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Lady Mary as a Role Model in the Qur'an and Bible

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Abstract

Qur'anic descriptions of the prophets and other prominent female personalities reveal the importance of using them as an exemplar in our daily lives. This makes certain that we are given the guidelines as to how to attain proximity to God. Lady Mariam is the most distinguished female mentioned by name in the holy Qur'an, so much so that an entire chapter is named after her.

Her titles of being the Masteress of women of her era as well as her qualities of chastity, virtue, and purity qualify her for being the mother of a prophet as well as a model for both men and women to follow.

This article studies the portrayal of role models in the Qur'an, several aspects of Lady Mary's upbringing, and Lady Mariam's features as seen in the Qur'an and the Bible.

Introduction

The Qur'an is a book for self-building. To reach its objective which is the flourishing of individuals, examples have been provided. Introducing these role models and examples helps in demonstrating the fact that it is quite possible to face all challenges and still become pious.

An outstanding feature of the Qur'an is that Allah has introduced His prophets as role models in order to complete the guidance for mankind and leave no doubt about the possibility of reaching nearness to Him and attaining salvation.²

Not only does Allah talk about how the Prophets eat, drink, and walk in the streets and bazaars, but He also discusses matters that show their pinnacle point in humanistic essence, their proximity to Allah, and their desire to reach the divine status. For example, referring to Joseph, the Qur'an says,

وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنْ رَأَى بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ كَذَلِكَ لِنَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ السُّوءَ وَالْفَحْشَاءَ إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا الْمُخْلَصِينَ

“He was indeed one of Our dedicated servants” (12:24).

In this study, Lady Mary is illustrated as an example and role model. Qualities that have made her a role model, effective factors in her upbringing, and her distinguished characteristics for which she was been chosen by Allah have been examined.

Prophets of Allah: Role Models for Mankind

Several verses in the Qur'an portray the Prophets as role models. The Prophets and holy Imams have been introduced as complete and realistic role models since their lives are completely set out on the just path and because they are infallible and free of error and mistake. In the chapter The Confederates, with reference to the Prophet Muhammad (s), we read: ***“In the Apostle of God there is certainly for you a good exemplar... (33:21)”***

The idea of the Prophet being an example for humankind can be understood from the male pronoun 'you' which include all human beings including both men and women. The Qur'an also refers to Prophet Muhammad as

رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

“a mercy to all nations” (21: 107)

and as

بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا

“a bearer of good news and warner to all mankind” (34:28).

Prophet Abraham is also introduced as a role model in the Holy Qur'an:

قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ

“There was a good lesson in the life of Abraham and those around him, for you” (60:4).

In this verse, following Abraham and his companions has been recommended to ‘you’ i.e. all people; the plural male pronoun (*lakum*) addresses both men and women.

One important point regarding this verse is the adjective ‘good’ (*hasanah*) which has been used for the word ‘exemplar’ (*uswah*). This adjective has been used in both verses that refer to Prophet Muhammad (s) and Abraham as role models. Why has the word ‘good’ been used? The reason is that being a follower can be a good deed and beneficial at times, but it can also be disadvantageous.

Since using the divine prophets and those chosen by them as a template is approved, the term ‘good’ has been used to reinforce this point. Modeling after other individuals, even people who are pious, is not always beneficial because the likelihood that they may make mistakes or fall into negligence remains.

Pursuing a role model is one of mankind’s needs, where in the course of struggling towards perfection and attaining progress in an innate spiritual (*fitri*) way, it has been placed in the nature of humans. ‘Replication’ is another term that is used as a synonym of role modeling. Allah the Exalted, in the Holy Qur’an, has answered to this psychological need of humanity and has introduced role models.

