

# Mary

MARY: A Christian View

By Dr. Terence Nichols

In the New Testament, Mary is the mother of Jesus and the betrothed wife of Joseph. Each of the gospels, however, gives a different picture of her. In Mark (the earliest gospel, c. 70 c.e.) there is no account of Jesus' childhood. Mary is only mentioned as a part of Jesus' family (Mk. 3:31), which is presented negatively, as not understanding Jesus' mission (Mk. 3:21). In the Gospel of Matthew, Mary is betrothed to Joseph, but "before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 1:18). Joseph is told in a dream to take Mary as his wife, and that the child she has conceived is from the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:20-21). Matthew's is the clearest statement of the doctrine of the so-called "Virgin Birth" (actually, virginal conception) of Jesus.

It is in Luke's account that we find most of the familiar biblical stories about Mary. The angel Gabriel announces to her that she will conceive a son, and will call him Jesus, and implies that the child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary's response is one of perfect submission: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." Mary also utters a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving—called the "Magnificat" (the first word of the prayer in Latin). It begins: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name...." (Luke 1:46-55). Mary is identified as one of the poor but pious people of Israel, whose faith and submission to God is blessed by God. In the Book of Acts (also authored by the author of Luke) Mary is presented as one of the nascent Christian community waiting in prayer before the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

The gospel of John gives yet another account of Mary. She was with Jesus at a wedding in Cana, in Galilee, when the wine ran out. She approaches Jesus for help, and he responds by turning the water of purification into wine (John 2:1-11). Mary is also presented as at the foot of the cross during Jesus' crucifixion. In this scene, Jesus gives her into the care of the beloved disciple: saying "Woman, here is your son" and to the disciple: "Here is your mother." From that time the disciple "took her into his own home" (John 19:27). From this account the tradition arose that Mary lived with the apostle John until her death, perhaps in Ephesus or Jerusalem. There is a House of Mary" in Ephesus, reputed to be the house where Mary died.

Thus the gospel accounts of Mary differ substantially. There is a trajectory, from the earliest gospel, Mark, with its relatively negative portrait of Mary, to Luke and John, which present highly positive views of Mary.

This same trajectory continues in the later history of the Church. Though Matthew and Luke only affirm that Mary remained a virgin through Jesus' conception, later tradition holds that she remained a virgin for her whole life. This contradicts the apparent sense of Mark 6:3 which names Jesus' four brothers and mentions his sisters. Christians however held that the Greek words *adelphoi* and *adelphai* (lit. brothers and sisters) could have referred to Jesus' cousins or his step siblings (children of Joseph but not of Mary). This position has remained that of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, though some recent Catholic scholars, such as John Meier, believe that Jesus had blood brothers.

Many of the details of Mary's life—the names of her parents (Anne and Joachim), the stories of her childhood and dedication to the Temple, come from a second century writing, the *Protoevangelium of Jame*. These stories have greatly influenced popular devotion to Mary, but their historical reliability is doubtful.

The Council of Ephesus, in 431, declared that Mary is *Theotokos*, literally, "God Bearer" or the "Mother of God." This decision was a response to the theology of Nestorius, who had asserted that Mary could not be called "Mother of God" but at most "Mother of Jesus." But the Council's decided that the divine and human natures of Jesus were so closely united in him that what could be said of one nature could also be said of another. To say that Mary was only the mother of the human side of Jesus would seem to divide Jesus into two separable natures. Hence the title "Mother of God," which has been embraced by Marian piety in both the Western and Eastern churches.

Devotion to Mary flourished during the medieval and Renaissance periods. In the west, devotional prayers such as the Rosary appeared. And much of the great art of the Renaissance focused on Mary, for example, Michelangelo's statue, the *Pieta*. In the East, devotion was expressed in icons of Mary and the infant Jesus. Icons are understood in the Eastern Church not as objects of worship, (which would be idolatry) but as aides to worship, windows onto the sacred, which help focus the mind. In both the Western and Eastern churches, Mary is regarded as an intercessor, but is not an object of worship. Thus the Rosary prayer says: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death."

In 1854 Pope Pius IX declared that Mary had been conceived without original sin (see Pius' encyclical *Ineffabilis Deus*). This doctrine is known as the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and is held by (most) Roman Catholics, but not by other Christians. Again, in 1950, Pope Pius XII (also after consulting with bishops) declared that Mary had been assumed into heaven body and soul (*Munificentissimus Deus*). Like the belief in the Immaculate Conception, this doctrine is held by the Roman Catholic church, but not by other Christian churches.

There has been a long history of reported appearances of the Virgin Mary, beginning with her appearance as the virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego near Mexico City in 1531. Another series of reported appearances took place at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917. The Roman Catholic Church has made no official pronouncement on these appearances,

though the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe is celebrated on December 12 in America and Mexico.

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#### Mary the Mother of Jesus Christ: A Muslim View

By Sheikh Odeh Muhawesh

Mary the daughter of Imran (Hebrew Imram) is a name that brings peace and love to the soul of every Muslim. The Holy Quran speaks of a woman who was elected by Almighty God to give birth to Allah's spirit (A name commonly given to him by Muslims), Jesus the Messiah. Mary is a name so revered in the world of Islam that it is given to women in most households.

