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Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima as Spiritual Female Models
in al-Ṭabarī's Presentation

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To Dr. Priscilla Starratt

ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a comparative study of three spiritual female models recognized in the Islamic tradition: Maryam, the mother of ʿĪsā, Khadīja, the Prophet Muḥammad's first wife, and Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter. Although comparisons between these three women occur frequently in the Islamic literature of different periods, this research focuses on two works of the famous exegete and historian Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), i.e., Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān and Taʾrīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk. In the light of textual analysis of al-Ṭabarī's depiction of these three women, it appears that their images contribute towards the formation of an ideal type of the believing Muslim woman. Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima are consistently characterized by their obedience, motherhood and purity. This thesis analyzes al-Ṭabarī's comments on, and understanding of, each of these virtues. It also argues that the comparison between these three women, as found in al-Ṭabarī's works, serves a wider religious purpose. Paradoxically, Khadīja's and Fāṭima's comparison with Maryam allowed the early exegetes to establish Islam's continuity with respect to the existing monotheistic religions and, at the same time, to affirm its superiority over them.

RÉSUMÉ

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Titre: Les modeles spirituels féminins Maryam, Khadīja et Fāṭima dans les
              oeuvres d'al-Ṭabarī

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Ce mémoire entreprend l'étude comparative de trois modeles spirituels féminins reconnus au sein de la tradition islamique: Maryam, la mere de 'Isā (Jésus), Khadīja, la premiere femme du Prophete Muhammad et Fāṭima, la fille du Prophete. Bien que la comparaison entre ces trois femmes apparaisse fréquemment dans la littérature islamique a différentes époques, cette recherche se concentre sur deux travaux du célebre exégete et historien Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (m. 310/923), Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān et Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk. A la lumiere de l'analyse textuelle de la description qu'al-Ṭabarī fait de ces trois femmes, il apparaît que leur image contribue a la formation d'un idéal type de la femme musulmane croyante. Maryam, Khadīja et Fāṭima sont caractérisées de maniere constante par leur obéissance, leur maternité et leur pureté. Ce mémoire analyse les commentaires et définitions d'al-Ṭabarī sur chacune de ces vertus. Ce mémoire révele également que la comparaison entre ces trois femmes, telles que présentées dans les travaux d'al-Ṭabarī, répond a des motifs religieux plus globaux. Paradoxalement, la comparaison de Khadīja et Fāṭima avec Maryam a permis aux premiers exégetes d'inscrire l'Islam en continuité avec les religions monothéistes déja existantes, et, en même temps, d'affirmer la préséance de l'Islam sur ces autres traditions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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TRANSLITERATION AND QUR'ĀNIC TRANSLATION

The system of Arabic transliteration used in this thesis is that of the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal. Common names, such as Baghdad, Kufa and Basra will be written according to the conventional English spellings.

‍‍‍ا = a	ز = z	ق = q
ب = b	س = s	ك = k
ت = t	ش = sh	ل = l
ث = th	ص = ṣ	م = m
ج = j	ض = ḍ	ن = n
ح = ḥ	ط = ṭ	و = w
خ = kh	ظ = ẓ	ه = h
د = d	ع = '-	ي = y
ذ = dh	غ = gh	
ر = r	ف = f	

The short vowels *fatḥa, kasra,* and *ḍamma* are respectively transliterated as "a," "i," and "u." The long vowels *alif* and *alif maqsūra, yā,* and *wāw* are respectively transliterated as "ā," "ī," and "ū." The *hamza* is transliterated as an apostrophe. As for the *ta' marbūṭa,* it is transliterated as "a" in pause form, and "at" in construct form.

Unless stated otherwise, the Qur'ānic translations are those of A. Yūsūf 'Alī.

INTRODUCTION

In their studies on the Qur'ānic figure of Maryam, the mother of 'Isā (Jesus),

modern Western scholars have for the most part taken two main directions.[1] As might

be expected, some of these studies were conducted in a Christian-Muslim comparative

framework, a literature usually aimed at finding common ground for mutual religious

understanding. Maryam has also been, in and of herself, the subject of more detailed

studies that discard the inter-religious comparative method to focus instead on the

significance that both normative and popular Islam have assigned to her image. Within

these two broad approaches, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the

different aspects of her figure: Maryam as a model of piety and purity, Maryam as a

model of emulation for Muslim women, Maryam as a popular saint, Maryam as seen by

the Muslim mystics, to name a few. My goal in this present research is not to add to the

list of her many incarnations, but rather, to apply an alternative approach to the study of

religious models like Maryam. This alternative approach – which I am about to explain

– brings, in my opinion, new insights into the significance and impact of Maryam in the

Islamic tradition.

In the course of my research for a previous study,[2] I came to realize that

Maryam was frequently referred to in conjunction with other prominent female figures

of the Islamic tradition – such as Rābi'a al-'Adawīya (d. 801). At first sight, Maryam,

the mother of 'Isā, and Rābi'a, the eighth century Sufi, would seem to have little in

common. One is a scriptural figure of Jewish origin, the bearer of a new religious

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[1] These two approaches are here distinguished for schematic purposes. The boundary that I am
drawing is quite permeable. Most studies can be placed in the spectrum delimited by the extremes that the
two approaches represent.

[2] Laure-Elina Bénard, "Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Rābi'a al-Adawiyya in the Islamic
Tradition: A Comparison of Two Women Saints," Concordia Journal of Religion and Culture 12 (Fall
1998) : 37-48. A version of this article is included in this thesis as an appendix.

message through her son 'Isā, and the beneficiary of a prestigious place in the Qur'ān. The other is an Arab Muslim woman who lived some one hundred and fifty years after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad and who became a revered saint of the Islamic tradition, especially in its mystical and popular expression. Yet, the famous Persian poet Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār saw enough of a similarity to attempt to reconcile these two figures in a poem praising Rābi'a in which the author presented her as "the second spotless Mary."[3] My previous research, therefore, consisted in pursuing the comparison between the two women and in showing that their legends display striking similarities, which appear to be essential elements defining the model of the pious woman in Islam.[4]

Research in English and French literature on Islamic popular religion has also shown the existence of certain spiritual characteristics common to the figure of Maryam and other Islamic female saints. Louis Massignon, for instance, who has written most notably on Maryam and Fāṭima, describes a situation in which these two figures are assimilated into each other in a process resembling osmosis.[5] Taking a different approach, Julian Baldick shows examples of women saints revered in popular religion "who seem to be a reflected image of Mary, the mother of Jesus."[6]

This relationship can also be found in textual and exegetical studies focusing on prominent female figures of the Islamic tradition. Denise Spellberg[7] in her study of three major female models of the Islamic tradition – Khadīja, Fāṭima and 'Ā'isha – frequently brings to the reader's attention their association with Maryam. Jane Dammen

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[3] Margareth Smith, Rābi'a the Mystic and her Fellow Saints in Islam (Philo Press: Amsterdam, 1974) 4.

[4] Similarities were found in their prenatal dedication to God, their protection from Satan, miracles and their high spiritual status.

[5] Louis Massignon, "La notion de voeu et de la dévotion musulmane à Fāṭima," in his Opera Minora, ed. Y. Moubarac, vol. I (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963) 573-591.

[6] Julian Baldick, "The legend on Rābi'a of Basra: Christian antecedents, Muslim Counterparts," Religion 20 (1990) : 28.

[7] Denise Spellberg, "Depictions of Khadīja, Fāṭima, and 'Ā'isha in Ninth-Century Muslim Sources," in Images of Women in Asian Literatures, ed. Michael Hillman (Texas: Literature East & West, 1990) 130-148.

McAuliffe shows in an article how "the transference of characteristics between Mary and Fāṭima . . . may be traced in the works examined."[8] The relationship between Maryam and Fāṭima described in McAuliffe's article is more of a competitive kind of relationship, especially in respect to the Shī'ī tradition.[9] A more equal relationship between Maryam and female models from the Prophet's family can be found in Jane Smith's and Yvonne Haddad's study, which reports on a tradition "in which the best women of the worlds are identified as Mary, daughter of 'Imrān; Khadīja, wife of the Prophet; Fāṭima, daughter of Muhammad; and Āsiya, wife of Pharaoh."[10] Barbara Stowasser also notices that "a number of traditions on the authority of the Prophet establish that Asya and Mary, Muhammad's wife Khadija bint Khuwaylid and Muhammad's daughter Fatima are 'the best women of the worlds' and also the ruling females in heaven."[11]

Although the modern scholars mentioned in the previous paragraph have laid the ground-work for the study of the relationship between Maryam and other Islamic female figures, this relationship still deserves to be given greater attention as it is a productive way of looking at Maryam within the Islamic tradition. This is why I have chosen to focus on the attempt at associating Maryam with other significant female models of the Islamic tradition. This alternative approach, as I called it earlier, confines the study of Maryam to the religion of Islam. At the same time, it allows me to use a comparative approach – a method which I find stimulating and fruitful.

Having established the overall approach of a study of this kind, its limitations

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[8] Jane McAuliffe, "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fāṭima in the Qur'ānic Exegesis," Islamochristiana 7 (1981) : 28.

[9] Some *hadīths* stipulate that Fāṭima has a greater status than Maryam. See for instance the exegesis of Abū al-Futūḥ Rāzī, quoted in ibid., 23.

[10] Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in the Islamic Tradition and Commentary," The Muslim World 79 (July, October 1989) : 179 n. 86.

[11] Barbara Stowasser, Women in the Qur'an. Traditions and Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 59.

and methodology still need to be defined. It is clear that Maryam occupies an exceptional position in the Qur'ān. She is the only female mentioned by name in the Muslim scripture and in fact has an entire *sūra* called after her.[12] In addition, one of the verses devoted to her asserts that "O Maryam, truly God has chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee over the women of all nations."[13] In a thorough study of the analysis of the interpretation of this verse in medieval and contemporary Sunnī and Shī'ī exegesis, Jane McAuliffe alludes to the competition that existed between Maryam and Fātima over this honorific title. In her analysis, Jane McAuliffe refers to a *hadīth*, already mentioned above, which asserts that the four best women are Maryam, Khadīja, Fātima and Āsya.[14] Interestingly, other versions of this *hadīth* have also included, or juxtaposed, the name of 'Ā'isha, who is known in the Islamic tradition as the favorite wife of the Prophet.[15] Yet the comparison with Maryam is not limited to these three prominent Islamic figures. For instance, in Muslim popular piety, Muhammad's mother, Amina, is also compared with Maryam on the ground of their "immaculate purity."[16]

This brief overview of examples of comparison between Maryam and other female figures reveals the significance assigned in the Islamic tradition to the women who were closely related to the Prophet Muhammad. The study of all the women of the Prophet's entourage who were compared with Maryam would however go well beyond the scope of research for a master's thesis. Therefore I have chosen to limit myself to a study of how Maryam is compared with Khadīja and Fātima. This choice is prompted by the frequent references one encounters to the aforementioned *hadīth* which places these three women on an equal footing. It was of course noted earlier that 'Ā'isha and Āsya

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[12] *Maryam* (19).

[13] *Āl 'Imrān* (3):42.

[14] McAuliffe, "Chosen," 22.

[15] Spellberg, Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha bint Abi Bakr (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 164, 169.

[16] Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary," 174.

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also have been mentioned in similar versions of the *ḥadīth*. Yet, 'Ā'isha is not included in this study, since the traditions referring to Khadīja and Fāṭima outnumber those which include 'Ā'isha, especially in the early sources. Besides, there exist already several thorough studies of the figure of 'Ā'isha, including discussions of her comparison with Maryam.[17] As for 'Asīya, I have chosen to exclude her from this study as well. The wife of Pharaoh is mentioned in the Qur'ān in conjunction with Maryam as "examples for those who believe."[18] Yet, as far as the association between prominent Islamic female figures and Qur'ānic models is concerned, Maryam is "by far the most pivotal."[19]

In Western scholarship, studies on Fāṭima are more abundant than those on Khadīja. The dimension that Fāṭima's image enjoys in the Shī'ī tradition[20] most probably explains this discrepancy. Nonetheless, both these women are widely recognized in the Islamic tradition as models of piety and as having exceptional spiritual status. In her study on 'Ā'isha, Denise Spellberg provides a significant amount of data on Khadīja and Fāṭima as depicted in the ninth-century textual sources. Her analysis takes an interesting perspective, which she calls the politics of praise, by which she examines the evolution of these three historical figures into spiritual models. Spellberg demonstrates how the various competitive religious groups in the formative period of Islam contributed to the emergence of these female models. Basing herself on biographical works, chronicles and commentaries on the Qur'ān, she shows how each group – Shī'ī and Sunnī – chose a woman related to the Prophet, i.e., Fāṭima vs. 'Ā'isha, and made her its emblem.

