

# Learning from Mary in the Qur'an

By Klaus von Stosch

Most Christians, knowing little of how Mary the mother of Jesus appears in Islam, will be amazed by how much they can learn from Mary through a close reading of the Qur'an. In this brief article, I will discuss three examples. The first example will develop how the Qur'anic story of Mary tries to overcome supersessionism and highlights the vulnerability of Mary. Then I would like to show how the Qur'an tries to intervene against any political or imperial misuse of Mary. Finally, I will show how the Qur'anic vision of Mary resonates with Christian efforts to empower women in the church. All these examples are grounded in the research that I have done with my Muslim colleague at the University of Paderborn, Muna Tatari, research that is developed in greater depth in our recent co-authored book on Mary in the Qur'an.<sup>1</sup>

## Overcoming Supersessionism

During late antiquity, many Christians came to believe that the time of Judaism was over – that the Jewish people no longer had a legitimate religion outside the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus. In these Christians' typological thinking, the deaths of Zechariah and John the Baptist represented the death of the Temple cult and the death of Judaism. The fact that Jerusalem came to be ruled by Christians in the following centuries was, moreover, interpreted as a rightful punishment for the Jews for the betrayal and murder of Christ. For this reason, Byzantine Christians struggled to interpret the empire's loss of Jerusalem to the Persians in 614. Jews, by contrast, welcomed the victory of the Sassanid Empire and hoped that it would create the conditions for coming back to Jerusalem and building the third temple. Apocalyptic hopes were mobilized on both sides and the future of Judaism was a central topic of debate. As we can see in the *Sefer Zerubbabel*, this debate was sometimes linked polemically with Mary from the Jewish side.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Christian sources were trying to show how Mary replaces the Temple and makes Judaism superfluous, Jewish sources questioned Mary's integrity and doubted her virginity. In other words, in late antiquity, the story of Mary was one of the places where Jews and Christians negotiated their hegemonic claims against each other.

In light of this history, it is particularly interesting to see how, in the closing years of late antiquity, the Qur'an defends (*pace* Jewish polemicists) Mary's integrity and virginity (Q 19:20-22) and even says that she has been purified and chosen over all the other women in the world (Q 3:42). At the same time, the Qur'an argues (*pace* Christian polemicists) against a supersessionist reading of the birth story of Jesus: Zechariah is portrayed in his integrity and his vivid relationship to God, and his prayer for a descendant is clearly understood as a prayer for a continuation of the

temple cult (Q 19:4-5). When he cannot talk any more, this is not a punishment as in the Bible (cf. Lk 1:20), but a sign in order to encourage him (Q 19:10). And the fulfilment of his wishes by the birth of John the Baptist is understood as a fulfilment of a continuation of the Temple cult; in this light it is interesting that the Qur'an does not mention John's death. Even the Arabic name of John responds programmatically to the Christian supersessionist claims: whereas we would expect the name *yūhannān* as the Arabic translation of his Greek name, the Qur'an invents a new name: *yahyā* – a name which from its root means "to be alive." In other words, the Qur'an stresses that John is a living testimony of God's fidelity to the covenant with Israel. In this light, the great respect for John in the Qur'an and the parallel description of John and Jesus also is an anti-supersessionist intervention. Whereas the proclaimer of the Qur'an respects the uniqueness of Jesus (as only Jesus is accepted as the Messiah, the word and the spirit of God),<sup>3</sup> it still does not want to understand this peculiarity in terms of superiority. At the same time, through the fact that Jesus characterizes himself as the servant of God, the Qur'an opens up space for the appreciation of a very special I-Thou relationship (though, crucially, not a relationship of identity) between Jesus and God. Whereas John the Baptist is always characterized in the third-person perspective (Q 19:12b-15), Jesus and only Jesus says of himself: "I am the servant of God" (Q 19:30). Thus – just as in the gospel of John – the Jesus of the Qur'an is characterized in the first person, and the title of "servant of God" quotes one of the most important early Christian titles of Jesus.

