

DESTABILIZING GENDER, REPRODUCING MATERNITY: MARY IN THE QUR'ĀN*

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Abstract

The Qur'ān tells Mary's story in extended passages in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (Q 3) and Sūrat Maryam (Q 19). These stories have been interpreted to emphasize sameness between men and women and prove Qur'ānic gender egalitarianism on the one hand, and to illustrate the Qur'ānic valuing of female, especially maternal, experience on the other. This essay proposes a third tack, highlighting queerness. Focusing on Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, this article suggests new avenues for thinking about gender, family, and society in the Qur'ān. In situating Mary in a semi-genealogical prophetic lineage and a believing community, Qur'ānic verses by turns affirm and unsettle binary gender constructions and disrupt heteronormative reproductivity. Oscillating between highlighting Mary's femaleness and likening her to prophetic and pious males, the text offers rich notions of gender, kinship, and power. A queer reading of Mary poses certain dangers but also offers a way out of certain feminist impasses by rejecting a totalizing narrative.

* I have worked on this essay for several years and owe thanks to numerous people. An early, brief attempt to grapple with the theme of mothers and daughters in scripture for *Vox Feminarum* (2003) was my first pass at the story of Mary and her mother. Michael Birkel prompted me to think further about these issues as we talked through a pericope from Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, a discussion reflected in his *Qur'an in Conversation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014). I presented various iterations of this material at a symposium on maternity at Fordham University (2013) organized by Kathryn Kueny; at the inaugural meeting of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (2013); at the Theorizing Islam and Gender conference at Penn State University (2014) organized by Gabeba Baderoon, Jon Brockopp, Nina Hoel, and Fatima Seedat; and at the panel "Sacred Troubling Texts" organized by Roberta Sabbath at the American Comparative Literature Association (2016). Shawkat Toorawa read a draft and offered useful suggestions as did two anonymous readers for *JiQSA*. When the article was nearing completion, amina wadud, Aysha Hidayatullah, and Jerusha Tanner read it and suggested important refinements. I dedicate this article to Seemi Ghazi, who recited Sūrat Maryam for me before my daughter Shaira's difficult birth and again, sixteen years later, over her too-early grave.

Keywords

Mary, exegesis, *tafsīr*, gender, feminism, embodiment, pregnancy, queer, Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān, Sūrat Maryam

Introduction

It is often said that Mary (Maryam) is unique among the Qur’ān’s female characters. Her story, told primarily through extended passages in Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (Q 3) and Sūrat Maryam (Q 19), lends itself to three interpretive trajectories. One approach, taken mostly by Muslim feminists, emphasizes *sameness* between men and women, noting Mary’s similarity to male figures as evidence of qur’ānic gender egalitarianism and the potential for women to fulfill characteristically male roles, such as that of prophet. A second strategy, found in some scholarly as well as pious works, focuses on essentialized *difference* between men and women, insisting on qur’ānic sensitivity to women’s gendered and embodied experience. In narrating Mary’s pregnancy, labor, and delivery, qur’ānic discourse affirms the sacredness and power of biologically female and specifically maternal experiences; it invests childbearing with value in a way that places it parallel to, though distinct from, prophecy.

In this essay, I propose a third tack, highlighting *queerness*. Applied to theology, the term “queer” has sometimes meant theology that centers queer people and their needs, in tandem with liberation theology’s focus on marginalized people. I focus on its related but distinct sense, derived from queer theory, of undoing binaries and unsettling taken-for-granted categories, especially those that pertain to sex, sexuality, and gender. Scholars of Judaism and Christianity have drawn on queer theoretical tools to engage scripture. Writing about Torah interpretation, Jay Michaelson lays out its basic assumptions:

In queer theory, gender and sexual dimorphisms are social constructions that invariably efface difference, administer power to the powerful, and subject the weak/disfavored to the rule of the strong/favored. Dyads such as them/us, black/white, and female/male are inexact, indeed incorrect, simplifications of actual experience, and they invariably subordinate one side to the other. Many contemporary philosophers have argued that even the basic dualisms of self/other and presence/absence contain within them the seed of oppression, marginalization, and subjugation; as soon as we divide, we begin to conquer.¹

1. Jay Michaelson, “It’s the Purity, Stupid: Reading Leviticus in Context. *Parashat Metzora* (Leviticus 14:1–15:33),” in Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser, and David Schneer (eds.), *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 145–150, 148. Michaelson cautions, however, that to

Queer theoretical interventions, then, have relevance for social life: challenging the presumed coherence and sacred nature of existing oppressive norms allows other forms of being and relating to emerge and flourish. Such flourishing is central to the work of Christian thinkers, including Marcella Althus-Reid, whose germinal *Indecent Theology* illuminates connections between the ways Christians approach the Bible and its major figures—including Mary—and the ethical and theological resources available to queer and marginalized Christians.²

Queer theory and theologies have complicated, sometimes vexed, relationships to feminist theory and theologies. Insofar as feminist thinkers challenge male dominance by centering and valuing women and female experiences, queer theory's insistence on undoing the dominant gender binary can be perceived as threatening: how do you center women if "woman" is just a construct? (Similar questions have vexed academic debates over Women's Studies versus Gender Studies; many institutions, recognizing the interconnectedness of the subjects, now have Women's and Gender Studies programs.) However, queer emphasis on the constructed, contingent, continually shifting meanings attached to "woman," "female," and "feminine" have been taken up, productively, for feminist liberation projects.

While there has been a good deal of gender-focused interpretation of Muslim texts, little scholarship has drawn on queer theory. This article seeks to bridge that gap, using queer theoretical tools to suggest new avenues for thinking about gender, family, and society in the Qur'ān. I focus on Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, which recounts Mary's own gestation and birth, her temple service, and her role in inspiring Zachariah (Zakariyyā) to ask God for goodly progeny, resulting in the birth of John (Yaḥyā), which preceded the annunciation of Jesus ('Isā) to Mary. In situating Mary in a semi-genealogical prophetic lineage and a believing community, qur'ānic verses by turns affirm and unsettle binary gender constructions and disrupt heteronormative reproductivity. Oscillating between highlighting Mary's femaleness and likening her to prophetic and pious males, the text offers rich notions of gender, kinship, and power. A queer reading of Mary poses certain dangers but also offers a way out of certain feminist impasses precisely because it refuses a totalizing narrative.³

value boundary blurring and "transgressive sexuality," and to contest the fixity of all categories, is a problem "if Judaism sets itself against a (real or imagined) 'other' that sacralizes the liminal."