Spellberg's study focuses essentially on the written sources available to modern

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[17] See Nabia Abbott, Aisha: The Beloved of Mohammad 2d ed. (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985). See also Denise Spellberg's book, Legacy.

[18] *Al-Tahrim* (66):11-12.

[19] Spellberg, Legacy, 8.

[20] On this issue, see J. McAuliffe's article "Chosen."

scholarship up until the end of the ninth century. In the century that followed, the new religion went through a phase where the *hadīths* in circulation were collected and subjected to intense scrutiny to determine their veracity. Among those who were most heavily involved in the process was the famous exegete and historian Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), who is especially known for two of his works, Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al Qur'ān (referred in this thesis as Tafsīr) and Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk (referred in this thesis as Ta'rīkh). In these two works, al-Ṭabarī compiled in a selective fashion a significant amount of traditions from the time preceding his own. As a matter of fact, Al-Ṭabarī's works are among the early 10th century sources that "preserve for us the broadest cross-section of earlier historical writing and which therefore most fully represent the ancient historical tradition."[21] This aspect of al-Ṭabarī's works makes them a valuable source for understanding how the perception of Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima evolved between the ninth century, which Spellberg has analyzed, and the time of al-Ṭabarī. The works of al-Ṭabarī are also central to my inquiry since they contributed so greatly to the shaping of later Sunnī exegesis. As Humphreys asserts, "so great was the prestige of the classical compilations [including al-Ṭabarī's works], and so compelling were the interpretations that they proposed, that most of the texts written earlier simply ceased to be copied or read in any systematic way, though it is clear that many titles were still available (and occasionally studied) down to at least the 7th /13th century."[22]

This study will largely consist in an analytical and comparative approach to specific passages from the two main works of al-Ṭabarī – his Tafsīr and his Ta'rīkh. This will be especially evident in the second chapter, which will focus on al-Ṭabarī's

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[21] R. Stephen Humphreys, Islamic History, A Framework for Inquiry (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1988) 73.
[22] Ibid., 72.

presentation of Maryam. His description of her can be found in his commentary on the

following verses: *Āl 'Imrān* (3):35-38; *Āl 'Imrān* (3):42-47; *al-Nisā* (4):156, *al-Nisā*

(4):171, *al-Mā'ida* (5):76, *Maryam* (19):16-29, *al-Anbīyā* (21):91, *al-Mu'minūn* (23):50,

and *al-Taḥrīm* (66):12. Given that we still lack full-length, abridged translations of the

Tafsīr in European languages (despite the extraordinary efforts of Pierre Godé[23] and the

late John Cooper[24]), I have had to rely in the case of the verses related to the story of

Maryam on the Arabic text of this work, for which I have provided my own English

versions.[25] When necessary, I have supplemented this with information from al-Ṭabarī's

Ta'rīkh, as translated into English in the History of al-Ṭabarī project under the general

editorship of Ehsan Yar-Shater.

The final chapter (Chapter Three) will examine al-Ṭabarī's description of

Khadīja and Fāṭima. The information on these two women is essentially drawn from the

aforementioned History of al-Ṭabarī. This chapter also includes an analysis of al-

Ṭabarī's commentary on *Āl 'Imrān* (3):42, which is of particular significance to our

endeavor in this chapter to analyze the comparison between Maryam, Khadīja, and

Fāṭima.

However, the analysis of the second and third chapters are preceded by a chapter

focusing on the scholarly contribution of al-Ṭabarī. The primary goal of this chapter

(Chapter one) is to arrive at an understanding of al-Ṭabarī's thought, since the present

thesis relies heavily on passages drawn from his two major works. The first section of

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[23] Al-Ṭabari, Commentaire du Coran, abridged, translated, and annotated by Pierre Godé, 5 vols. (Paris: Éditions d'Art Les Heures Claires, 1983–).

[24] Al-Ṭabari, The Commentary of the Qur'ān, abridged, translated, and annotated by J. Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[25] For this aspect of the study, I am greatly indebted to my fellow student Khaleel Mohammad (Ph.D. student at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University) for his help and revisions. The Arabic texts used for this translation are drawn from the compilation by Riyād Abū Windi and Māha al-Malaki entitled 'Īsā wa-Maryam fī al-Qur'ān wa al-Tafsīr (Ammān: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996). In this compilation, the editors relied on the 1978 edition of al-Ṭabari's Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān published in Beirut by Dār al-Ma'rifa lil-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr.

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this chapter, based on secondary sources, will present the aspects of al-Ṭabarī's biography that are available to us and relevant to understanding his personality. In the light of the information gathered in this first section, al-Ṭabarī's alleged pro-Shī'ī leaning[26] will be examined, since there is a possibility that al-Ṭabarī's presentation of the Prophet's daughter, Fāṭima, may have been influenced by Shī'ī preference.

The second goal of Chapter One is to provide a basic outline of the state of Islamic scholarship prior to al-Ṭabarī's time, for this thesis is also concerned with situating al-Ṭabarī with respect to the direction taken by early Muslim scholarship. Section two of this chapter, therefore, will focus on al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr, its methodology, and the place the work holds in the development of the genre. Moreover, it will present al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh, its methodology and its place in the Islamic historiographical tradition during the first three centuries of Islam. The first chapter will make use of the secondary literature available to date, and will be illustrated with al-Ṭabarī's own comments on the respective topics.

The thesis will close with a concluding chapter in which the arguments developed earlier in the study will be tied together and suggestions for further research made.

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[26] R. Paret, "Al-Ṭabarī," in Encyclopedia of Islam, 1st ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1934).

CHAPTER I: The Scholarly Contribution of al-Ṭabarī

Tracing the biographical elements of al-Ṭabarī's life is similar to solving a mystery in which the detective is confronted with clues varying in their reliability and consistency. Although we would expect that al-Ṭabarī's works, such as Dhayl al-Mudhayyal in which he discussed his teachers, might disclose substantial autobiographical data, al-Ṭabarī's extant works actually provide little personal information.[27] They are at best revealing of his scholarly personality. These works only hint at the authorities and scholars with whom he most probably had contacts; indeed, the depth of his relationship with them remains uncertain.

A few of al-Ṭabarī's contemporaries mentioned him in their works. One of them, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Kāmil (260-350/873-962),[28] who knew al-Ṭabarī personally, dedicated a monograph to him which was used by later biographers. An obituary notice was also written by Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh b. Aḥmad b. Ja'far al-Farghānī (282-362/895-972), a former student of al-Ṭabarī who undertook a continuation of al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh. A third monograph of importance for al-Ṭabarī's biography first appeared some three hundred years after his death. The work is by the Egyptian scholar al-Qifṭī (568-646/1172-1248) and is entitled Al-Taḥrīr fī Akhbār Muḥammad b. Jarīr.[29] These works have not survived, as far as we know. Their contents can only be partially traced in the works of later biographers, who drew most of their information on al-Ṭabarī from them. It cannot be guaranteed but only assumed that these later biographers preserved

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[27] Al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater, trans. by Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 5. Rosenthal points to the fact that the complete text of the Dhayl al-Mudhayyal is lost. Ibid. 89. Al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī: Biographies of Companions and Their Successors, trans. by Ella Landau-Tasseron, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) contains an incomplete form of the Dhayl al-Mudhayyal. For a discussion on the history of this work and its title, see Ella Landau-Tasseron's "Introduction" to Biographies.

[28] Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 7.

[29] Ibid., 8.

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accurately the material furnished by the original biographies. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the information we possess concerning al-Ṭabarī was compiled at a time when his fame had already been established and his stature already somewhat idealized. It might even be said that the literature in which we find most of our information on major Islamic scholars, the biographical dictionaries, yield too much of "an astonishingly complete and exact self-image of this group"[30] to be necessarily historically accurate.

Al-Ṭabarī became such a respected authority in the fields to which he contributed that many references are made to him in the literature of the subsequent centuries. Yet it seems that most of the later biographies rely on the earliest sources on al-Ṭabarī which are still available to us, such as the Ta'rīkh Baghdād (History of Baghdad), by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (392-463/1002-71), the Ta'rīkh Madīna Dimashq (History of Damascus), by Ibn 'Asākir (499-571/1105-76), and Kitāb Irshād al-Arīb Ilā Ma'rifat al-Adīb (Dictionary of Learned Men and Litterateurs), by Yāqūt (d. 626/1228-9). These works are the main sources for the secondary literature on al-Ṭabarī to which I refer in this chapter. The content of these sources, unfortunately, remains too impersonal and insubstantial to provide the detailed biography of a major personality that we are to expect today. As Humphreys asserts, "the aggregate data derived from (the biographical dictionaries) can be given life and substance only when it is fleshed out from other sources."[31] One way in which this can be done is by attempting to reconstruct the outward circumstances of the scholar's life in order to comprehend the character and development of his thought. In what follows, therefore, I will provide a brief outline of the historical and political context in which al-Ṭabarī lived and worked.

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[30] Humphreys, Islamic History, 187.
[31] Ibid., 192.

A) Elements for a Biography of al-Tabari.

a) *The political context of al-Tabari's time.*

In al-Tabari's lifetime, the 'Abbasid rulers had begun to show signs of decline. The 'Alids, although originally in favor of the dynasty, were beginning to challenge the legitimacy of the latter.[32] As the direct heirs of the Prophet through the descent of 'Ali and Fatima, the 'Alids argued for the legitimacy of their own right to exercise power and constantly threatened the 'Abbasids. The 'Alids also accused the 'Abbasids of financial excesses, especially in Baghdad. The 'Alids drew support from the most economically and socially deprived segment of the population. The 'Abbasid rulers tried to repress the emerging power of the 'Alids, and for the most part they succeeded. Yet the 'Alids managed to control some bastions in peripheral regions and to occasionally destabilize the central power. During the period in question, the greatest of the 'Alids uprisings was the Zanj rebellion in lower Mesopotamia, which began in 255/869 and lasted for 15 years. It was followed soon thereafter by the Qarmatiya movement which began in 286/899.[33]

Tabaristan, the region where al-Tabari was born, was among the regions where resistance to the 'Abbasids was fiercest.[34] The remoteness and inaccessibility of the Elburz mountain on the south and of the Caspian Sea on the north, kept Tabaristan safe from conquering Muslim armies for a long time. It was partially overwhelmed by the Umayyad Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik (96-99/715-717). It remained as such until it was

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[32] Abdulkader Tayob, "Islamic Historiography: the Case of Al-Tabari's 'Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk' on the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 1989) 51; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization. The Classical Age of Islam, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 260, 372.

[33] Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 52. Hodgson, Venture, 498-488; 490-1.

[34] Cf. Huart, "Tabaristan," in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1st ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1934); Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 54.

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fully conquered by the armies of al-Manṣūr (132-153/754-775). Even then it did not completely come under the full political control of the ʿAbbāsids, and therefore it had to be reconquered by al-Maʾmūn (198-218/813-833).[35]

Yet in the ninth century, Tabaristan attracted the attention of ʿAlid partisans who increasingly moved into the area from 247/861 under the leadership of Muḥammad b. Zayd. The area came directly into the orbit of ʿAlid influence after the ʿAlid uprising led by Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar in Kufa in 250/864, was crushed by the ʿAbbāsids. The combination of ʿAlid activity in the area and the socio-political grievances of the Ṭabarīs proved disastrous for the ʿAbbāsids. The ʿAlids found a willing audience for their call and very soon established an independent state in Tabaristan. They took over the city of Amul – where al-Ṭabarī was born – in 250/865,[36] i.e., some years after al-Ṭabarī had left the area.

The ʿAlids were not the only opponents of the ʿAbbāsids. Moreover, the ʿAbbāsid rulers in place also faced threats of rebellion in the very center of their power, Baghdad. It seems that this cosmopolitan capital was reflective of the instabilities of the wider empire. For example, not only did the ʿAlids find some support there, but so did the Ḥanbalites, especially after Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (164-241/780-855) had stood up to the inquisition (miḥna) of al-Maʾmūn. Among Ibn Ḥanbal's followers were many prominent Baghdadi scholars and political activists.[37]

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[35] Huart, "Ṭabaristān"; Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 55.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 56. Two of these scholars are known as Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 311/923) and Abū Muḥammad al-Barbahārī (d. 329/940-1). But it seems that the bulk of Ibn Ḥanbal's followers were probably young men without any theological training who participated in the Ḥanbalites insurrections. See Hodgson, Venture, 389-92. For further information on this subject, see Gaston Wiet, Baghdad, Metropolis of the Abbasid Caliphate, trans. Seymour Feiler (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

b) *The Status of Scholars under the 'Abbāsids.*

'Abbāsid society was mainly divided into two broad classes, the ruling class

(*khāṣṣa*) and the ruled ('*āmma*). Just where Islamic scholars fit into this scheme is hard

to say, for generally, "they are neither a socio-economic class, nor a clearly defined

status group, nor a hereditary caste, nor a legal estate, nor a profession."[38] They did not

quite belong to the masses because of their literacy, and their familiarity with the

religious sciences, but they nevertheless sometimes benefitted from their support. On

the other hand, they were not of the ruling class either, even though the latter hoped to

gain their favor and win their support for the legitimacy of their power.[39] Moreover it

was not unusual to see that some Islamic scholars take up an occupation, such as

commerce, to ensure themselves an independent income and devote themselves to the

study of religion.[40] Politically, scholars could be allied with the 'Alids, the Ḥanbalites or

the 'Abbāsids. At any rate, the Islamic scholars did not form a closed and cohesive

group, despite what one might be led to conclude from the unifying picture that the

biographical dictionaries tend to give of their group. They did though play "a crucial

role in the processes by which social communication was carried on," and, thereby,

contributed to "the integration of society into a working whole."[41]

Therefore, the political, social and historical context of the late ninth century in

which al-Ṭabarī grew up and won renown as a scholar could not have failed to impact on

his life and career, and thus provides a background against which to measure his

achievement.