So it seems that the proclaimer of the Qur'an tries to find a sort of middle way between Judaism and Christianity and makes truth claims that should be acceptable, or at least resonant, for both sides. In a seventh-century atmosphere of strong apocalyptic propaganda and mutual condemnations, the Qur'an offers a vision of mutual respect. And this respect is especially embodied in the person of Mary, who is portrayed in her vulnerability and loneliness. It is striking how much this vulnerability is highlighted – especially in Surah Maryam (Q 19), which was proclaimed at a time when

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Muhammad was in a very similar situation of vulnerability as Mary and seems to see her as a kind of role-model for the message he bears. Mary and Muhammad are linked through their task of bringing the word of God to the world, and they are both in a very dangerous, exposed, and marginal position when they bring this word to birth.

### Struggling with the Misuse of Mary in Imperial Theology

Let me go a bit deeper here and attend to some later verses of the Qur'an, exploring whether they still support the idea of this kind of solidarity between Muhammad and Mary. First, however, we should note that there are some verses in Sura *al-Mā'ida* (= Q 5) that seem in fact to polemicize against Mary. In Q 5:17, for example, the proclaimer of the Qur'an says:

They disbelieve those who say, 'God is the Christ, the son of Mary.' Say, 'Who can prevent God, if He willed, from annihilating the Christ son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth?' To God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth and what is between them. He creates whatever He wills, and God has power over everything.

Why is it important for the proclaimer to highlight this in regard to Mary? It would not seem to be controversial, even for Christians, that God has substantial power and qualitative superiority over Mary. And yet, the propaganda of the Byzantine Emperor Herakleios tell another story. After his defeat by the Sassanids, Herakleios started his own military campaign against the Sassanid Empire in 622.<sup>4</sup> After a preliminary success in 624, he was with his army far away from the capital in 626 when Byzantium was severely attacked by the Avars. As the emperor needed all his soldiers for the campaign in the east, the capital had been left without sufficient defense. In this situation, the only solution of the Byzantine people was to pray to Mary and Jesus, asking them for help on the battlefield. And indeed, the Avars were repelled; thus the siege of Constantinople in 626 famously became the moment in history when Mary started her career as patron saint of the city and as a military emblem, in some sense even as a goddess of war.<sup>5</sup> The court theologians of Herakleios promoted the sudden and inexplicable victory at the siege of 626 as proof for the invincibility of Mary. They used her in their propaganda and claimed that nobody – not even God – could overcome her protective power.

There is a second event that has to be mentioned if we want to understand why the imperial propaganda of Herakleios insisted so much on the invincibility and indestructibility of Mary. In 619, during another attack of the Avars against Constantinople, Mary's clothes (being venerated at a church in Blachernae, just outside the protection of the city wall), were not destroyed during the attack.<sup>6</sup> The people of the city understood this as a miracle and the theo-

logians seem to have developed the idea that Mary's purity could be understood as incorruptibility. Her incorruptibility, in turn, was transferred to her clothes and other relics, making these objects indestructible. Hence, they came to be venerated as powerful protective shields that would safeguard the city from any attack. The great siege of 626 would subsequently be understood as proof of this theological claim; we have some evidence that it was used thus in the propaganda of Herakleios.

This tradition is so striking because the idea of the immaculate conception of Mary (which in a certain reading is the foundation for the claim of her incorruptibility) had not been developed before the medieval age. Moreover, the doctrine of bodily incorruptibility that was applied to Jesus by many theologians in late antiquity (not only among heretics, like apthartodoketists, but also within Chalcedonian Christianity) was not typically claimed to be true for Mary. The doctrine of the incorruptibility of the body claims that the body of the incorruptible person is like the bodies of Adam and Eve, with no need to eat or satisfy other bodily needs. As the church fathers explained it, Jesus – who is presented as enthusiastically eating and drinking in the gospels – ate not because of natural obligation but rather by his free choice, because of his solidarity with humans. In one of the dominant interpretations of this theological theory in late antiquity, the free choice of Jesus in regard of eating and drinking was understood as a consequence of his protection from the consequences of the fall. As he was free of original sin, he did not have the bodily conditions that came to pass following the expulsion from Eden. Hence he ate and drank, not because of a biological necessity, but because of his good will to live in solidarity with humanity.

