role of Mary would again be elevated to show her piety and good character.

In this apocryphal Gospel, just as it is written in the Qur'an, Mary's life was dedicated to worshipping God. Living in the temple, she would have spent time in prayer every day.⁵⁶ An interesting facet of this story is the fact that it claims Mary was consecrated in the Jewish Temple. The practice of consecrating women in the Temple was not common in this time period. Again, the idea that Mary would have gone through that process sets her apart for something great which God will soon reveal, was the birth of Jesus. The fact that in a religious context a woman was permitted to participate in actions typically reserved for men, shows how sometimes religion affords women greater rights than the greater society.

One of the most noteworthy historians within Islamic scholarship, al- Tabari, wrote an extensive narrative of history which is viewed as one of the most important accounts in Islam.⁵⁷ In one of the many volumes of his work, al- Tabari captured the story of Mary's life and upbringing.⁵⁸ Here it is seen once more, the depiction of Mary being raised in the temple under Zechariah is affirmed. The birth story here involves Joseph, who in this context is referred to as

⁵⁶ *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 42.

⁵⁷ This is a multi-volume account of the history recorded by al- Tabari. Al- Tabari wrote of the ancient world as well as the life of the prophet. His work is very widely known and has been translated across many languages.

⁵⁸ Al-Tabari lived during the ninth century which meant he was living during a period of time where Christianity, Judaism, and Islam were prominent throughout the Middle East. This was a time of great change in leadership as countries were being built and religious groups were fighting to hold power over the rest. Al- Tabari died in 923 CE. About one-hundred years later the crusades would begin, meaning that he was existing in the climate of tension beginning to build up which would eventually lead to intense fighting. Regardless, his work provides insight into the stories which were circulating among these prominent religious groups also known as "people of the book."

Mary's cousin. He was the one who was with Mary when she gave birth to Jesus. At first he wanted to accuse her as he was horrified by the fact that she was unmarried and pregnant. He then remembered her piety and understood the story unfolding as being directed by Allah and wanted to help exonerate her.⁵⁹ The account is written in the fourth volume of *The History of al-Tabari*:

Mary and Joseph were then serving at the Temple, and service there was a great honor. They were both attending to the sanctuary, perfuming, sweeping, cleaning, and whatever was necessary. They were the most eager worshippers of the age. Joseph was the first to censure Mary's pregnancy. He was distressed by what he saw, horrified, and knew not what to ascribe it to. When Joseph was ready to accuse her, he remembered that she was pious and innocent, that she had never absented herself from him. When he wanted to exonerate her, he observed what had happened to her.⁶⁰

In this section of the story the language of Mary being a pious woman who was eager to worship is reiterated. Her service to the temple demonstrates her role in Islam as a significant figure to be modeled after and highly revered. This narrative also aligns with that of the Protoevangelium in which Mary grows up living out a life of faith, worshipping and praying to God.

⁵⁹ Al- Tabari, 113.

⁶⁰ Al- Tabari, 113.



Figure 6: Islamic depiction of Mary just after giving birth to Jesus

Mary as a Qur'anic Prophet

One area of debate surrounding Mary amongst Islamic scholars is her status as a prophet. While the vision of Mary as a prophet is a minority belief, it presents an interesting point of view in which Mary's importance is increased. If Mary can be seen as a prophet, this too would elevate the status of women. Female prophethood is not a common attribute of the Islamic faith. There are no women who are confirmed prophets within the religion which appears to be a point of evidence as to why many scholars do not believe Mary should be given such a title.

Two of the more prominent scholars who promoted and affirmed the prophethood of Mary were al- Qurtubi and Ibn Hazm.⁶¹ This debate took off during the eleventh century and created much friction ultimately leading to the exile of many scholars.⁶² Ibn Hazm engaged in this conversation arguing in favor of the role of female prophethood:

He justified this position with specific Qur'anic verses that explicitly state that certain women were capable of receiving divine messages. For instance, he considered Moses' mother a prophetess, based on Q. 28:7, which mentions her receiving a revelation (wah. y). He also regarded Sarah, the wife of the Prophet Abraham, as a prophetess because she received divine messages through angels, as indicated in verses 11:71–73 and 51:29. Mary was, likewise, recognized as a prophetess, due to her receipt of divine communication through the appearance of an angel, as described in the Qur'an (Q. 3:42–47; Q. 19:17–21).⁶³

If the criteria for prophethood involves the revelation of divine messages, surely Mary would be at the top of the list as her entire story is that of receiving divine messages. Still, many disagree with this understanding of the Qur'anic texts.

