

## The Story of Mary as a Feminine Counterpart of the Story of Joseph: A Narratological Study

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### Abstract

Mary is a character held in the Qurʾān in great esteem. A prominent attribute of hers in the Qurʾān is her chastity (aḥṣanat farjahā/ Q 21:91; 66:12). However, the Qurʾān does not give any explicit reason why Mary was known as chaste. This paper proposes an answer to this question by analyzing three Qurʾanic narratives: the narrative of Mary's encounter with the angel in Sura Maryam (Q 19), another version of the same narrative in Sura Al 'Imrān (Q 3), and Joseph and Zulaykhā's narrative in Sura Yūsuf (Q 12). I begin by highlighting the differences between the two versions of Mary's story in Q 19 and Q 3, then I will show that in the Q 19 version, Mary is at the heart of the narrative, while in the Q 3 version the theme is the "word" (Jesus). I will compare Mary's story in Q 19 with Joseph's story in Q 12. The Qurʾān has deployed similar elements in both narratives, leading us to think that, in the Q 19 version, we can see a theme analogous to that of Joseph and Zulaykhā's narrative, since in both the main characters are involved in an erotic situation but preserve their chastity. With this analysis, we can claim that the sentence "[She] guarded her chastity" refers to Mary's encounter with the angel. To show this, I focus on the Qurʾanic manner of storytelling, analyzing the elements of these narratives (i.e., the location, situation, characters' reactions, etc.). I also refer to Quranic commentaries and traditional sources of qīṣaṣ al-qnbiyā', because they contain details of the story which support this understanding.

**Keywords:** Mary (Maryam), Joseph (Yusuf), Aisas al-anbiyā', Qurʾanic Storytelling, Qurʾanic narratives, Tafsir.

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## Introduction

Qur'ānic stories have always been appealing to Muslims since early Islam. One could claim that the bulk of lay peoples' understanding of Islam comes from these narratives. A figure whose life story and virtues are narrated in the Qur'ān is Mary. She is the most eminent Qur'ānic woman and the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'ān.

Besides being Jesus's mother, her most conspicuous attribute in the Qur'ān is her chastity (Q 19:20; 21:91; 4:156; 66:12). For instance, to highlight her chastity, Q 21:91 refers to Mary simply as *allatī aḥṣanat farjahā* (she who guarded her chastity), without naming her. But the Qur'ān does not explain why Mary is characterized as chaste. I argue that by analyzing the elements of the narrative of Mary's encounter with the angel, and by considering the similarities between this narrative and Joseph and Zulaykhā's narrative, we can put forward an interpretation that has not received much attention so far. On this interpretation, the theme of this narrative is somehow analogous to that of Joseph and Zulaykhā's narrative<sup>1</sup>. In both, the main characters are involved in an erotic situation while preserving their chastity. Because of Mary's continence in that situation, the Qur'ān describes her as one "who guarded her chastity."

To conduct this study, I will first examine the meaning of the verb "*aḥṣanat*" in the Qur'an and then will talk about the Qur'ānic manner of storytelling. Afterwards by analyzing the narrative elements, I will try to reconsider Mary's encounter with the angel and highlight the similarities between Mary's narrative and that of Joseph. There are hadiths, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* sources, and commentaries (mainly from

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1. Her name does not appear in the Qur'ān, but according to *hadith* and *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* sources, her name was Zulaykhā.

early centuries) in which the two stories are deemed analogous or sometimes compared with each other. Moreover, some of these narrations and commentaries add details that corroborate this view, and to these I will refer. Finally, I will briefly consider why exegetes and commentators did not consider this possibility in understanding the story.

### **1. The Verb *Aḥṣanat***

The prevailing explanation for the phrase “*aḥṣanat farjahā*” is that Mary refrained from sexual intercourse, lawful and unlawful alike (e.g., Jawharī [1931, 10:234]; Zamakhsharī [n.d., 2:506]; Rāzī [n.d., 22:218]). In the *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān*, it is suggested that this phrase means that “she had no sexual intercourse before she became pregnant with Jesus” (Motzki 2002). However, the other uses of the verb *aḥṣana* in the Qur’ān undermines this interpretation.

