



*The Bible - Women - The Qur'an:  
Some intertwining perspectives*



I remember talking with a new Christian friend who had grown-up in the Middle East, some forty years ago. Her wise advice, that if I wanted to introduce Muslim friends to the good news of Jesus then the scripture I needed to know well is the Bible, has served me well in the intervening years. Mostly it has served to nurture my own walk with the Living God, so that when I have been asked to explain the hope that is in me it has simply been natural to share texts, themes, and stories from God's word that have shaped and thrilled me, almost invariably resulting in further interest in my questioner. Some of those friends have been keen to tell me that the things I have spoken of are found in the Qur'an, a few wanted to know if I had read the Qur'an, and one with whom I corresponded for a while challenged me to join her in making a comparison between the two scriptures: I continue to feel sad that responsibilities which took me away from the role I had at that time meant I could not follow through on that challenge. Perhaps if I had had a better knowledge of the Qur'an I would have been able to manage responsibilities and take up the challenge.

For many of the early years of ministry I had attempted reading an English translation of the Qur'an, but in a dip-in-and-out-to-find-out-what-is-said-on-key-topics kind of way. My knowledge of what is in the Qur'an was guided by the knowledge of others, mostly through the teaching and writing of Christians. It was an unusual Muslim friend who could give me any help in how to go about becoming familiar with the Qur'an. They knew their faith through the traditions they had been taught. Their Qur'an was literally a veiled book, as it was kept wrapped in a cloth to honour and protect it and was in a language which they could not read (Arabic) even if they were literate. (Many Muslim women I had the privilege to meet in Pakistan were smart but

illiterate, with Punjabi, Saraiki, or Pahari as their heart language whilst able to understand Urdu when spoken, but certainly not when written.) When I shared stories of Jesus' respect and kindness towards women, even as they were drawn to him, some would want me to know that this was what their Prophet was like too. I am guessing that readers of this article have probably had the same experience, whilst hopefully also finding that faithfully continuing to share such stories, especially in the context of more sustained Chronological Storying from the Bible (sometimes now called CBS), is nevertheless taken by the Spirit of God to reveal His love. For those unfamiliar with CBS, the approach combines oral sharing of Bible Stories, usually in their chronological sequence, with discussion.<sup>91</sup> The non-literate has freedom to repeat and to memorize in a dialogical process that is gently geared toward a clear destination.<sup>92</sup> With literate women it was, and is, always easier to open texts to enable exploration of the evidence. But inevitably most at some point have questions of comparison. Often the questioners' ideas about what is in Christian scripture and in the Qur'an is more informed by what others have taught them than their own reading of the text (as is true of most Christians, even a majority of those training for ministry, if my recent experiences of lecturing and teaching are anything to go by! ... and also true of most secular commentators on the relationship between Islam and Christianity). Certainly, in the South Asian context, most questioners could not actually help me to locate where words or phrases they might quote from memory had come from. Yet their

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<sup>91</sup> Annette Hall, "Chronological Bible Storying" in *From Fear to Faith: Muslim and Christian Women*, compiled by Mary Ann Cate and Karol Downey (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 75.

<sup>92</sup> Scott Moreau and Mike O'Rear, "And So the Story Goes ... Web Resources on Storytelling, Myths and Proverbs," *EMQ* 40 no. 2 (April 2004), 237.

assumptions, part grounded in their scripture and part in their traditions, influenced what they could understand of the Christian message.

In light of these things I continue to endorse the views of my friend of forty years ago but am also convinced of the need to develop good general knowledge of the Qur'an and what Muslim sisters know of it. What follows are, therefore, some insights gathered as I have sought to become clearer about the kinds of things other women may want to clarify, including what to make of observations by some influential contemporary Muslim women writers. I set up our shared reflections by first giving a wide-angle overview of what we find in the Qur'an, before taking us into some selected detail. I do, of course, write as a Christian. Indeed, I illustrate various points by making comparison with the Bible, as most of us develop our understanding through analogy. However, it would please me greatly if you check my detail with the primary source (the Qur'an) and, when you have opportunity, compare with what others say.