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[38] Humphreys, Islamic History, 187. For a discussion on the '*ulamā*', the religious scholars of Islam, see his Chapter 8, "A Cultural Elite, the Role and Status of the '*ulamā*' in Islamic Society," 187-207.

[39] Tayob, "Islamic Histotiography," 70-71, 75, 77.

[40] Hayyim J. Cohen, "The Economic Background and Secular Occupations of Muslim Jurisprudents and Traditionists in the Classical Period of Islam (until the Middle of the Eleventh Century," Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 13 (1970) : 32.

[41] Ira M. Lapidus, Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 108. Quoted in Humphreys, Islamic History, 201.

c) *The Biography of al-Ṭabarī.*[42]

Al-Ṭabarī was born in Amul, the principal capital city of Tabaristan, in 224-5/839. Little is actually known about his family. Information about al-Ṭabarī's mother is scant. On the paternal side, Rosenthal deduces from the Arabic genealogy of his father that his paternal family members were probably Muslims who migrated to Amul and settled there at some early date. His father, Jarīr, was a man of property, although he was not rich. As long as he lived, he provided his son with an income, and al-Ṭabarī inherited his share of the estate after his father's death. The modest degree of financial independence which al-Ṭabarī enjoyed throughout his life enabled him to travel while yet a student, and it gave him some freedom to follow his scholarly and moral ideals when he was an established scholar.

Al-Ṭabarī was a precocious child, as is commonly reported of scholars in the biographical dictionaries. It is said that he knew the Qur'ān by heart at the age of seven, served as prayer leader when he was eight, and studied the traditions of the Prophet when he was nine. Seeing his son's gift for learning, al-Ṭabarī's father encouraged him to leave home "in quest of knowledge," which al-Ṭabarī did when he was 12 years of age. Al-Ṭabarī studied in al-Rayy (the site of present-day Teheran). There he stayed for five years, receiving his basic intellectual formation. Among his teachers was Ibn Ḥumayd (d. 248/862), one of the traditionalists whom al-Ṭabarī most frequently cites in his works. From Ibn Ḥumayd, al-Ṭabarī received instruction on the historical works of Muḥammad b. Isḥāq (d. 150-2/767-9), the famous author of the Sīra.[43] Then, after his pilgrimage in 240/855, al-Ṭabarī set out for the main intellectual center of his day,

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[42] The most thorough and detailed biography of al-Ṭabarī that I was able to trace in western scholarship is that found in F. Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 3-134. Unless specified otherwise, my references to the factual aspects of al-Ṭabarī's life are drawn from Rosenthal's study.

[43] It can be assumed, thus, that al-Ṭabarī's interest in history emerged early in his life, as we shall discuss below.

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Baghdad, with apparently an intention to study with Ibn Ḥanbal there. But this famous scholar had died shortly before al-Ṭabarī's arrival in the city. After a short stay, al-Ṭabarī left Baghdad for Basra and Kufa, where a number of famous authorities lived and taught. Al-Ṭabarī probably spent less than two years traveling in southern Iraq. His return to Baghdad is thought to have taken place in the year 244/858-9 or thereabouts. Soon after his arrival, he accepted a position as tutor to a son of the wazīr 'Ubaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān.

At some subsequent date, al-Ṭabarī left once again to pursue further studies in the countries located at the west of Iraq, and especially Egypt as his ultimate goal. Al-Ṭabarī's journey also included visits to Syria and Palestine. Beirut was an especially important stop because it gave him the opportunity to study with al-'Abbās b. al-Walīd b. Mazyad al-'Udhrī al-Bayrūtī (ca. 169-270/785-883), who instructed him on the variant readings (ḥurūf) of the Qur'ān according to the Syrian school. Finally al-Ṭabarī arrived in Egypt in the year 253/867. There he met a number of scholars and perfected his knowledge in ḥadīth science and legal matters. The number of scholars he visited throughout this trip[44] reveals the degree of intellectual research which scholars such as al-Ṭabarī pursued their "quest for knowledge."[45]

As is apparent from our account to this point, most of what we know of the person of al-Ṭabarī is related to his religious and scholarly life. The technical and impersonal character of his works reveal at best the relationships he had with his sources/teachers, which may be attested by cross-references. Little is known, though, about al-Ṭabarī's other relationships. Rosenthal relates an anecdote that only alludes to

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[44] For the names of the scholars al-Ṭabarī encountered during his travels, see Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 20-30.

[45] For an analysis of ṭalab al-'ilm, see G. H. A. Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 66-70.

"a lifelong friendship between fellow students."[46] This may be about all "we can expect to gather from sources that usually tended to disregard personal aspects of scholarship."[47] Al-Ṭabarī probably never married.[48]

The impersonal tone of al-Ṭabarī's biography is nevertheless typical of the genre as it existed in his day, for the idea of a biography as perceived at the time of al-Ṭabarī was apparently different from that of our present-day perception. As Humphreys points out, "as for writing about one's personal life and inner experience – the very stuff of biography as we know it – that was crude and indiscreet, it was simply not done by people who cared about their dignity."[49]

The accounts of al-Ṭabarī's life also stress his intellectual and pious personality, since even the personal data available points to a devout lifestyle.[50] For instance, al-Ṭabarī was very diet-conscious. His diet, for which we have a disproportionate amount of details, it seems,[51] was clearly based upon the views and practices of contemporary medicine, in which he was quite well-versed. Moreover, his appearance projected the cleanliness demanded by religion and society, just as it reflected his inner purity. His daily routine was rigorously maintained, a fact which suggests that "he led a highly

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[46] Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 31.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Rosenthal reports an anecdote that suggests that al-Ṭabarī might have had a son, but Rosenthal concludes that the evidence is inconclusive. Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 35-6. Al-Ṭabarī's kunya, Abū Ja'far, may well correspond to the Arab custom of attributing a kunya as an honorary title, although the person does not have children.

[49] Humphreys, Islamic History, 192.

[50] It is difficult to assess whether this personal data is entirely genuine or whether it represents an effort to present al-Ṭabarī as the ideal image of the Islamic scholar, as suggested for instance by Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī (849-911/1445-1505) in his Itqān. According to Mahmoud Ayoub, The Qur'ān and its Interpreters, vol. 1 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 25, "Suyuti gives three essential qualifications of the mufassir. First the mufassir must have sound faith and must strictly observe the precepts of Islam. He must avoid erroneous views and spurious traditions and must take seriously his trust, which is the Book of God. Second, he must have a good purpose, that is, his aim should be only to serve God and not to acquire wealth and prestige. A good mufassir must therefore be totally detached from the world. Third, a mufassir must be an authority on the sciences of the Arabic language."

[51] Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 40-42.

disciplined life."[52]

Another example of al-Ṭabarī's rectitude was his refusal to accept donations beyond what he actually thought he deserved. His biographers also tell of numerous instances when he refused a gift because he was unable to make a countergift of equal value. This attests to his highly ethical personality. But it also shows his desire to remain independent and free from obligation to those in authority who would provide him his livelihood. Al-Ṭabarī apparently never accepted a position in the government or in the judiciary, as would have been natural for him as a jurist. Several anecdotes and biographical notes indicate al-Ṭabarī's strong conviction that religious scholarship took precedence over political prominence. From his biographical accounts, it appears that al-Ṭabarī's main concern was to immerse himself in the study of the Islamic religious sciences and the writing of his works. Nevertheless, al-Ṭabarī probably augmented his living by teaching and giving legal advice. For, even though the massive amount of work al-Ṭabarī accomplished during his lifetime (most probably produced without the help of a research assistant) was certainly due to an exceptional intellectual ability, adequate material conditions would have played an important role.[53]

Al-Ṭabarī spent the rest of his life in Baghdad as an independent scholar, with the possible exception of two visits to his homeland. As a scholar, al-Ṭabarī specialized in three fields: legal theory, Qur'ānic science and history. All three subjects imply a thorough understanding of the science of *ḥadīth*. Other disciplines such as poetry, prosody, medicine, and to a certain level arithmetic and algebra were known to him, too. Yet the field of knowledge that appears most in his work, besides the religious sciences, is language. He knew Arabic and Persian and was well-versed in grammar and lexicography, which allowed him to make frequent assessments of the vocabulary used

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[52] Ibid., 43.
[53] See the second section of this chapter, "al-Ṭabarī's Literary Production," for an overview of his works.

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in the Qur'ān.

As a jurist, al-Ṭabarī at first considered himself to be a Shāfiʿite, and was affiliated with that school for a period of ten years. Eventually, though, his own legal research set his legal thought apart from the other schools of his time. The natural development of al-Ṭabarī's legal thought led him to found a separate legal school, the "*madhhab Jarīrī*."[54] It was, however, never strong enough, original enough or popular enough to gain a following in the highly competitive and politicized world of the major legal schools. For by the time of al-Ṭabarī, certain of these schools, such as the Ḥanafītes, Mālikites, and Shāfiʿites, had become firmly entrenched and, as history was to show, could no longer be displaced. Yet al-Ṭabarī's legal position might explain, in part, the struggles he experienced with the Ḥanbalites. Ḥanbalism was the latest of the legal schools to emerge and must have found itself in a precarious position. Thus Ḥanbalites may have seen in al-Ṭabarī and his followers potential rivals.[55]

Even on the occasion of his death, which took place on Shawwāl 27, 310/February 17, 923, the biographies remind us of the religious integrity which al-Ṭabarī maintained throughout his life. Just before his death, al-Ṭabarī is reported to have given an ultimate instruction to his friends and students: "My advice for you is to

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[54] Ella Landau-Tasseron found in Yāqūt's Irshād a reference that points to the fact that al-Ṭabarī found his own school of law and "declared everyone who contradicts his views to be an infidel. [Al-Ṭabarī] states that he would not accept the testimony of, or trust traditions transmitted by people who held Qadarī, Shīʿī, or Khārijī doctrines, nor would he accept (legal) arguments based on reasoning." Ella Landau-Tasseron remarks that this statement is "of an extreme nature." Landau-Tasseron's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, Biographies, xix. This statement is quite surprising since al-Ṭabarī included in his works Shīʿī authors and others of different persuasions. Ibid. xx. Rosenthal cautiously states that "naming a sect or school after the father of the founder was a common practice. With respect to "Jarīrī," it is clear that neither Ṭabarī's given name nor the name of his country of origin would have made a distinctive designation for the school. It is not known, however, when the name "Jarīrī" was introduced, nor is there any precise information as to when the outside world began to look at Ṭabarī as the founder of his *madhhab*." Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 64.

[55] In corroboration of this idea of rivalry between the Ḥanbalites and al-Ṭabarī, Rosenthal points out to the fact that "Ṭabarī is alleged to have expressed the opinion that he did not think of Ibn Ḥanbal as a jurist. . .but rather as an important *ḥadīth* scholar." Understandably, such a statement could have led to riots if it was ever expressed in public. See Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 70.

follow my religious practice and to act in accordance with what I have explained in my books – or something like it," says the reporter, who then adds: "Then he repeated the confession of faith and mentioned God many times. He wiped his face with his hand and used it to close his eyes. When he let go, his spirit had left his body."[56]

d) *Al-Ṭabarī and the Shī'a: an Assessment of the Polemic.*

Al-Ṭabarī is commonly seen as a traditionalist who operated within the boundaries of the emerging mainstream or "orthodox" Islam. Rosenthal asserts that "in general, Ṭabarī is described as unswerving in his faithful adherence to the orthodox views of the ancient Muslim scholars in most of his dogmatic views (*jull madhāhibihī*)."[57] His monumental works, such as his <u>Tafsīr</u> and <u>Ta'rīkh</u>, served as a basis for later Sunnī exegesis. Yet we find in the biographical accounts of al-Ṭabarī mention of alleged pro-Shī'ī positions.