A question arises here regarding the difference between being a role model and exemplar and being an example. Are these two the same? Concerning Abraham (a) and Prophet Muhammad (s) God says they are good role models or exemplars, but pertaining to the wife of Pharaoh or Lady Mary, God says:

وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا امْرَأَةً فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لِي عِنْدَكَ بَيْتًا فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنِ الْفَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ

Allah draws an[other] example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, ‘My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot. (66: 11)

وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِنَا وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكَانَتْ مِنَ الْغَائِبِينَ

And Mary, daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. She confirmed the words of her Lord and His Books and she was one of the obedient. (66: 12)

Explaining profound gnostic ideas by using parables has been common in Holy Scriptures. For example, the Qur’an refers to the biblical description of those who were with the Prophet Muhammad (s) in the form of parables (48:29). In the Bible, there is a whole book called, The Parables. The Qur’an’s use of examples has been extensive:

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ

“We have certainly interspersed for the people this Quran with every [kind of] parable” (17:89).

The advantage of using examples and parables is that it breaks down hefty and contemplative gnostic knowledge and brings it to the level that the general public can better understand and comprehend it.^{[3](#)}

Bringing examples has been compared to a string where it makes a link from the highest level of gnostic knowledge to the general public’s level of understanding, where in the form of a parable they have the ability to comprehend intellectual and rational information and understand what is being compared and evaluated to the best of their ability:

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

...We draw such parables for mankind, so that they may reflect (59:21)

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ

And We draw these parables for mankind; but no one grasps them except those who have knowledge (29:43)

وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا

Allah draws an[other] example for those who have faith... (66: 11)

In the following verse, Allah introduces Lady Mary as another example: “and Mary, daughter of Imran” who was chaste,^{[4](#)} God breathed into her of His spirit,^{[5](#)} confirmed the words of her Lord and His Books,^{[6](#)} and was one of the obedient.^{[7](#)}

Thus, we may answer to the question concerning the difference between introducing a person as a good role model and bringing someone forth as an example is that the latter can be restricted to some aspects of that person’s character. For instance, the Pharaoh’s wife is an example for the faithful because she had strong faith in God and knew what to ask from Him and how to ask for it.

She wanted to be near God which was more important for her than being in heaven and this is why she first said “*indaka*” (near You) and then she said “*bayt-an fi’l-Jannah* (a home in Paradise).” So she could be taken as a role model in these qualities and actions, but not necessarily in her entire conduct.

But concerning the Prophet Muhammad (s), it is important to know that he is a role model and should be

followed in all his qualities and actions. Lady Mary is introduced as an example for the faithful in such a high qualities and actions like chastity, purity, obedience, and truthfulness; confirming the words of her Lord and His Books, she can certainly be taken as a good role model for most, if not all, in every step taken in the spiritual journey towards God.

Lady Mary in the Gospel

In the Gospel of Matthew, Lady Mary is said to be engaged to Joseph even though Christians do not consider Jesus to be his son, but rather the son of God:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost... [Matthew 1:18-25]

In the Gospel of Luke two characteristics of the Virgin Mary are mentioned – ‘being holy’ and ‘being favoured:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you and you are amongst the Holy women.”

... But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God... [Luke 1:26-30]

In the Gospel of John, Lady Mary is referred to as an aid and assistant to Jesus in the miracle of changing water to wine:

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no more wine.” “Dear woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied, “My time has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water;” so they filled them to the brim... This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee... [John 2:1-11]

In general, the Gospel refers to two of Lady Mary’s traits. One quality is that God blessed Mary very much and second is that she was a source of blessing for people. Of course, the Bible does not give a detailed account of Lady Mary’s life or specific characteristics.

Altogether Lady Mary's name has been mentioned nineteen times in the Gospel and thirty-four times in the Qur'an. A relatively lengthy chapter in the Qur'an has been named after her and a venerated position has been set for her.

Lady Mary's Status in Islam

According to numerous Islamic narrations, Lady Mary is one of the four chosen women, namely Asiyah, Mary, Khadijah and Fatimah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. In the book Conquests of Mecca, after Muhyiddin Arabi describes how masculinity and femininity are relinquishing aspects and not the truth of humanity, he quotes a narration from the Holy Prophet where he says, "The same way the Holy Prophet gave testimony regarding the perfection of men, he gave testimony about the perfection of women and he referred to Mary and Asiyah as the most perfect women" as seen in the following hadith:

"Many men have achieved perfection and among women, Mary daughter of 'Imran and Asiyah wife of Pharoah."⁸