2. Marcella Althus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2000).

3. Aysha Hidayatullah, in *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), has given a significant account of those impasses and signaled possible new directions for inquiry. The current vibrant and contentious state of Muslim women's scriptural interpretation emerges in the *JFSR* roundtable "Feminism and

Modern scholars, Muslim and otherwise, have investigated the qurʾānic Mary. Some explore influences or resonances with canonical and apocryphal biblical texts as well as other Near Eastern stories, including the Gospel of Luke and the *Protevangeliūm of James*.⁴ My approach to the text is literary rather than historical. I set aside qurʾānic composition and redaction to focus on the extant text. Rather than looking at gaps, inconsistencies, or seeming contradictions as evidence of influences, precursors, or parallels, I treat the important divergences between the Mary who appears in Sūrat Āl ʿImrān and the Mary who appears in Sūrat Maryam as grounds for a literarily and theologically fruitful instability.⁵ In this sense, my work complements scholarship on Mary that focuses on intra-qurʾānic dynamics of each *sūrah* as an organic unity,⁶ and on the commentarial tradition.⁷

Scholarship on Mary has often highlighted Sūrat Maryam.⁸ Shawkat Toorawa’s translation of the *sūrah* attends particularly to linguistic parallels and word roots.⁹ Aish Geissinger has analyzed the “subversive” nature

Islam: Exploring the Boundaries of Critique,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32 (2016): 111–151. The roundtable includes a lead essay and final statement from Asma Barlas and responses from me, Karen Bauer, amina wadud, Hidayatullah, Fatima Seedat, and YaSiin Rahmaan.

4. Consult, for instance, Suleiman A. Mourad, “Mary in the Qurʾān: A Reexamination of Her Presentation,” in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 163–174, as well as the works cited in Angelika Neuwirth, “Foreword,” in Hosn Abboud, *Mary in the Qurʾān: A Literary Reading* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), xiii–xviii, xiii, n. 2. Abboud, *Mary*, discusses the *Protevangeliūm* at 115–128.

5. Abboud posits compatibility between Muslim belief in the divine status of the qurʾānic text and the obvious existence of textual parallels outside the Qurʾān, suggesting that intertextuality functions to highlight the significance of qurʾānic choices. See *Mary in the Qurʾān*, 111.

6. Angelika Neuwirth, “The House of Abraham and the House of Amram: Genealogy, Patriarchal Authority, and Exegetical Professionalism,” in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (eds.), *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu* (TSQ 6; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 499–531.

7. Barbara F. Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾān, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67–82; Kristen Zahra Sands, *Sūfi Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 97–109.

8. This is especially true for non-specialist engagement with Mary. See, e.g., Chapter 5 of Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), “The Heroine of the Qurʾān and the Black Madonna” (67–79).

9. Shawkat M. Toorawa, “Sūrat Maryam (Q19): Lexicon, Lexical Echoes, English Translation,” *JQS* 13 (2011): 25–78. On Toorawa’s translation, and for alternate renderings of portions of Sūrat Maryam, consult Bruce B. Lawrence, *The Koran in English: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 117–121.

of Mary's labor and delivery of Jesus.¹⁰ Leyla Ozgur Alhassen treats the intertwined themes of family, signs, and secrets in Q 19:1–58.¹¹ Scholars have noted the parallels in the *sūrah* between the births of Jesus and John, and the equally striking parallels between their parents, Mary and Zachariah.¹² *Sūrat Maryam's* primacy as the locus for qur'ānic discussions of Jesus (and Mary) is obvious in the Islamic Society of North America's publication in pamphlet form, with a short introductory essay, of the chapter in its entirety.¹³

Although scholars have devoted relatively less attention to the extended account of Mary in *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, “one cannot but pay attention to the fact that there is more than one image of Mary in the text.”¹⁴ Angelika Neuwirth and Hosn Abboud have explored *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān's* theologically-motivated Medinan “re-reading” of the Meccan *Sūrat Maryam*.¹⁵ Neuwirth's exploration of the “House of Amram” (i.e., *'Imrān*) as a matrilineal (though patriarchally-named) competitor to the “House of Abraham” foregrounds maternal lineage and female power, as it “historicizes” the “mythic” Mary presented in *Sūrat Maryam*.¹⁶ Abboud's literary reading addresses the internal logic of each treatment of Mary and its biblical/apocryphal intertexts.

Other recent scholarship demonstrates the complexity and heterogeneity of qur'ānic discourses on maternity, masculinity, and prophets. Using insights

10. Aisha Geissinger, “Mary in the Qur'an: Rereading Subversive Births,” in Roberta Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 379–392.

11. Leyla Ozgur Alhassen, “A Structural Analysis of *Sūrat Maryam*, Verses 1–58,” *JQS* 18 (2016): 92–116.

12. Geissinger explores the parallels between “Zachariah's story” and “Mary's story” (“Mary in the Qur'an,” 383–384, with a handy table); Toorawa refers to the “account of Zachariah/John at verses 2–15 and the account of Mary/Jesus at 16–33” (“*Sūrat Maryam*,” 26).

13. *The Story of Mary and Jesus from the Qur'an* (Plainfield, IN: Amana Publications, 1989).

14. Neuwirth, “Foreword,” xvi.

15. Angelika Neuwirth, “Mary and Jesus: Counterbalancing the Biblical Patriarchs. A Re-reading of *Sūrat Maryam* (Q. 19) in *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* (Q. 3),” in Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014); Neuwirth posits “a double religious-political purpose” for the re-reading in “House of Abraham,” 505. For Abboud (*Mary in the Qur'an*, 6), the verses on Mary in *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* “seem to embark on the task of interpreting already delivered themes from *Sūrat Maryam*.” Mustansir Mir has written about plot, character, and irony operative within *Sūrat Yūsuf*. For an overview of his literary approach, consult Mir, “Some Aspects of Narration in the Qur'an,” in Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes*, 93–106. Abboud (5, nos. 16–18) offers additional resources for thinking about literary approaches to the Qur'an.

16. Neuwirth, “House of Abraham,” 506.

from gender and sexuality studies, scholarship on Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and other biblical figures has showcased the multiple registers and variations in qur'ānic accounts of prophets.¹⁷ Amanullah De Sondy explores passages on Adam, Joseph, Jesus, and Muḥammad to demonstrate that no single qur'ānic model of masculinity or the normative family exists.¹⁸ Kathryn Kueny illustrates the multiple ways in which qur'ānic passages discuss creation and reproduction, gender and generativity; she shows how human language and concepts insufficiently capture the full reality of divine engagement in the world.¹⁹ My exploration of Mary's story, especially as told in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, corroborates these observations, even as it suggests further destabilization of gender norms in the text.