The Qur’ān invites believers to preserve their chastity. Chastity is mainly denoted in the Qur’ān by the verb *aḥṣana*, which designates preserving or protecting. Transitive and intransitive forms of this verb have the same meaning—both are used to mean chastity (Rāghib al-Iṣḩānī 1412 AH). Two other verbs used for chastity are *ḥafiẓa* with a meaning analogous to *ḥaṣina* (Q 33:35; 23:5; 24:30, 31; 70:29) and *ista’affa* (Q 24:33). The crucial point here is that in the Qur’ān, chastity does not mean abstinence from sexual intercourse of all kind. This is evident from the verses in which righteous Muslim men are characterized as having sexual intercourse only with their wives and female slave (Q 23:5-7; 70:29-30). Indeed, the scope of chastity for Muslims is to restrict their sexual relationship to lawful relations, as is evidenced by the use of *ghayr musāfiḩīn* and *ghayr musāfiḩāt* after *muḩṣinīn* and *muḩṣināt* (Q 5:5,

24; 4:25). Given this, we cannot take the verb *ahṣanat* in the phrase *ahṣanat farjahā* to mean abstinence from both lawful and unlawful sexual intercourse.

Remarkably, the Qur'ān introduces Mary as an example for believers (Q 66:12). As the above-mentioned verses and those about the relationship between prophets and their spouses show, the Qur'ānic moral exemplar is not someone who abstains from all kinds of sexual relationship, but one who can remain chaste in all circumstances.

## **2. Qur'ānic Storytelling**

Qur'ānic storytelling has characteristics that must be taken into account if we are to analyze the elements of each Qur'ānic narrative. One such characteristic is that although many of these narratives are about real historical figures, the Qur'ān does not limit itself to one version when reiterating a story; it changes the tone, imagery, and elements of the story in each reiteration.

The main determinant of a narrative's shape is the Qur'ān's purpose of that narrative. Therefore, all elements, including the plot, dialogues, and imagery, are arranged in the most proper order to achieve that purpose, and unnecessary details are left out. All elements of the narrative are subordinate to the goal; sometimes time or location is vague or even the main character is unknown, but the goal is earnestly pursued (Malbūbī 1376 Sh, 119-20). The other factor contributing to changes in versions of a story is the circumstance in which the story is told. In these retellings, the emphasis might be on "dialogue," "action," or "character" (A. Ḥusaynī 1377 Sh, 146). An instance of such dynamic storytelling can be seen in Q 91:10-15:

Thamud denied in their rebellious pride when the basest of them broke forth and the messenger of Allah said: it is the she-camel of Allah, so let her drink but they denied him, and they hamstrung her, so Allah doomed them for their sin and rased (their dwellings) he dreadeth not the sequel.

This version of this story, which belongs to the beginnings of the Prophet's ministry, seeks to inspire in the Prophet's addressees the idea that they should stop hostility and fear the consequences of opposing the Prophet. Accordingly, the narrative is shaped around this theme and the story's elements focus on this goal. In this version, the name of the tribe is mentioned (Thamūd), but the main character (Ṣāliḥ) and the vicious character (the one who hamstrung the she-camel) are mentioned only by the title: "the messenger of Allah" (*rasūl Allāh*) and "the basest of them" (*ashqāhā*). The theme is denial of a prophet and his sign (she-camel). Ṣāliḥ is called the messenger of Allah as an allusion to Muhammad's prophethood, and the one who hamstrung the she-camel is called the basest of them as an allusion to the Prophet's opponents, and the wicked deed of Ṣāliḥ's enemies (killing the camel) is condemned to censure the denial of God's message by the Prophet's opponents (Malbūbī 1376 Sh, 126). But in Q 7:73-79 and 26:141-159 versions of this story—retold when the Prophet was engaged in dialogue with his opponents—the element of "dialogue" is highlighted and other changes occur in how the story is narrated (see A. Ḥusaynī 1377 Sh, 146-51).

Moreover, because of its brevity, the Qur'ān selects only the effective scenes in the process of the story, leaving out the rest (A. Ḥusaynī 1377 Sh, 43). The Qur'ān merely depicts parts and elements of the story that matter in the intended message (Mir 2006, 97). Thus,

the place is not mentioned by name in many narratives—as in the narrative of the People of the Cave (Q 18:8-22), since the place has no role in its message. This is also true about the element of time, as in the story of Zechariah’s prayer, where no reference is made to the time though the location (“*mihrāb*”) is referred to (Q 3, 38-41; 19, 1-11).

I will thus analyze Mary’s story based on the principle that in Qur’ānic narratives the images and words are used selectively and that alteration of elements in different versions of a story has a function and meaning. Therefore, an analysis is preferred if it can better explain the functions of the elements employed in the narrative.

### **3. Comparing the Two Versions of the Story**

Mary’s encounter with the angel is narrated in Q 19 and Q 3. Although both versions are narrated in a similar context (after the story of John’s birth and before saying that Jesus is God’s servant), which indicates that its main message is to show Jesus’ miraculous birth and God’s power, analyzing these two versions reveals that, besides this message, each version has an ancillary or implicit message as well. However, the majority of the exegetes have considered the main message (Jesus’ miraculous birth) and neglected the implicit message. Analyzing these two versions reveals this message.