### **Introducing the Qur'an and its women characters**

The vast majority of Muslims accept the leading 'orthodox' view that the Qur'an has actually always existed,<sup>93</sup> but was revealed through the Prophet Muhammad in the later third of his life, i.e., the late sixth and early seventh century after the birth of Christ (CE). After a period of counter proposals and even heated debate, current non-Muslim scholarship has largely settled to agreeing with the broad details of timing and

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<sup>93</sup> There have always been those who hold that the Qur'an is a product of human mediation in much the same way as Christians speak of inspiration of the Bible (see Suleiman A. Mourad 'Theology, Freewill and Predestination' in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Islamic World*, 2013: 187). It is not an uncommon view amongst Muslim intelligentsia today.

circumstances in which the Qur'an came into being that Islam has claimed.<sup>94</sup> More disputed is the milieu in which it was initially situated, and what kinds of exposure to Christians, Jews and other religious groups are in evidence in the allusive references to shared prophets and models. Where Muslims and Christians co-exist together today most will be aware that we share Mary, Abraham, Moses and some other major figures. To state the obvious, there is no reference to important figures in the indigenous belief systems of North America or Austral-Asia, nor even to Buddha or Confucius, in the Qur'an. However, most of the limited number of qur'anic characters, other than those who were contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad, are to be found in the Bible. There is a particular relationship between Islam and the biblical faiths that begs comparative questions. There are allusions in the Qur'an which imply familiarity with elements of Jewish and Christian traditions. It is not uncommon for Christians to view elements of the Qur'anic presentations of past events and prophetic models as evidence of misunderstanding or due to dependency on apocryphal sources, if not demonic perversions, or for Muslims to say that differences exist because the biblical material is changed from the true original. But if we are serious about getting our assumptions straight, we need to first check the detail of what is there. If you want to think this through some more, I found the comments of Anderson, in the opening chapter of his *The Qur'an in Context*, very helpful on this matter.<sup>95</sup>

The Qur'an is around the size of the New Testament but is very different in its make-up. The New Testament is made up of blocks of books characterised by their

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<sup>94</sup> See Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, 2017, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Robert Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016, 9-11.

genre: the Gospels and Acts track history in a narrational way, the letters are ... letters, whilst the book of Revelation intertwines symbolic visions with apocalyptic storying. The Qur'an is made up of 114 suras, which are not books (though suras 2-5, if not others, could be considered book length in the biblical kind of way) nor even really chapters (as chapters tend to be constructed to follow one another to develop argument or plot). In many ways suras are more like Psalms. Each is distinct. Some include references to historical events and stories found elsewhere in the monotheistic scripture (a bit like we find in Pauline letters as well as some Psalms), whilst others are more like prayers, or are tools for worship. It does feature apocalyptic outbursts, and also, in suras close to the beginning of the Qur'an, extended portions of legislation. The stories in the Qur'an tend not to be full blown narratives, Sura Yusuf (ie., sura 12) notwithstanding. In narrative, such as the Gospels of the New Testament and books such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel etc in the Old Testament, the characteristics of individuals and the plot develop as different events take place over time: these narratives not only provide some historical chronology but open up the way human beings come to know God (or wander away from Him). Whether it is the apostle Peter or the great patriarch Abraham, the narrative of the Bible shows them being stretched in faith and developing as people of God through their failings and their Redeemer's kindness as unanticipated experiences come their way. In contrast, though like some of the letters of the New Testament (eg., Romans 9:8-18, Hebrews 11), the Qur'an mostly gives short vignettes, as it utilises the great characters as models of faith in its overarching genre of prophetic warning. The difference between qur'anic genre and much of the Bible make it difficult for Muslim readers of the Bible to find their way around and make initial sense of the biblical text. The differences can also tempt us to present our Bible characters in a qur'anic kind of way to make them

