

# A Shared History: Representations of Mary in the Christian and Muslim Traditions

AUTUMN DELONG  
Macalester College

## Abstract

In this essay, I provide an exegetical analysis of representations of the Virgin Mary within early Syriac Christian and Muslim texts in an effort to explore the shared history and geography of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East from the first through eighth centuries. In this analysis, I focus on the Syriac Christian *Protevangelium of James* and the third and nineteenth surahs of the Qur'an. These texts provide surprisingly similar descriptions of Mary and her role in the life of Jesus, a reality which challenges what we as a society have deemed "Western" Christianity – the Christianity which has been canonized in the Christian Bible and has defined as orthodox at the hands of white, male church fathers. I argue that, as the Syriac Christians of the first century developed a distinct focus on Mary's purity, so too did the Muslim community. The portrayals of Mary in the *Protevangelium* and the Qur'an overlap as a result of these respective traditions' shared geographies and histories. I suggest that Mary is a site, sometimes one apart from Christ, which must continue to be explored to better understand the shared traditions and identities of Christians and Muslims living in the Middle East.

VENERATION OF THE VIRGIN MARY has transcended the divisions of religious communities both geographically and temporally. Theological understandings and textual representations of her, however, vary across faiths and cultures. The intersection of Christian and Muslim communities in late Byzantine history presents a unique piece of the history of devotion to Mary. To better understand how context affects these views of Mary, in this essay I focus on textual representations of her from the Syriac Christian and Muslim traditions. Within this history, I analyze the portrayals of Mary in the apocryphal Christian *Protevangelium of James* and the parallel narrative provided in Qur'anic surahs three and nineteen. I first define Syriac Christian Mariology – a unique strand of Christianity which stands apart from the Western Roman tradition – as inherited from textual portrayals such as the *Protevangelium*. I then argue that the parallels between the *Protevangelium* and the Qur'anic narrative reflect a shared interpretation of Mary.

I propose that this shared Mariology may serve as a platform for further analysis of the history of Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle East. Specifically, I am interested in how this portrayal of Mary may relate to the shared geography, history, and culture of Syriac Christianity and Islam, and I argue that these similar understandings of Mary reflect the communities' shared culture. In addition, I propose that the direct interaction between Muslims and Christians in the region, in concert with their shared textual portraits of Mary, challenges modern rhetoric of an inherent difference between Christians and Muslims. This perceived divide stems from an assumption of Christianity as "Western" and Islam as "non-Western." As this terminology ignores the diversity of beliefs and practices in both communities, my research suggests that deeper exploration of Middle Eastern Christians' view(s) of Mary may contradict the assumption that there exists a well-defined divide between the theologies of these traditions. In the interest of deconstructing these divides I suggest that scholars pay more attention to the commonalities of Middle Eastern Christianity and Islam.

Ultimately, this essay seeks to challenge the academically orthodox mode of analyzing and categorizing Christianity and Islam in the Middle East in antiquity, with a particular interest in planting seeds for further questioning in our contemporary era. By discussing the clear overlaps and shared understandings of the Virgin Mary in Syriac Christianity (as opposed to “Western” Christianity) and Islam, I pose questions regarding the validity of the common assumptions the scholarly community has made regarding her role in both these traditions. I suggest that geography, culture, and language are integrally tied to religious experience in both Christian and Muslim history and that this multidisciplinary approach to understanding the boundaries – or lack thereof – between religious traditions may be a more empathetic and historically accurate academic approach to the study of ancient Christianity in the Middle East.

## The Syriac Mary

The *Protevangelium*, more so than the canonical Gospels (which may be considered representative of the newly institutionalized Christianity of Constantine’s time), uses discussion of Mary’s purity to emphasize her connection with the divine. This attention to purity reflects a large focus in the Syriac Christian tradition on asceticism as evidenced in other Syriac Christian texts. The earliest Syriac Christian writing, the *Odes of Solomon* (probably from the end of the first century C.E.), provides some of the initial references to these ascetic ideas.<sup>1</sup> In reference to Mary, the writer states, “And she [Mary] labored and bore the Son, but without pain, because it did not occur without purpose.”<sup>2</sup> This depiction of Mary fixates on her lack of pain during childbirth, explained by her of purity and lack of sinfulness.