Hosn Abboud analyzed the writings of many Islamic scholars who engaged in the debate of Mary as a prophet. She brought in the work of al- Qurtubi, who argued “truly Maryam is a prophetess because God (may He be praised) inspired her through the angel in the same way He inspired the rest of the male prophets.”⁶⁴ Al- Qurtubi believes that because Mary had direct communication with God she qualifies as a prophet.⁶⁵ He also believed that Mary's willingness to accept God's plan and the praise she received from Muhammad provided grounds for her life to be viewed with the same distinction as the male prophets of the Qur'an. Her story:

⁶¹ Halim Calis, "Mary's Prophethood Reassessed: Overlooked Medieval Islamic Perspectives in Contemporary Scholarship," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024): 2. Ibn Hazm was a scholar of the eleventh century and al- Qurtubi was a scholar of the thirteenth century.

⁶² Calis, 2.

⁶³ Calis, 2.

⁶⁴ Abboud, 163-164.

⁶⁵ Calis, 2.

Being accepted by God to serve in the temple, her purity and sinlessness (“isma), her righteous upbringing (anbataha nabatan hasanan) and miraculous sustenance (al-rizq min ‘ind Allah), God’s annunciation to Maryam (al-bishdra) through the angel’s appearing to her in human form and her being impregnated by the Holy Spirit (fa-nafakhna fihad min rihina) and by God’s word (nubashshiruki bi-kalimatin minhu), and last but not least, her being chosen by God above women of all nations (istafaki ‘ald nissa’ al-Glamin).⁶⁶

Everything about Mary’s life in the Qur’an sets her apart from the ordinary person. She was clearly given a special role which some view as embodying that of a prophet. While this is one interpretation of the Qur’anic narrative of Mary, Abboud points out that, “Muslim classical exegetes of the Islamic East do not share” in these opinions.⁶⁷ The stance most scholars have held is “that prophethood is exclusive to men and that there is no prophet among women.”⁶⁸ This is the typical stance of Sunni scholars who “base their arguments on qur’anic verses 12:109, 16:43, and 21:7, in which the word rijal (men) is used to refer to prophets.”⁶⁹ While Mary’s prophethood has been a historically unpopular position to occupy, the consideration that there have been scholars who have brought to light the possibility of interpreting her as a prophet encourages further study and conversation surrounding the status and importance of Islamic women.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Abboud, 176.

⁶⁷ Abboud, 166.

⁶⁸ Abboud, 168.

⁶⁹ Bahar Davary, “Mary in Islam: ‘No Man Could Have Been Like This Woman,’” *New Theology Review*, 23 no 3 (August 2010), 29.

⁷⁰ Sunni Islam is the main branch of Islam practiced in the world. One of the other major branches is Shia Islam however, they hold the minority population. Most scholars in Sunni Islam adhere to the idea that prophethood pertains only to men which is why the prophethood of Mary remains a minority opinion.

The Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side

The narrative of Jesus' birth is an obvious difference between the Bible and the Qur'an. The Bible indicates that Mary would be giving birth to the son of God who would come to die for the sins of his people. The Qur'an on the other hand understands Jesus as a prophet sent by God to teach people about him. The part that remains the same in each text is the virgin birth. This is a component of both narratives which plays a vitally important role in indicating that Jesus was sent to be part of God's greater story even though the exact meaning is different between the two religions.

Gordon Nickel established a connection between verses expanding upon Mary in both the Bible and Qur'an. In Luke 1:28, it says, "The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.'"⁷¹ This verse, Nickel points out, compares to one in the Qur'an from the third surah, Al- Imran, which states, "The angels said, 'Mary! Surely God has chosen you and purified you, and He has chosen you over all other women.'"⁷² Textually these verses exhibit similarities and again remind the reader that both of these Abrahamic religions contain shared stories and messages. Mary is spoken about in a familiar context in which she is praised for being chosen and favored by God to birth Jesus. She was clearly set apart in both religions. Gabriel Said Reynolds explored the topic of Biblical narratives within the Qur'an. He compared the textual similarities and differences of numerous accounts including that of the story of Mary. Reynolds makes the claim that "The Qur'an depends on its audience's knowledge of biblical traditions. This dependence is also evident from the manner in which the Qur'an refers to Biblical material."⁷³ This claim follows the idea that Islam is a continuation of

⁷¹ Luke 1:28.