From our modern perspective, we might think that Mary could easily be integrated into the very same theory if we simply conceive her without original sin – which has been official Roman Catholic doctrine since 1854. But in the theological sources we have from late antiquity, this idea of bodily incorruptibility was not used for Mary, with one exception: imperial court theology after the siege of Constantinople. In this literature it was argued that if even Mary's clothes are incorruptible, surviving the destructive Avar onslaught, how much more so would Mary herself have been – just like her son Jesus?

In this context, we can recognize the important interreligious intervention of the Qur'an. The key point here is that the Qur'an reminds us (5:75) that both Mary and Jesus had to eat their daily food. This apparently odd statement becomes clear if we bring it together with the Byzantine court propaganda after 626. As those verses are developed exactly in this time (probably 630/631), within the larger context of a polemical debate with Byzantium, this connection makes

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a lot of sense. The proclaimer of the Qur'an stresses the vulnerability of Mary and rejects the claim of her incorruptibility. She has to drink and to eat, and neither she nor her clothing are incorruptible. In other words, the war propaganda of Herakleios and his court theologians were outright rejected, and the Byzantine use of Mary's clothes and icons as instruments in war is denounced by Islamic revelation.

Hopefully, all Christians today will agree with the proclaimer of the Qur'an on this matter. But the polemics of this period provided an important lesson for late antique Christians. And still today the qur'anic depiction of Mary reminds us of the danger of misusing religious ideas within military campaigns. The qur'anic critique of supersessionist and imperial misuse of religion in war is still important to keep in mind – of course not only within Christianity.

### **Reconciling Mary 1.0 and Mary 2.0**

Let me turn to a third and final lesson that Christians can learn from the representation of Mary in the Qur'an. Some scholars in Qur'anic Studies have already demonstrated that the Qur'an develops a female genealogy for Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the biblical genealogy always needs Joseph to provide the link to David and thereby relies uniquely on men (Mt 1:1-16; Lk 3:23-38), the qur'anic genealogy starts with two women: Mary and her mother (Q 3:35). Joseph does not exist in the Qur'an, and Mary's father does not have any active role. Of course, Mary is also mentioned in the genealogy of the Bible, but the genealogical line depends on Joseph, who alone is Jesus' link to the heritage of David. For the proclaimer of the Qur'an, however, such a male link is not necessary. The power of Jesus and even his purity is mediated through his mother and his grandmother. Most impressive in this context is the prayer of Jesus' grandmother. She promises to God that she will dedicate her child to the Temple because she hopes that this promise will help her to become pregnant – presumably hoping to have a son, because only men were allowed to do service in the temple (Q 3:35). Her request is fulfilled and she becomes pregnant, but not with a male child as she might have hoped. Nonetheless she does not hesitate to bring her daughter Mary to the Temple (Q 3:37). It is the mother's prayer that purifies Mary and Jesus and protects them from Satan (Q 3:36). Hence she seems to have ritual power and Mary is closely linked with the Temple without replacing it.<sup>8</sup>

From a typological perspective, Mary's relationship to Zechariah becomes very interesting. Zechariah serves the role of caring for her at the Temple, but she proves not to need this care because God provides her food directly through the angels (Q 3:37). If it is true that Zechariah is the representant of Judaism and is appreciated in his dignity in the Qur'an, it is also true that Christianity (represented in the person of Mary) becomes independent from him and de-

velops her own independent and equally valid relationship to God. But the relationship of Mary and Zechariah also has a story to tell in terms of gender equality. Mary does not need the care of the male authorities. God cares for her as a child and also in the desert during her pregnancy; she can subsequently give birth to the word of God without any male help. After Jesus' birth, she is in a sense protected by him and can rely on him as the word of God, whose presence protects and exalts her from the beginning of his life. But even this protection is not the protection of a powerful man, but protection through God's word alone, manifest in her own child (Q 19:29), for whom she is responsible and herself protective.