Later Syriac writers and poets further expounded upon the prototypical ideas of the *Odes*. Ephrem the Syrian, a prominent fourth century Syriac writer (c. 306-373 C.E.), presents a similar view in his work, contrasting the purity and holiness of Mary with the sinfulness and humanity of Eve.<sup>3</sup> He states, “Your [Mary’s] womb escaped the pangs of the curse. By means of the serpent came the pains of the female [Eve]; Shamed be the Foul one, on seeing that his pangs are not found in your womb!”<sup>4</sup> This and other excerpts of Ephrem’s work emphasize Mary’s virginity and lack of sin. This focus on Mary’s purity reflects the fundamental focus on asceticism in the Syriac Christian tradition as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

*The Ascension of Isaiah*, an Antiochian text, also focuses on Mary’s purity.<sup>6</sup> Fragments of this book, which likely dates to the second century, exist today in Greek, old Slavonic, and Coptic translations. The entire text, however, remains only in Ethiopian, suggesting a similar geographical relevance to that of the Infancy Gospel.<sup>7</sup> This narrative presents a similar understanding of Mary’s and Joseph’s relationship to that of the *Protevangelium*, as both emphasize the couple’s kinship and Mary’s virginity.<sup>8</sup> The gospel tradition of the early Syrian church broadly portrayed Mary as a pivotal figure in the narrative of Jesus’ life.<sup>9</sup> These Syriac references to Mary’s purity reflect the influence of the earlier Infancy Gospel and suggest that the Syriac Christian community inherited

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<sup>1</sup>Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>“The Ascension of Isaiah,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 643.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup>Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*, (New Haven: Yale University, 2016), p. 86.

a different understanding of Mary than that of the Roman Church.<sup>10</sup>

The text on which I focus in this essay, the *Protevangelium of James*, (alternatively named the Infancy Gospel of James), is an apocryphal Christian text which may be divided into three sections. The first provides the story of the Virgin Mary's own birth and childhood; the second contains an account of her marriage to Joseph; and the third recounts the story of Jesus's birth as harmonized from the canonical Gospels of Matthew and Luke.<sup>11</sup> The text claims to be written by James, Jesus' step-brother. References to the canonical Gospels lead scholars to believe that the original must have been composed in the mid-second or early third century.<sup>12</sup> The text exists today in about one hundred and thirty Greek manuscripts, almost all of which are from later than the tenth century.<sup>13</sup> Four known manuscripts of a Syriac translation exist, which scholars believe date to the fifth century.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have also uncovered manuscripts of this text written in Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, and Coptic, but are not yet able to determine which version stands as the original.<sup>15</sup> From this translation tradition, we may infer that the *Protevangelium* circulated widely in Middle Eastern Christian communities, but did not gain such prevalence in the Latin Christian tradition.<sup>16</sup> Although scholars are unable to confirm where the text originated, Syria is perhaps most plausible, as many other Gospel harmonies also have their origin there.<sup>17</sup>

As evidenced from this translation tradition and the text's parallels with numerous other Syriac Christian texts, the *Protevangelium* may serve as the representation of Mary accepted by the Syriac Christian community and divergent from that of the Roman Christians. It is especially important to note that these differences focus particularly on Mary's agency or lack thereof. The Latin rite largely adopts the portrayal of Mary included in the New Testament canon, which largely emphasizes Jesus' agency and Mary's role as his mother. These Syriac Christian texts, and particularly the *Protevangelium*, highlight Mary's own connection with the divine, rather than basing her importance on the divinity of her son.

## The Muslim Mary

Echoing the Infancy Gospel view of Mary, Qur'anic surahs three and nineteen, which provide the Muslim account of Mary's life, narrate Mary's life in a way which highlights her purity. As Muslims believe the text to be a direct transcription of the oral revelations of God's word to the Prophet Muhammad, the narrative may have been recorded as early as 610 CE, when Muhammad began to receive these revelations. Given the lack of hard evidence for the existence of the Qur'an before the seventh century, the dating of this text has created great scholarly debate. The story of Mary's life given in Surah 19, however, contains quotations, paraphrases, and adaptations from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan asserts that these parallels are especially significant "when seen in connection with the differences between the Christian doctrine of Mary, as it had developed by the time of Muhammad in the early seventh century, and the Muslim

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<sup>10</sup>Rubin, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup>"The Protevangelium of James," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), p. 421.

<sup>12</sup>"Infancy Gospel of James," Early Christian Writings (accessed April 2, 2018).