understandable. The irony is that, as we observed at the beginning of this article, the majority of Muslims know about the important characters of Islam through their traditions (rather than directly from the Qur'an), and this fills in detail about them through story! It is not possible to give a precise total for the number of women characters found in the Qur'an, nor indeed for the Bible. The Qur'an does not say how many daughters Lot had (Q11:81), nor the quantity of Egyptian women who cut themselves in the Joseph story (Q12:30-31) or give the exact number of 'Mothers of the Believers' (Q33:6). But then how many women celebrated the birth of Naomi's grandson at the end of the book of Ruth (Ruth 4:14), or eulogised the breasts that nurtured Jesus (Luke 11:28)? Clearly counting such things in scripture is an inexact science. Even so, we note that there are around 20 women specifically identified in the Qur'an, mostly referred to in single or short blocks of verses. Only one of them, Mary the mother of Isa, is mentioned by name. Most of the others are namelessly identified, often in terms of a male relative. Meanwhile around thirty male characters are named in the Qur'an. Most are identified as prophets. The Bible has between 135 and 170 women who are identified by personal name amongst an even harder-to-be-sure-of number of between 1,700 to 2,900 named men.<sup>96</sup> The issue of genre may play a part in this difference between the Bible and the Qur'an too. For the relatively low number of named women compared to men in the Bible reflects their absence from the prophetic books, the rarity of them being foreign political leaders or of them being mentioned in

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<sup>96</sup> Karla G. Bohmbach, 'Names and Naming in the Biblical World' (in Meyers (ed.) *A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical books and the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001: 33-4) reviews ambiguities in the texts which make it impossible to give an exact number, eg., where spellings could make a name refer either to a man or a women, or even two people.

lists of priests and warriors. What the Bible reader notes is that women have significant roles within the great narrative portions of her scripture, and where her status and condition decline it is symptomatic of deterioration of community faith.<sup>97</sup> With the help of the table below, and some knowledge of the Bible, we also note that the only women mentioned in both the New Testament and the Qur'an are the mothers of John the Baptist / Yahya and Jesus / Isa. Many aspects of the Gospel accounts are unknown to those nurtured on the Qur'an. But, then, what details about the women characters in the Qur'an have we tended to assume or overlook?

The stories about female characters which are beloved by Muslim women tend not to come from the Qur'an.<sup>98</sup> They know all kinds of detail about their great faith example Khadija, who is not mentioned in the Qur'an at all. But then neither is Fatima, nor A'isha unless as tradition suggests she is being alluded to in sura 24:11-12. The women who *are* to be found in the Qur'an are listed below. The table shows which suras mention women characters, and who those women are (those bracketed indicate that it is not clear who is being referred to):

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<sup>97</sup> The recent edition of the Tyndale commentary on the book of Judges (Mary J. Evans, *Judges and Ruth*, IVP, 2017) is a helpful guide to this subject.

<sup>98</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, remains the seminal work on the subject.



<i>Sura</i>	<i>Women Characters</i>
<b>2</b>	<i>Wife of Adam (v.35)</i>
<b>3</b>	<i>'A woman of Imran' (vv. 35-36) and her daughter Mary (vv.35-63)</i>
<b>4</b>	<i>Mary (v.156)</i>
<b>5</b>	<i>Mary (vv.17&amp;78)</i>
<b>7</b>	<i>Wife of Adam (vv.18-25)</i>
<b>11</b>	<i>Wife of Abraham (vv.69-73), daughters (v.78) and wife of Lot (v.81),</i>
<b>12</b>	<i>Potiphar's wife (vv.21-35) and Egyptian women who cut their hands (vv.30-31) – in the Joseph story</i>
<b>(14)</b>	<i>(Hagar (v.37))</i>
<b>15</b>	<i>Wife (vv.58-60) and daughters of Lot (v.71)</i>
<b>19</b>	<i>Mary (vv.16-34)</i>
<b>20</b>	<i>Mother and sister of Moses (vv. 38-40), wife of Adam (vv.115-121)</i>
<b>21</b>	<i>Mary (v. 91)</i>
<b>23</b>	<i>Mary (v. 50)</i>
<b>(24)</b>	<i>(A'isha (vv.11-26))</i>
<b>26</b>	<i>Old woman (= wife of Lot (v.171))</i>
<b>27</b>	<i>Queen of Sheba (vv.20-44), wife of Lot (v.57)</i>
<b>28</b>	<i>Mother and sister of Moses (vv.7-13), wife of Pharaoh (vv.9-13), the woman Moses married (vv.22-28)</i>
<b>29</b>	<i>Wife of Lot (vv.32-33)</i>
<b>(33)</b>	<i>(Mothers of the Believers (vv.6,28-40,53, etc))</i>