The 'Alids, as the Shī'īs were also called at the time of al-Ṭabarī, had their claim to power on the basis of their direct connection with the Prophet through Fāṭima, his daughter, and 'Alī, his cousin and son-in-law. Among their beliefs was that the continuity of the Muslim community was to be ensured through the presence of an authoritative spokesperson on behalf of the divine will.[58] They saw in 'Alī the embodiment of the first true *imām*. He was able to hold this primordial status as he was thought to have acquired the full *'ilm* necessary to guide the consciences and the lives of true Muslims.[59] Based on the tradition of Ghadīr Khumm, which expressly states that the spiritual leadership of the Prophet was passed to 'Alī, the 'Alids saw in Fāṭima's husband not just one of the first four Caliphs, but the figure with the unique authority to

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[56] Ibid., 79.
[57] Ibid., 61.
[58] Hogdson, <u>Venture</u>, 372.
[59] Ibid.

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lead the Muslim community. Shīʿism developed its own doctrines and forms of piety in

the face of the unfulfilled promises of the ʿAbbasid rulers. A person's Shīʿī tendencies

or leanings could therefore be deduced from any statement suggesting the superiority of

ʿAlī over the three preceding caliphs. It is on this point that al-Ṭabarī's position appears

to be ambiguous.

Al-Ṭabarī occasionally gave lectures on the virtues of the Companions of the

Prophet and the Caliphs. It is reported that he gave a particular lecture of the virtues

(*fadā'il*) of ʿAlī after he had heard a scholar denouncing the veracity of the *hadīth*

Ghadīr Khumm. Commenting on al-Ṭabarī's book al-Fadā'il, a biographer summarizes

the event as follows:

> One of the scholars in Baghdad had declared the Ghadīr Khumm (episode) to be untrue because, he
> said, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib was in Yemen at the time when the Messenger of God was at Ghadīr Khumm.
> In a *muzdawwij* poem containing descriptions of each place and station (in Arabia, connected with
> the Prophet's biography [?]), that man inserted the following lines alluding to the significance of the
> tradition of Ghadīr Khumm:
>> Then we passed by Ghadīr Khumm,
>> Subject to a large number of fraudulent statements
>> About ʿAlī and the illiterate Prophet (al-umm[i]).
> When Abū Jaʿfar learned about it, he started on a discussion of the virtues of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and
> mentioned the various recensions of the tradition of Khumm. Many people flocked to listen to (his
> lectures on) the subject.
> Some extremist Shīʿites, who unseemingly slandered the Companions, came together. So Ṭabarī
> started (to write) on the virtues of Abū Bakr and ʿUmar. Then the ʿAbbāsids asked him about the
> *fadā'il* of al-ʿAbbās.[60]

Al-Ṭabarī's defense of the Ghadīr Khumm tradition was later appealed to by

Shīʿī scholars such al-Ṭūsī and evoked the reprobation of later Sunnī exegetes such as

Ibn Kathīr.[61] Yet his bibliographical sources as a whole show that he was equally

concerned to defend the preeminence of all the first four caliphs.

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[60] Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 91-92.

[61] Ibid., 92. In his Bidāya, Ibn Kathīr formulates his criticism of al-Ṭabarī as follows: "(Ṭabarī)
concerned himself with the tradition of Ghadīr Khumm and composed two volumes on the subject. In
those volumes, he reported the various recensions as they were transmitted and by whom. His discussion
is a mixed bag of valuable and worthless, sound and unsound information. This is in keeping with the
custom of many *hadīth* scholars who (merely) report the information they have of a subject and make no
distinction between what is sound and what is weak." Quoted from ibid., 92-3.

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Al-Ṭabarī was accused of Shīʿī leanings on another occasion as well. The interpretation of Qurʾānic verse *al-Māʾida* (5):6 usually distinguishes the Shīʿī point of view from the Sunnī on the issue of "wiping" or "washing" the feet during the ritual ablution before prayer. Based on his grammatical analysis of the verse, al-Ṭabarī concludes in favor of "wiping," although he stresses the fact that wiping and washing are one process. Despite his final plea for the correctness of the Sunnī view, he was accused in some circles of sympathy towards the Shīʿa. It has been suggested that al-Ṭabarī's double stand on this issue is more symptomatic of a general attitude of compromise between "his scholarly instincts and the religious practices which he felt it necessary to uphold at all costs."[62]

Al-Ṭabarī's Shīʿī inclinations were also advanced on the basis of two verses by the well-known Shīʿī poet Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī (ca d. 383/993). The verses refer to the alleged poet's familial relationship with al-Ṭabarī – supposed to be a close as that of nephew and uncle.[63] The verses assert that the Jarīr family (*banū Jarīr*) were 'Alid extremists (*rāfiḍī*) through the female lineage ('*an kalālah*), while al-Khuwārizmī himself was a *rāfiḍī* by paternal inheritance. As al-Ṭabarī's main biographer Yāqūt suggests, these verses may have been the creation of Ḥanbalite polemic.[64]

Allegations of al-Ṭabarī's allegiance to the 'Alids of his fief seem even less probable in view of the fact that his assertion of the virtuousness of the first two caliphs resulted in his having to leave his home town to escape 'Alid resentment, despite his having grown up in Tabaristan. Al-Ṭabarī had most probably left Tabaristan before the 'Alids became strong in the area. Moreover, al-Ṭabarī showed throughout his life that he was cautious of any obligation. On one occasion, in response to accusations of Jahmite inclinations and extremist pro-'Alid views, al-Ṭabarī was forced to issue a denial of his

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[62] Ibid., 57.
[63] Rosenthal concludes that it would be chronologically impossible. Ibid., 13.
[64] Ibid.

interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse *al-Mā'ida* (5):64.[65] Here again, the issue might have been triggered by al-Ṭabarī's hostile relationship with the Ḥanbalites.

Given the historical and political context of the time in which al-Ṭabarī lived, the accusation of pro-Shī'a sympathies was an easy weapon against personal adversaries. Al-Ṭabarī's struggle with the Ḥanbalites might be seen as a consequence of his judgement in matters of law and his refusal to recognize Ibn Ḥanbal as a jurist. Just as he had on the issue of the correct way to wash the feet during ritual ablution, it seems al-Ṭabarī was compelled to take a position in the face of political polarities, not so much out of strong partisan conviction. Al-Ṭabarī was a scholar well aware of the political and religious tensions of his time. He was also a scholar with a strong desire, as we have seen, for political independence and religious integrity. His account of the history of the Companions in his Ta'rīkh takes into careful account the differing positions taken by the Ḥanbalites, the 'Alids and the 'Abbasids,[66] a clear reflection of his concern to reach a compromise on sensitive issues. The fact that he cites Shī'ī sources in his works "may signify that his pursuit of the 'science of the traditionists' (*'ilm al-rijāl*) arose from a broader interest than usual."[67]

In short, the evidence for al-Ṭabarī's so-called pro-Shī'ī leanings is circumstantial, whether be at legal, political or religious level. Questions of an 'Alid bias will therefore largely be discounted in our analysis of the figure of Fāṭima in al-Ṭabarī's works.

B) Al-Ṭabarī's Literary Production.

As has been mentioned, al-Ṭabarī was an unusually prolific author. Some of his

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[65] For more details on this episode in his life, see ibid., 59.

[66] Ibid., 79.

[67] Landau-Tasseron's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, Biographies, xx.

works were first "dictated" to his students, as is hinted at in the aforementioned report on the genesis of the Faḍā'il,[68] and were most probably read back to him for his final approval. In his time, dictation was a common way to copy down texts.[69] Al-Ṭabarī also wrote many of his works in his own hand. It is related that he wrote fourteen folios a day from the time he entered puberty to his death at the age of eighty-six. One report relates that al-Ṭabarī wrote forty pages a day for forty years.[70] Whatever we may think of the veracity of these reports, they at least illustrate his contemporaries' admiration for his intellectual productivity.

Establishing an exact bibliography of his works is rendered difficult not only by its sheer volume, but also by al-Ṭabarī's reluctance to give titles to his works and, when he did, his inconsistency in recording them.[71] Many of his books (not all of which are preserved) are referred to by himself and by later biographers under varying titles, usually alluding to the genre of the works. Al-Ṭabarī wrote significant and authoritative works in many diverse fields. Indicative of his pious nature and religious ethics, al-Ṭabarī began the writing of a treatise of the Ādāb al-Nufūs (The Proper Ways of Spiritual Behavior) but this work remained unfinished at his death. Among the legal works attributed to him, his Kitāb Laṭīf al-Qawl fī al-Bayān 'an Uṣūl al-Aḥkām (The Book of Subtleties Concerning the Exposition of the Principles of Legislation) seems to have been his main text on juristic methodology.[72] Only parts of his Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā' (Divergent Opinions of the Jurists), an exposition of legal thought, have survived to our day. As can be expected from a traditionist (muḥaddith) and jurist (faqīh), al-Ṭabarī also wrote on 'ilm al-rijāl, the biographical science concerning the transmitters of traditions.

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[68] On this issue, see above.

[69] Al-Ṭabarī, The Commentary of the Qur'ān, vol. 1, trans. by J. Cooper (Oxford University Press, 1987) xi.

[70] Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 32.

[71] Ibid., 80.

[72] Cooper's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, xi. This work is no longer extant.

He also wrote on the administration of justice, and on ethical conduct.[73] Another of his

writings, namely his <u>Kitāb al-Qirā'āt wa-Tanzīl al-Qur'ān</u> (The Book of Recitations and

of the Revelation of the Qur'ān) was generally considered the standard work on the

subject. The enumeration of a few of his works as such does not exhaust the list of

disciplines on which he wrote, for he had a wide range of knowledge and interests.[74] His

most significant works however remain his <u>Tafsīr</u> and <u>Ta'rīkh</u>. The number of available

copies and editions of these two works attests to their importance. The following

section will be dedicated to the presentation of these two works. An understanding of

their respective approaches is intrinsic to the analysis that will be offered in the two

following chapters

a) *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān (The Comprehensive Exposition of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'ān.)*.

This work belongs to the typically Islamic genre of *tafsīr*. Given the essential

place attributed to the Qur'ān and its interpretation in the shaping of Islamic thought, it

seems appropriate to begin with an outline of the history of this literature up to the time

of al-Ṭabarī. Tracing the origins and the development of this interpretative discipline is

problematic, as it emerged from a period of Islamic history which is rendered more

obscure by the scarcity of, what modern scholarship considers, critical data. In addition,

the development of *tafsīr* is intimately linked with issues that are beyond the scope and

purpose of this study, such as the question of the origin and reliability of *ḥadīth*

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[73] Ibid., xii.

[74] For a complete lists of his works, see Rosenthal's "Foreword" to al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 80-134.

literature. These issues have been debated by major Muslim and Western scholars,[75] and the secondary literature on the subject shows a variety of stands on the matter, all of them quite successfully argued. Yet the point here is not to give an exhaustive account of these positions, but rather to examine the material necessary for understanding the scholarship and intellectual trends that affected al-Ṭabarī as he undertook the composition of his Tafsir.

1) *Brief History of a Genre.*

The necessity to understand the Qur'ān and interpret it dates back to the time when it was revealed, i.e. during the Prophet's lifetime. Besides being considered as the miracle that testified to Muḥammad's prophethood,[76] the Qur'ān was also the prophet's principal guide for new religious ethics and rituals and for a world view for his community of followers. The Qur'ān itself states that the revelation was made in Arabic to facilitate its understanding by the Arab people. In his introduction to his Tafsir, al-Ṭabarī says that "this is quite clearly stated in the Revelation of our Lord where He says: 'We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ān; haply you will understand' (*Yūsuf* (12):2), and 'Truly it is the Revelation of the Lord of all Beings, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon your heart, that you may be one of the warners, in a clear, Arabic tongue'" (*al-Shu'arā*(26):192-5).[77] Then al-Ṭabarī adds, "it is clear that there will be found in the Book of God which was revealed to His Prophet Muḥammad, those

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[75] For the most important western views in this area of research, see the works of such scholars as I. Goldziher, J. Schacht, F. Sezgin, N. Abbott, J. Wansbrough, M. Cook, G. Juynboll and J. Burton. A recent reflection on some of these views is found in Fred Leemhuis, "Origin and Early Development of the *tafsir* Tradition," in Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 13-30.

[76] Helmut Gätje, The Qur'ān and its Exegesis, Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations, trans. and ed. Alford Welch (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) 31.