It is clear, then, that Mary and her mother have both ritual and prophetic power in the Qur'an. What is so interesting in the story of Mary in the Qur'an is the fact that this female empowerment (which we moderns might be tempted to view as a later innovation) is drawn completely from a highly traditional retelling of the story. Mary remains a virgin in the perspective of the Qur'an and she is thoroughly linked to religious institutions. This too provides a helpful reminder for Christians today. In the Catholic Church in Germany today there is a movement of women who want to have more power for women in the church. They call themselves Mary 2.0 and they argue (among other things) for the priesthood of women. Conservative Catholics have responded to this movement with a campaign for "Mary 1.0," stressing Mary's virginity and servanthood. The intriguing message of the Qur'an for both campaigns is that the Qur'an clearly stresses Mary's dependence on God and Jesus, along with her virginity, which would seem to align the proclaimer with the conservative understanding of Mary 1.0. At the same time, it is precisely this traditional Mary and her mother who are invested with ritual power and who authoritatively mediate God's word to the world – all elements uplifted by Mary 2.0. That is why, in some sense, the perspective offered by the qur'anic Mary can indicate fruitful interpretive space between the positions of liberal and conservative Catholics. But, as we have seen, she can also bring together people who have reservations about Mary (such as Jews and Protestants) with Christians from the Catholic or Orthodox traditions who live with a strong veneration of Mary. Last but not least, the qur'anic Mary can serve as a bridge between Christians and Muslims insofar as the way that the Qur'an presents Mary is very much compatible with the core narratives of Christianity in which she appears. Christians and Muslims alike, insofar as they celebrate the holy purpose and significant status of Mary, have to reflect seriously on how their traditions have treated women over the years and continue in many ways to marginalize them. More specifically, in terms of the inter-religious implications, Christians have to learn that they do

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not own Mary and that Muslims too have important things to say about her that add valuable perspective, even as they may challenge Christian traditions.

Let me conclude with one of these traditions within Christianity that may be fruitfully challenged in dialogue with Islam. For the traditional doctrine of Mary's virginity in Christianity, it is supposed that Mary remains a virgin during the birth of Jesus. This dogma, aside from its inscrutable biology, is in keeping with a theological tendency to downplay the pain and trauma of Mary's human birth-giving. Mary's birth pains are neglected, if not ignored, because as the "new Eve" she is meant to be free of the pain that, in Genesis, is associated with the disobedience of Eve and Adam. Such a typological reading extracts Mary from her role as representative of humanity and it permits some problematic, docetist assumptions about the birth of Jesus. But when the proclaimer of the Qur'an describes Mary's birth pains (Q 19:23) and her deep despair, he invites Christians as well to identify with Mary as he himself identified with her. Again, Mary becomes a figure that can bring Muslims

and Christians together in shared insight; she is in this respect an interreligious enabler. 

**Notes:**

1. Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch, *Mary in the Qur'an* (London: Ginkgo Library, 2021 [forthcoming]). All insights in this article are more comprehensively developed in this book. If I, as a Christian theologian, dare to say so much on the Qur'an's message in this article, this is only because I summarize insights that were collaboratively cultivated with my Muslim colleague.

2. Cf. Martha Himmelfarb, "The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and Sefer Zerubbabel," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture, III*, edited by Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2002), 369-390.

3. Cf. Klaus von Stosch, "Reflecting on Approaches to Jesus in the Qur'an from the Perspective of Comparative Theology," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, edited by Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 37-58.

4. Cf. James Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius' Persian Campaigns and the Revival of the East Roman Empire, 622-630," *War in History* 6 (1999), 1-44.

5. Cf. Martin Hurbanič, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626: History and Legend* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

6. Cf. Antoine Wenger, "L'intercession de Marie en Orient du sixième au dixième siècle," *Etudes Mariales* 23 (1966), 51-75.

7. Cf. Angelika Neuwirth, "The HHouse of Abraham and the House of Amram: Genealogy, Patriarchal Authority, and Exegetical Professionalism," in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Texts and Studies of the Qur'an, 6), edited by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 499-532.

8. If we compare the role of Mary's mother in the Qur'an with that in the Protevangelium of James, it becomes even clearer how much the Qur'an empowers her: her husband plays a much more active role in the other source.