Sameness

One way of approaching Mary's story is to note how often she appears as like or a peer to men. The qur'ānic text mentions Mary in conjunction with Jesus on numerous occasions (e.g., Q Mu'minūn 23:50) as well as in the company of other (righteous) men. Rather than being among "devoutly obedient" women—*qānitāt*, which has a particular resonance in the Qur'ān, appearing in the context of marital relationships (Q Nisā' 4:34)—Mary is "among the *qānitīn*," those people or men who show *qunūt*, devout obedience (Q Taḥrīm 66:12); thus, the only specific woman identified as having *qunūt* has no husband.²⁰ The Qur'ān also applies the term *qānit* to the prophet Abraham

17. Consult, for instance, Mahdi Tourage, "The Erotics of Sacrifice in the Qur'anic Tale of Abel and Cain," in *International Journal of Zizek Studies* 5 (2011), <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/432>; and, for an exploration of how such narratives are deployed, Karen G. Ruffle, "An Even Better Creation: The Role of Adam and Eve in Shi'ī Narratives about Fatima al-Zahra," in *JAAAR* 81 (2013): 791–819.

18. De Sondy's *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* shows that these figures do not conform to a single model of what it means to be an exemplary Muslim (i.e., submissive to God) man. The story of Jesus goes even further than the others in rejecting or bypassing heteropatriarchal social norms: "Jesus' life begins and ends in circumstances that defy every social and scientific norm that might support notions of a nuclear family or the roles found within one"; although "Muḥammad and Jesus are similar in the sense that they have no father role models in their lives," Jesus also violates conventional standards for being born, partnering, procreating, and dying. See Amanullah De Sondy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 116.

19. Kathryn M. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), esp. Chapter 1, "On Wombs, Women, and the Hand of God: The Beginning of Life in the Qur'an," 19–49.

20. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the qur'ānic text are mine,

(Q Nahl 16:121). In another parallel to a male prophet, Mary is a “truthful woman (*siddīqah*)” (Q Mā'idah 5:75) just as Joseph is a “truthful man” (*siddīq*) (Q Yūsuf 12:46).²¹ Sūrat Maryam makes parallels to (male) prophets when it commands readers to “Mention Mary in the book” (v. 16), as it commands mention of Abraham (v. 41), Moses (v. 51), Ishmael (v. 54), and Idris (v. 56).

Like men (prophets and others) Mary is named in the qur'ānic text.²² As Mona Siddiqui observes, “In the Qur'ān only Moses, Abraham, and Noah are mentioned by name more frequently than Mary.”²³ Other women are indicated by relational terms: Mary's mother is a woman or wife of Amram; Moses' mother and sister are both referred to in terms of their relation to him, as are Adam, Noah, and Zachariah's wives. Even the Queen of Sheba has a title, not a name.²⁴ Mary is “sister of Aaron” once (Q Maryam 19:28), but more often she is called by name. Contemporary women interpreters consider Mary's naming especially significant. Asma Lamrabet deems the

drawing on various interpretations and translations. The translation “devoutly obedient,” now common, was first used by Abdullah Yusuf Ali in 1937 (see Bruce Lawrence, *The Koran in English*, 101). The Qur'ān's use of the feminine plural of *qānit* in Q 4:34, a verse usually understood as inscribing male authority, particularly marital authority, is noteworthy. It reads, in part: “Righteous women are *qānitāt*, protecting the unseen in accordance with what God has guarded.” Premodern commentators on this verse typically glossed *qānitāt* as “obedient,” “obedient to God and their husbands,” or even simply “obedient to their husbands.” See Kecia Ali, “Obedience and Disobedience in Islamic Discourses,” in Suad Joseph et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 5.309–313. The most important recent publications in an extensive body of literature on Q Nisā' 4:34 include Ayesha Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence in the Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Karen Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Qur'an: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

21. Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 155 notes this parallel.

22. Notably, a *sūrah* is named for her; this is an honor (otherwise) reserved for prophets (Muḥammad, Noah, Luqmān, Jonah, Joseph, Abraham, and Hūd). One can wonder whether those who titled the *sūrahs* considered her a prophet.

23. Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 151. Note, though, that many of these instances include her name as part of Jesus' name. On naming and namelessness generally, consult Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 52.

24. On the Queen of Sheba and her exemplary fulfillment of the typically male role of leader, consult Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 38–42, and Asma Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading*, trans. Myriam Francois-Cerrah (Markfield, UK: Kube Publishers, 2016), 25–35. The Qur'ān also refers to pharaoh(s) by title rather than name, suggesting that gender may be irrelevant when it is the leadership role that is at stake.

fact that Mary is named in scripture “undeniable evidence of her proximity to God!”²⁵

Moreover, Mary unsettles patriarchal naming conventions in a more fundamental way. Jesus is “‘Īsā ibn Maryam” (Q Maryam 19:34), that is, “Jesus the son of Mary.”²⁶ As Abboud puts it, “she is named, and has the power to name.”²⁷ The matronymic reinforces the theological point that Jesus has no human father and also serves as a reminder that Mary fulfills a role typically reserved for men.

Like (other) prophets, Mary communicates with the Divine. Like Moses’s mother, who was “inspired” by God to save her child by casting him afloat in the river (Q Ṭā-hā 20:38–39; Q Qaṣaṣ 28:7), Mary receives direct communication from God, through an angel or otherwise. Receiving *wahy*—which Amira Mittermaier calls “a dense signifier and a highly charged term”—made Mary a prophet in the eyes of a small minority of medieval commentators.²⁸ These scholars were not interested in whether women could be prophets but rather, as Maribel Fierro points out, in whether someone who received a particular kind of inspiration from God was a prophet; the inclusion of women was a by-product, not the desired end result.²⁹

Modern discussions of Mary’s potential prophethood consider the impact her being considered a prophet would have on other women. Palwasha Lena Kakar’s interrogative “Is She a Prophet?” emphasizes the potential importance for women of there being a female prophet: she would serve as model for greater female potential, which men would also have to recognize.³⁰ (Kakar ultimately withholds any verdict on whether or not Mary actually was a prophet.) The most extended argument for Mary’s prophetic status in recent times comes from Hosn Abboud, who surveys the Andalusian and “Eastern” exegetical arguments for and against women’s capacity to receive *wahy*, finding the former convincing and the latter mere reflections of “pre-

25. Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur’an*, 71.

26. Or *al-Masīh ibn Maryam* (Q Nisā’ 4:171, Q Mā’idah 5:75).

27. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur’an*, 1. Note, too, that it is Mary’s mother who names her (Q Āl ‘Imrān 3:36).