Q 19:16-21:

And mention in the book, Mary, how she withdrew from her people to an eastern place and she took a veil apart from them; we sent to her our spirit in the resemblance of a perfect human. She said: “I take refuge in the merciful from you! if you are fearful.” “I am the messenger of your Lord,” he replied, “and have come to give you a pure boy.” “How shall I bear a son,” she answered,

“when I am not touched by a human and not unchaste?” “Even so,” he replied, “as such your lord has said: ‘Easy it is for me. And we shall make him a sign to mankind and a mercy from us. It is a matter decreed.’”

Q 3:45-47:

([A]nd remember) when the angels said: “O Mary, Allah gives you glad tidings of a word (be) from him, whose name is messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary. He shall be honored in this world and in the everlasting life and he shall be among those who are close. He shall speak to people in his cradle and when he is aged, and shall be among the righteous.” “Lord,” she said, “how can I bear a child when no human being has touched me?” He replied: “Such is the will of Allah. He creates whom he will. When he decrees a thing, he only says: ‘be,’ and it is.”

Here are some of their differences:

- **Location:** In Q 19, there are descriptions of her location, such as her going away, being lonely, and being out of sight, whereas in the Q 3 version, there is no reference to the location.
- **Man/Angels:** In Q 19, an angel appears to Mary as a “perfect man,” but in Q 3 the “angels” speak to her.
- **Mary’s *isti’ādha*:** In Q 19, Mary says, “I seek refuge in the beneficent one from thee”; but the quote does not appear in Q 3.
- **Virginity/chastity:** In Q 3, Mary just says “*lam yamsasnī bashar*” (I am not touched by a human). This phrase refers to her virginity when she conceived Jesus (cf. gospels of Luke and Matthew where both confirm her virginity), whereas in Q 19,

after referring to her virginity, Mary adds, “*wa lam aku baghiyya*” (and I was not unchaste). As pointed out, according to the Qur’ān, what makes a person *muḥṣan/muḥṣana* is avoidance of unlawful sexual relationships.

- **The word *ghulām* (son):** In Q 3, the angels use the (theological) word *kalima* (the word), whereas in Q 19, the man (i.e., the angel) says that he wants to give a son to Mary.

- **Description of the child:** In Q 19, when the man (i.e., the angel) speaks about giving her a son, he only describes the son as pure (*zakiyy*). In Q 3, however, almost half of the narrative is devoted to describing the son (or the “word”).

- **Action/dialogue:** In Q 3, the element of “dialogue” is dominant, while in Q 19, the main focus is on describing the event.

These differences indicate that, in addition to their shared message, the two versions of the story contain different messages. The Q 19 version, just like Joseph’s story, seems to introduce a model; hence, actions and reactions are accentuated. But the Q 3 version—which belongs to the Medinan period, when the addressees already knew Mary’s story from the Meccan Q 19—pursues a theological goal. This could explain this version’s similarity to the biblical story of Mary’s conception, where several sentences are devoted to describing the boy (Luke 1:28-36).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, that is probably why we find that Mary’s

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1. Neuwirth (2009) has shown the development of Qur’ānic attitudes towards Christian figures and dogmas from Mecca to Medina. She writes: “The earliest instance of Mary’s appearance in the Qur’ān is found in Sūrat Maryam (Q 19) ... both figures [Mary and Jesus] receive new attention in the Medinan period, where a long sūra, Āl ‘Imrān (Q 3), ... reveals traces of intensified theological exchange with Christian or perhaps Jewish and

virginity (the miraculous aspect of the story) is common between two Qur'anic and two biblical narratives (Matthew, 1: 18; Luke, 1: 27), but rejection of unchasteness (the aspect of being an exemplar) is only mentioned in the Q 19 version. In short, it seems that in the Q 19 version, Mary is at the heart of the narrative, but in the Q 3 version the axiom is the “word” (Jesus).

#### **4. Analyzing the Elements of the Narrative**

In this part, I will adduce some evidence—from the elements employed in the narrative of the angel’s appearance to Mary—to show that its theme is Mary’s chastity. The evidence includes the elements employed in the Q 19 version and the similarities between this narrative and that of Joseph and Zulaykhā.

##### **4.1. Elements of the Narrative in the Q 19**

###### **4.1.1. The Location**

The narrative begins as follows: “[W]hen she withdrew from her people to an eastern place and she took a veil apart from them” (19:16). As discussed before, in its storytelling, the Qur’ān mentions the place and location only when it is necessary and relevant to the theme and the message. In other words, no element is introduced unless it has a function; for instance, the city in which the story occurs is not mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

Compare this description of the location with the theological version of this story in Q 3, which involves no reference to any place, or with the narrative of giving the glad tidings about John to Zechariah

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Christian believers, without, however, displaying any polemical attitude towards particular Christian dogmas.”

