

Mary in Early Christianity and Islam

Morteza Rezazadeh ¹

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This article explores the life and importance of Mary in Islam and Christianity, aiming at clarifying the criteria for which Mary has been revered in each tradition. It will be shown that Mary in Christianity is almost merely important because she was the mother of Jesus, while the Muslim reverence for her is based on her own noble characteristics. From the Muslim perspective, even if Mary had not been Jesus' mother, she would have been a prominent figure and a great example for believers.

Keywords: Mary, Jesus, Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Introduction

As a highly respected figure in both Islamic and Christian traditions, Mary can be a source for reconciliation and can open doors for a more accurate knowledge about her as the mother of Jesus Christ, as well as understanding the position of women in the two traditions.

Given the high respect for her in both Islam and Christianity, she

1. PhD Candidate in Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran (mrezazadeh@live.com).

can also be a good ground for interfaith dialogue, as well as an important way to fix the place of women in both traditions. The important role of Mary is unknown to many. This paper is a humble effort to investigate the life and importance of Mary in the light of early Christian and Muslim sources. The aim is to clarify the criteria for which Mary has been revered in Islamic and Christian early sources.

Mary in Early Christianity

Given the fact that Christians in different traditions have taken very different attitudes towards Mary, writing about her might have been controversial in the past (Macquarrie 1991, xiii), and it still remains very difficult to talk about Mary in Christianity due to these varieties. Some have esteemed her highly, others have virtually ignored, her but she has had a significant position in the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches.

Christian tradition reckons her the principal saint, naming her variously the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady, and Mother of God. Biblical data on the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is naturally found primarily in the New Testament, but also certain passages of the Old Testament as interpreted by inspired writers in the New Testament concern her (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 9: 238). Due to the nature of this brief article, we do not talk about those verses in the Old or New Testament that refer to Mary only through interpretations; rather. We will limit our study to the instances which clearly talk about Mary.

As the primary source among Christians, I will refer to all the instances of Mary being mentioned in the New Testament, because it is mainly from these texts that the doctrine and tradition concerning Mary's person and mission in the history of salvation has been evolved.

The Gospel of Matthew

Mary is mentioned in Matthew in two types of passages: first, a group of verses that refer to her in the infancy narrative of chapters 1 (16-25) and 2; Second, Matthean texts that have parallels in Mark. In the first group, Mary is introduced as the virgin mother of Jesus who is engaged with Joseph but not married yet, and the second group which are in 12:46-50 and 13:53-58 do not say anything special about Mary. They just say that Jesus is the son of Mary.

The Gospel of Mark

Chronologically speaking, Mark is the earliest written gospel and a source upon which Matthew and Luke relied for a large portion of their material (Streeter 1927).

Mary and other members of the family of Jesus are mentioned in Mark 3:31-35 and 6:1-6. In chapter 3, we have Mary as a devout mother who is concerned about her son, Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles

In Luke's gospel we may distinguish two kinds of passages pertinent to Mary: first, a relatively extensive set of references to Mary in the infancy narrative of chapters 1-2, where she has an important role in the annunciation, the visitation, the birth at Bethlehem, the presentation in the Temple, and the finding of Jesus in the Temple; second, four brief passages in the narrative of Jesus' public ministry. Like Matthew, Luke offers a genealogy of Jesus; and the first of the four ministry passages in a line in that genealogy (3:23) indicates that Jesus is only the *supposed* son of Joseph. The second and the third Lucan Ministry passages have synoptic parallels—namely, Luke 4:16-30 narrating the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (cf. Mark 6:1-6; Matt 13:53-58); and Luke 8:19-21, pertaining to who constitute the family of Jesus (cf. Mark 3:31-35; Matt 12:46-50). The fourth ministry passage (11:27-28), where a woman from the crowd proclaims the

blessedness of Jesus' mother, is peculiar to Luke.

Mary is mentioned only once in the Acts of the Apostles (1:14), in a listing of those who had gathered together to pray in Jerusalem after the ascension and before Pentecost (Brown et al. 1987, 105-6).

Although the Lucan Marian material is more abundant than that of any other New Testament writer, but still they are limited to the stories about the relation of Mary and Jesus. We do not find a passage that talks about Mary's life from an angle other than her motherhood to Jesus.