28. Amira Mittermaier offers this characterization of *wahy* in her ethnography of dreams and dream interpretation in contemporary Egypt, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 134. On the view that Mary was a prophet, see Maribel Fierro, “Women as Prophets in Islam,” in Manuela Marín and Randi Deguilhem (eds.), *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 183–198; Abboud, *Mary in the Qur’an*, 130–144; Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 77; Sands, *Sūfī Commentaries*, 99.

29. See Fierro, “Women as Prophets in Islam.”

30. Palwasha Lena Kakar, “Is She a Prophet?: Maryam, Mother of Jesus,” *Azizah* 3 (2003): 14–18.

conceived ideas” about women’s limitations.³¹ Such prejudices led the exegete al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) to opine that “the angels spoke orally to Maryam as a miracle to Zakariyya.”³²

Still, beyond patriarchal presuppositions, there are scriptural roadblocks. To consider any woman a prophet would clash with the seemingly clear sense of the qur’ānic declaration that “We have only sent men prior to you” (*mā arsalnā min qablīka illā rijāl*) (Q Yūsuf 12:109). One counterargument, which Abboud adopts, is that this passage refers to messengers (*rusul*) only, and does not disqualify a woman from being a prophet (*nabī*).³³ Another argument takes *rijāl* to refer to human beings in contrast to angels, rather than males in contrast to females.³⁴

Like Geissinger, Abboud emphasizes the way that Mary serves as a model for Muḥammad. She shows the close parallels between the story of Mary’s heroic journey told in Sūrat Maryam and Muḥammad’s reported struggles during the Meccan period, recalling that Sūrat Maryam is Meccan. Abboud enumerates the parallels between the two, and the resonance of Mary’s story with the “basic model or prototype” of prophets who are rejected before being vindicated.³⁵ The implication is clear: Mary is at least as much a role model for Muḥammad as (other) qur’ānic prophets.

Mary’s status as a (potential) prophet, on a par with and considered in the company of pious males, caps the sameness argument. It does not question the categories of male and female so much as assert that for Mary, the differentiation between them is meaningless or even that Mary is “beyond gender.”³⁶ Certainly, some material in the Qur’ān fails to comment specifically

31. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur’an*, 138. Lamrabet briefly mentions Mary’s status as prophet—as well as “model of spiritual perfection”—in *Femmes et hommes dans le Coran: quelle égalité?* (Paris: Albouraq, 2012), 37, also 18; she discusses Mary at length in *Women in the Qur’an*, 70–89.

32. As quoted in Abboud, *Mary in the Qur’an*, 136.

33. Ibid., 143; see also, Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 155. On the utility of this distinction, consult Zakyi Ibrahim, “A Prophet or a Messenger: How Bona Fide a Qur’anic Concept?,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26 (2009): 20–46.

34. Yet as Azizah al-Hibri points out (personal communication, September 2016), one must ask: why not a gender-neutral term? On *rijāl* as “gender-neutral” outside the context of prophethood, see Lamrabet, *Femmes et hommes*, 59. It would be interesting to explore the relationship between the binaries men/women and human/angel, which seem to set woman and angel as the parallels. Gendered binaries (spirit/flesh, heaven/earth) typically associate the masculine with the superior element; the likening of women to angels in this case retains this attribution of more value to the masculine element to the extent that human beings are valued over angels.

35. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur’an*, 144–146. See also Geissinger, “Mary in the Qur’an.”

36. So suggested a respondent to an early version of this paper.

on Mary's gender. Yet these references situate her within the unmarked category of male as they compare her to or describe her in ways that parallel men, including the prophets Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ishmael, and Idris. One might best consider this a liberal-egalitarian interpretation, focused on Mary as an exceptional individual. Perhaps refusing to recognize the salience of gender is the equivalent of contemporary American "color-blind racism": by failing to acknowledge persistent, pervasive discriminatory elements in social life, it individualizes and thereby exceptionalizes gendered structural realities.³⁷ Paradoxically, in insisting that Mary symbolizes or exemplifies the unlimited possibilities for women, the sameness or gender-oblivious interpretation illustrates the immensity of the boundary that (normally) exists: only a woman not subject to ordinary constraints can attain such an august rank.³⁸

Difference

Another interpretive trajectory highlights Mary's femininity. Mary is, of course, exceptional, but not because she alone among women is like or of equal worth to men. Rather, her extraordinary virtue in her divinely-imposed travails stands as the pinnacle of specifically feminine accomplishment. Rather than focusing on Mary's individual characteristics, affirming her ability to transcend limitations of gender, or presuming their irrelevance when moral excellence is at stake, those who emphasize difference portray her primarily in the company of women or as differentiated from men. What greater affirmation of gender difference could there be than the affirmation that "the male is not like the female" (Q *Āl 'Imrān* 3:36)? This declaration appears in the context of reproduction, indeed, at the end of the sacred pregnancy in which Mary emerges from her mother's womb.

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān recounts that a pregnant "woman/wife of Amram" dedicated "what was in [her] belly" to God (v. 35). "She delivered a female child" and seemed to think this was a problem, but "God knew best what she delivered, and the male is not like the female" (v. 36). This assertion flips the usual script. It does not treat male as the unmarked category. Nor

37. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (4th rev. ed.; Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

38. Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition," *MW* 79 (1989): 161–187, 163. Smith and Haddad note that although some exceptional mystics might find her appropriate as a role model, for ordinary believers "Mary is not and by definition cannot be a model for human aspiration in Islam because she is clearly recognized and treated as unlike anyone else." Quoted in Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 160.

does it simply state that males and females differ. Instead, the female sets the standard against which the male is compared.³⁹ Presumably, this is because of the role Mary—singled out from a group of women—will play by bearing the prophet Jesus and continuing the divine narrative of prophets in history.

Sūrat Maryam's account of Mary's travails epitomizes qur'ānic attention to, and valorization of, women's embodiment. No experience is so quintessentially associated with women as childbirth. In mapping Mary's experience of labor—pain, despair, eventual acceptance—the Qur'an presents a compelling account of a strongly female and irreducibly embodied experience.⁴⁰ Mary functions "as a semi-mythical sacred female figure"⁴¹ and a "paradigmatic mother."⁴² The Qur'an presents a positive notion of motherhood and also uses "the term 'mother' to describe a purified, perfected receptacle through which God reveals a multiplicity of signs."⁴³ Mary's sexual purity receives prominence in her claim that she is "not a whore (*baghī*)" (v. 20). Though less focused on the experience of labor and delivery than Sūrat Maryam, Sūrat Āl 'Imrān is, as Neuwirth points out, frank in its use of terms referring to female reproductive anatomy.⁴⁴

For amina wadud, the qur'ānic attention to Mary's experience of childbirth surpasses anything found in Christian scripture or theology. The "special function" of childbirth merits "detailed mention to attest to its significance

39. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 101–102, offers a somewhat different reading of this line.

