

Mary in Islam

(part 1 of 3)



Mary, the Mother of Jesus, holds a very special position in Islam, and God proclaims her to be the best woman amongst all humanity, whom He chose above all other women due to her piety and devotion.

“And (mention) when the angels said, ‘O Mary! Indeed God has chosen you, and purified you, and has chosen you above all other women of the worlds. O Mary! Be devoutly obedient to your Lord and prostrate and bow with those bow (in prayer).’” (Quran 3:42-43)

She was also made by God an example to follow, as He said:

“And (God sets forth the example for those who Believe) of Mary, the daughter of Heli, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into it through Our Angel (i.e., Gabriel), and she believed in the words of her Lord and His Scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient.” (Quran 66:12)

Indeed she was a woman who was fit to bring such a miracle as that of Jesus, who was born without a father. She was known for her piety and chastity, and if it were any different, then none would have believed her claim to have given birth while remaining in a state of virginity, a belief and fact to which Islam holds true. Her special nature was one which many miracles proved of from her early childhood. Let us recount what God revealed in regards to the beautiful story of Mary.

The Childhood of Mary

“Indeed God chose Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of Heli above all others of the creation. Offspring, one of the other, and God is the All-Hearer, All-

Knower. (Remember) when the wife (Hannah; also Anne, Ann, Anna) of Heli said: ‘O my Lord! I have vowed to You what (the child that) is in my womb to be dedicated for Your services (to serve Your Place of worship), so accept this, from me. Verily, You are the All-Hearer, the All-Knowing.’ (Quran 3:35)

Mary was born to Heli and his wife Hannah, who was of Davidic descent, thus coming from a family of Prophets, from Abraham, to Noah, to Adam, may the Peace and Blessings of God be on them all. As mentioned in the verse, she was born to the chosen family of Heli, who was born into the chosen family of Abraham, who was also born into a chosen family. Hannah was a barren woman who longed for a child, and she made a vow to God that, if He granted her a child, she would consecrate him to His service in the Temple. God answered her invocation, and she conceived a child. When she gave birth, she was saddened, for her child was female, and it was usually males who were given in service to Bait-ul-Maqdis.

“So when she gave birth to her, she said, ‘My Lord! I have delivered a female...and the male is not like the female.’”

When she expressed her sorrow, God rebuked her saying:

“...And God knows best what she delivered...” (Quran 3:36)

... for God chose her daughter, Mary, to be the mother of one of the greatest miracles of creation: the virgin birth of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. Hannah named her child Mary (Maryam in Arabic) and invoked God to protect her and her child from Satan:

“...And I have named her Mary (Maryam), and commend her and her offspring to your protection from Satan, the outcast.” (Quran 3:36)

God indeed accepted this supplication of hers, and He gave Mary and her soon to come child, Jesus, a special trait - given to none before nor after; neither of them were afflicted by the touch of Satan upon birth. The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“None are born except that Satan touches them upon their birth, due to which it comes out screaming from its touch, except Mary and her son (Jesus).” (Ahmed)

Here, we can immediately see a similarity between this narration and the Christian theory of the “Immaculate Conception” of Mary and Jesus, although there is a great difference between the two. Islam does not propagate the theory of ‘original sin’, and therefore does not condone this interpretation of how they were free from the touch of Satan, but rather that this was a grace given by God to Mary and her son Jesus. As other prophets, Jesus was

protected from committing grave sins. As for Mary, even if we take the position that she was not a prophetess, she nevertheless received the protection and guidance of God which He grants the pious believers.

“So her Lord accepted her with gracious acceptance, and reared her in purity and beauty, and entrusted her to the care of Zachary.” (Quran 3:37)

Upon the birth of Mary, her mother Hannah took her to Bait-ul-Maqdis and offered her to those in the mosque to grow under their tutelage. Knowing the nobility and piety of their family, they quarreled as to who would have the honor to rear her. They agreed to cast lots, and it was none other than the prophet Zachary who was chosen. It was under his care and tutelage which she was reared.

Miracles in her Presence and Visitation by Angels

As Mary grew older, even the prophet Zachary noticed the special features of Mary, due to the various miracles which occurred in her presence. Mary, as she was growing up, was given a secluded room within the mosque where she could devote herself to the worship of God. Whenever Zachary would enter the chamber to see to her needs, he would find abundant, and out of season, fruit in her presence.