The Gospel of John

The name Mary never occurs in the fourth gospel, although other women called Mary have been mentioned fifteen times in this gospel. She is very briefly mentioned in this gospel in two scenes: first, where she makes an appearance at the wedding feast of Cana (2:1-11, 12); and second, at the foot of the cross (19:25-27). There are a few other verses that do not have a clear pertinence to Mary but have been said to have some indirect relations to her.

Our study shows that Mary in the New Testament appears as a virgin mother, and a loyal follower of Jesus. Mary, the mother of the Jesus, is primarily a believer who has been with Jesus from his conception, to his birth, his infancy, childhood, and manhood. She remains a believer after his death and is present when Jesus' promise of his Spirit is given at Pentecost. There is no reference to the birth of Mary in the New Testament and neither can be found any details regarding her childhood. Therefore, we can realize that Mary in these texts is always presented as a figure linked and related to Jesus and not an independently looked upon person.

Mary in the Apocrypha

Mary is mentioned in apocryphal texts more abundantly, mainly in the infancy gospels of James and Pseudo-Matthew. We will cover these gospels in this part.

The Infancy Gospel of James (Protevangelium Jacobi)

The image that is presented in this gospel about Mary and her birth is much more detailed than any other source in early Christianity. This gospel offers an answer to the perplexing problem of Mary's perpetual virginity, since the early scriptures speak of Jesus' brothers. Joseph is presented as a widower, with children by a previous marriage (Barnstone 2005, 383). This solution does not answer the question about the rest of Mary's life as Joseph's wife though.

According to this gospel, Mary's parents (Joachim and Anna) did not have children and they were old and wealthy. They eagerly ask God to grant them a baby; her mother vows to dedicate the baby to the service of God after she is given glad tidings by angels of becoming a mother. When Mary becomes three years old, her parents take her to the temple to fulfill the pledge they had already made. She is respectably received and blessed in the temple by the priests. Now Mary was in the temple of the Lord like a dove being fed, and she received food from the hand of an angel. When she becomes twelve years old, the priests decide to find a ward for her. Zacharias, receiving vision from an angel told them to cast lots and the Lord will show them the one to whom Mary will be the wife. Finally, Joseph is chosen and he receives her as her ward. While Joseph is not with her for a while, Mary hears an angel who calls her: "The Lord is with you, you are blessed among women... you have found favor before the Lord of all, and you will conceive by his word."

After his return, Joseph finds Mary pregnant and becomes mad about it, but an angel appears to him in his dream and says that the one

who is in her is from the Holy Spirit; his name will be Jesus, and he will save people from their sins. Joseph is accused of defiling Mary and marrying her secretly after priests receive the news about Mary having become pregnant, but they both exonerate themselves. They drink the water of testing, and they are cleared since their sin did not appear in them. Joseph takes her to a cave when the son is ready to be born. Joseph brings a midwife for help, but the baby is born miraculously while a great light appears in the cave that their eyes could not bear it. The story in this gospel continues about Jesus, Magi, Herod, Zacharias, and so forth, but Mary is not mentioned anymore (Barnstone 2005, 385-92).

The Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew

This gospel is a strangely poetic version of the *Infancy Gospel of James*. The sources of the gospel are the *Gospel of James* and also the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (Barnstone 2005, 394). Unlike the Gospel of James, we do not find stories about Mary's birth and parents here. A difference in this gospel with the previous gospel is that this starts right from the pregnancy of Mary. When Joseph returns from his nine-month work trip as a carpenter and finds Mary pregnant, he is totally gripped by anguish, but the other virgins who were with Mary during his absence bear witness that she has never been touched by a man, and they assert that she has been addressed by an angel and received food from the hand of the angel in a daily manner. However, Joseph remains skeptical, but an angel appears to him in his dream and tells Joseph about Mary's purity. The rest of the story is pretty similar to the previous gospel, save here we find Jesus as an infant miracle-maker during their way back to the Land of Judah (Barnstone 2005, 394-97).

Syriac Sources

Syriac materials are of high significance in studying early Christianity, so we need to know the image of Mary in these sources too. In his

history book, Tabari bases himself on the Syriac sources. He states that Persians assert that sixty-five years after Alexander seized Babylonia, and fifty-one years after Arsacid rule began, Mary the daughter of Imran gave birth to Jesus, but Christians assert that Jesus was born 303 years after Alexander conquered Babylonia (Tabari 1987, 4:711). Mary was pregnant with Jesus when she was thirteen years old. They also report that Jesus lived thirty-two years and a few days before his ascension, and that Mary lived six more years after his ascension, altogether over fifty years. Zechariah provided for Mary, and she was engaged to Joseph. Mary and Joseph were cousins and their lineage goes back to David, the prophet (Tabari 2009, 2:91).