1. The Bible says that Mary saw the angel in Galilee (Luke 1:26-27) and Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4).

in the same chapter (Q 19:1-11), where the sole reference to the place is *miḥrāb*, or with giving the glad tidings about a son to Abraham (Q 11:69-73), which involves no reference to the location. Among Qur'ānic narratives that include giving glad tidings about a child, the only one that gives a rather detailed description of the location is this narrative.

Almost all exegetes have interpreted the word *intabadhat* here as implying that she was away from people, in solitude (e.g., Zamakhsharī, n.d., 2:504; Ṭabarī 1978, 16:46; Ālūsī, n.d., 16:75). The isolation is highlighted by saying that she took a veil apart from the people. There are different interpretations of “taking veil”: that she went to a locked room (Jam‘ī az ‘ulamā-i Māwarā’ al-Nahr 1383 Sh, 142), she went behind a wall (Ṭabarī 1978, 16:45), or behind a curtain (Maḥallī and Suyūṭī 1416 AH, 309).

The exegetes disagree, however, on Mary’s reason for seclusion. On one account, she was seeking a place for worshiping (e.g., Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1371 Sh, 14:36; Ālūsī, n.d., 16:75). On another, she was looking for a place for ablution after her menstruation (Bayḍāwī n.d., 4:7; Majlisī 1378 Sh, 1077; Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 6:783; Baghawī, n.d., 3:191). On yet another, she wanted to take a bath or wash her head (Nīshabūrī 1384 Sh, 364; Maḥallī and Suyūṭī 1416 AH, 309; Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 3:783). In his *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Rāzī says that there are five views here: ablution after menstruation, worship, taking a bath, washing her hair, or finding drinking water. (Rāzī n.d., 21:196).

About “*makān<sup>an</sup> sharqiyy<sup>an</sup>*” most commentators have noted that it refers to the east of the mosque or the east of the *miḥrāb*. We can understand the meaning of *makān<sup>an</sup> sharqiyy<sup>an</sup>* if we know why Mary went away. Advocates of the view that worshiping was the reason for her seclusion usually have difficulty explaining this phrase. Thus,

some have said that she chose the eastern part arbitrarily (Ālūsī, n.d., 16:75); some have claimed that she went eastward, because her people esteemed the East (Qurtubī 1967, 11:90)<sup>1</sup>; and some have not given any reasons for why the East appears in the verse (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1371 Sh, 14:34). Some commentators have offered a totally different explanation; for example, 'Abd al-Razzāq proposes a mystical meaning for the East, suggesting that the East is *'ālam al-quds* (the world of holiness) and the veil is the enclosure of *'ālam al-quds* (Ibn 'Arabī 1422 AH, 2:7).<sup>2</sup> But on another account, remarkably consonant with the narrative's theme, *makān<sup>an</sup> sharqiyy<sup>an</sup>* means a sunshiny place: "In a cold day, she was seeking privacy to open her hair and unclot and benefit from the warmth of the sun, so she went eastward" (Nīshabūrī 1384 Sh, 364; see also Zamakhsharī, n.d., 2:505; Majlisī 1378 Sh, 1077; Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 6:783; Baghawī, n.d., 3:191).

The reasons for Mary's seclusion and her move towards an eastern place are two gaps of the Q 19's narrative. It is necessary to fill these gaps in order to fully understand the story. As noted, those who propose worshiping as the reason for her seclusion have not been able to fill the next gap (i.e., the reason for moving towards an eastern place) properly. But other reasons such as ablution after menstruation, taking a bath, and washing hair—all somehow related to a kind of nudity—can help fill in the gap related to the eastern place (a sunshiny place), on the one hand, and given that the theme of this narrative is analogous to that of Joseph's story, all these elements will find their function in the narrative, on the other hand. (Later, I will argue that, of these reasons,

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1. But even if we accept this claim, she should face towards the east, not go to the east.
  2. This commentary belongs to 'Abd al-Razzāq, but sometimes is mistakenly published under the name of Ibn 'Arabī.

ablution after menstruation is more compatible with the message, because it accentuates the point that Mary was an ordinary woman).

#### **4.2.2. The Perfect Man**

After depicting the location, the angel appears: “We sent to her our spirit in the resemblance of a perfect human” (19:17). All exegetes understand “*sawiyya*” in this verse as handsome, good-looking, and attractive: “He had all the beauties of mankind.” (e.g., Ālūsī, n.d., 16:76; Zamakhsharī, n.d., 2:505). In his *Mathnawī*, Rūmī makes an allusion to the story of Joseph and women (Q 12:31), saying that the angel was even more attractive than Joseph:

Mary in her chamber saw a form that gave increase of life / a life-increasing, heart-ravishing one.