⁷² Gordon D. Nickel, *The Quran with Christian Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 84-85.

⁷³ Reynolds, 128-129.

the greater story of God. That the prophets of the Bible including Jesus are part of the Islamic faith and tradition.

An interesting component to this textual comparison is seen when examining the reasoning for the virgin birth in each religion. Christians “have often interpreted the virginal conception as a sign of Jesus’ divinity, Mary’s condition carries no such connotations for Muslims.”⁷⁴ Rather, in Islam, this notion conveys the message of Allah’s ultimate transcendent power and ability to set his will into action.⁷⁵ Allah is one being in Islam. There is no trinity, and Jesus is seen as a separate and fully human being serving as a prophet. This provides a rather interesting juxtaposition. In Islam, Mary is not the mother of God but is seen as perfect, while in Protestant Christianity Mary is not viewed as perfect, she is viewed as a fallible and sinful human like anyone else, yet she is the mother of God.

Many Islamic scholars do not affirm the idea that Mary would get married, supporting the notion of Mary’s perpetual virginity.⁷⁶ This draws yet another similarity between the Islamic and Catholic views of Mary. This stems from the narrative that Mary grew up in a “sanctuary” which sparked debate amongst scholars in the first place of what this term means in actuality.⁷⁷ The fact that Mary was kept in this sanctuary “Seems to reflect a concern provoked by the traditional islamic doctrine that Mary never married.”⁷⁸

Both the Qur’an and the Bible put forward the claim that it does not matter if one’s gender is male or female, all are equal in the eyes of God. The Qur’an states, “Surely I do not let

⁷⁴ Michael Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 141.

⁷⁵ Lodahl, 142.

⁷⁶ Both Catholics and Protestants understand Mary to have been betrothed at the time of Jesus’ birth, and later married to Joseph.

⁷⁷ Reynolds explains how this word “sanctuary” may have meant synagogue or place of honor, 130-131.

⁷⁸ Reynolds, 131.

a deed of anyone of you go to waste- whether male or female- you are all alike.”⁷⁹ In a very similar way, the Bible states that, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁸⁰ Textually these verses provide evidence that women are granted a higher degree of importance, equal to that of men, contrary to what has often been offered to them by society, culture, and ironically in the church as well. These verses also allude to the greater similarities between these religious texts, as there are many instances where the same ideas are expressed.

Women’s Status

Throughout history, women have often been subjected to Patriarchal systems within and outside of religion. The literature and scholarship of Islam and Christianity has been no exception. In these spaces women have either been forgotten or subordinated to a degree of lesser importance to men. While this occurs socially, it should be noted that the actual religious texts hold women such as Mary to a much higher status.

During the inception of Islam, women held very little legal status or rights as independent beings. It can be argued however, that the Qur’an provides women with more equality and acceptance than society at the time:

A companion of the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra) became the second Caliph of Islam and one of the most influential leaders in recorded history. His own view of women changed significantly under the Prophet’s gentle guidance after he embraced Islam. As he testifies in his own words: “In *Jāhiliyya*, we used to have no regard for women whatsoever. But when Islam came and Allah made mention of them, this caused

⁷⁹ Al- Imran 3:195.

⁸⁰ Galatians 3:28; This point is further supported by the fact that in Genesis 1:26 it says that both male and female were made in the image of God.

us to realize that they have rights upon us...” To truly fulfill Islam’s mandate of justice and mercy, Umar’s realization of the proper status of women must continuously be revived in the hearts of all Muslims, at all places and times.⁸¹

As mentioned, Muhammad spoke of treating his wives well and even helping with household duties.⁸² These are ideas that did not stand on their own outside of this religious context. As Islam spread its “acknowledgment of women’s equity in the societal, familial, and spiritual spheres was unprecedented at its time.”⁸³

Despite living amongst other religions which had stricter laws surrounding the purity of believers, especially women, Muhammad believed women should be “excused from prayer and fasting during menstruation due to the weakness that accompanies menstrual bleeding, but they are not ostracized nor deemed spiritually impure, nor are they obligated to separate themselves from society.”⁸⁴ However small this may seem, this was somewhat of a revolutionary idea at this time as many women were deemed unclean and had to remain separated from society during menstruation. The Qur’an provided textual evidence that women should be treated more fairly than what society had been offering.⁸⁵ Upon further reading of the Qur’an, Mary is given the ultimate role of performing this miraculous act of birthing Jesus. She was set apart and consecrated in the Temple to live out a life for God. Again, this was not something that was typical of women's lives at this time.