40. Geissinger writes that Mary's "lonely labour and delivery are movingly, even hauntingly depicted" ("Mary in the Qur'an," 385). There remains more to be written about the qur'ānic treatment of embodiment as it relates to questions of breastfeeding, menstruation, sex, and ablution. Of course not all women are biologically capable, or desirous, of bearing biological children or mothering offspring of any sort. For cis women (those whose gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth), a variety of factors may intervene. For trans, non-binary, and gender-fluid individuals, pregnancy is a more complicated subject. Although there has been some limited scholarship on gender identity and Islamic law (see brief discussion and citations in Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* [2nd ed.; London: Oneworld, 2016], Chapter 5), there has to date been relatively little on gender and the Qur'an.

41. Neuwirth, "House of Abraham," 504.

42. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 41.

43. *Ibid.*, 40–41. The parallel between Muḥammad—the *ummī* prophet—and the virginal Mary has been frequently asserted and occasionally productively explored, including briefly in Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 145–146. Jerusha Tanner Lamptey takes up the comparison at length in Chapter 5 of *Divine Words, Female Voices: Muslima Explorations in Comparative Feminist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2018), "Bearers of the Words: Muhammad and Mary as Feminist Exemplars" (121–155).

44. Neuwirth, "House of Abraham," 512.

in the Qur'anic worldview."⁴⁵ In her essay "The Birth of Aliya Maryam," Seemi Ghazi connects Mary's spiritual opening to the act of childbirth—and notes the ritual function of recitation of Sūrat Maryam for laboring women.⁴⁶ Neuwirth perceives in both *sūrahs* focused on Mary "the particular sensitivity and concern that the Qur'ān harbors for the female condition."⁴⁷ In her article exploring Mary's potential prophethood, Kakar insists that part of what makes her example so powerful is precisely that unlike certain female ascetics, Mary is undeniably female, and need not sacrifice her experience of embodied womanhood to live prophetically.⁴⁸

Mona Siddiqui's account of Sūrat Maryam differs considerably. When she was pregnant with her first child, Siddiqui recounts, her "mother encouraged [her] to read sūra Maryam at least once a day throughout [her] whole pregnancy." Siddiqui read it but does not believe it "spoke" to her "as a woman, 'chosen by God' above so many other women... in a way which was unique, which [she] could hold on to as special or symbolic."⁴⁹ Rather, it seemed to her to be another presentation of the "bigger, eternal message of the ultimate story—God's infinite presence and mercy."⁵⁰ Even the embodied experience of pregnancy becomes a vehicle for the insistently monotheistic message of the Qur'ān.⁵¹ As Abboud points out, Mary thus serves "as a model to the Prophet Muhammad." Her "journey celebrates the powerful role of the feminine in the fertile land of the maternal and renders Maryam, from this essentialist perspective, on an equal level with other male prophets and apostles."⁵² Here, Abboud connects the two lines of argument: Mary is, like Muḥammad and certain other men, a prophet; she carries out her prophetic duties, however, by fulfilling the exclusively female destiny of bearing a child. Unusually, a woman's (ordinary if not universal) experience becomes a model for a man's (very unusual) experience; its moral resonance stands independent of its particular gendered form.

45. Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 40.

46. Seemi Bushra Ghazi, "The Birth of Aliya Maryam," in Virginia Gray Henry-Blakemore (ed.), *Voices of Life: Family, Home, and Society* (Voices of Islam 3; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 113–122.

47. Neuwirth, "Foreword," xvii.

48. Kakar, "Is She a Prophet?," 14.

49. Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 149.

50. *Ibid.*, 150.

51. Or, as I once put it, "human events are merely in service to the sacred history that the text recounts." Kecia Ali, Elyse Goldstein, and Elaine Guillemin, "Sacred Stories: Mothers and Daughters?," *Vox Feminarum: The Canadian Journal of Feminist Spirituality* (Spring 2003): 7–13.

52. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 151.

Yet even as Mary's story shares its main arc with stories of (other) prophets—those chosen by God seldom find their tasks easy, and Mary is no exception—elements of her story reflect specifically gendered forms of injustice. As Geissinger shows, her story posits experiences of isolation and condemnation that arise from perceived feminine transgressions of social-sexual norms. Mary's gestation leads to a “subversive birth.” Isolated, abandoned, chastity impugned, Mary withdraws socially.⁵³ Although in some respects her exile is like that of Abraham, Moses, and Muḥammad, the Qurʾān depicts “her gendered vulnerability, as a woman alone with no family to protect her.”⁵⁴ Mary's “outcast” status is the more poignant given that she had not sought the situation into which she is thrust.⁵⁵ Unlike her counterpart Zachariah, who, impressed by Mary, entreats God for “good progeny” (*dhurriyyah tayyibah*, Q Āl ʿImrān 3:38), “Mary's annunciation,” Geissinger observes, “does not bring her welcome news. Nowhere is it suggested that she expects to become a mother in the near future, much less that she has been prayerfully longing for a child.”⁵⁶

Mary expresses incredulity at the notion that she will “have a son when no man has touched me” (Q Āl ʿImrān 3:47), but she neither refuses outright nor consents enthusiastically. Kueny, exploring Mary's “unique procreative partnership with God,”⁵⁷ has argued that

God's choosing of Mary to bear his ‘signs’ in many ways mirrors his partnering with the earth to create life... In theory, Mary, like the earth in the eyes of exegetes, could have rejected God's breath that imparted his spirit into her body... While God could have created Jesus in Mary's womb regardless of her own desires, her consent and receptive nature are vital to the Qur'an's theological message.⁵⁸

53. Geissinger, “Mary in the Qur'an,” 380.

54. *Ibid.*, 385. For a parallel discussion with regard to the biblical text, see Betsy J. Bauman-Martin, “Mary and the Marquise: Reading the Annunciation in the Romantic Rape Tradition,” in Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes*, 217–231; for brief discussion of a Christian interpretation that insists on the necessity of Mary's consent, see Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, 157.

55. Geissinger, “Mary in the Qur'an,” 385.

56. *Ibid.*, 384; see also Bauman-Martin, “Mary and the Marquise,” 228: “the male voice has women submit to coerced sex or rape and then claim to have been loved, singled out, or honored.” Here, of course, the issue is undesired childbearing rather than unwanted sex, though in many lives the two coincide.

57. Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, 43.

58. Kueny, “Reproducing Power,” 254.

One reading of this story suggests a crucial parallel with the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son (Q *Ṣaffāt* 37:102–103), which attends to the son's consent. The son agrees but does not suffer actual death at his father's hand; Mary "acquiesces to God's request and bears and delivers Jesus successfully, but in great hardship and pain."⁵⁹ She suffers a sort of social death, as her reputation is disparaged. Only her son's miraculous ability to defend her (Q *Maryam* 19:29–33) exonerates her and saves her from ostracism.

Even as the *Qur'ān* emphasizes Mary's gendered vulnerability, it attends to her feelings, particularly of loss. In this respect, it strongly parallels the story of Moses's birth (Q *Ṭā-hā* 20:37–40, Q *Qaṣaṣ* 28:7–13). (In turn, this sense of loss on Moses's mother's part echoes the loss felt by Jacob during Joseph's absence, creating a parallel between the prophet-sons drawn into Pharaoh's orbit and between their parents, father on the one hand and mother on the other, who receive *wahy*.⁶⁰) Both birth stories subvert dominant patriarchal norms. Geissinger notes the parallels between the "subversive births" of Jesus and Moses, "births which are seemingly—but clearly not actually—'illegitimate.'"⁶¹ Discussing the emotional impact of childbearing and (temporary) loss on Moses's mother,⁶² Geissinger notes the "noticeable focus on the mother's emotions," also "a noteworthy feature of the story of Mary in Q 19."⁶³ These stories' "subversion of patriarchal notions of 'legitimacy'" connects to and "provides a mordant comment on" the rejection of Muḥammad's prophethood, given that he too is rejected for seeming nonconformity with dominant expectations.⁶⁴

Thus, both the story of Mary's birth and childhood and the story of her labor and delivery can be read in ways that undercut larger patriarchal narratives. Like interpretations based on egalitarian or gender-neutral sameness, interpretations premised on gender-based difference situate Mary comfortably in the larger moral and narrative world of the *Qur'ān*. Indeed, the fact that one can argue for either the sameness of Mary to male prophetic figures or for her difference from them is itself noteworthy. The literary evidence supports seemingly dichotomous readings: Mary is like men *and*

59. *Ibid.*, 254.

60. On Moses' mother as recipient of *wahy*, consult the sources cited above on Mary as prophet as well as Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 39.

61. Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 391.

62. Q *Mu'minūn* 28:10, "Moses's mother felt a void in her heart"; cf. v. 13, "We restored him to his mother... so that she might be comforted, not grieve, and know that God's promise is true." Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 389 (the translation is the one Geissinger uses).

63. Geissinger, "Mary in the Qur'an," 389.

64. *Ibid.*, 391. On Mary's story as a parallel to Muḥammad's story, consult also Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 144–146.

therefore there are no gender-based limits to what women can achieve; Mary excels in a way that is essentially different from how excellent men excel *and therefore* women's achievements are worthy even though they may differ from men's. Each of these readings has a defensible claim to coherence within a broader qur'ānic worldview. In the next section, I argue for a third approach that refuses these binaries and instead embraces an irresolvable tension between polarities.

Queerness

Mary unsettles binaries. Despite the qur'ānic declaration at her birth that “the male is not like the female,” which neatly divides the sexes, other passages disturb the categorization. Verses oscillate between highlighting Mary's femaleness and likening her to prophetic and pious males. Throughout the Qur'an, Mary shifts between being a peer to males and being singled out as female. Mary is both among and separate(d) from “the women of the worlds” (Q Āl 'Imrān 3:42). She parallels Zachariah and his son and joins with male worshippers in pious prostration (v. 43). Her story is queer in “the broad sense of challenging the stability of all sexual”—or, more particularly, sex/gender—“identities, and, beyond that, insisting on the fluidity of all seemingly fixed boundaries.”⁶⁵ Mary's story reproduces maternity but destabilizes gender, especially in its account of her birth and childhood through the angelic annunciation (vv. 35–47).

Discussing fairy tales, Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill write, “A queer reader intuitively seeks a tale's structural distinctions—polarities, binaries, or relational chains—that fail to conform to heteronormative claims.”⁶⁶ In Sūrat Āl 'Imrān's account of Mary, the “relational chains” that connect Jesus to Moses and Jesus to Zachariah are replete with generational and gendered slippages. In Sūrat Maryam, Mary's experiences of “subversive birth” and receipt of *wahy* connect her most closely to another woman: Moses' mother. But Sūrat Āl 'Imrān's narrative of Mary's gestation and birth, childhood, and annunciation, instead links her most closely to two men: Zachariah and John.

Mary's gestation and birth prefigure the gestation and birth of Jesus. Both pregnancies are marked by maternal devotion and maternal power. Mary's mother dedicates the child growing in her womb to God's service (Q 3:35). Following this presumably atypical act, she names Mary and seeks God's

65. Judith Plaskow, “Foreword,” in Drinkwater, Lesser, and Schneer (eds.), *Torah Queeries*, xi–xii, xii.

66. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill, “Introduction: Once Upon a Queer Time,” in Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill (eds.), *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 1–26, 15.

protection for her and her offspring. Mary's mother's act of naming here foreshadows Jesus' matronymic, but it also places her among those (male) prophetic figures in the biblical/qur'anic tradition who appeal to God for themselves and their descendants. Mary's mother acts in ways one might expect a father to act; this is the only commentary on his absence in this *sūrah*.⁶⁷ (Zachariah's wife, presumed barren [Q Āl 'Imrān 3:40, Q Maryam 19:8], never negotiates with God.) Eventually, Zachariah takes guardianship of the child and Mary is written into a story of service to God. Zachariah, impressed by Mary, prays: "God, grant me from your power good progeny. You are the one who listens to prayers" (Q 3:38).