The other stories about Mary in the History of *Tabari* are all about her conception of Jesus and his birth. Reading the section of the history of *Tabari* on Mary and Jesus, we do not see any other stories about the life of Mary, save the stories about her conception to Jesus and his birth. Therefore, in this book, like the other texts that we studied, we almost always see Mary beside Jesus and not alone.

Mary in Islam

The image of Mary in Islam is different than that of Christianity in some cases, though there are many commonalities. Some of these differences might be because of the difference between the two theologies regarding the nature of humans.

Mary is the only woman who has been mentioned by name in the Quran. She has always been talked about with the highest reverence in the Quran. She has also been mentioned as *a sign* of God. There is an entire chapter in the Quran (chapter 19) entitled to her. She is mentioned thirty-four times in the Quran, much more than she is mentioned in the Bible. This number is even more than the frequency of the name of her son Jesus. To know the position of Mary in Islam, we will mainly focus on her from a Quranic point of view but will also

refer to some historical and hadith sources.

Birth

Unlike New Testament, the Quran talks about the birth of Mary in an outstanding way. The story of Mary is one of the most interesting and amazing stories in the Quran. It starts with the vow that her mother had made to dedicate her child to the God (Q. 3:35). Mary`s parents, Imran (Joachim in Christian tradition) and Hannah were old and childless for a a long time. God revealed to Imran that they would be given a blessed son who would be able to heal the sick, revive the dead, and who would be an apostle for the Israelites. Imran informed Hannah about this son, and therefore everyone was expecting a son to be born (Makarim-Shirazi 2001, 323). Being given a daughter instead of a son suggests that the promised son is given to them through Mary, because in this way they would have been given a greater honor by having a son without father, a great sign of God (Tabatabai 1995, 3:172). It can also be an indication of the close relationship between Mary and Jesus, as if Mary is the beginning of Jesus (Shomali 2012, 11).

Hannah`s promise of making her son a devotee of God was accepted by God in Mary. He made her grow in purity, and Zachariah was assigned as her guardian. Every time that he entered her chamber to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: “O Mary! Whence (comes) this to you?” She said: “From God: for God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure” (Q. 3:37).

Nature

Both, Mary and her Son, Jesus Christ have been introduced as human beings. Believing in Jesus as God has been considered to be an exaggeration in religion by people of the book (Q. 4:171). This is accepted among all Muslims. Indeed, there is no divine person in Islam with the Christian definition of divinity. We find arguments in

the Quran about the human nature of Mary and her son. For example, chapter 5, verse 17 of the Quran says: “They are certainly faithless who say, ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary.’ Say, ‘Who can avail anything against God should He wish to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone upon the earth?’ To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them. He creates whatever He wishes, and Allah has power over all things.’

And in verse 75 of the same chapter, the Quran says: “The Messiah, son of Mary, is but an apostle. Certainly [other] apostles have passed before him, and his mother was a truthful one. Both of them would eat food. Look how We clarify the signs for them, and yet, look, how they go astray!” indicating that God has no needs, while Mary and Jesus were needy like other people who need food in order to stay alive. In other words, Jesus is an apostle of God like all the other apostles, and the fact that he and his mother ate food shows that they were needy, and being needy is the first sign of being created. Therefore, Messiah has been a *possible existent* and not a *necessary existent*; created, not the Creator; born from another created person named Mary. Any other assumption that suggests their divinity is considered to be exaggeration (Tabatabai 1995, 6:73).

Importance

Jesus is considered a significant figure in Islamic thought. He has a great position in Islamic theology, as well as eschatology and morality, but the interesting point is that when his name is mentioned in the Quran, it almost always comes before the name of his mother as *Isa ibn Maryam* (Jesus the son of Mary). He is rarely named alone in the Quran. This can have many messages; one of which is the important position of Mary in the life of Jesus as a great prophet. It

can also refer to the Islamic view of Jesus as a human being, and not as the son of God.