⁸¹ Roohi Tahir, Dr. Omar Suleiman, Sh. Mohammad Elshinawy and Maryam Al-Dabbagh, "We Used to Have No Regard for Women: Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam," Yaqeen Institute, 2024, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/we-used-to-have-no-regard-for-women-gender-equity-the-advent-of-islam>. This is a website which contains information from the perspective of Islam.

⁸² Marion Holmes Katz, *Wives and Work: Islamic Law and Ethics Before Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 42.

⁸³ "We Used to Have No Regard for Women: Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam."

⁸⁴ "We Used to Have No Regard for Women: Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam."

⁸⁵ In pre Islamic arabia “a woman’s economic rights were largely overlooked due to a worldview that disregarded women and marginalized their contributions to society.” We Used to Have No Regard for Women: Gender Equity & the Advent of Islam."

Islamic women in the eyes of Allah are seen as equal to men and will be accepted into paradise if they do good and believe in him.⁸⁶ The Prophet was known for expressing "The believers who show the most perfect Faith are those who have the best behaviour, and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives."⁸⁷ Textually, Islam calls for husbands to treat their wives well and places value onto them. It appears that Islam culturally follows a complementarian structure in regards to the relationships of men and women. There has throughout history been debates regarding the roles of women and the expectations placed upon them within a marriage.

Marian Holmes Katz engages with this conversation in her book *Wives and Work*, by looking at the scholarship between the ninth to fourteenth centuries and highlighting interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith which have been incorporated into practice by many. Katz analyzes the obligation which has been placed on women to engage in domestic work. What she found was a variety of opinions among many of the leading scholars. Some saw the Qur'an and Hadith as confirming the role of women as domestic workers while others believed there was more complexity and that husbands should provide more help to their wives than often afforded. While the interpretations of religious text varied, most agreed that "the denial of a wifely obligation to do housework is often unfamiliar and shocking to Muslim lay people."⁸⁸ There has been a culture built up in which women have assumed the domestic role and maintain order inside the home, in submission to their husband whose role is to provide for her and the family.

⁸⁶ Al- Imran, 3:195.

⁸⁷ Riyad as-Salihin 278.

⁸⁸ Katz, 205.

When reading the Qur'an and Hadith there is a lack of clarity in terms of defining certain obligations such as housework, this seems to be a component for why culturally the outcome is the result of those in leadership and power. In many places in society, women have often been subjected to harsh treatment and in some cases have very little rights in comparison to men. This is not an inherent Islamic value as it was mentioned before that Muhammad believed in the just treatment of women. People have come to place interpretations upon the religious texts which delineate into what have become some of the defining characteristics of Islam. This is not unique to one particular religion, in fact, this happens across many different faith traditions including Christianity.

Christianity poses a particularly interesting framework to the roles and spirituality of women. Historically Christianity has taught that women did not hold a subordinate spiritual position to men, but in fact they were inherently less than men. In the modern era this has changed quite dramatically. To begin with, large swaths of the church have embraced an egalitarian understanding of the spirituality and value of men and women. Egalitarians would view men and women as equal in all aspects including marriage and church leadership.⁸⁹ At the same time, a very significant portion of the church now embraces a theology of complementarianism. Complementarianism affirms the equality of women's spirituality and value before God; however, complementarianism does call women to embrace a position of submission to men, understanding this as the roles God designed for the ordering of life.⁹⁰ Men are to be the leaders and women are to follow and support.

⁸⁹ Paul C. Maxwell, "Is There an Authority Analogy Between the Trinity and Marriage?: Untangling Arguments of Subordination and Ontology in Egalitarian-Complementarian Discourse," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 3 (December 31, 2016):542.

⁹⁰ Maxwell, 542.

In these things significant progress can be viewed in the ways in which women are seen and valued; however, for this sector of the church women still play a subordinate role. Although complementarianism does affirm the inherent Biblical value of women, in understanding that women are designed to play a subordinate role that value is often diminished unintentionally. Still other sections of the church, with a misguided understanding of true complementarianism or an outright rejection of it, teach explicitly or implicitly that women are to be subordinated in their roles and spirituality because they are simply less than men.