“Whenever Zachary entered the chamber, he found her provided with sustenance. He said, ‘O Mary! From where did you get this?’ She replied, ‘It is from God.’ Surely God bestows sustenance upon whom He pleases without measure.” (Quran 3:37)

She was visited by angels on more than one occasion. God tells us that the angels visited her and informed her of her praised status amongst humanity:

“When the angels said, ‘O Mary! God has chosen you and purified you (due to your worship and devotion), and chosen you (by making you the mother of the prophet Jesus) above the women of the worlds. O Mary! Pray to your Lord devoutly, and prostrate yourself, and bow down with those who bow down.” (Quran 3:42-43)

Due to these visitations of the angels and her being chosen above other women, some have held that Mary was a prophetess. Even if she was not, which is a matter of debate, Islam still deems her having the highest status amongst all women of creation due to her piety and devotion, and due to her being chosen for the miraculous birth of Jesus.

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Her Annunciation

God informs us of the instance the angels gave Mary the glad tidings of a child, his soon to be status on earth, and some of the miracles he will perform:

“When the angels said: ‘O Mary! Indeed God gives you glad tidings of a word (His saying, ‘Be’) from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and in the Hereafter, and of those nearest to God. He shall speak to people while still in the cradle, and in manhood, and he shall be from the righteous.’ She said, ‘My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me?’ He said, ‘Even so, God creates what He pleases. When He decrees, He merely says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is. And He will teach him the Book and the Wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel.” (Quran 3:45-48)

This sounds much like the words mentioned in the Bible:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus.”

Astonished, she replied:

“How can this be, since I do not know a man?” (Luke 1:26-38)

This instance was a great trial for her, for her great piety and devotion was known to everyone. She foresaw that people would accuse her of being unchaste.

In other verses of the Quran, God relates more details of the annunciation by Gabriel that she would give birth to a Prophet.

“And mention in the Book, Mary, when she withdrew from her people to a place. And she placed a veil to screen herself from them; then we sent to her Our Spirit (Gabriel), and he appeared to her in the form of a human in all respects. She said, ‘I seek refuge in the Most Gracious (God) from you, if you fear Him.’ He said, ‘I am only a messenger from your Lord, to announce to you the gift of a son most pure.’” (Quran 19:17-19)

Once, when Mary left the mosque to see to her needs, the angel Gabriel came to her in the form of a man. She was frightened due to the close proximity of the man, and sought refuge from God. Gabriel then told her that he was no ordinary man, but an angel sent by God to announce to her that she would bear a child most pure. Out of astonishment, she exclaimed

“She said, ‘How shall I have a son, when no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?!’” (Quran 19:19-20)

The angel explained that it was a Divine Decree which already has been ordained, and that it is indeed something easy for God the Almighty. God said that the birth of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, will be a sign of His Omnipotence, and that, just as He created Adam without father or mother, He created Jesus without father.

“He said, ‘So it will be,’ your Lord said: ‘That is easy for Me, and We shall make him a sign to the people, and a Mercy from Us, and it is a matter which has been decreed.’” (Quran 19:21)

God blew the spirit of Jesus through the angel Gabriel into Mary, and Jesus was conceived in her womb, as God said in a different chapter:

“And Mary the daughter of Heli, who guarded her chastity, so we breathed into her through Our Spirit (Gabriel).” (Quran 66:12)

When the signs of pregnancy became apparent, Mary became even more worried about what people would say about her. Her news spread far and wide and, as was inevitable, some began to accuse her of being unchaste. Unlike the Christian belief that Mary was espoused to Joseph, Islam upholds that she was neither betrothed, nor espoused nor married, and it was this that caused her such anguish. She knew that people would hold the only logical conclusion to her state of pregnancy, that she was so out of wedlock. Mary isolated herself from people and left to a different land. God says:

“So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. The pain of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree.” (Quran 19:22-23)

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The Birth of Jesus

On the onset of her labor, she was in extreme pain, both mentally and physically. How could a woman of such piety and nobility bear a child out of wedlock? We should mention here that Mary had a normal pregnancy which was no different than other women, and delivered her child as others do. In Christian belief, Mary did not suffer the pains of childbirth, for Christianity and Judaism regard menstruation and labor to be a curse upon women for the sin of Eve^[1]. Islam neither upholds this belief, nor the theory of ‘Original Sin’, but rather strongly emphasizes that none shall burden the sin of others:

“...No person earns any (sin) except against himself (only), and no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another...” (Quran 6:164)

Not only that, but neither the Quran nor the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, ever mention that it was Eve who ate from the tree and enticed Adam. Rather, the Quran places the blame on either Adam alone, or on them both:

“Then Satan whispered suggestions to *them both*...So he misled *them* with deception. Then when *they* tasted of the tree, that which was hidden from them of their shame (private parts) became manifest to them” (Quran 7:20-22)

Mary, due to her anguish and pain wished that she had never been created, and exclaimed:

“Would that I had died before this, and become something forgotten.” (Quran 19:23)

After delivering the child, and when her distress could not be any more severe, the newborn babe, Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, cried out miraculously from beneath her, appeasing her and reassuring her that God will protect her:

And he called to her from beneath her, “Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be contented. And if you see from among hhumanity anyone, say, ‘Indeed, I have vowed to the Most Merciful abstention, so I will not speak today to (any) person.’” (Quran 19:24-26)

Mary felt reassured. This was the first miracle performed at the hands of Jesus. He spoke reassuringly to his mother upon his birth, and once again when people saw her carrying her newborn baby. When they saw her, they accused her saying:

“O Mary, truly a strange thing you have brought!...” (Quran 19:27)

She merely pointed to Jesus, and he miraculously spoke, just as God had promised her upon annunciation.

“He shall speak to people while still in the cradle, and in manhood, and he shall be from the righteous.” (Quran 3:46)

Jesus said to the people:

“I am indeed a slave of God. He has given me the Book and made me a Prophet, and He has made me blessed wherever I may be. And He has enjoined upon me prayers, and to pay the alms, as long as I live and (He has made me) kind to my mother, and He has not made me insolent,

unblessed. And may Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and on the Day I shall be raised to life.” (Quran 19:30-33)

From here starts the episode of Jesus, his lifelong struggle to call people to the worship of God, evading the plots and plans of those Jews who would strive to kill him.

Mary in Islam

We have already discussed the great status which Islam gives to Mary. Islam gives her the status of being the most perfect of women created. In the Quran, no woman is given more attention than Mary even though all the prophets, with the exception of Adam, had mothers. Of the Quran's 114 chapters, she is among the eight people who have a chapter named after them, the nineteenth chapter “Maryam”, which is Mary in Arabic. The third chapter in the Quran is named after her father, Imran (Heli). Chapters Maryam and Imran are among the most beautiful chapters in the Quran. In addition, Mary is the only woman specifically named in the Quran. The Prophet Muhammad said:

“The best women of the world are four: Mary the daughter of Heli, Aasiyah the wife of Pharaoh, Khadeejah bint Khuwaylid (The wife of the Prophet Muhammad), and Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad, the Messenger of God.” (Al-Tirmidhi)

Despite all these merits which we have mentioned, Mary and her son Jesus were only human, and they had no characteristics which were beyond the realm of humanity. They were both created beings and both ‘born’ into this world. Although they were under the special care of God from committing grave sins (total protection - as other prophets - in the case of Jesus, and partial protection as other righteous persons in case of Mary, if we take the position that she was not a prophetess), they still were prone to make mistakes. Unlike Christianity, which holds Mary to be faultless^[2], none are given this quality of perfection except God Alone.

Islam commands the belief and implementation of strict monotheism; that none have any supernatural powers other than God, and that He alone deserves worship, devotion and adoration. Even though miracles may have occurred at the hands of the prophets and righteous people during their lives, they have no power to help themselves, let alone others, after their death. All humans are slaves of God and are in need of His help and mercy.

The same holds true for Mary. Although many miracles occurred in her presence, all this ceased after her death. Any claims people have made that they saw apparitions of the Virgin, or that people were saved from harm after invoking her, like those mentioned in apocryphal literature such as “Transitus Mariae”, are mere apparitions made by Satan to steer people away from the

worship and devotion to the One True God. Devotions such as 'the Hail Mary' praised upon the rosary and other acts of magnification, such as the devotion of churches and specification of feasts to Mary, all lead people to magnify and glorify others besides God. Due to these reasons, Islam has strictly forbidden innovations of any kind, as well as building places of worship over graves, all to preserve the essence of all religions sent by God, the pristine message to worship Him alone and to leave the false worship of all other besides Him.

Mary was a maidservant of God, and she was the purest of all women, specially chosen to bear the miraculous birth of Jesus, one of the greatest of all prophets. She was known for her piety and chastity, and she will continue to be held in this great regard throughout the ages to come. Her story has been related in the Glorious Quran since the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, and will continue to be so, unchanged in its pristine form, until the Day of Judgment.

Footnotes:

[1] See Genesis (3:16)

[2] St. Augustine: "De nat. et gratis", 36.