That trusted Spirit rose up before her from the face of the earth / like the moon and the sun.

A trembling came over Mary’s limbs / for she was undressed and was afraid of evil.

(‘T was) such a form that if Joseph had beheld it plainly / he would have cut his hand in amazement, like the [Egyptian] women. (Rūmī 1925–1940, lines 3701-3075)

One prevailing answer to the question why the angel appeared to Mary as a handsome guy is that “the angel appeared in that way lest he frightens Mary, so that she accepts his words; if the angel had appeared in his real form, she would have feared” (Qurṭubī 1967, 11:90; Marāghī 1947, 16:42; Zamakhsharī, n.d., 2:505). But comparing this narrative with other Qur’ānic narratives leads us to a different answer.

Analyzing those narratives shows that if this narrative's theme boiled down to giving some news to Mary, there would be no need to depict the angel as a man. In four other narratives in the Qur'ān, which are about giving glad tidings or commissioning somebody, the narrative lacks such an element: giving the glad tidings about a child to Mary in Q 3, giving the glad tidings about a child to Zechariah, giving the commission of sacrificing his son to Abraham (Q 37:102), and the revelation to Moses's mother (Q 28:7). In all these narratives, the glad tidings or the commission is not conveyed by an angel who has the appearance of a perfect and attractive man.

The sequence of the events in Q 19 is also noteworthy in this regard. Mary saw the attractive man, [she controls herself] and seeks refuge in Allah, [the test is over], she realizes that the man is an angel. But in Q 3, there is no such a suspension: it is announced at the outset that the messengers are angels.

Thus, if we say that Mary's encounter with the attractive man (angel) has a sexual theme, as in Joseph and Zulaykhā's narrative—that is, her chastity in a difficult situation—then the description of the man's (the angel) beauty finds its function. Some exegetes have compendiously referred to this function (e.g., Zamakhsharī, n.d., 2:505; Ālūsī, n.d., 16:77).

#### **4.1.3. To Give You a Son**

As mentioned before, one difference between the Q 3 version and the Q 19 version is in the words referring to the child: “word” in the former and “son” in the latter. The man (angel) says to Mary that he is there to give (*li-ahaba*) her a son. This dialogue is in agreement with the narrative's sexual theme; for, in the Qur'ān, giving a son to somebody refers to the normal way of having a child through sexual

intercourse. The best example is Q 21:90 which indicates that in order to give John to Zechariah, “we adjusted his [barren] wife (to bear a child) for him.” Interestingly, three uses of the verb “*wahaba*” in order to speak of having a child are found in Q 19 (verses 19, 50, and 53; other instances include 29:27; 21:72).

#### **4.2. Similarities to the story of Joseph**

And she, in whose house he was, asked of him an evil act. She bolted the doors and said: come! He said: I seek refuge in Allah! Lo! He is my Lord, who hath treated me honorably. lo! wrong-doers never prosper she verily desired him, and he would have desired her if it had not been that he saw the argument of his Lord. Thus it was, that we might ward off from him evil and lewdness. lo! He was of our chosen slaves. (Q 12:23-24)

In its various narratives, the Qur’ān seeks to complete its messages, so sometimes it depicts opposing characters in similar circumstances, such as the son of Noah (11:41-41) against the believer from Pharaoh’s family (40:28-29) and Pharaoh’s wife (66:11) against the wives of Noah and Lot (66:10), and it sometimes narrates two supplementary parts of a message in two narratives, such as the story of reviving ‘Uzayr<sup>1</sup> (2:259) and that of reviving the birds (2:260). If we look at Mary’s and Joseph’s narratives from the chastity perspective, it seems that these stories are two sides of the same coin: there, a man is stuck in a situation of adultery; here, a woman.

However, scholars with a more feminine tendency consider women as main characters of both stories: “In contrast to Mary as an example of piety, Potiphar’s wife is pictured as a symbol of lust and immodesty” (Āriyān 1388 Sh, 18). As noteworthy as it is, since

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1. The Qur’ān does not name the revived person, but he is said to be ‘Uzayr in hadith and *qiṣaṣ* sources.

Joseph is the main character of that narrative (Zulaykhā is mentioned by a general description “*allatī huwa fī baytihā*”), it is more acceptable to see these two narratives as complementary (Mary-Joseph), not contrastive (Mary versus Zulaykhā). In what follows, some similarities between these narratives will be discussed to support this view.

#### **4.2.1. Characteristics of Historical Narratives**

The goal of Joseph and Zulaykhā’s narrative is teaching chastity to the believers. In such a story, familiarity with the protagonist helps the reader identify with him or her, and thus the narrative will be more effective, because the reader sees that a familiar person could preserve his or her chastity in such a difficult situation.