Chapter 19 of the Quran has been named after Mary and the third chapter has been named after her family. In what follows, we will present the image of Mary in the Quran, and we will show that her importance in the Islamic point of view is mainly because of her own great spirituality and noble characteristics. Examining all the verses about Mary in the Quran, I have come to a list of virtue that have made her a noble figure according to the Quran:

- a) Obedience (66:12)
- b) Truthfulness (5:75)
- c) Chastity (21:91, 66:11-12)
- d) Being purified by God (3:42)
- e) Receiving food from God (3:37)
- f) Being addressed by angels (3:42)
- g) A sign of God for all the nations (21: 91)
- h) An exemplar for all the believers (66: 11-12)
- i) Being chosen by God above all women (3:42)
- j) A dedicated worshiper and fervent in prayer (3:37, 3:43)
- k) A true believer in the words and books of the Lord (66: 12)
- l) Being the mother of Jesus through a miraculous conception (19: 16-34)
- m) Being accepted by God as the first female devotee to God in the temple (3:37)

Considering all these virtues of Mary, we can come to the

conclusion that in the Quran Mary is a great pure lady, who has had the advantage of being purified by God. Indeed, the image of Mary in the Quran is pictured as a lady whose sincere worship and submission to God`s will as well as her truthfulness and chastity caused her to reach to a position which is called the position of the people who have been purified by God, and finally she became the mother of one of the greatest apostles of God through a miraculous conception.

The position of getting purified by God is special only to some rare people like great prophets and the people of the household of the Prophet Muhammad (Q. 33:33). Whoever reaches such a great position would be secure from all impurities and sins in actions and intentions. Indeed, it is the position of being infallible. The reason for this lies in the concept of purification itself, because if there is any impurity in the person`s actions or characteristics, he will not be *pure*, especially when the act of purification is done by God. It is also good to note that purification is one major goal of one`s spiritual journey in Islam. The reason behind all the religious laws and other spiritual instructions and prophets` efforts has been to make people pure, so that they gain proximity to God, which is the true meaning of Salvation.¹ People who try to purify themselves by following the right path are called *Mutahhirun*, which means *purifiers*, and they will be greatly rewarded for their determination and efforts in the way of God, but not all of them will be *Mutahharun*, which is the stage of those especially *purified* by God himself. This group will have access to the secrets of divine revelation (Q. 56:80).

I would also like to put an emphasis on Mary as *a role model* for all the believers as she has been introduced that way in Q. 66:2. Assigning a person as a role model indicates that she must be looked at in everyday life in order to get practical lessons from her. In Islam,

1. See Q. 62:2; 2:15; 3:164; 87:14; 91:9.

Mary's significance is mainly because of her own traits and not because of her being the mother of Jesus. Because she can never be an exemplar for others in that. Although being the mother of Jesus is a great honor for her, but this is a result of her great purity and chastity. This is the main difference between Mary's image in Islam and Christianity. Therefore, Mary is independently important in Islam, and even if she had not been the mother of Jesus, she would have still been an important figure.

This becomes clearer when we look at the way she has been introduced in the Quran in the verses I referred to, as we see that God admires her because of her devotion to worship and her chastity and truthfulness more than any other things in her. But when we look at her in Christian sources, we see that she is almost always being posed in relation to her son Jesus.

Indeed, there is a basic principle in Islam of giving value to people because of their own actions and ethics not only because of their family relations.¹ Therefore, we can observe that seeing Mary's greatness in her own personality is in more consistency with this principle.

Motherhood

Apostles of God have always been raised from pure families. It is interesting that some prominent figures of prophethood are the fruits of their upbringing by their mothers. The role of the mothers of Moses and Muhammad is highlighted in Islam, while their fathers have not been mentioned as much, though they have also been great and pure men. This shows the importance of the role of the mother in shaping one's personality. This is more emphasized when it comes to Mary

1. For example, Noah's son, Abraham's father, the wives of Noah and Lot, and uncle of Prophet Muhammad have been introduced as negative figures, but Pharaoh's wife is mentioned as an exemplar for believers in the Quran.

and Jesus, as Jesus did not have a father. Hannah, the mother of Mary, was also a special person, who played a great role in shaping the character of Mary as she vows to dedicate her child to God.

Conclusion

Although many Christians look at Mary more deeply to find messages for their life in her, but studying early Christian sources reveals that Mary in Christianity is almost merely important because she was the mother of Jesus, while the Islamic approach to her is mainly based on her own noble characteristics, so she is revered independently. Mary's special status with God is based on her own sacred characteristics, and not on her being the mother of Jesus. Even if she had not been Jesus' mother, she would have been a great lady in the Islamic point of view, and this is why she has been introduced as a great example for believers. This can be regarded as the main difference between the Islamic and Christian viewpoints on Mary.

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