It can be difficult at times to view these religions as liberatory institutions for women. This is an understandable position to hold as there have been many instances of subordination and poor treatment of women historically; however, the textual evidence points to a vision and design of equality in the eyes of God. If taken at face value, both Islam and Christianity provide a framework of equality and fair treatment for both men and women. Both the Bible and the Qur'an affirm the idea that God made men and women created as equals who, if they proclaim their faith and follow him, will either enter heaven or paradise. There is no sense of discrimination in those aspects of the faith based upon gender. Society has done the work to interpret texts and place cultural values and ideology onto the followers of those religions, despite the fact that, if taken at face value, the texts of these religions seem to offer a liberatory way of life.

Bringing Mary into this conversation helps to further recognize how women too can hold important and influential roles in life. God in each of those stories chose an ordinary girl to carry out a miraculous act. Islam and Christianity have many similarities in the ways that texts get interpreted in completely different ways depending on factors such as the location in which one lives or the cultural norms of those places. Understanding the cultural and historical context of

women in each religion helps to further see how Mary can elevate their status and bring about a greater degree of equality.

Mary as a Model for All

Mary serves as a clear model for women in Christianity and Islam. However, what is less explicitly clear is that Mary may be a model for men as well. Mary is consistently praised for the virtues that she possesses such as piety, submission to God, and humility. These are not virtues that are reserved for women in either religion, in fact both men and women are encouraged to live into them. If this is true, men too should look to Mary as a model for living out a faithful and obedient life.

The idea that Mary can be understood as a spiritual example for men has more basis within Christianity. This is especially true in Catholicism where Mary is at the center of many aspects of prayer and practice. The “Hail Mary” serves as an example of a Catholic prayer which seeks out Mary for help and guidance. This is not an aspect of the Protestant faith but is an instance of Mary serving both men and women in the greater Christian tradition. While Protestantism does not have these kinds of practices, Mary can and should be a model for men there too. Protestants take value in all of the virtues attributed to Mary, meaning, men can strive to live as she did despite the gender difference. One particular aspect which Protestants uphold Mary for is her response to the Annunciation. The Annunciation is the term used to define when the Angel Gabriel came down to bring the news to Mary that she would conceive a son.⁹¹ Her

⁹¹ Luke 1:26-28

decision to have faith in God's plan using her as the vessel for Jesus to come into the Earth is an example of obedience and trust in God.

Within Islam this idea is certainly not an explicitly stated notion. Mary is very clearly presented as a model for women, but not so much for men. This, however, does not mean that the image of Mary cannot be reframed to provide influence for everyone. Piety is highly praised in the Islamic faith and Mary is said to have been one of the most pious women. There is some scholarship within Islam which has begun to uphold Mary as a model for everyone, not just women.⁹² This too looks to the importance of piety expressed in Islam as a way of viewing Mary's significance. By spending her entire life devoted to serving Allah, she embodied the exact attributes in which Muslims are still called to embody in their day to day lives. The Qur'an even goes on to state in surah Al- Hujurat that, "Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware."⁹³ Righteousness is emphasized in this verse as a noble trait which has also been attributed to Mary. If all are called to a life of Righteousness to find favor in Allah, men too can strive to incorporate the characteristics of Mary in order to lead a more pious and devoted life.

When positioning Mary as a model for both men and women, she elevates the status of women. It is expected for women to seek influence from female figures throughout various religions; however, it is not often thought of for men to seek out these women for guidance in their spiritual lives. When a woman is uplifted as a model for men, this allows for women to be seen as significant and provides them more spiritual credibility than often given. This is especially true in religions which hold complementarian views. There are many who would be

⁹² Zeki Saritoprak, "Mary in Islam" *Faculty Bibliography*, Carroll University, 2019.

⁹³ Al- Hujurat 49:13.

hesitant to accept the spiritual authority of a woman, yet it seems clear that Mary embodies the exact virtues and characteristics that both Christianity and Islam push for all of their followers to live by.

The Feminist Critique

While Mary's qualities have stood as a model to women within the religious context of Christianity and Islam, the feminist perception of Mary varies in how her attributes are ascribed to women. There are feminists who understand Mary to be a significant figure of female empowerment. Her position as chosen by God to be the vessel for Jesus' miraculous birth and her faithful response allows for women to see themselves in a position of opportunity and capability to be part of something greater. Mary can be seen as a boundary breaker. She is part of a highly patriarchal set of religions, yet has managed to become revered by all. However, some understand Mary as a figure who brings women back into a place of submission. In the more recent years, "feminist-inspired critiques have claimed that Marian devotion is now and always has been counterproductive for women's flourishing."⁹⁴ There are those who view the highly praised attributes of purity and virginity as placing more restrictions and expectations onto women than empowerment.