Joseph’s story has these features: Joseph is a real and familiar person to the reader,<sup>1</sup> and the Qur’ān narrates his story in the form of a historical incident. Mary’s story also has these features: being alone with an attractive man happens for a woman with whom the reader is familiar (Mary is the only woman whose name has been mentioned in the Qur’ān, other women, such as ‘Azīz’s wife, Moses’s mother, Moses’s sister, and Pharaoh’s wife have not been mentioned by name), and this story is narrated along with other historical incidents. (As will be noted in the following sections, there are other points in Mary’s and Joseph’s narratives whose functions are seemingly to show that Mary and Joseph are truly human beings, and thus everyone can follow their example).

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1. Compare this with stories such as that of the garden owners (Q 18:32-44), in which the characters are unknown and have very general titles (e.g., owner of a garden). This feature has raised a discussion about whether these stories are historical or parables (A. Ḥusaynī 1377 Sh, 57-69).

#### 4.2.2. Private Place

One similarity has to do with the locations in both narratives: Mary's encounter with the man (angel) occurred in a place away from people and behind a veil; Joseph and Zulaykhā also met in a locked room. In some commentaries and *qiṣaṣ*, this similarity is highlighted:

To take a bath, Mary entered that chamber, and went to the sunshiny part, taking a veil. **The chamber was locked**, and the key was in Zechariah's hand. Mary went behind the veil and washed her head, and then Gabriel entered. (Jam'ī az 'ulamā-i Māwarā' al-Nahr 1383 Sh, 141)

#### 4.2.3. The Man's Beauty

In both narratives, the man is depicted as handsome and attractive. Q 12:29-33 mentions this as a reason for Zulaykhā's affection for Joseph. According to these verses, other women of the city also praised his beauty and seemingly stopped blaming her. In Mary's story, too, the man is attractive. This similarity clarifies the function of the phrase *bashar<sup>an</sup> sawiyya* in Mary's narrative, showing that the ground of attraction in Joseph's narrative exists here for Mary as well.

Taken together, these elements—the man's attraction, the private place, and Mary's situation (according to the narratives that depict her as having undressed to take a bath)—accentuate the similarity between these two stories.

#### 4.2.4. Seeking Refuge in Allah

Both Mary and Joseph seek refuge in Allah. After seeing the man, Mary seeks refuge in Allah. Many exegetes account for this part of the story in terms of "fear," ignoring other possibilities. For them, the fear was the only reason why Mary sought refuge in God (Ālūsī, n.d., 16:76; Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1371 Sh, 14:36; Qurṭubī 1967, 11:90; Sharīf Lahijī 1373 Sh, 3:19). But seeking refuge in Allah (*isti'ādḥah*) is shared in both

narratives, where it comes in the same form: direct speech. In order to yield more effectiveness, the Qur'ān has in several cases used the direct speech form, instead of describing the situation, because a description from an outsider perspective does not yield the needed effectiveness (see Mir 2004a). Likewise, in these two narratives, when the story reaches this point, the Qur'ān deploys direct speech (Q 12:23; 19:18).

This similarity seems to help us draw the shared theme of these two narratives, showing that she sought refuge in Allah to evade sin, like Joseph. Some exegetes have considered this possibility; for example, Ālūsī reports that some exegetes have said:

[H]er seeking refuge in Allah implies that she (according to the human nature) felt lust and was attracted to the man, like Joseph's statement "if thou fend not off their wives from me I shall incline unto them" (Q 12:33). This is not, however, incompatible with chastity, because it is impulsive and according to one's nature. It is also true about what is said [in Joseph's narrative that] "he would have desired her" (Q 12:23), because it is natural to feel aroused in such a situation.<sup>1</sup> (Ālūsī, n.d., 16:78; see also Zamakhsharī, n.d., 2:505)

As aforementioned, for most of the exegetes, the fear was the only reason why Mary sought refuge in God. But a noteworthy point here is that there is no explicit mention of fear in the narrative itself. There is no mention of the way the angel appears, and we are faced with a gap in the narrative. The narrative is silent about whether the angel appeared to her suddenly and in a surprising way or whether he appeared to Mary in a way that did not frighten her. Given the similarities between this narrative and the narrative of Joseph, it could

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1. Ālūsī himself maintains that Mary's statement shows that she did not have any inclination towards him, let alone feeling aroused (n.d., 16:78).

be argued that the best option to fill this gap is to refer to the clime of that narrative. In this case, seeking refuge in this narrative can be understood as the one in the story of Joseph.