<b>37</b>	<i>Old woman (= wife of Lot (v.135))</i>
<b>51</b>	<i>Wife of Abraham (vv.24-30)</i>
<b>58</b>	<i>'The woman who pleads' (v.1) – contemporary with Muhammad</i>
<b>60</b>	<i>'The women to be evaluated' (Title and v. 10) – contemporary with Muhammad</i>
<b>66</b>	<i>2 wives of Muhammad (vv.3-5), wives of Lot and of Noah (v.10), wife of Pharaoh (v.11), Mary (v.12)</i>
<b>111</b>	<i>Wife of Abu Lahab (vv.4-5) - contemporary with Muhammad</i>

### **Women characters in the Qur'an: some observations**

In recent years a number of Muslim women scholars, taking up a term first coined by the biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, have sought to present a 'depatriarchalized' reading of the Qur'an. Trible's fresh analysis of the early chapters of Genesis, developed<sup>99</sup> in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978), sent wide ripples which continue to reverberate in the world of biblical studies. Women such as Riffat Hassan, Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud have likewise reviewed assumptions about female origins, status and culpability which had been justified through their scripture. They too have created fresh perspectives within their own community of faith as they have reviewed what is written and taught about the qur'anic Eve. It is both heartening to see the initiatives and heart-breaking to read the comparative elements of their critiques.

In her 1985 *al-Mushir* article Hassan led the way with polemical criticism of the influence of biblically-based Christian teaching about Eve's contribution to the Fall, as

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<sup>99</sup> Her initial article, called 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *JAAR* 41: 30-48, was published in 1973.

she pointed out that there is no indication in the Qur'an that the woman initiated the eating of the fruit in the Garden. Denise Spellberg (1996)<sup>100</sup> reinforced the critique of Christian influence by arguing that Islamic consensus was constructed from encounter with Jewish and Christian oral, written and cultural tradition in ninth and tenth century Baghdad (during the Abbasid Caliphate). From my own investigations I have discovered that it is, in fact, really hard to accurately deduce how the very negative teaching about the wife of Adam emerged. It more likely came from Greek influence in the Baghdad region, as Aristotelian ideas came to the fore when Muslims, Jews and Christians thrashed out their thoughts there in the early parts of the Abbasid era. It is true that hierarchical notions of women's status can be found in patristic statements from this period<sup>101</sup>, but the extreme position found in Muslim tradition<sup>102</sup> (not the Qur'an) that woman was made from 'a bent rib' existed centuries before it drifted in to Christian lore. It is not at all clear in which direction the traffic of ideas and interpretation went. It does, perhaps, illustrate how inter-faith debate can take everyone away from detail in their own scriptures.

But if we leave traditions out of the equation what is said of Eve in the Qur'an, and in the Bible? First we affirm that there is no direct reference to her creation in the Qur'an, but also note that the account of her beginnings in Genesis 2 are a celebration of the correspondence of the man and the women: the 'this', 'this', 'this' of Genesis

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<sup>100</sup> Denise Spellberg, 'Writing the Unwritten Life of Islamic Eve: Menstruation and Demonization of Motherhood' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, 1996:305.

<sup>101</sup> Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Scheearing and Valarie H. Ziegler (eds.), *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999: 112, 150-151.

<sup>102</sup> See both Hassan but also Jane I. Smith & Yvonne Y. Haddad, 'Eve: Islamic Image of Women' in Azizah al-Hibri (ed.) *Women and Islam*, Oxford: Pergammon Press, 1982:137.