Notably, each of these tales of pregnancy and childbirth is odd, problematic, or at least extraordinary. Few conform to what is purportedly the norm: a married couple conceiving a child, without divine intervention, whom the woman carries to term and that they then raise.⁶⁸ Even within marital contexts, generativity and reproduction are less than straightforward. Mary's mother's gestation of her daughter is marked by her vow and God's acceptance; Mary's father remains firmly off-page. Zachariah is married, but as he notes, "old age has come upon me and my wife is barren" (Q Āl 'Imrān 3:40; cf. Q Maryam 19:5). Mary's conception of Jesus bypasses entirely a key element of heteronormative patriarchal family structure, which is male control of female reproductive labor in a dyadic marital relationship.⁶⁹ Indeed, much of *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* treats men as "superfluous, and patriarchal categories of male social dominance are emphatically bracketed."⁷⁰ Abboud argues that "If in *Sūrat Maryam*, the female was venerated for her power of fertility, here the female is venerated for her maternal power."⁷¹

Even as Mary's conception, gestation, and delivery of Jesus acknowledge maternal power, that power is not necessarily gendered female. Motherhood, here, involves privileges of naming and of independence traditionally associated with men and fatherhood. At the same time, ambivalence, fear, and pain—physical as well as psychological—enter into the equation. Prevailing ideas about female weakness, and its ties to female embodiment,

67. There is a good deal more to be said about absent fathers in qur'anic passages. On the Qur'an's refusal to sacralize fatherhood, consult Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Syracuse, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

68. I address the disjunction between modern Muslim appeals to normative nuclear families and the presence of disparate models in sacred sources, including prophetic biography, in "Muhammad and Khadija," *Critical Muslim* 14 (2015): 53–63.

69. Kueny discusses qur'anic accounts of Mary's conception of Jesus, as well as later interpretations of them, in "Reproducing Power," 251–254.

70. Neuwirth, "The House of Abraham," 513.

71. Abboud, *Mary in the Qur'an*, 128.

reveal even the biological aspects of motherhood to be social. As Muslims increasingly address varied approaches to gender binaries, trans womanhood (and manhood), and gendered norms, questions about gendered parenthood arise. The intertwined stories in *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* prompt a closer look at other accounts of reproduction and childrearing in the qur’ānic text. Few if any conform to what is typically understood as the norm. Although *Q Nisā’* 4:1 describes progeny—indeed, humanity—emerging from the coupling of mates, other accounts signal the fragility of the marital bond and the need to ensure that children receive their proper nourishment by nursing even if the marital bond is broken (*Q Baqarah* 2:233; *Q Ṭalāq* 65:6) or, as in the case of Moses, the child was exiled for his own safety and adopted by outsiders (*Q Qaṣaṣ* 28:7). The mother/nursling bond is powerful. It is an indication of how serious the matter is that when the apocalypse comes, mothers will forget their nurslings; only the most extraordinary calamity could cause this abandonment (*Q Ḥajj* 22:2). Mother-child bonds are presumed to be strong; father-child bonds are sometimes strong, sometimes seemingly absent.

In addition to its failure to conform to now-conventional expectations about reproduction, *Āl ‘Imrān*’s narrative presents numerous disrupted “relational chains.” Zachariah, a kind of substitute for Mary’s father, also parallels Mary’s mother: like her, he desires pious offspring. John, the son born to Zachariah and his wife, prepares the ground for a new parallelism between Mary and Zachariah: Zachariah’s notification about John finds an echo in Mary’s being told about Jesus. Mary and Zachariah are both informed about the children they are going to have; John and Jesus come to share some characteristics, including purity.

These relationships and connections are imbricated in other scriptural themes and patterns. The reference to Mary as chosen from or among “the women of the worlds” (*‘ālamīn*, *Q Āl ‘Imrān* 3:42) evokes *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, where God is spoken of as “sovereign of the worlds” (*rabb al-‘ālamīn*, *Q Fātiḥah* 1:2). When the text immediately commands, “Mary, be devoutly obedient (*iḡnutī*, i.e., have *qunūt*) to your Lord and prostrate yourself and bow down with those who bow down” (v. 43), it moves from situating Mary among (while simultaneously distinguishing her from) an all-female collective (“the women of the worlds”) to situating her in a male or mixed-gender group (“those who bow down” is a masculine plural noun, *rāki‘īn*). As soon as she is “chosen from,” or “chosen among,” or even “chosen over”—the preposition *‘alā* is ambiguous—her connection with the women is immediately undone. She is extracted from a female environment and placed in a mixed or (otherwise) exclusively male group of worshippers. The purification that she undergoes precedes her removal from the group of women to the male/mixed group. More saliently, it connects her closely to Zachariah. As Toorawa has noted, purity is a central concept in *Sūrat Maryam*; the purification of Mary and the

purity of Zachariah, whose name draws from the same root, links the two.⁷² In these accounts, “the lens shifts focus from normative sexual dynamics... or patriarchal moral lessons... to the tales’ internal struggles, suggestive of multiple and more complex desires and their perversely performative nature.”⁷³ Mary’s struggles are sometimes over matters of “normative sexual dynamics,” as when she is accused of in chastity, but at other times, they focus on “internal struggles,” as when she confronts God’s angel.

A queer reading does not reject approaches that emphasize sameness (Men can be prophets? Women too!) or celebrate difference (Look at how the Qur’ān recognizes motherhood and women’s experience!) so much as indicate their limitations. The first sets up the equivalence of male and female; the second their radical dissimilarity. Each is plausible; each is inadequate. It may be that “the male is not like the female” but this declaration tells only part of the story. It assumes that male and female are clear and utterly separate categories, and moreover, that they are unified within themselves. Yet the female isn’t even always like the female: Mary, purified and chosen, is *unlike* the other “women of the worlds,” just as Muḥammad’s wives “are not like other women” (Q Aḥzāb 33:31). Both difference and sameness, then, are situational and never absolute—much like queer readings.⁷⁴

Comparison

As with the part, so with the whole: the Qur’ān’s treatment of Mary illustrates dynamics operative in the entire text. Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān and Sūrat Maryam contain multiple, contentious meanings which resist simplification and fixity. If the Mary of Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān moves restlessly between male contexts and pointed femaleness, her counterpart in Sūrat Maryam engages in embodied labor, seemingly categorically female. These distinctions suggest not only fluid visions of gender and generativity within Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān but varied characterizations across the qur’ānic text as a whole. It is in this sense that what Judith Plaskow has written about the Torah applies to the Qur’ān: it “emerges as a queer text, filled with fertile contradictions. It is replete with shifty and shifting characters who challenge norms that the text elsewhere seems to proclaim as absolute, sometimes policing boundaries that at other moments dissolve.”⁷⁵ One way to consider the relative insignificance of

72. Toorawa, “Sūrat Maryam,” 32 and throughout.

73. Turner and Greenhill, “Introduction,” 3.

74. On this point as applied to religious difference, consult Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

75. Plaskow, “Foreword,” xii. It is debatable whether the Qur’ān has “shifty”

boundaries (or the importance of transgression of boundaries) in Mary's story is to focus on the *story* aspect.