The Qur'ān also uses these dialogues and statements to portray the characters of its narratives (M. Ḥusaynī 1384 Sh, 115). Besides, the Qur'ān always tries to show that the examples introduced in its stories are “human” (Mir 1986, 7), as noted in several verses (e.g., Q 14:11; 18:110; 41:6). In both narratives, seeking refuge in God affirms the humanity of the main characters, showing that the character is aware of his or her vulnerability in such a situation. The narrative displays the vulnerability so that the reader identifies with the protagonist as an ordinary human. The fear that most exegetes have seen in Mary's seeking refuge in God could also be included in the understanding of the narration with the same framework, because in addition to the fear of sin, Mary also has the fears of an ordinary woman. A woman in a deserted place (while perhaps taking a bath) sees a man. Even if she overcomes her lust, she is still not safe; therefore, Mary is like every other woman in this situation afraid of being raped, and by saying, “I take refuge in the merciful from you! If you are Allah-fearing” (19:18), she tries to awaken his conscience and invite him to be chaste too. There are other elements in the story highlighting that Mary was an ordinary woman; for example, she, like other women, had pangs of the child-birth, or she needed eating and drinking (Q 19:23-24).

Joseph's narrative also involves similar elements. By saying that Joseph “would have desired her,” it is implied that he is an ordinary man who would feel aroused in such a situation (Suyūṭī 1404 AH, 4:13; Bayḍāwī, n.d., 3:160). Later again, he says to God, “If thou turn not away their wives from me, I will yearn towards them and become (one) of the ignorant” (12:33). The verb *aṣbu*, used to describe his

feeling, was a special term in romantic poems referring to juvenile passions. The word *jāhilīn* (the ignorant) has an analogous function, because *jahl* in this context means an unwarranted deed, and *jāhil* is someone who cannot control his passions (Izutsu 2002, 225). The Qurʾān deploys their seeking refuge in God, fear, lust, and other humanly features to reiterate that they are ordinary people.

#### 4.2.5. A Third Party Testifies

Another similarity between these two stories is that both Mary and Joseph are accused of unchasteness: Joseph is accused by Zulaykā (12:26) and Mary by her people (19:27). But both are exonerated. Moreover, they are exonerated in the same way: a third party testifies in their favor; in Joseph's story, someone<sup>1</sup> from Zulaykhā's family testifies, saying, "If his shirt is torn from behind, then she hath lied and he is of the truthful" (12:26-28), and in Mary's, Jesus speaks in the cradle, testifying to his mother's chastity (19:29-30).

In some hadiths, the similarity is stronger, because Joseph's witness is said to be an infant who spoke miraculously:

Joseph said, "I am innocent." 'Azīz replied, "Do you have any proof?" Joseph pointed to the infant. 'Azīz said, "You did what you know and now you are mocking me by asking a seven-month infant. You are obviously guilty." Suddenly, the baby spoke in cradle... (Nīshabūrī 1384 Sh, 199)

In this hadith, even Joseph's gesture is similar to Mary's. In her story, when people accused her, "she pointed to him [Jesus]. They replied, 'How can we speak with a baby in the cradle?'" (19:29). In *al-Durr al-manthūr*, al-Suyūfī reports similar hadiths: "Four people

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1. The Qurʾān uses the word "*shāhid*" (witness) for this person (12:26).

spoke in their infancy: the son of the hairdresser of the Pharaoh's daughter, the baby who testified in Joseph's favor, the baby in Jurayh's story,<sup>1</sup> Jesus son of Mary" (Suyūṭī 1404 AH, 4:15).

Such hadiths and *qiṣaṣ* depicting Joseph's witness as an infant or a hadith from Imam al-Ṣādiq that Mary and Joseph are similar examples of chastity (Kulaynī 1388 Sh, 472) are, among other things, evidence that many Muslims in the early centuries conceived the two narratives as analogous.

## **6. Why Most of the Exegetes Neglect This View**

Only a few exegetes of the Qur'ān have mentioned the similarity between these two narratives. In this part, I want to introduce possible causes of this negligence. These causes can be found both in their exegetical manner and their social and intellectual atmosphere.

### **6.1. Linear View**

The view of Qur'ānic verses as interconnected was not popular in the history of Qur'ānic exegesis. In the past century and with the works of Farāhī, Iṣlāhī, Sayyid Quṭb, Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Thanawī, and others, a view was propounded to the effect that each chapter (even the whole Qur'ān) is an interconnected unity. On this view, literary aspects of the Qur'ān, like its dramatic elements, could be studied (Mir 2004c, 206). There were exegetes in the past who attached importance to verse orders, but the mainstream exegetical approach was linear-atomistic. The exegetes started from the beginning of the Qur'ān, explaining the verses one by one. In this method, the exegete only focused on one or two verses (Mir 2004c, 200). Thus, "a methodology for linking similar Qur'ānic ideas, syntactical structures, principles, or themes together is almost non-existent" (Wadud 1999, 2) in this way of explaining the Qur'ān.

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1. It refers to a story about a pious Israelite.