Lady Mary in the Qur'an

Anne Mary Schimmel writes: "Lady Mary has the most honorific status; she is the only woman who has been mentioned by name in the Qur'an and has been glorified and acknowledged as the virgin mother of Prophet Jesus."⁹

According to the Qur'an, Lady Mary was given the ability to speak with the Archangel Gabriel and converse with other angels. Her other qualities are as follows:

1. Masteress of the women of her age:

وَإِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ وَاصْطَفَاكِ عَلَى نِسَاءِ الْعَالَمِينَ

***And when the angels said: 'O Mary, Allah has chosen you and purified you and He has chosen you above the women of the worlds.'* (3:42)**

2. Chastity: Mary is chaste and virtuous. She has been referred to as a person who Allah blew into her from His own spirit:

وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِنَا وَصَدَّقْتَ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكَانَتْ مِنَ الْقَانِنِينَ

And Mary, daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit... (66: 12)

Elsewhere the Qur'an says:

...قَالَتْ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي وَلَدٌ وَلَمْ يَمَسِّنِي بَشَرٌ

She [Mary] said, 'My Lord, how shall I have a child seeing that no human has ever touched me?' (3:47)

قَالَتْ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَلَمْ يَمَسِّنِي بَشَرٌ وَلَمْ أَكْ بَغِيًّا

She [Mary] said, 'How shall I have a child seeing that no human being has ever touched me, nor have I been unchaste?' (19:20)

3. Chosen by God:

وَإِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ وَاصْطَفَاكِ عَلَى نِسَاءِ الْعَالَمِينَ

And when the angels said, 'O Mary, Allah has chosen you and purified you and He has chosen you above the world's women. (3:42)

4. A sign of God:

وَجَعَلْنَاهَا وَابْنَهَا آيَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ

... and We made her and her son a sign for all the nations. (21:91)

In this verse, Mary and her son, Jesus, have been introduced as a single sign, with emphasis on Lady Mary. By mentioning her name and showing Prophet Jesus' kinship with her, the greatness of her personality is further conveyed. The absence of the plural form of 'sign' is probably because Mary and Jesus were very close to each other.

If there were a substantial difference between them, they would have been mentioned in the plural format i.e. signs for all the nations, like day and night which are considered as two signs: "We made the night and the day two signs" (17: 12). This verse has been revealed in the plural form so that the significant and basic difference between night and day can be completely clear.

5. Most truthful: Lady Mary was siddiqah, that is, one of the most truthful people (5:75). The most truthful, the witnesses, the righteous, and the prophets are those upon whom God has sent His blessings:

وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ ۖ وَحَسُنَ أُولَٰئِكَ رَفِيقًا

“Whoever obeys Allah and the Apostle —they are with those whom Allah has blessed, including the prophets and the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous and excellent companions are they!” (4:69).

Every Muslim in his ritual prayer asks God to let him join them: “Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have blessed.”

6. **Devotee:** Lady Mary has been described in the Qur’an as one of the devotees or obedient (qanitin) servants of God. [10](#)

7. **Lady Mary, a Prophetess:** Based on several verses of the Qur’an, it has been suggested that Lady Mary was a prophetess. [11](#) Can a woman bear the responsibility of a social position as big as delivering a message? What have the previous Revealed Books said about this matter and what are some Islamic proofs and sources? Because this topic is quite dated in our current society, it has not been considerably discussed. The Old Testament and New Testament identify women who have had the specifications of “prophethood.” [12](#) *Deborah*, wife of *Lappidoth*, *Huldah* spouse of *Shallum*, the four daughters of Philip [13](#) and Hannah [14](#) have been referred to as prophetesses.

Distinguishing between prophetic (anbiyai) revelation and legislative (tashri’i) revelation, Ayatollah Jawadi Amuli argues for the possibility of women receiving the former.