[77] Al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, 11. In his translation, J. Cooper uses A. Arberry's English translation of the verses of the Qur'ān. See Ibid., xxxiv-xxxv.

rhetorical devices which are to be found in the speech of the Arabs."[78]

Still, accounts of the Prophet offering explanations to the avid questions of the new Muslim converts are frequently reported. The *ḥadīth* literature relates cases in which the Prophet's contemporaries asked him about issues ranging from basic ritual and behavioral matters to more obscure ones, such as the Qur'ānic prophecy regarding the Last Judgement.[79] We can therefore accept that some type of exegetical activity was required in the time of the Prophet, and that his being physically present facilitated this kind of exchange and inquiry. The Prophet's answers and explanation in reply to the questions posed by the early Muslims concerning the meaning and application of the Qur'ānic verses constitute the initial stage of *tafsīr* scholarship understood in its widest sense.

Now, modern western views appear to depart from the traditional Muslim views on the history of the early development of *tafsīr* after the Prophet's death. According to Muslim sources, the absence of the Prophet caused the young community of Muslims to turn towards the Companions, who had known, heard, and lived with the Prophet. The companions, in effect, became the legitimate and accurate transmitters of the Prophet's words and deeds. The information from these transmitters was then passed on to the next generation, to be registered in writing by the following generation in the time of the dynastic change from the Umayyads to the 'Abbāsids.[80] At least, this is what we are led to believe on the basis of the earliest *tafsīr* works available to us which date back no further than 210/815,[81] i.e., more than a hundred and eighty years after the death of the Prophet. These works claim to refer to a mixture of oral tradition and early writings on the subject of exegesis, and thus, suggest the existence of a linear and straightforward

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[78] Ibid., 12.

[79] Leemhuis, "*Tafsīr* Tradition," 13; John Burton, An Introduction to the Hadith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994) 19.

[80] Leemhuis, "*Tafsīr* Tradition," 14.

[81] A date on which J. Wansbrough and H. Birkeland seem to agree, as indicated in ibid., 15, 16.

account of the transmission of exegetical *ḥadīth* going all the way back to the Companions. Muslim scholars of the ninth century were well aware of the fact that the proliferation of *ḥadīth* that occurred in the 700s, also implied the putting into circulation of forged *ḥadīth*, i.e., the support of a text (*matn*) on the basis of a made-up *isnād*. In the following half century,[82] the institution of *isnād* developed a system of evaluation in order to establish the reliability of the transmitter. Therefore, the *isnād*, if found 'sound,' was thought to guarantee the authenticity of the *matn* it supported. If, however, the reliability of an authority could be challenged, the authenticity of the *matn* could also be contested. What was not questioned, though, was the institution of *isnād* itself.[83] In other words, most of the Muslim scholars did acknowledge the possibility of forgery within the institution of the *isnād*, but did not conceive that the institution as a whole could be a forgery. This is the point at which modern Western scholarship departs from Muslim scholarship.[84]

On the historicity of the claim that the authors of the late second and third Islamic century transmitted the material of older authorities, Leemhuis writes that "independent source material from this first phase of exegetical activity, that may verify or falsify that view, is virtually non-existent. All we know about the early period is from later ascriptions. But whether or not these claims are valid cannot be checked, because no objective criteria can be applied."[85] Thus a wide spectrum of positions have developed in the West on the possibility of whether these claims are historically accurate. The most positive view is held by F. Sezgin, who argues that the reconstruction of old material on the basis of later works, such as Ibn 'Abbās' exegetical activities, is possible to a certain extent and suggests that the ninth century reports did,

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[82] Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, 75.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Humphreys, Islamic History, 15.
[85] Ibid., 14.

in fact, base their transmission on tangible material. W. M. Watt expresses the view that

the basic framework of *hadīth* and its extensions are on the whole reliable.[86] J.

Wansbrough argues for the opposite view[87] in consideration of the fact that "extant

recensions of exegetical writing here designated haggadic. . . are not earlier than the

date proposed to mark the beginnings of Arabic literature," and that "a long period of

oral composition and transmission, or possibly of oral delivery from notes is commonly

supposed to have preceded the redaction of more or less fixed text."[88] This position,

initially held by Goldziher, reveals the existence of an opposition, in the early stage of

Islam, to a certain kind of *tafsīr*, subjective and even mythological, which was indicated

as *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*. On this issue Birkeland takes a new stand: there was no such

opposition in the early stages of Islam. For him, *hadīth* or *sunna* and ancient poems, as

well as sound reasoning (*ra'y*) were regarded as self-evident means of interpretation.

According to Birkeland, it was only in a later period, that the *'ulamā'*, seeking

legitimacy for the emerging Islamically-inspired consciousness, developed the genre of

traditional exegesis, and that other modes of interpretation were looked upon

negatively. Other modern Western scholars[89] also note that material of a different type

entered into the early development of narrative exegesis, i.e., as stories about the life of

Muhammad stemming from the *qussās* and biblical accounts from Jewish and/or

Christian circles or converts – usually referred to as *isrā'īliyāt*.[90]

In any case, the multiplicity of arguments and positions presented under the

rubric of Western scholarship demonstrates the nascent Muslim community's self-

conceptions before these conceptions came to be incorporated into a more unified

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[86] W. Montgomery Watt, Early Islam, Collected Articles (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) 21.

[87] His views, and those of his former students P. Crone and M. Cook, are considered extreme by some scholars. See, for instance, Watt, Early Islam, 13-14.

[88] Quoted in Leemhuis, "*Tafsīr* Tradition," 15.

[89] Such as in Juynboll, Muslim Tradition, 74, and Leemhuis, "*Tafsīr* Tradition," 27.

[90] See below for more details of this body of literature.

Islamic framework. In corroboration of this idea, modern scholarship appears to agree on two points. First, "*ḥadīth* criticism, mainly confined to *isnād* criticism, came too late to become an adequate tool for sifting the material that could genuinely be ascribed to the oldest authority of its *isnād* from that which could not thus be ascribed."[91] And second, "opposition from pious people from the end of the first century AH to [the] type of narrative *tafsīr* may later have been reinterpreted as having directed against *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* or *tafsīr* that was not properly *ma'thūr* (traditional)."[92]

From the late second century onward, the perfection of the science of *ḥadīth*, and in particular of exegetical traditions, allowed the emergence of Qur'ānic commentaries based on the compilation of the extant traditions. This is a form of exegesis which is denoted in Arabic by the phrase *tafsīr bi-'l-ma'thūr*. This traditional Qur'ānic exegesis was primarily developed in the emerging Sunnī Islam, and was marked by such names as Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 248/862) and al-Muthannā b. Ibrāhīm al-Amulī (d. after 240/854). The climax of this trend of compilatory exegesis is commonly attributed to al-Ṭabarī on the ground that he brought together the entire breadth of the material of traditional exegesis extant in his time. Yet at the same time, his <u>Tafsīr</u> marks the end of the trend,[93] as it opens exegesis to a more critical and scholastic endeavor. Cooper asserts that, after al-Ṭabarī, "a great deal more theology and philosophy was introduced and accepted, and the Traditional material collected by Ṭabarī was pared down to more manageable dimensions by a critical approach to the sources and the transmitters."[94]

Although not related to our topic, mention needs to be made here regarding the *tafsīr* literature written outside the Sunnī tradition. The Shī'a also developed their own corpus of traditions, extending back to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Their exegesis, based on the

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[91] Juynboll, <u>Muslim Tradition</u>, 75.
[92] Leemhuis, "*Tafsīr* Tradition," 29.
[93] Gätje, <u>Qur'ān and its Exegesis</u>, 34.
[94] Cooper's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, <u>Commentary</u>, xxiv.

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distinction between *tafsir* and *ta'wil*,[95] explores the inner meaning (*batin*) of the Qur'ān. This trend is noted as early as the ninth century with authors such as 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 328/939), a contemporary of al-Ṭabarī. The Ṣūfis also developed their own style of exegesis which also emphasized the inner meaning of the Qur'ān. This type of *tafsir* forms a body of teachings concerned with the spiritual intuition to be gained through meditations on the meanings of the Qur'ān, and can be found in works such as the commentary of Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 161/778). Later on, the sayings of early masters were compiled, as in the case of Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).[96]

2) *Al-Ṭabarī's Tafsir Methodology.*

Here again, we are confronted with the contrast between our present-day conceptions of scholarship and the type of scholarship which marks the works under study. Our present-day scholarship demands that a great emphasis be placed on methodology and that methodology should be clearly spelled out before undertaking any research. This is not to imply that al-Ṭabarī was not concerned with methodology. Quite to the contrary, he was very well-aware of methodological issues as shall be seen later in this section. Yet al-Ṭabarī's methodology is not explicated in ways familiar to us. It must therefore be retrieved from direct and indirect evidences spread throughout his works.

In the Introduction of his Tafsir, al-Ṭabarī stresses the importance of knowing and understanding the Qur'ān, "which will abide for [all] time, will remain constant throughout [all] ages and epochs, and will endure the passage of the months and the years, its light becoming more brilliant as time goes by, and more radiant as night and

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[95] A distinction that al-Ṭabarī did not make. He considered these two words synonymous, as shows for instance the different versions of the title of his Tafsir.

[96] For an overview of these trends, see the following works: Cooper's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, Commentary; Gätje, Qur'ān and its Exegesis; Ayoub, Qur'ān and its interpreters.

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day succeed each other."[97] Indeed, in the light of the preceding quotation, it can be

asserted that al-Ṭabarī perceived the Qur'ān as a universal guidance,[98] "the reciter of

which will gain abundant provisions [for the next world] and a magnificent reward."[99]

Although the Qur'ān was revealed in the language of the Arabs, so that the Prophet

might "explain clearly to men what is sent for them," (al-Naḥl (16):44) another verse

suggests the existence of clear and ambiguous meanings. The verse in question (Al

'Imrān (3):7) stipulates that "He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are

verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning) (muḥkamāt) ; they are the

foundation of the Book (umm al-kitāb): others are allegorical (mustashābihāt). But

those in whose heart is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking

discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings

except God. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (al-rāsikhūn)[100] say: 'We

believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord : " and none will grasp the Message

except men of understanding."

The majority of our clues to al-Ṭabarī's methodology are to be found in his

commentary on this verse. Here, al-Ṭabarī first presents a preliminary explanation of the

meaning of āyāt muḥkamāt and āyāt mustashābihāt. The former are verses "which are

fortified (aḥkamna) by clarity (bayān) and detail (tafṣīl),"[101] while those of the latter

types are described as "similar in vocal utterance, differing in meaning."[102] He restricts

the mustashābihāt verses to a very small fraction of the Qur'ān, basing his judgement on

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[97] Al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, 6.
[98] The concept of universal guidance is actually a central assertion of the Qur'ān itself. See for instance the following Qur'ānic verses: al-An'ām (6):155; al-Naḥl (16):44, 64; Maryam (19):97; al-Luqmān (31):2-3; al-Zumar (39):41; al-Takwīr (81):27-28; al-Lail (92):12.
[99] Al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, 8.
[100] See for a discussion of the phrasing of this sentence, J. McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr," in Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 54.
[101] Ibid., 51.
[102] Ibid.

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the inherent necessity of everything contained in it. After he proceeds with a lengthy classification of traditions on the subject, which shows its importance in his eyes, he states his own position, according to which three categories of verses may be distinguished.

> [First,] knowledge of interpretation of some of the Qur'ān can be attained only though the explanation given by the Messenger. This is the interpretation of whatever contains various modes of His command. [...] [Secondly,] the interpretation of [some other aspects] is known only to God, the One, the Omnipotent. This is whatever contains information about future dates and times, such as when the Hour of Resurrection will begin, when the last trump will be sounded, when Jesus, the son of Mary, will come down and so on. [...] [Thirdly,] everyone who knows the language in which the Qur'ān was sent down knows the interpretation of [some of its aspects]. They can establish its desinential inflexions (*i'rāb*), they know the things referred to by essential and unambiguous names in it, and the things qualified by specific attributes; none of them are ignorant.[103]

Contrary to other traditions, which maintain that a *muḥkam* verse may be distinguished from a *mutashābih* one in that the latter is liable to more than one interpretation, al-Ṭabarī bases his understanding of the classification on the very possibility of interpretation itself. Thus, while the meaning of the *muḥkam* verses are accessible to the *'ulamā'*, those of the *mutashābih* ones are comprehended by no one, except God Himself. Thus,

> The commentator most successful in reading the truth is [...] [firstly] the one with the clearest proof of [all] that he interprets and commentates, the one whose interpretation goes back to the Messenger of God alone to the exclusion of the rest of his community, through Traditions reliably attributable to him, either through an extensive transmission, ... or otherwise through a transmission by righteous, reliable persons, ... or otherwise through a transmission by righteous, reliable persons, ... or because of an indication establishing their truth; and [secondly] the one with the most correct demonstration for [all] that he interprets and explains, knowledge of which he can attain from the language.[104]

As can be expected, al-Ṭabarī draws his interpretation of the Qur'ān from the corpus of the *ahl al-ḥadīth*,[105] and discourages any tentative interpretation of *tafsīr bi-l ra'y*, for as *Al 'Imrān* (3):7 suggests, such endeavor will lead one astray. Even if

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[103] Al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, 33. The words in square brackets both here and elsewhere in my quotations from Cooper's version were supplied by the original translator. The ellipses enclosed in square brackets indicate the text that I have left out as unnecessary to the sense of the argument.