2:23 is exuberant declaration of discovering the perfect match. In the Bible she then emerges as an active character in the narrative of Genesis chapters 3 and 4, and is referred to for illustration in 2 Corinthians 11:3 (where her experience is taken as a warning to both men and women about their capacity for being duped) and 1 Timothy 2:13-15 (in a letter from Paul to the young pastor Timothy, where guidelines are given that strong vocal women should quietly learn, echoing the important lesson in Genesis that Adam's wife was neither the actual source of life nor of wisdom). The three repeat accounts of Adam and his wife eating the fruit and being expelled from the Garden found in the Qur'an all involve language that affirms the gift of gendered human coupling, even as the pair share in the same act of disobedient eating. Reading the Bible and Qur'an side by side, leads us to similarly note that at the heart of 1 Timothy, as at the end of Genesis chapter 2, statements indicate the high view in which scriptures hold marriage: 1 Timothy 4:1-5 warns against hypocrites with seared consciences who 'forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving ... for everything created by God is good ... .' Alongside this we also observe that both the Qur'an and Bible admit that the good relationship can go wrong, and expand on the implications. We find that the second sura, which has the story of Adam and his wife as the first vignette, moves towards legislation in its second half which deals with provision in case of divorce, being widowed and law suits. We also find that in Genesis their story sets the context for the long account of patriarchs and matriarchs that is characterised by all kinds of hopes, passions, deceits but also deliverance, with the downward spiral resolved after, on the one hand, Judah's heart is turned back towards righteousness through the creative intervention of a woman who was being ignored (Genesis 38) and, on the other, Joseph resists a temptress (Genesis 39). Read this way, both accounts leave



open any judgement we make on Adam's partner: in the Bible and the Qur'an Adam's wife is a good thing, even as the pair succumb to Satan's deception.

Careful attention to biblical narrative reveals that women have always had active roles in the purpose of God in ways that extend beyond child rearing, or keeping home (eg., Abigail (1 Sam 25), the wise woman of Abel beth-Maacah (2 Sam 20), the slave girl in the story of Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), Mary Magdelene (John 20:11-18), Phoebe (Romans 16:1)). As Jardim demonstrates more fully, women also have agency in the Qur'an (Georgina Jardim, *Recovering the Female Voice in Islamic Scripture*, 2016, see especially pp 204-5 and 217-219). However Muslim women scholars addressing issues of patriarchy turn to semiotics and ontology rather than to narrative within their scripture to make their point: as already observed, the option of narrative is not readily available to them due to the genres employed. And interestingly, even for the scholars, recognising the theological intent of biblical narrative does not come naturally: in her very balanced article on the Joseph story (sura 12) Shirin Shafaie draws the conclusion that 'The biblical account is far less theological; here the name of God appears only once, whereas in the qur'anic account, we can observe a "*transition from narrative to explicit theological discourse.*"<sup>103</sup> The moot point that impacts how we help each other hear our respective texts then, lies in our understanding(s) of how they do theology. We Christians would all do well, I suggest, to consider the many ways the Bible informs knowledge of God without constantly interjecting with a, or the, name of God, even as we consider how to help friends recognise what is being set out through

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<sup>103</sup> Sharin Shafaie, *Toward inter-theological hermeneutics*, in Daniel J. Crowther et al, *Reading the Bible in Qur'anic Context*, London: Routledge, 2017::51, italic hers to show she is referring to Paul Ricoeur's 'Towards a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties' in his *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, 1995:246

the tracing of history or drawing on signs and symbolism. Biblical narrative is not sugar-coating around hidden doctrine, but theological testimony to the way the living God deals in the real lives of flawed humanity.

Actually the Qur'an too demonstrates direct and indirect ways of presenting teaching. On the one hand the single straightforward statement in Sura 33:35

*“Surely the men who submit (to Allah) and the women who submit (to Allah), the men who have faith and the women who have faith, the men who are obedient and the women who are obedient, the men who are truthful and the women who are truthful; the men who are steadfast and the women who are steadfast, the men who humble themselves (to Allah) and the women who humble themselves (to Allah), the men who give alms and the women who give alms, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard their chastity, the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember Allah much: for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward”*

is regularly taken to demonstrate equality of women and men before God whilst, on the other, elements of Sura 4:34, which in a literal reading seems to promote harsh treatment of wives by husbands,

*“... righteous women are obedient and guard the rights of men in their absence under Allah's protection. As for women of whom you fear rebellion, admonish them, and remain apart from them in beds, and beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek ways to harm them ...”*

are judged to be not so straightforward but needing to be explained through comparison with other texts and underlying principles. Barlas and Wadud both resolve the seeming conflict through philosophical deduction that takes the principles of God's justice<sup>104</sup> and of unity<sup>105</sup> as the foundation of their interpretation. Narrative from beyond and within the Qur'an also contributes evidence from which deductions can be made. Detail given about Mary (sura 3:45), and about Moses' mother (sura 28:7) show women being inspired by God whilst sura 66, in particular, counterbalances any presumption that the majority of the Qur'an's women characters are simply appendages of the leading prophets of the major epochs (ie., the wives of Adam, of Noah, of Abraham and Lot, women in the world of Moses and then of John the Baptist and Jesus, and of Muhammad) by emphasising that even these women only attain Paradise through their own genuine faith.