In *Women in the Mirror of Glory and Beauty*, he states that the Prophetic revelation implies that an individual becomes aware of what is happening in the world and what is to come of it. He knows about his future and is aware of the people’s future. This type of prophethood is a prerequisite for legislative prophethood and not the same. [15](#)

Ayatollah Mutahhari offers an explanation of the Qur’anic perspective of Lady Mary:

Her state reached the point where she used to worship at the altar and the angels would speak to her and converse with her in dialogue. Provisions were provided for her from the unseen. Her actions had reached an extremely high rank from a spiritual perspective that the prophet of her time was astonished by her. She was far ahead of Zecharias, who would always find himself bewildered and amazed when confronted with her. [16](#)

Mary: A Spiritual Role Model

In the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, Prophet Abraham, the wife of Pharaoh, and Lady Mary have become role models because of their specific characteristics. Allah introduced the Virgin Mary, with her

specific traits, as an exemplar and exalted role model for believers including both men and women.

One of her traits is her chastity. As mentioned before, this virtue has been mentioned by Lady Mary herself:

وَلَمْ يَمَسِّنِي بَشَرٌ وَلَمْ أَكُ بَغِيًّا

...no human being has ever touched me, nor have I been unchaste? (19:20)

In the chapter, The Forbidding, God the Exalted emphasizes this matter:

...وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا

And Mary, daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb. (66: 12)

Truthfulness of Lady Mary is the other quality mentioned in the Qur'an:

... مَا الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ وَأُمُّهُ صِدِّيقَةٌ

The Messiah, son of Mary, is but an apostle. Certainly [other] apostles have passed before him and his mother was a truthful one. (5:75)

Other traits include Mary as a 'worshipper' (*abidah*) because she spent most of her time in the temple worshipping God, and obedient (*qanit*).¹⁷ Moreover, Mary has also been of 'those who bow [in worship]' (*raki'in*) and of those who pray:

يَا مَرْيَمُ اقْنُتِي لِرَبِّكِ وَاسْجُدِي وَارْكَعِي مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ

'O Mary, be obedient to your Lord and prostrate and bow down with those who bow [in worship]. (3:43)

A combination of these traits qualifies Lady Mary to be chosen by Allah, as seen in the term 'chosen' (*istafak*). The same idea is mentioned in the Bible:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you and you are amongst the Holy women."

... But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God... [Luke 1:26–30]

Mary's Upbringing according to the Qur'an and the Bible

An individual's nurture and upbringing is based on two conditions: genetic and acquired. Scholars and scientists differ as to whether inheritance or environment is more effective. Some believe that inherited factors are more important than environmental factors, such as August Kent and Herbert Spencer.

On the hand, there are people who believe that environmental factors are more important, such as Stewart Mill and John Locke who believe that many of the intellectual and behavioral characteristics develop and flourish in the environment. The reality is that both groups have actually taken the path of two extremes. Living beings are influenced by both environment and inheritance. [18](#)

There are five general factors that bear on one's upbringing: 1) the instructor, 2) the individual, 3) environment, 4) inheritance and 5) the spiritual and supernatural causes.

For Lady Mary, the instructor was Prophet Zechariah (a) who was given this task by Allah (swt).

The second factor is Lady Mary herself who was a worshipper, always prostrating, bowing, and supplicating. Every opportunity she found at the temple was spent in self-building and acts of worship. She was virtuous, chaste, and far from Satan as Lady Mary's mother had asked for when she prayed to God:

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّي أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهَا مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ

And when she bore her, she said, ‘My Lord, I have borne a female [child]’ —and God knew better what she had borne — ‘and the male is not like the female. I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Your care against [the evil of] the outcast Satan.’ (3:36)

The third factor is the environment. Lady Mary was definitely influenced by a healthy environment. She grew up in the temple, a place where people would come to pray to God.

The fourth factor is inheritance and genetics. As stated in the Qur'an, Lady Mary was from the family of 'Imran and in His book, Allah has 'chosen' the Family of 'Imran where He says:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ آدَمَ وَنُوحًا وَآلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَآلَ عِمْرَانَ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

Indeed Allah chose Adam and Noah and the progeny of Abraham and the progeny of 'Imran

above all the nations. (3:33)

Because 'Imran is of the Family of Abraham, Allah the Exalted could have simply used Family of Abraham and not have mentioned Family of Imran in the verse. However, due to the virtue of that family (which were no more than three individuals: the mother of Mary, Lady Mary herself, and Jesus), Allah the Exalted separately spoke of the Family of Imran and included them amongst the chosen and dignified.