[104] Ibid., 40.

[105] Hodgson, Venture, 385-89.

commentators, using their own personal judgement, were to reach the same conclusion as that which "is correct before God," they would find themselves at fault, for they would "not speak as a person who knows that what he says about it is true and correct."[106] Clearly, in al-Ṭabarī's eyes, the reliance on traditions is the necessary condition that can validate one's interpretation.

This attitude is reflected in al-Ṭabarī's sources. In accordance with the standard belief of his time that *tafsīr* originated with the Companions and their Followers, al-Ṭabarī quotes from the four "rightly guided" caliphs, as well as from 'Ā'isha, one of the Prophet's wives.[107] However, al-Ṭabarī also extensively quotes traditions on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (d. 66/688). Considered to be the father of traditional exegesis, this companion is famous for having attained an exceptional degree of knowledge of the Qur'ānic text and its interpretation, as well as excelling in fields such as pre-Islamic history, *maghāzī* (military expeditions), *fiqh*, and pre-Islamic poetry. According to Muslim sources, Ibn 'Abbās wrote his own commentary on the Qur'ān.[108] He is also said to have attracted a number of Companions and students to come study under him in Mecca, and is therefore traditionally thought to have been the founder of a Meccan 'school' of *tafsīr*. His followers, often cited in al-Ṭabarī's commentary, were 'Ikrima (d. 105/723-4), Mujāhid (21-104/642-722), Sa'īd b. Jubair (45-95/665-714) and 'Aṭā b. Abī Rabāh (d. 114-15/732-3).

Another Companion important as a source for traditional exegesis, and thus for al-Ṭabarī, was 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd (d. 32/652-3). Like Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn Mas'ūd specialized in exegesis, but is not accorded the same elevated rank as the former in the eyes of posterity. Ibn Mas'ūd 'school' was based in Kufa, and those of his pupils whose reports are quoted by al-Ṭabarī include 'Alqama b. Qais (d. 62/681), Qatāda (60-

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[106] Al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, 35.
[107] Ibid., xv.
[108] Gätje, Qur'ān and its Exegesis, 33.

118/680-736), Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (21-110/642-728) and Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī (46-96/666-815).

Al-Ṭabarī's other sources include members of a Medinan 'school' whose founder is usually taken to have been the Companion known as Abu'l-Mundhir (d. 18/637 or 30/651), who was a Jewish rabbi before embracing Islam. Al-Ṭabarī quotes from a number of his Medinan followers, including Abu'l-'Aliya (d. 90/708 or 96/714), al-Rabī' b. Anas (d. 139/753). Al-Ṭabarī also quotes other Companions, such as 'Abdallāh 'Umar (d. 73/693), Zaid b. Thābit (d. 45/666), Anas b. Mālik (d. 91-3/709-11), Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 42/662) and Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678 or 59/679).[109]

The above mentioned sources form the bulk of what we might call the early exegetical tradition. It must be noted, however, that al-Ṭabarī does not appear to apply himself to the critical study of individual traditions,[110] an attitude more common with later scholars. Rather, al-Ṭabarī declares his goal in writing his Tafsīr as being

> to surpass all other books on this subject. In all of this we shall state whatever consensus has come down to us where there has been agreement concerning [the book of God], as well as disagreement where this has occurred, establishing the reasoning of each of the schools of thought among them."[111]

On this basis, Cooper suggests that al-Ṭabarī was "primarily an encyclopedist, concerned to preserve as much as he could, and only secondarily a systematizer."[112]

The traditions cited in al-Ṭabarī serve several different purposes. In some cases, passages in the Qur'ān are illustrated or explained on the basis of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or occasions of revelation. Another kind of "historical" commentary was supplied by the so-called *Isrā'īliyāt*, stories taken from Jewish and Christian source material. In this respect, al-Ṭabarī's major source is Ibn Isḥāq, who wrote a three-volume work on pre-

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[109] Several of these authors are thought to have compiled their own *tafsīrs* in written form. However, the question of authenticity of these compilations has been a controversial one, as was seen in the preceding section.

[110] Cooper's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, xix.

[111] Ibid., 9.

[112] Ibid., xiv.

Islamic history, the early life of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Prophet's Medinan period. This work survives in the recension of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/834) under the title Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh.[113] Al-Ṭabarī quotes Ibn Isḥāq[114] frequently, especially from his first volume.[115]

Another aspect of al-Ṭabarī's commentary is his interest and expertise in lexicography and grammar, and particularly in the important question of the seven ḥurūf and qirā'āt of the Qur'ān. The amount of traditions and discussion he dedicates to these subjects in the Introduction to his Tafsīr is significant. He subdivides this material under four headings: 1) "the conformity of the meanings of the verses of the Qur'ān to the meanings of the speech of those in whose language it was sent down," 2) "expressions common to both Arabic and the languages of some other divisions of mankind," 3) "the Arabic dialect in which the Qur'ān was sent down, and 4) on the meaning of the words of the Messenger of God 'The Qur'ān was sent down from seven gates of paradise.' "[116] These sections precede even al-Ṭabarī's classification of the types of verses to be found in the Qur'ān and his assessment of the Companions and their Followers. Al-Ṭabarī's emphasis on linguistic analysis was a major reason for the stature that he enjoyed in the history of *tafsīr*.

Al-Ṭabarī was, moreover, well-aware of the fact that the traditions do not always concur with one another; thus, he is scrupulous about reporting the different points of view in each case. He formulates his own opinion on the matter, although not systematically, and sometimes without giving any reasons. His opinions usually take the

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[113] This work has been translated in English. See A. Guillaume, The Life of Muḥammad: A Translation of Ibn Isḥāq's Sīrat Rusūl Allāh (London: Oxford University Press, 1955.)

[114] See next section for more details on this author.

[115] This book is no longer extant. However, because al-Ṭabarī quotes from it so extensively, his Ta'rīkh is a significant source for retrieving the contents of Ibn Isḥāq's first book. See Gordon Newby, The Making of the Last Prophet (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

[116] Al-Ṭabarī reports this tradition on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd and Abū Qilāba. Al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, 29.

form of a paraphrase of the preferred tradition. For this reason, J. McAuliffe asserts that al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr is "far more than simply a collection and compilation of the extant exegetical material. It is a carefully structured work which evinces considerable insight and judgement."[117] Its value to subsequent generations may be seen in the statement: "If a person has to go to China to obtain a copy of Muḥammad b. Jarīr's Tafsīr, it will not have been too much [effort]."[118]

b) *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk (History of the Messengers and Kings)*

The various conceptions of history that emerged in the early period of Islam are overwhelming in their diversity and complexity. Here again the development of the historical genre is intimately linked with that of *ḥadīth*. Moreover, the boundaries that separate historical writing from the genre of *tafsīr* are porous. As much as the interpretation of the Qur'ān implies a certain sense of (religious) history, the historical works of early Islam are not free from exegetical considerations. Perhaps the complexity of the genre is due in part to the fact that it draws upon the pre-Islamic cultural heritage, which so influenced the forms and content of nascent Islamic historiography. The presence of non-Muslim sources in early Islamic historiography is also to be noted. Al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh reflects this diversity of conceptions of history, yet the significance of the work derives not so much from the form it takes as from the material he was able to gather and preserve – making him the greatest single source of information for much of the early period of Islam.

Al-Ṭabarī's presentation of history belongs to a genre that was already established by the time he wrote the Ta'rīkh. It is, therefore, helpful to understand early

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[117] McAuliffe, "Hermeneutics," 48.
[118] Abū Ḥāmid al-Isfarā'inī (d. 418/1027), quoted in Cooper's "Introduction" to al-Ṭabarī, Commentary, xiv.

Islamic historiography, since it reflects heavily on al-Ṭabari's work. Since retracing this field is an immense task that goes beyond the scope of this study, I will limit myself to drawing the major lines of this development only. As I will later touch upon the figure of Maryam, I will pay particular attention in what follows to the material related to the history of the Abrahamic tradition. Moreover, because I will later be touching upon two members of the Prophet's family, I will also focus on the material dealing with Muḥammad and his Companions.

1) *Place of the Qur'ān in Early Islamic Historiography.*

The Qur'ān is certainly not a history book, at least insofar as we understand history today. To say the least, the historical information that the Qur'ān contains lacks in precision.[119] Yet, the Qur'ān strongly suggests a sense of history that demarcates itself from the pagan Arabs' world view. From what we can infer from later sources, the tribal sense of time was punctuated by great events which served as landmarks for dating events.[120] Through the retelling of raiding expeditions and battles, stories and genealogies, the tribal Arabs were able to constantly revive their past. In contrast, the revelation of the Qur'ān provided Arabs with a sense of history whose purpose and design was orchestrated by God along a linear time-frame. The world had a definite beginning and is moving towards a definite end – the Day of Judgement. The actions of all people, who are given a certain freedom to act, are known to God and observed by Him. Their performance of good and evil deeds will be remunerated in terms of reward and punishment in this world and in the hereafter. Examples of God's sending messengers to guide nations abound, and an emphasis is put on the dreadful

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[119] It is interesting to note that the word *ta 'rīkh* is not specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān. See Franz Rosenthal, A History of Muslim Historiography (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) 183.
[120] A. A. Dūri, The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs, ed. and trans. Lawrence Conrad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)

consequences suffered by those who went astray. The prophets are said to belong to the monotheistic (biblical) tradition which started with the creation of Adam. Muḥammad, as understood by Muslims, is presented as belonging to this prophetic tradition and is believed to be the final Prophet of the Abrahamic lineage, i.e. the "Seal of the Prophet" (al-Aḥzāb (33):40).[121]

Whether this new conception of history was perceived as such by the contemporaries of Muḥammad is difficult to know. Some reports maintain that the text of the Qur'ān was gathered only at a later period,[122] and that the question of the historicity of ḥadīth does not allow one to confirm whether the Prophet's exegetical comments took on the form and content they are purported to have done – although it seems plausible that the Prophet would have legitimated his status in accordance with his divinely ordained insights. In time, however, it came to be seen in this way by the scholars of religious science. At least it might be suggested that a dualistic view of history borrowing from the Qur'ānic and tribal lore existed for some time before the Qur'ānic viewpoint of the scholars of ḥadīth rose to a dominant position in historical writing.[123]

The Qur'ān is thus a major focus of early Islamic historical literature. First, there is the material known as asbāb al-nuzūl which provides the 'historical' context and occurrence that prompted a particular revelation.[124] Second, there are elaborations in the form of ḥadīth in which Muḥammad interprets, explains or expands on a particular Qur'ānic verse. These two sources are also fundamental to our knowledge of the life of the Prophet. Although the Qur'ān does not give a chronological account of

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[121] Franz Rosenthal, "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography," in Historians of the Middle East, ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) 37.

[122] See the investigations of this topic published by J. Wansbrough, P. Crone and M. Cook.

[123] Dūri, Rise of Historical Writing, 22.

[124] The reliability and historicity of these occasions is doubted by modern Western scholars. See Andrew Rippin for a (too?) cautious position on the subject.

Muḥammad's life and exploits, it is used by earlier historians to illustrate an already known outline of events.[125] The Qur'ān thus provided a religious rationale and framework to their emerging history. Nevertheless, this emerging sense of history did not come from the Qur'ān alone. The Qur'ān might have inspired it, but other constituents have shaped early Islamic historiography, as we shall now see.