<sup>13</sup>"The Protevangelium of James," in *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, ed. Ron Cameron (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), p. 107.

<sup>14</sup>*New Testament Apocrypha*, p. 421.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 422.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>*The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1996), p. 69.

portrait of her in the Qur'an and in Islamic commentaries on the Holy Book."<sup>19</sup> This statement, however, accepts the notion that one understanding of Mary could exist. As Rubin explains, "it was out of the religious debates and controversies in the rich desert cities of Arabia that a new stage in the realization of Mary took place, as Mary became one of the holiest women of a new religion - Islam."<sup>20</sup> The Muslim depiction of Mary, which differs dramatically from that provided by the canonical Gospels, emerged in the midst of great debate about the role of Mary and the nature of her son, Jesus.

## Exegesis of Key Phrases

Both the *Protevangelium* and the Qur'anic surahs paint Mary as a chaste figure throughout her lifetime, beginning with her conception. In both texts, this section of the narrative portrays the commitment of Mary's parents, Imran and Anna, to their Lord. As a display of this devotion, they dedicate their future child, Mary, to the work of God. The *Protevangelium* reads, "Anna said, 'As the Lord my God lives, if I bear a child, whether male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it shall serve him all the days of its life.'"<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the Qur'an states, "The wife of Imran [Anna] said, 'My Lord, indeed I have pledged to You what is in my womb, consecrated [for Your service], so accept this from me.'"<sup>22</sup> In both texts, Anna and Imran entrust their future child to the Lord, connecting her to the divine from the time of her birth. In both narratives, Mary embodies a unique connection with the divine through her parents.

This emphasis on Mary's purity and connection with the divine continues in both portrayals of her childhood. From a young age, Mary lives in a temple, away from the rest of society, as a man named Zechariah takes care of her. This seclusion from the outside world builds a textual focus on Mary's purity. Both narratives depict her as receiving food from a heavenly or divine source. The Infancy Gospel reads, "And Mary lived in the temple of the Lord. She was fed there like a dove, receiving her food from the hand of a heavenly messenger."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the Qur'an states, "Every time Zechariah entered upon her in the prayer chamber, he found with her provision. He said, 'O Mary, from where is this [coming] to you?' She said, 'It is from Allah. Indeed, Allah provides for whom He wills without account.'"<sup>24</sup> Thus, both texts depict Mary as pure and in direct communication with the divine, leading to the fulfillment of her role as the mother of Jesus.

While these texts align in their representations of Mary specifically, they differ in their understanding of her relationship to Jesus. Most obviously, the Qur'an seems to give Mary more of a position of honor, stating, "the angels said, 'O Mary, indeed Allah gives you good tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary.'"<sup>25</sup> In naming Jesus as the son of *Mary*, rather than the son of *God*, Mary gains more agency than in the *Protevangelium*. In addition, the Qur'an highlights Jesus' devotion to his mother. It states, "[Jesus] said, 'Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet... And [made me] dutiful to my mother.'"<sup>26</sup> This contrasts with "occasional Gospel suggestions of a coldness between the adult Jesus and his mother," as may be seen during the Wedding at Cana (John 2:3-4).<sup>27</sup> In

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup>Rubin, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup>*Protevangelium* 4.2

<sup>22</sup>Qur'an 3.35

<sup>23</sup>*Protevangelium* 8.3

<sup>24</sup>Qur'an 3.37

<sup>25</sup>Qur'an 3.45

<sup>26</sup>Qur'an 19.30-32

<sup>27</sup>Tim Winter, "Mary in Islam," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), p. 483, no. 24.

this scene, Jesus responds flippantly to Mary's gentle observation that they have run out of wine. While these texts portray Mary's purity in similar ways, they differ in their understanding of the relationship between Mary and her son.

## Mariology in Conversation with Christology

To better explore how these representations of Mary relate to the communities' contrasting perceptions of Jesus, we must return to the Christian Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. The result of a long Christological controversy, this conference was held in an effort to define Christ's nature. [Many] Middle Eastern Christians adopted a miaphysite view which diverged from the orthodoxy adopted at Chalcedon, arguing that Christ had a united God-man nature. As this Christological controversy continued to divide Christians, it became important for Church leaders to assert Christ's divinity, defining him as the "Son of God" and Mary as the *Theotokos* - the "Bearer of God."