So, both Bible and Qur'an highlight the importance of the personal active faith of individual women. However it is notable that sura 66 (Surat al-Tahrim, 'The Prohibition'), which has the largest concentration of different women characters in the Qur'an though only twelve verses long, is more known for the traditional background

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<sup>104</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002:16

<sup>105</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading Sacred Texts from a Woman's Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999:25-26

stories related to its origins than for what it says about the faith of women. In all likelihood your Muslim friends will know well the alternative entertaining back stories from the hadith, which tell of the Prophet being tricked by two of his jealous wives.<sup>106</sup> It is very unlikely that they will know that the detail on Noah's wife conflicts with that in the Bible, and that this is the only place in any world literature where she is deemed to be wanting in her faith. From traditional interpretations they are also likely to understand that the sura provides the basis for confirming that Pharaoh's wife, Assiya, and Mary qualify to be consorts for Muhammad in Paradise. Meanwhile Christian readers tend to be left wondering why Mary is called 'the daughter of 'Imran' here (sura 66:12). Contemporary scholars tell us that this echoes reference to Mary being born into the clan of 'Imran in sura 3: 33, and being called 'Sister of Aaron' in Q19:28, and may not be due to a muddle with the sister of Moses but echoing the allegorical language of the early Syriac theologian, Ephrem (306-373 CE), who likened Mary the mother of Jesus to Aaron's flowering rod (Numbers 17:8).<sup>107</sup> Here, almost delinked from Jesus, who is not referred to in sura 66, Mary is recognised as a legitimate member from amongst the Jewish community (belonging to the clan from which their first leaders came<sup>108</sup>), whose openness to revelation and capacity for self-control is exemplary. Elements within other vignettes referring to her in the Qur'an (sura 3:31-63, Sura 19:16-34) also seem to echo non-canonical Christian traditions of

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<sup>106</sup> Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an*, 100

<sup>107</sup> Michael Marx, 'Glimpses of a Mariology in the Qur'an: From Hagiography to Theology via Religious-Political Debate', in A. Neuwirth et al. (eds.), *Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigation into Qur'anic milieu*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010, 533-563, esp. 553.

<sup>108</sup> Suleiman A. Mourad, 'Mary in the Qur'an: a re-examination of her presentation', in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in Historical Context*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008, 163-174.



that time.<sup>109</sup> Tradition, it seems, has long clouded what Muslims and Christians have understood of each others' scriptures.

All this leads me to conclude that getting clear about precise detail in the Qur'an will not necessarily help us know the lessons our friends have learnt from it. It will, though, help us not to be unknowingly dismissive or presumptuous about the text our sisters treasure.

### **Some final thoughts**

A lot of Christians, keen to prepare themselves for witness to Muslims, memorise questions related to a qur'anic (re)telling of the annunciation to Mary (sura 3:42-49). If you have found that useful all well and good. But the parallel telling in the Gospel of Luke opens up much more detail both about Jesus, Son of David, and also the active growing faith of Mary. It does not leave her as a voiceless, pious example. Her story does not end with the conception, nor even the birth, of Jesus. Staying with the narrative we discover a woman whose initial faith was challenged and reshaped the longer she was around Jesus. Continuing to dig into and reflect on the biblical text has the potential to take us on that same journey. It is enriched when we do so against the backcloth of comparing with the Qur'an: a process that is eminently doable these days. Hopefully, as a result it becomes ever more natural to share texts, themes, and stories from God's word that shape and thrill us, to the end that our friends want to become a part of the bigger narrative of God's unfolding plans for the world He loves.

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<sup>109</sup> Michael Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an side by side*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010: 137-148