2) *Non-Qur'ānic Constituents of Early Muslim Historiography.*

As far as pre-Islamic history is concerned, earlier authors focused primarily on the lives and deeds of the Ancient Prophets. As we saw earlier, the Qur'ān contains little in the way of historical facts, although specific references are made to biblical figures. Thus, a body of material which centered on Biblical events and figures, mostly inspired by the Judeo-Christian traditions, became significant for early Muslims, as it gave substance to the Qur'ānic biblical stories and clarified obscure Qur'ānic statements. In fact, a number of Companions were said to have been engaged in investigating Jewish and Christian Scriptures.[126] Among those mentioned most often in *isnāds* are Abū Hurayra, 'Alī, Salmān al-Fārasī, Ibn 'Abbās and Zayd b. Thābit. In the following century, this type of material grew quickly in size. The general designation for this material is *isrā 'īliyāt*, a term that apparently came into common usage beginning in the first century. Significantly, it is usually non-Arab Muslims, *mawalis*, who are credited with having brought this type of material into consideration. As G. Newby asserts, "more and more *mawalis* penetrated the ranks of the *quṣṣāṣ* and brought with them a stock of stories which were useful to them in explicating the Qur'ān and a methodology which contributed to the development of Islam's own tradition of commentary and

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[125] Watt, Early Islam, 19.
[126] Gordon Newby, "Tafsir Isra'iliyat," in Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 47 (1979) : 686.

history."[127]

With the beginning of 'Abbāsid rule, this body of material lost favor among scholars. This corresponds to a period of time when scholars' consciousness of their distinctive Islamic identity was growing at a theological level. Also at this time, the doctrine was being developed that the Qur'ān was the interpreter of previous Scriptures – and not the other way around.[128] As Nabia Abbott aptly summarizes, "the comparatively tolerant attitude that characterized the first century yielded – for all and finally, about the middle of the second century – to all but complete prohibition of (the use of non-Mulim sources)."[129] The isrā'īliyāt traditions then came to supplement the genre of Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā', the legends of the Prophets. In al-Ṭabarī's writings, more so in his Ta'rīkh than in his Tafsīr,[130] traces of these traditions appear. Their purpose appears to confirm Islam's position as interpreter of all past revelations.

Early Islamic historiography was also influenced by its pre-Islamic Arab heritage. The tribal Arabs recounted their history through akhbār, i.e., stories and anecdotes which focused on remarkable figures and events covering various aspects of their culture.[131] One type of akhbār was known as the ayām (the Days), which consisted of accounts of the most important battles the tribe had fought. The akhbār were eventually incorporated within an Islamic framework. For since the emerging Islamic conception of the past considered it as Part of the Unseen,[132] the past could therefore only be faithfully accounted for through the reports of eye-witnesses. The importance given to the concept of direct witnesses was incorporated by later scholars who preferred to rely on isnāds rather than apply other methods of historical criticism. Al-

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[127] Ibid., 689.
[128] On this issue, see Watt, Early Islam, 77-85; J.-M. Gaudeul et R. Caspar, "Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le tahrīf des Écritures," Islamochristiana 16 (1980) : 61-104.
[129] Quoted in Newby, "Tafsir Isra'iliyat," 691.
[130] Ibid., 688.
[131] Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 11.
[132] Ibid., 15-6.

Ṭabarī writes,

> For no knowledge of the history of men of the past and of recent men and events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters. This knowledge cannot be brought out by reason or produced by internal thought processes."[133]

Therefore, early Islamic historiography kept the form of the *akhbār*, but the *akhbār*'s content changed.[134] Thus instead of tribal accomplishments, early Islamic historiographers focused on the prophets of ancient times, and the words and deeds of Muḥammad, and had a greater concern for dating and chronology.[135]

In recounting the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, early Muslims emphasized his military campaigns and the Companions' expeditions. The *maghāzī* genre emerged out of this tendency. This material emerged in Medina in conjunction with the study of *ḥadīth*, and was also passed along by word of mouth among *quṣṣāṣ*, storytellers.[136] As it developed, the *maghāzī* came to refer to the entire period of the Prophet's mission. The historians active in Kufa and Basra, two main centres of Arab tribal settlement during the first two centuries,[137] were on the other hand *akhbāriyūn*, philologists and genealogists. Their primary focus was the exploits of the tribes. These exploits had been transmitted in the form of *akhbār* and also poetry – an important means of cultural Arabic expression whose place in early historiography one should not underestimate.

The *ḥadīth* scholars and historians of the third century were therefore faced with

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[133] Al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 170. F. Rosenthal comments that "the stress on the supremacy of intellect and reason ('aql) was the hallmark of the Mutakallimūn, the philosophical theologians of his age, who tried with considerable success at the time to assert themselves, and it is their introduction of 'aql into the Muslim view of the world that Ṭabarī attempted to reject while defending the supremacy of tradition," Ibid., 158.

[134] In Rise of Historical Writing, A. Dūri argues that two 'schools' of history were in juxtaposition for a while: the Medinan 'school' adapted the form of *akhbār* as a means to express their new historical interest, and the Iraqi 'school' continued the tribal version of *akhbār*, specifically detailing the exploits and genealogies of the Arabs.

[135] Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 22.

[136] Dūri, Rise of Historical Writing, 23.

[137] Ibid., 42.

an incredible amount of material. They undertook the selection and criticism of this corpus with various degrees of critical rigor. They also applied the new criteria of veracity and reliability that the science of *ḥadīth* had developed. Al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh in fact comes at the climax of Arab historical writing and is reflective of the trends mentioned above. This is especially attested by the large number of sources he uses, of which we provide a brief account below.

3) *Sources*[138] *and Methodology of al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh.*

The *maghāzī* material was transmitted by prominent followers of the Companions of the Prophet. Among those mentioned by al-Ṭabarī is the *ḥadīth* scholar and jurisconsult 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 94/712). Later examples include such scholars as 'Abdallāh b. Abī Bakr b. Ḥazm (d. 130-35/747-52), 'Āṣim ibn 'Umar b. Qatāda (d. 120/737), and Muḥammad b. Muslim b. Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741). Their evidence, which casts light on the origin and scope of historical writing, established the framework for *maghāzī* writing, and was exposed by Ibn Isḥāq and later al-Wāqidī (130-207/748-823). Among the *akhbārīyūn* cited in al-Ṭabarī, we find the Kufans Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/774), 'Awāna b. al-Ḥakam (d. 147/764), Sayf b. 'Umar (d. 180/796), Naṣr b. Muzāḥim (d. 212/827) and the Basran al-Madā'inī (d. 135-225/752-839). The outstanding genealogical accounts included those of Abū Yaqẓān al-Nassāba (d. 190/805), his son Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī (d. 204/819), Muṣ'ab al-Zubayrī (d. 233-36/847-50) and al-Haytham b. 'Adī (d. 206/821).

As a source for *isrā'īlīyāt* material, the Yemenite scholar Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110/728) is to be especially noted. His Al-Mubtadā' added to the Muslim material other lore that Wahb had gained through his contacts with the *ahl al-kitāb* and by reading

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[138] My investigation into the sources al-Ṭabarī uses is drawn mainly from the extensive information that Dūrī has gathered on the subject in his Rise of Historical Writing.

their scriptures. The fact that Al-Mubtada' was also referred to by the title *Isrā'īīyāt*[139] shows the focus of its contents. Among the other scholars on whom al-Ṭabarī relied and who transmitted non-Muslim material were Mūsā b. 'Uqba (d. 141/758) and Ibn Isḥāq, with special attention given to the latter. Ibn Isḥāq wrote a three-volume work divided as follows: the Mubtada', on the history of the period between Creation and Muḥammad's call; the Mab'ath, on the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad; and the Maghāzī, on the Prophet's military campaigns and raids. In his writing, Ibn Isḥāq combined material from the *isrā'īīyāt* material, *ḥadīth* reports and popular *qiṣaṣ*. Ibn Isḥāq was criticized in particular by later scholars for his dependence on *isrā'īīyāt* material. When Ibn Hishām undertook the editing of Ibn Isḥāq's work, he left out the Mubtada' and eliminated poetic citations.[140] This is quite indicative of the low status accorded to the *isrā'īīyāt* material as the methods of establishing reliability and veracity were gradually perfected in the science of *ḥadīth*.

The next generation of historians included the younger contemporaries of al-Ṭabarī. Their works reflect, on the one hand, the now well-established practice of critically examining the extant material and, on the other hand, the more universal dimension that their conception of history had come to incorporate. Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Jābir al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892) wrote two important books, the Futūḥ al-Buldān (Conquests of the Provinces), and the Ansāb al-Ashrāf, (Genealogies of the Notables). Al-Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897) wrote a Ta'rīkh consisting of a comprehensive synopsis of a universal history, which begins with the Creation and surveys the histories of other ancient nations. Two examples of this type of universal history can also be found in the works written by Ibn Qutayba (d. 270/883), Kitāb al-Ma'ārif, and al-Dīnawarī (d.

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[139] Newby, "Tafsir Isra'iliyat," 686.
[140] Watt, Early Islam, 22, Dūrī, Rise of Historical Writing, 36.

Thus, the concept of universal history found in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh was not an innovation, but rather a growing trend of which he was the most well-known representative. Al-Ṭabarī's extensive riḥla fī ṭalab al-'ilm (quest for knowledge) in his youth acquainted him with the diversity of the Muslim historical sources. Contrary to his Tafsīr, al-Ṭabarī drew from a wide variety of historical accounts for his Ta'rīkh. It is obvious that al-Ṭabarī intended to compile the entire corpus of Arabic historical material up to his time. As he himself says,

> In this book of mine, I shall mention whatever information has reached us about kings throughout the ages from when our Lord began the creation of His creation to its annihilation. There were messengers sent by God, kings placed in authority, or caliphs established in the caliphal succession.[142]

Yet al-Ṭabarī did not blindly accept the content of any account. The value of the traditions was assessed in relation to the strength of its isnād. Interestingly, once the isnād proved valid, al-Ṭabarī absolved himself of any responsibility for the contents (matn) of the tradition – an attitude which was also reflective of his time. Al-Ṭabarī writes:

> This book of mine may (be found to) contain some information, mentioned by us on the authority of certain men of the past, which the reader may disapprove of and the listener may find detestable, because he can find nothing sound and no real meaning in it. In such cases, he should know that it is not our fault that such information comes to him, but the fault of someone who transmitted to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us.[143]

Finally, al-Ṭabarī established in a final form the concept of history as an expression of Divine Will. Whereas his Qur'ān commentary expressed the will of God

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[141] The secondary sources I have consulted for this chapter are not clear about al-Ṭabarī's indebtedness to the historians of his time. This may be because at the time of al-Ṭabarī, as we have seen, scholars mainly relied on ḥadīth for history rather than historians. Moreover, given that scholars at that time most frequently used other works without giving them full credit, it is difficult to say to what extent al-Ṭabarī consulted and relied upon the works of his contemporaries.

[142] Al-Ṭabarī, General Introduction, 170.

[143] Ibid., 168.

through His words, his <u>Ta'rīkh</u> "elucidates the will of God through the activities of mankind."[144]

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[144] Dūrī, <u>Rise of Historical Writing</u>, 159.

CHAPTER II: Al-Ṭabarī's Depiction of Maryam, the *muslim*.

In the title of this chapter, the initial "m" of the qualifier *muslim* is intentionally written in lower case. In the writings of most Western scholars, the Arabic noun *islām* and the active participle of the same root – *muslim* – are either spelled out in italics or written with the first letter in upper case. This distinction refers to what Jane Smith calls the "horizontal plane" in understanding the word *islām*, conveying the idea that it is "seen both as the expression of individual submission and as the name of the group of those who have submitted."[145] In the eyes of the early traditional Muslim commentators, *islām* connoted both these aspects at once, "but with the overriding emphasis being on the former personal aspect."[146] On the individual level, *islām* means for al-Ṭabarī "the deeper personal surrender of the heart in the fullest sense of which it is understood as *īmān* (faith)."[147] Thus, in light of this distinction, Maryam cannot be called a Muslim in the institutionalized sense of the term, for she is a pre-Muḥammadan scriptural figure of Jewish origin and of outstanding importance to the Christian tradition.[148] Yet, in keeping with his conception of faith and the then well-established understanding of submission to God, al-Ṭabarī corroborates the Qur'ānic account of a young woman who submits to the will of God, i.e., who is *muslim*,[149] by marshaling a vast number of

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[145] Jane Smith, An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term 'Islām' as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'ān Commentaries (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975) 226.

[146] Ibid., 231.

[147] Ibid., 219. Jane Smith writes about al-Ṭabarī's conception of faith that "the obedient submission about which al-Ṭabarī has consistently been talking is expressly related to the sincere devotion (*ikhlāṣ*) of the individual." See ibid., 63. Jane Smith also explains that al-Ṭabarī is not particularly concerned with the distinction between *islām* and *īmān* because he understands *dīn* to be not so much the religion of God as the service towards God. See ibid., 75-6.

[148] For a detailed study on Mary in the Christian tradition, see Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Random House, 1983).

[149] The verses *al-Qaṣaṣ* (28):52-53 suggest the possibility of being a *muslim avant la lettre*. They read: "Those to whom We sent the Book before this, – they do believe in this (Revelation); And when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe therein, for it is the Truth from our Lord: Indeed we have been *muslims* (Bowing to God's Will) from before this.'" In his translation of the Qur'ān, Yusuf 'Ali consistently writes the Arabic participle *muslim* as Muslim, thus implying both the individual and

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ḥadīths on the subject.