The growth of Islam further expanded the scope of this Christian debate of Jesus' nature to become part of the Muslim narrative as well. Multiple early Muslim texts, including the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock (c. 691 C.E.), label Christ as the Messiah, Apostle, and the "Son of Mary."<sup>28</sup> Multiple scholars assert that these textual representations of Mary are related to the traditions' views of Christ. Tim Winter, for instance, understands Mary as serving the needs of the greater Islamic theology, as he states:

The Qur'anic text shares the *Protevangelium's* emphasis on Mary's purity, her prayerfulness, her miracles and her moral excellence. Although these are charisms of Mary in her own right, they also provide a fitting Islamic preface to the birth of a messianic prophet, who explicitly rejects those who would divinize him. Like his mother, he is only a human, a servant of God.<sup>29</sup>

I am hesitant to ascribe the Islamic community's view of Mary entirely to its understanding of Christ. However, the Islamic and Syriac Christian communities' common focus on Mary's purity cannot be overlooked. Miri Rubin provides an insightful understanding of the Muslim depiction of Mary as inherited from shared discourse with the Christian community, explaining:

The Muslim reaction against the course that orthodox dogmatics had taken in the Christian church, specifically with regard to the person of Jesus Christ, also had to follow the Christian development by focusing serious attention on Mary, not as *Theotokos*, Mother of God, but as Mother of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

With this acknowledgment of the communities' shared inheritance of a pure and profoundly agentive Mary, I wonder how this narrative interacted with their differing views of Christ. Did the faiths' contrasting views of Jesus shape those of Mary, or vice versa? Or did these respective Mariologies and Christologies influence each other, eventually becoming inextricably linked?

## Conclusion

As Syriac Christians developed a distinct focus on Mary's purity, so too did the Muslim community. As such, the portrayals of Mary in the *Protevangelium*, the hymns of Ephrem, *The Ascension*

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<sup>28</sup>Fred M. Donner, "Inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem," in *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010), p. 233-235.

<sup>29</sup>Winter, p. 480.

<sup>30</sup>Rubin, p. 75.

of *Isaiah*, and the Qur'an overlap as a result of their respective traditions' shared histories. As discussion of Mary inherently involves discussion of Jesus, recognizing the parallels between the Christian and Muslim depictions of Mary also draws into question how these representations of Mary relate to the communities' understandings of Jesus. Do these communities' shared Mariologies reflect the wider history of the traditions? How do these representations of Mary relate to the communities' differing ideas of Christ? How does the Syriac view of Mary differ from that of the Roman Church? What effect does this difference have on relations between what we conceive as Western and Eastern Christians throughout history? And finally, could Syriac Christians quite possibly share more history with Muslims than with the Roman Church?

The intersections of these texts push us to recognize the possibility for harmonious relations between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East. The analogous representations of Mary in the *Protevangelium* and the Qur'anic surahs three and nineteen reflects the shared geography of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and suggests the possibility of a larger shared history. In addition, these communities' shared inheritance of a distinctly pure Mary challenges the notion that Christians and Muslims are inherently at odds with each other. This direct interaction between Muslims and Christians in late antiquity remains integral to modern discussion of interactions between Europe and the Middle East, as the communities' shared understanding of Mary challenges common political and social rhetoric which defines Muslims as the "other." Continued exploration of Christian understandings of Mary in the Middle East, especially in relationship to the views of Muslim communities, may further dispute this hateful speech.

Given the limited scope of this essay, I have only focused on those sections of the Qur'an which provide the narrative of Mary's life parallel to the *Protevangelium*. I therefore propose that, in the future, scholars explore the ambiguity in the authorship of the Qur'an and the subsequent possibility for multiple, varying representations of Mary within that text. I also propose that future research explore these texts in relation to both communities' geographic separation from "Western" Christianity. These representations of Mary provide a platform for exploration of other aspects of these communities' shared history, which may continue the work of challenging the perceived divide between Christians and Muslims. Academic scholarship should not and cannot fall victim to the biases and assumptions which pepper the landscape of our contemporary world. Rather, the academy must base its findings on the texts and resources available to it, ultimately working to combat those biases which have historically characterized its view of history, particularly that of Islam and the Middle East. Both for the deconstruction of divides built between historic identities and life-worlds, and for the betterment of scholarly integrity, the academic community must challenge what has become an academically orthodox division between religious traditions.

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