Due to the prevalence of this method, some commentators on Mary's story engaged in explaining the words and phrases without having a holistic view of the text to discover the theme. In their interpretations of the narrative, they have just examined reports about whether "*li-ahaba*" is correct or "*li-yahaba*" (in Q 19:19) or discussed the difference between "*lam yamsasnī bashar*" and "*lam aku baghyyia*" (e.g., Baḥrānī 1374 Sh, 3:705; Shanqīṭī 1415 AH, 3:386).

### **6.2. Dominance of the Theological View**

Exegetes with a theological view usually read the Qur'ān discretely; that is, instead of searching for the links between phrases, stories, imageries, and so forth, they just search for the theological "content" of the Qur'ān. When they find such a content, they usually focus on it and tend to put the context aside (see Mir 2004b, 65-67).

Such exegetes are just concerned with theological problems; therefore, they only try to theologically account for the differences between the Q3 and Q19 versions of the story, saying, for example, "angels" in Q 3:45 means "the world of the angels" and this world is embodied in one angel in Q 19:17 (Khaṭīb 1967, 8:730).

### **6.3. Male dominance**

One relevant factor in exegesis is the personal characteristics of the exegete and the social and cultural atmosphere in which he or she lives. The gender is a relevant factor in commentaries (Mihrīzī 1385 Sh, 16). There are few female exegetes, and the consideration of their work supports the view that if women write exegeses, new interpretations will be yielded (see Mihrīzī 1385 Sh; a review of Bānū Amīn's commentaries on women-related verses).

Apparently, since almost all commentaries are written by men, the similarity has not been noted in mainstream exegetical works. Male exegetes can sympathize with Joseph's situation, but they cannot identify with Mary.

#### **6.4. Denouncing Sexual Desire**

Another reason why exegetes have neglected the sexual theme of the narrative is an extreme traditional view of chastity in which even alluding to the existence of sexual desire in a person (especially in women) is considered wrong. Thus, Ālūsī writes that it is disrespectful to say that Mary was aroused in the situation (Ālūsī, n.d., 16:77) or Sharīf Lāhījī writes:

Al-Bayḍāwī has proposed the shameful possibility that the angel appeared like a man so that Mary would be aroused by seeing him... It is an extraordinary accusation against prophets' mothers; therefore, neither Rāzi nor Zamakhsharī speak of such a possibility. Seemingly, al-Bayḍāwī who has spoken of this probability has compared prophets' mothers to his own mother. We seek refuge in Allah from these absurdities and nonsenses. (Sharīf Lahījī 1373 Sh, 3:18)

#### **6.5. Giving a Flawless Portrayal of Religious Characters**

The other reason—somehow related to denunciation of sexual desire—is the tendency to depict a portrayal of these characters that has no vestige of mundane features, including sexual desire. This leads the exegetes to omit, sometimes unconsciously, all traces of sexuality in this story. Thus, the writers of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* think that nudity is not suitable for a figure like Mary, adding the following note to Q 19:17: “We sent to her our spirit (and after she wore her clothes) the spirit appeared as a perfect human” (Maḥallī and Suyūṭī 1416 AH, 309) or Ālūsī writes that Mary's statement that “I seek refuge in God from you” (19:18) is strong evidence that she did not even have an

inclination towards the man (angel), let alone being aroused (Ālūsī, n.d., 16:78). Also, in Joseph's story, these exegetes try to provide a non-sexual explanation for the phrase "he would have desired her" (Q 12:24) (e.g., Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1371 Sh 11:138-50).

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I sought to reconsider the question why the Qur'ān describes Mary as "*allatī aḥṣanat farjahā*." The most common answer is that this description refers to her virginity and her abstinence from lawful and unlawful sexual relationships. But it was demonstrated that in the Qur'ān, the verb "*aḥṣana*" refers only to abstinence from unlawful sexual relationships. To find alternative answers, we analyzed Qur'ānic narratives of Mary's encounter with the angel. Analysis of the Q 19 version provides us with two sets of findings: (1) elements specific to this narrative, such as virginity, her chastity, or the fact that among Qur'ānic narratives of giving the glad tidings about having a child, this is the only case in which the angel is presented as a beautiful man in a secluded place, and (2) similarities between this narrative and that of Joseph and Zulaykhā.

Although my account may not be the only possible interpretation of this narrative, the coherence of this interpretation, in virtue of which the elements of the narrative find their functions, as well as considerable evidence supporting this reading of the narrative, leads us to claim that between the lines of the story, a similar theme to that of Joseph and Zulaykhā's story could be found; that is, in both the main characters are involved in an erotic situation while preserving their chastity. Therefore, we can claim that the sentence "[she] guarded her chastity" refers to Mary's encounter with the angel.

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