While all of these interpretations have truth, the work of religious feminists has contributed to the elevation of Mary into a liberatory figure for women. One Christian feminist wrote, "Surely, in the 21st century, the most grievous dangers facing the world will arise from abuses of power in their secular and religious forms. If we wish to struggle against the cruel laws

⁹⁴ Sidney Callahan, "Mary and the Feminist Movement," *America the Jesuit Review* (December 1993). <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/100/mary-and-feminist-movement>.

of the jungle or the callous competitiveness of the marketplace, in which only the strongest survive, we do well to support the joining together of feminist and Marian ideals.”⁹⁵ This frames Mary as a path to reconciliation in the world. In places where both society and religion have restricted women to subordinate positions, the elevation of Mary to a role model stands as a reminder that women too can have claim in important stories and places.

The feminist critics of Mary express their views from a place of attempting to liberate women from the confines of patriarchal expectations. The emphasis placed on Mary’s role as a mother can be seen as diminishing her greater participation in the narrative of certain religions. Feminist scholarship has often expanded on how motherhood has sometimes been used in a way which defines the importance of a woman's life to the exclusion of other important things. Rather than placing the emphasis on Mary’s strength, humility, and faithfulness, those who only promote her motherhood and submission, take away from the many other attributes of Mary which feminists strive to elevate.

Mary can be viewed as a religious feminist figure not only because she elevates the importance of women but because she was a trailblazer in doing so. She has affirmed the equality of female spiritually and has created room for women to be viewed on an equal footing to many other male religious figures. Feminism at its very core seeks to promote equality between men and women under the pretense that often in the past women have not been given this opportunity. Mary does exactly this, meaning she can quite rightly be viewed as a feminist figure for those in Christianity and Islam. To have played this role in only one of the world's major religions would have been a significant accomplishment, but to have played this role in two amounts to a monumental achievement.

⁹⁵ Callahan.

Conclusion

Though Christianity and Islam contain many elements which set them apart from one another, they both provide a depiction of Mary which elevates the image of women beyond what society has allowed. The qualities often attributed to her include piety, purity, humility, and faithfulness. Each of these things have become ideals for women across the different sects in Christianity and Islam. Mary's story does not rely on anyone other than herself and God. She was chosen and set apart for something that seems almost inconceivable, or entirely unbelievable to those outside of these religions. The idea of God choosing a young and ordinary girl for such a profound task provides evidence that women do in fact have a significant role in the eyes of God. There is a recurring theme within scripture where God tends to seek out those deemed as ordinary and insignificant for miraculous work, yet those same individuals, then and now, are often regarded as lowly and inconsequential by society.

Mary serves as a model not only for women, but for all people who seek to live their lives as followers of Islam or Christianity. Her significance in these texts speaks volumes to how women should be viewed and treated in society, even when that has not been the reality. Christianity and Islam, being Abrahamic religions, share many ideals and narratives, yet are often seen as vastly different religions. This study of Mary shows how textually women within both of these religions ought to be afforded a greater degree of importance and recognition than what has historically taken place. Mary can be understood as a religious figure on par with the men of both Christianity of Islam, affirming the value of women and establishing the heights to which they could aspire.

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Images

Figure 1. Duccio di Buoninsegna. “Madonna and Child.”

<https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-cult-of-the-virgin-mary-in-the-middle-ages>.

Figure 2. “Icon of the Virgin and Child with Saints Theodore and George, St. Catherine’s Monastery, Mt. Sinai, 6th century.”

<https://americanassociationoficonographers.com/2024/03/25/iconography-of-mary/>.

Figure 3. Guido Reni. “Assumption of the Virgin.”

<https://www.padreserra.org/assumption-mary.html>.

Figure 4. “Theotokos of Tolga I.”

<https://www.artchive.com/artwork/theotokos-of-tolga-i-big-theotokos-orthodox-icons-c-1275-c-1300/>.

Figure 5. “The Protoevangelium of James.”

<https://www.orthodoxroad.com/the-protevangeliu-of-james/>.

Figure 6. Neyshaburi. “Nativité Dans Le Désert.” <https://publicmedievalist.com/mary-islam/>.