In the second chapter of the Quran, Al-Baqarah, "The Cow", Jesus, who is a prophet in Islam, is honorably called "the son of Mary (2:87). In the next chapter in the Quran, The Family of Imran, Mary is given distinction over all women of the world (3:33-34). God tells us how Imran's wife prayed that the child in her womb would be dedicated to His service. That child was Mary. Imran's wife also prayed that Mary and her offspring would be kept safe from Satan. God answered this prayer. When Imran's wife brought the baby Mary to the temple in fulfillment of her promise to God that the child in her womb would be dedicated to His service, a dispute occurred between the priests as to who would care for this holy child. Zechariah, who was the only present prophet, wanted to protect the baby Mary so he requested that custody of the child be given to him (3:44). God tells us it was by His will, that Zechariah was given custody of Mary after this dispute. Mary grew up "pure and beautiful". When Zechariah would see how Mary was doing at her place of worship (perhaps in the Temple of Jerusalem as is described in some apocryphal books not in the New Testament, such as the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary), he would always find fresh food that was often out of season. When Zechariah asked Mary about the food, Mary responded that Allah had sent her the food (3:35-37). Upon hearing this, Zechariah himself prayed for virtuous offspring, so Allah granted him a son, John the Baptizer (3:38-41).

The Family of Imran chapter also relates how Mary was informed by the Angels that Allah had purified her and given her distinction among women. The Angels also directed Mary to pray with devotion to her Lord and bow down in prayer (3:42-43), for this lofty position is only given to those who are near to God, and who devote themselves to Him. The

Angels told Mary the good news that she would give birth to a son whom Allah called “His Word”. His name would be The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary. Jesus would be an honorable man, “one of the righteous ones” and be one of the nearest to Allah. From the cradle, he would speak to people (3:45-46). The apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (chapter 19) also tells of Jesus speaking as an infant, although the story of the child Jesus differs in this apocryphal gospel from the description given in the Quran.

Mary, of course, didn’t understand how she could have a son when she was a chaste virgin. The Angels replied that Allah creates whatever He wants (3:47). The Angels continued that Jesus would be given wisdom by Allah, Who would teach Jesus about the book of Abraham, the Torah, and the Gospel. Mary also learned that Jesus the Messiah would be the Messenger of Allah to the Israelites, and how he would show Israel many miracles. (3:48-49).

The events described above in The Family of Imran chapter are similar though not identical to some events described in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, as well as the apocryphal Gospel of the Nativity of Mary and the apocryphal Infancy Gospel Matthew.

Chapter 19 of the Quran, titled Mary or “Maryam”, begins by stating the story of the blessing Allah gave to Zechariah in his old age (19:2). After blessing Zechariah with a son, John the Baptizer (19:7), the Quran gives the story of how Mary, who had been taken care of by Zechariah, gave birth to Jesus. The story of how the Angel, who Allah calls “Our Spirit” who was in the shape of a “well-formed human being”, is mentioned again (19:16-21). After this, the Quran goes on to relate that Mary, before conceiving her son, left her family to a distant, solitary place in the East. When the labor pains of childbirth began, Mary, with only a palm tree for company, became sad. She declared, “*Would that I had died long before and passed into oblivion*” (19:22-23). But her baby, Jesus, declared to her “*Don’t be sad*”, and with those comforting words told her of the stream of water her Lord had just caused to flow at her feet. The infant went on to tell Mary that if she were to shake the trunk of the palm tree, fresh ripe dates would be provided for her. “*Eat, drink and rejoice*”, exclaimed the baby Jesus to his mother. “*Should you see a person going by, tell him that on this day you have promised the Beneficent Allah to fast and not to talk to any human being*” (19:24-26).

For this reason, many Muslim women believe it is recommended to eat dates immediately after giving birth to a child. It is also a common Muslim practice for either of the parents to take a very small amount from a date and put it on the new born baby’s tongue before it is given milk for the first time.

Mary then brought the baby Jesus to her people and they said, “*Mary, this is indeed a very strange thing! Sister of Aaron! Your father was not a bad man, nor was your mother unchaste*”. When Mary pointed to the baby, her people responded by saying “*How can we talk to a baby in the cradle?*” (19:27-29). Then, the baby Jesus declared to the people, “*I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Book and has appointed me to be a Prophet. He has blessed me no matter where I dwell, and commanded me to worship*

*Him and pay the religious tax for as long as I live. He has commanded me to be good to my mother and has not made me an arrogant, rebellious person. I was born in peace and I shall die in peace, and be brought to life again in peace".* The Quran declares this to be the "true story of Jesus the son of Mary, about which they dispute bitterly" (9:30-34).

Chapter Al-Anbiya, the Prophets, states: "*Into the woman who maintained her chastity We breathed Our Spirit and made her and her son a miracle for mankind*" (21:91). This passage can be taken as a summary of what the Quran teaches about the Virgin Mary and her boy child, Jesus the Messiah (Peace be upon them both). It is a statement on which both Muslims and Christians agree, and therefore the story of the Virgin Mary may be a place for Muslims and Christians to begin friendly dialogue.

Muslim scholars agree that Mary was spoken to by the angels. The Quran describes her as *Siddiqa*, which is one who believes and never tells a lie. The common belief in Sunni Islam is that angels only speak directly to Prophets; however, Shia Muslim scholars state that angels speak to prophets and other chosen humans if there is a purpose for such speech. They give the undisputed story of the angel speaking to Mary as proof of their argument. .

## Points of Agreement, Disagreement, and Further Dialogue

### Agreement:

Christians and Muslims agree that Mary was the mother of Jesus, and that Jesus' conception was through the Spirit of God. Jesus did not have a human biological father, and Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. Mary is held up as a role model in both traditions, as being submissive and obedient to God's will. Many children in both Christianity and Islam are named "Mary." Many Christians (Roman Catholics and Orthodox) and many Muslims pray to Mary as an intercessor.

### Disagreement:

In the Christian tradition, Mary has been honored with the title "Mother of God," which would be excessive and even heretical in Islam (since it indicates that Jesus is a divine person).

### Points for further discussion:

Mary as a model for perfect submission to God, Mary as an intercessor, Mary as role model for women.