The nature of qur'ānic narrative is the subject of some scholarly attention, although to date, feminist and gender-minded interpreters have tended to focus on halakhic rather than haggadic material and concerns.⁷⁶ Neuwirth has suggested that the Qur'ān may be best understood as doing something *other* than narrative, even in those moments when it is concerned with character and events.⁷⁷ But less important than whether any story constitutes a proper narrative is that stories cannot be reduced, as so-called legal verses typically are, to directly prescriptive content. Stories, and their interpretation, may convey norms or rules indirectly, but they differ from verses that prescribe portions for inheritance, postures for prayer, requirements for dress, or regulations for marital conduct. Gender-minded interpreters—among whom I count myself—have tended to emphasize norm-delivering statements, particularly those that differentiate between men and women in marital matters, especially to contest extant patriarchal interpretations of such passages.⁷⁸ Yet by shifting to story rather than rules, one avoids the patriarchal norms and boundaries that the Qur'ān “elsewhere” affirms.⁷⁹

Mary's story, which centrally addresses maleness, femaleness, and reproduction, bypasses marital hierarchy. The absence of a husband for Mary in the text is opportune for feminist and gender-conscious exegetes: male marital authority cannot take root.⁸⁰ Neither a husband's control nor his responsibility to provide or support figures in Mary's storyline. Instead, qur'ānic presentations of moments from her life show her confronting challenges, relying sometimes on support from kin or quasi-kin such as the infant Jesus or Zachariah, but mostly on God. Verses highlight Mary's

characters; there seems to be general agreement that they are flatter than biblical characters and do fewer morally ambiguous or wrong things.

76. YaSiin Rahmaan's contribution to the *JFSR* roundtable “Feminism and Islam” (“Feminist Edges of Muslim Feminist Readings of Qur'anic Verses,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 [2016]: 142–148) offers a thoughtful reflection on the importance of deep experience with the Qur'ān as well as “rigorous feminist literary critique” of individual *sūrah*s and *sūrah* clusters. Alongside a broader evaluation of gendered language in key scriptural passages, Rahmaan discusses Mary, and considers the possibility that she is a “mother prophet” (145).

77. Neuwirth, “Foreword,” xiv–xv.

78. Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, esp. Chapter 7.

79. Scholars of rabbinics recognize the ways in which haggadic narratives may contradict or undermine halakhic prescriptions. One study which treats this dynamic and considers its relevance for Jewish feminist interpretation is Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1998).

80. Bauman-Martin, “Reading the Annunciation,” 230.

ungendered virtues of spiritual tenacity and devout obedience to God. Still, gender remains central, even if only insofar as the challenges she confronts—childbirth, accusations of sexual impropriety—are gendered—that is, they are linked to social norms of biological womanhood. The question of how and to whom Mary serves as a model requires attention: Geissinger and Abboud show that the Qurʾān presents her as an analogue or exemplar for Muḥammad. Contemporary interpreters could consider how her story might inform Qurʾānic accounts of women’s lives as well as how they relate, if indeed they do relate, to questions about normative family structures and women’s place within them.

Asma Barlas has called the Qurʾān “radically egalitarian and even anti-patriarchal.”⁸¹ Her most convincing arguments point to the text’s refusal to sacralize fathers or enshrine father-privilege. What better place to note one of the Qurʾān’s intermittently anti-patriarchal moments than a story where there is no husband-father to serve as patriarch? Likewise, the absence of husband-fathers in crucial Qurʾānic prophet-stories complicates the resolutely dyadic vision of human reproduction articulated in Q Nisā’ 4:1: “Revere your Lord who created you from a single soul-self and from it created its mate and dispersed, from the two of them, many men and women.”⁸²

Both tellings of Mary’s story resist simplification and fixity. So too, the heterogeneity of the Qurʾānic corpus as a whole suggests an irreducible tension. Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān largely concerns itself with the transmission of prophetic lineages and the continuity of prophetic lines, with community and the power and necessity thereof; Sūrat Maryam, in contrast, focuses on individual spiritual struggle. In Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān, Mary has family and community ties. In Sūrat Maryam, she faces her travails alone—except for God, who does not forsake her.⁸³

This plurality of approaches attests to the incompleteness and insufficiency of any one account. There are obvious limitations to what a queer reading can accomplish. Yet a queer reading of Mary does not foreclose other readings. Indeed, it recognizes the important work that various readings can do in particular contexts and for specific readers—and indeed, that what is normative or transgressive itself depends on context and audience. But such

81. Barlas, *Believing Women*, 5.

82. My translation. See Kueny, *Conceiving Identities*, on the multifaceted nature of Qurʾānic discourse on reproduction.

83. The thematic unity within each *sūrah* suggests the need for careful contextual readings of the material contained therein. This is the case throughout the Qurʾānic text. For instance, both Sūrat al-Nūr (Q 24) and Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (Q 33) discuss female clothing and sexual boundaries. But whereas Nūr is primarily concerned with individual righteous conduct, Aḥzāb’s larger preoccupation is communal harmony and the threats thereto.

readings are always contingent and always on the verge of being undone. Queer reading, Greenhill and Turner tell us, “privileges the ephemeral, momentary sites and phenomena that appear and quickly disappear.”⁸⁴ Chinks in the armor of patriarchy do not make the Qur’ān an anti-patriarchal text. Several important passages assume or affirm male control over women.⁸⁵ Yet the fabric of male domination is not seamlessly woven: it has gaps where a stitch was dropped, where it threatens to unravel. A queer reading need not reject approaches focused on sameness or difference; it need only indicate their limitations. I would suggest valid theological reasons to appreciate Qur’ānic messiness. Human community is never as simple as some would have it. “Whoever you are,” American Sufi teacher Rabia Terri Harris has said about the Qur’ān, “if you take this thing seriously, it is going to mess with your story.”⁸⁶

Queer readings of the Qur’ān cannot, and need not, tell the whole story. They need only make people a little less smugly certain about the meanings they derive from the text. Qur’ānic verses warn repeatedly against human arrogance, against human certainty about social status as ascribed through women and sons and heaps of precious metal (e.g., Q Āl ‘Imrān 3:14). Human values are often misguided; as a result, so are human interpretations. The Qur’ān is complicated. It both asserts and subverts patriarchal values. The joke, ultimately, is on those who cling too tightly to this world’s comforts and dominant, established value schemas. Mary, unsettled and unsettling, allows readers to perceive the Qur’ān itself as a queer text, contesting its own narratives and refusing fixity—and in this way, Mary is perhaps exemplary, but not unique.

84. Greenhill and Turner, “Introduction,” 14.

85. For a recent exploration of these issues and the ways in which interpreters committed to women’s equality and gender justice debate them, consult the aforementioned roundtable in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

86. Rabia Terri Harris, personal communication, 2013.