For this reason, in terms of inheritance and genetics, the originality of Mary's lineage and her purity is approved by the Qur'an.

The fifth factor is the spiritual and supernatural causes. With regards to Mary's nobility and spiritual virtues, it is enough to say that in her perfection she rose above the Prophet of her time (Zechariah). This was to the point that every time Zechariah visited her in the Temple, he would see heavenly provisions at Lady Mary's disposal.

Thus, this good upbringing and proper and complete growth was gathered in Lady Mary and one can say her being chosen was both genetic and acquired. In the Gospel she is only known to be an ordinary person who so happened to be chosen for the birth of Jesus Christ.

According to Islamic narrations, Mary the daughter of 'Imran was of the lineage of Aaron and Levi, but according to Christian narrations she was not of the lineage of Levi; rather, her ancestry reached King David. Her mother's name was 'Hannah' or 'Hana' whose sister was Elizabeth, the wife of Prophet Zecharias.

According to the Qur'an, 'Imran's wife had made vow to dedicate her child to serving at the Temple. Even though 'Imran's child was a female, they allowed her to worship at the Temple. Hannah named her child Mary, meaning 'the worshipper,' and her uncle Zechariah was to convince the priests to allow Mary to live in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

According to biblical sources, Mary was an ordinary girl who would go to Heichal (a place of worship) in Jerusalem only on Jewish holidays. In the Gospel there is no sign of Mary being 'chosen' and 'distinguished' until the point in time where God spoke to her. According to Christian belief, the basis for why Mary was chosen as the one to give birth to Jesus Christ was simply a decision made by God based on His wisdom.

According to the Qur'an (3:44), the temple priests and the Israelite scholars had a dispute over who should be given Mary's guardianship and custody. They made a draw by throwing their pens into the water. All of the pens sunk into water and only Zechariah's pen stayed afloat.

Thus, Zechariah obtained the custody of Mary and built her a room atop the temple; every few days, using a ladder, he would go up to her room and would take essentials for her. Zechariah would also

witness her nobility when he visited her:

وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّى لَكَ هَذَا قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

...Whenever Zechariah visited her in the sanctuary, he would find provisions with her. He said, ‘O Mary, from where does this come for you?’ She said, ‘It comes from Allah. Allah provides whomever He wishes without any reckoning. (3:37)

Of course when exploring the great status of Mary, we must not forget her mother’s important role. Even though the growth and nurturing of Mary were in the hands of Zechariah, this was still at the final stages of her rearing. Mary’s mother had the worthiness to give birth to a mother of a prophet and she had great insight which made her decide to send her daughter to the temple.

The most important point regarding Mary’s mother is how God accepted her daughter in the best possible way:

... فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا

Thereupon her Lord accepted her with a gracious acceptance, and made her grow up in a worthy fashion, and He charged Zechariah with her care... (3:37)

Allah (swt) gave this lady many gifts and blessings and she was capable of safeguarding them. Allah (swt) chooses people for His missions like being role models for people based on His wisdom:

اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ حَيْثُ يَجْعَلُ رِسَالَتَهُ

“Allah knows best where to place His apostleship” (6: 124).

And Mary was an example of this.

We can say that even though Mary was chosen based on her family background, her formation in the womb of her mother and her superb upbringing by her mother, she continued to improve under the guardianship of Zechariah in her nurture and growth. Of course, as mentioned before, her true guardian was Allah.

Mary’s Extraordinary Acts

The virtue and greatness of Mary is made clear in the Qur’an. However, throughout time, Qur’anic

commentators have had two opinions. Some Mu'tazilites like Zamakhshari in his Al-Kashshaf have suggested that Lady Mary on her own was not able to witness and speak with angels. It was a miracle of Zechariah and Jesus and a sign of their greatness that she could have such experiences.

They have suggested that all extraordinary things that happened to Mary were either of Zecharias' miracles or of the early miracles of Jesus. This is called *irhas* (auspice). It is similar to the series of extraordinary events that will take place before the Day of Judgment (referred to as Signs of the Hour). Before the appointment or birth of a prophet, a series of extraordinary events usually take place.

Conversely, people like Qurtabi, a famous Sunni exegete, believe Mary to be a prophet. Their reason behind this belief is because angels would often appear to her and make her aware of Divine Revelations.

Through those revelations they would announce her purity and excellence and give her the glad tiding of becoming a mother to a prophet. Since Mary would receive revelations from the angels and could speak to them and the angels approached and spoke to her, she must be a prophet.

Shi'a scholars are of the belief that the status and greatness of Lady Mary has to do with herself and not just because of Zechariah or Jesus. Those extraordinary acts were not miracles of Zechariah or Jesus.

They argue for both positions from the Qur'an's exoteric meaning. According to the Qur'anic passages, all the virtues and extraordinary acts of Mary belonged to herself. The angels spoke to her and appeared to her.

The Qur'an states:

فَاتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا فَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا قَالَتْ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ مِنْكَ إِنْ كُنْتَ تَقِيًّا

And he appeared to her as a well-proportioned human. She said, 'I seek the protection of the All-beneficent from you, should you be Godwary!' (19: 17 & 18)

At the same time, Shi'a scholars normally hold that Mary was not a messenger and had not received the legislative revelation. It should be noted that Qurtabi's idea that Lady Mary was a prophetess may be accepted, but if he meant that she was a messenger, this is incorrect as described earlier.

The reason for differences of opinion between the Qur'an and the Gospels

As mentioned, in regards to Lady Mary and Jesus and many other issues, there are differences between the Qur'an and the Gospels. The Qur'an itself states this notion:

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَقُصُّ عَلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَكْثَرَ الَّذِي هُمْ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

Indeed this Qur'an recounts to the Children of Israel most of what they differ about. (27:76)

After relating the story of Mary and the miracle of Jesus, the Qur'an states the following in another section:

ذَٰلِكَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ قَوْلَ الْحَقِّ الَّذِي فِيهِ يَمْتَرُونَ

That is Jesus, son of Mary, a Word of the Real concerning whom they are in doubt. (19:34)

According to Professor Michelle Dosch, professor of History of Religions, in the various Gospels, on one account Lady Mary's name appears five times; and on another, nineteen times. Also, as mentioned earlier, Mary was portrayed only as an ordinary and average girl who so happened to be the mother of a prophet.

In the Gospel, both her early childhood and final stage of her life are unknown. However, in the Holy Qur'an not only is a chapter (Mary) named after her, but her name has also been mentioned thirty-four times with great titles attributed to her.

Conclusion

In order to provide a role model, the Holy Qur'an has used various individuals so that people can use these good exemplars as templates for themselves. Amongst them is Lady Mary, a reliable example for both women and men.

Lady Mary qualifies for an exceptional ideal because of her fine ancestry and her proper upbringing in a healthy environment. Having teachers such as her mother and Zechariah, and considering her abilities and her status before God as one who was deserving of the heavenly provisions sent for her, led to her to become a fine role model.

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[2.](#) Kasaniha, 1382. p. 119.

[3.](#) Jawadi Amuli, 1381, volume 2, p. 326.

[4.](#) أَحْصَنْتِ

[5.](#) فَفَخَّنَا فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِنَا

[6.](#) وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُتِبَ

[7.](#) مِنَ الْقَانِتِينَ

[8.](#) Ibn Arabi, volume 3.

[9.](#) Schimmel, 1376, p. 449.

[10.](#) Qanit has also been defined as preacher (dai). See Majlesi, 1403, p. 207. Therefore, Lady Mary was one of those who preached people towards god. See Fahim Kermani, 1374, pp. 42 & 43.

[11.](#) Fahim Kermani, 1374, p. 27.

[12.](#) Ibid, p. 15.

[13.](#) Gospel, Chapter 21, Verse 7–10.

[14.](#) Gospel of Luke, 1378, p. 119.

[15.](#) Jawadi Amoli, 1371, p. 143–144.

[16.](#) Motahhari, 1378, p. 119.

[17.](#) Qanitin

[18.](#) Hojjati, 1370, p. 124.

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