Al-Ṭabarī's account and his views on the figure of Maryam are found mainly in his commentary on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān clearly grants her an especially high status. In it, she is the only woman identified by name and the only one after whom a *sūra* is titled (*sūra* 19). In the whole of the Qur'ān, 70 verses refer to her in one form or another. She is mentioned explicitly in 34 of these, including 24 times in relation to her son 'Isā.[150] Her story appears mainly in *Āl 'Imrān* (3):35-47 and *Maryam* (19):16-34 in correlation with the story of the birth of 'Isā and the announcement of his prophethood. The *sūra Maryam* is said to have been revealed during the Meccan period and the *sūra Āl 'Imrān* during the Medinan period.[151] She is also referred to by al-Ṭabarī in his Ta'rīkh, although to a lesser extent. His approach in the latter work is more narrative and chronological than in his Qur'ānic commentary, although, as we have already pointed out, both works rely on earlier traditions as sources. It is therefore interesting to highlight the similarities and differences between the two works. Equally interesting is the variety of accounts on Maryam that al-Ṭabarī records. Thus al-Ṭabarī's works provide not only an understanding of the Qur'ānic figure of Maryam, but also a range of traditional views that circulated about Maryam up to his time.

Because Maryam was seen as belonging to the *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the

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communal meanings of the term *muslim*. I have made an exception to his rendering in the previously quoted verse to reflect the individual submission to the will of God before the community of Muslims even existed.

The universal aspect of *islām* described above find its origin with Abraham, as is suggested by *al-Baqara* (2):130 "And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly?" Commenting on this verse, al-Ṭabarī writes that "la question fait allusion aux Juifs et aux Chrétiens qui préfèrent respectivement la tradition juive et la tradition chrétienne à la Soumission fondamentale. Pourtant, la Tradition d'Abraham est la Religion pure (*ḥanafīya*) et saine (*musallama*). Dieu – exalté soit-il – a dit: "Abraham n'était ni un Juif, ni un Chrétien mais un pur (*ḥanīfn*) et un soumis (*muslimān*)." (Cor. 3,67.)" See al-Ṭabarī, Commentaire, vol. 2, 108.

[150] Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary," 162.

[151] Stowasser, Women, 72. For more details on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of these verses, see below.

book)[152] and because her story is linked with theological considerations, it is necessary

to proceed with some preliminary remarks on al-Ṭabarī's position regarding Christians,

before moving on to his depiction of Maryam.

A) Preliminary Remarks on al-Ṭabarī's Views on Christians.

Al-Ṭabarī does not demonstrate in his writings any interest in the communal

situation of his time; hence there is no internal suggestion of outside influence in his

commentary on Maryam, and more generally on Christians. As J. McAuliffe writes on

the genre of *tafsīr*, "it is frequently difficult to determine from internal evidence alone

whether a commentary was written in Anatolia or Andalusia, whether (the) *mufassir*

(commentator) had ever seen a Mongol or a Crusader or had ever conversed with a

Christian or conducted business with one."[153] Of al-Ṭabarī in particular she adds that

"his glance does not light upon the Christian community of the late ninth-century

Baghdād."[154] This is not to suggest that al-Ṭabarī was oblivious to his contemporaries.

The previous chapter indicated the existence of politico-religious tensions that, to a

certain extent, influenced or, at least, occasioned his writings. For instance, Dominique

Sourdel writes of a passage in a text entitled *Sarīḥ al-Sunna* (The Purity of the Sunna)

and attributed to al-Ṭabarī, that it represents "un témoignage précieux sur les positions

théologiques essentielles défendues par al-Ṭabarī en même temps que sur le climat

politico-religieux qui régnait alors à Bagdad et qui dut influencer directement la

manière dont se trouvent explicitées ou au contraire passées sous silence quelques-unes

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[152] This Qur'ānic expression refers sometimes to Jews and Christians together, or in some verses
to Christians alone. See Abdelmajid Charfi, "Christianity in the Qur'ān Commentary of Ṭabari,"
Islamochristiana 6 (1980) : 107.
[153] Jane McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians. An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 35-6.
[154] Ibid.

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des idées de l'auteur."[155] These is, however, no sign of inter-religious influence in his
Tafsīr, even insidiously, that might serve as a hermeneutical element. His accounts in
the Ta'rīkh on 'Īsā and Maryam are no more explicit on the matter. If any context is to
be found, therefore, it must be looked for the intellectual legacy which he inherited. In
fact, the method of *tafsīr al-ma'thūr* to which al-Ṭabarī commits himself is not
propitious to the inclusion of contemporary material as argumentative elements. Rather,
through the science of *ḥadīth* and its corollary the *isnād* institution, "the eyes of the
exegetes look back, focused upon seminal thoughts, figures and incidents in the nascent
period of Islam and their authoritative representation at subsequent historical stages."[156]

We are therefore justified in looking back at two major events in the Prophet's
lifetime, each involving encounters between the Muslims and Christian communities.
Interestingly, these two events are recognized by Muslim exegetes as the *asbāb al-nuzūl*
(occasions of revelation) of the *sūras* relating the story of Maryam.[157] One involves the
first Muslim migration to Abyssinia. In the year 615 – two years after the Prophet's
mission became public and seven years before the flight to Medina (*hijra*) – some eighty
Muslims emigrated to this Christian land to escape from persecution and ask for the
protection of their fellow monotheists.[158] Before the migration took place, a *ḥadīth*
quoted by al-Ṭabarī on the authority of Saʿīd b. Jubayr relates that the Najāshī, (Negus)
or king of Abyssinia, had sent a delegation of his Christian subjects to the Prophet, who
in turn recited to them passages from the Qur'ān.[159] The verses of *sūra Maryam* (19) are
said to have been revealed to impress "upon Negus Islam's status as a monotheistic faith
and consequently, his obligation to protect the Muslim migrants in his realm against

[155] Dominique Sourdel, "Une profession de foi de l'historien al-Ṭabarī," Revue des études islamiques 2 (1968) : 178.
[156] McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians, 35.
[157] Stowasser, Women, 72; The Life of Muhammad, 150ff and 270ff.
[158] Hodgson, Venture, 170.
[159] McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians, 205. This ḥadīth is found in al-Ṭabarī's commentary on al-Mā'ida (5):82-3.

their pagan Meccan compatriots."[160] The *hadīth* goes on to say that the Christian

delegation immediately converted, and that on their return home, they recited passages

of the Qur'ān to their king, who also converted.

Accounts of this episode vary, however. Another *hadīth* from Ibn 'Abbās

suggests that a group of Meccan pagans reached the Abyssinian king before the

Prophet's followers, and warned the king against them. Yet the Najāshī remained

willing to give the Muslim deputation a hearing and asked them about 'Isā and Maryam.

The leader of the migrants is reported to have said: "He [Muḥammad] says that Jesus is

the servant ('*abd*) of God and the word (*kalima*) of God, which God cast into Mary, and

His spirit (*rūḥ*). About Mary he says that she is the virgin (*al-'adhrā' al-batūl*)."[161]

Another aspect of the Muslim relationship with the Abyssinian Christian community

reveals the ambivalent position of the early Muslims (and the Qur'ān) towards

Christians.[162] Commenting on *al-Baqara* (2):115 and *Āl 'Imrān* (3):199,[163] al-Ṭabarī

mentions a *hadīth* on the authority of Qatāda which relates that the Prophet, upon

hearing the news of the death of the King of Abyssinia, urged his followers to "pray for

your brother who has died in another country."[164] His followers objected that he was

neither a Muslim nor had he ever performed his prayers in the direction of the *qibla*. In

answer to these remarks, *Āl 'Imrān* (3):199 and *al-Baqara* (2):115 are said to have been

revealed.[165]

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[160] Stowasser, Women, 72.

[161] McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians, 205. McAuliffe says in this instance that "the closest Qur'ānic equivalent to Ja'far's declaration would be *sūra al-Nisā'* (4):171, which both Muslim and Western scholars date as Medinan, i.e., well after the Abyssinian emigration."

[162] For a detailed study on this issue, see McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians. See also A. Charfi, "Christianity."

[163] *Al-Baqara* (2):115 reads "To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the Presence of God. For God is All-Pervading, All-Knowing." *Āl 'Imrān* (3):199 reads "And there are, certainly among the People of the Book, those who believe in God, in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them, bowing in humility to God: They will not sell the Signs of God for a miserable gain! For them is a reward with their Lord, and God is swift in account."

[164] McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians, 161; al-Ṭabari, Commentaire, vol. 2, 38.

[165] Al-Ṭabarī, Commentaire, vol. 2, 38.

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The second event illustrative of the Muslim-Christian encounter in the time of the Prophet took place in 10/631, i.e., one year after the recapture of Mecca by the Prophet. At the time a series of deputations from the tribes and communities of the Hijāz and Najd came to an understanding with the emerging Muslim power.[166] M. Hodgson writes that "an important part of Yemen, where Sāsānian control seems to have become weak during the wars, submitted, notably the Christian town Najrān."[167] The community of Najrān sent a delegation to Medina to negotiate with the Prophet. Upon their arrival, the Prophet let them enter into the mosque where he subsequently reproached them for believing in the divinity of 'Isā and encouraged them instead to convert to Islam.[168] As they began to argue about God and the Messiah, "God revealed the beginning of Sura 3 (Al 'Imrān) about that and clarified that Jesus was created as was his mother before him."[169] Following the suggestion of Al 'Imrān (3):61,[170] Muhammad summoned them to submit to an exercise of mutual execration[171] whose final judge would be God. The following day, the Christian delegation renounced the challenge. Still refusing to convert to Islam, they nonetheless accepted a compromise which stipulated that they would pay the jizya (tax imposed upon the ahl al-kitāb) in exchange for their protection by the Muslim state.[172]

What comes through in the early exegetes' and historians' presentation of the

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[166] Hodgson, Venture, 194.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Louis Massignon, "La Mubahala de Médine et l'hyperdulie de Fatima," Opera Minora, ed. by Y. Moubarac, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Maareef, 1963) 555.

[169] Stowasser, Women, 72.

[170] Al 'Imrān (3):61 reads "If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge hath come to thee, say: "Come! Let us gather together,- our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of God on those who lie!"

[171] This event involving the early Muslims with a Christian community of Najrān is usually referred to as having been a mubāhala (ordeal), which L. Massignon describes as "un rite spécial de malédiction conditionnelle réciproque." See Massignon, "Mubahala," 550.

[172] Their jizya was to take the form of hulla (garments), 1000 of which were to be provided twice a year. For more details on this, see Massignon, "Mubahala" and al-Tabari's commentary on Sūra Al 'Imrān (3):61, in his Commentaire, vol. 3, 106.

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Muslim encounter with Christians is its correlation with theological assertions. In fact, *sūra Maryam* (19), which is said to have been revealed in the context of a sympathetic relationship with the Abyssinians, emphasizes the miraculous conception and birth of Maryam and 'Isā. *Sūra Āl 'Imrān* (3), which was apparently revealed in the context of a more hostile encounter with the Christians of Najrān, stresses the negation of 'Isā's divinity. As Stowasser asserts, "post-Qur'ānic Islamic exegesis . . . came to perceive the main purpose of all of the revelations on Mary as divine clarification of the true natures of Jesus and Mary in order that their creaturedom be but another sign of God's Oneness and Omnipotence."[173]

This theological attitude was indicative of the growing belief in the early period of Islam that the Qur'ān was to serve as the interpreter of all previous scriptures. By the time of al-Ṭabarī, there was no doubt that, in case of divergence, the Qur'ān was to be the criterion of veracity for theological issues. In the eyes of al-Ṭabarī, God's revelations had been sent one after the other, so that the latest of them was the one to be followed. As al-Ṭabarī writes,

> La foi des Juifs consistait à s'en tenir fermement à la Thora et à la Tradition (sunna) léguée par Moïse et ce, jusqu'à la venue de Jésus. Lors de la venue de Jésus, celui d'entre eux qui suivait la Thora et la Tradition de Moïse et qui ne les laissait pas pour suivre Jésus, celui-là était perdu. Quant à la foi du Chrétien qui consiste à s'en tenir fermement à l'Évangile et à suivre les Voies instituées par Jésus, elle est agréée par Dieu jusqu'à la venue de Muḥammad. Celui d'entre eux [auquel est parvenu la Prophétie] et qui ne laisse pas la Tradition de Jésus et l'Évangile, celui-là est perdu.[174]

Al-Ṭabarī's <u>Tafsīr</u> includes numerous references to the idea that the previous revelations had been affected by *taḥrīf* or distortion. The definition of this word is not straightforward, although it can be said that it refers to a variety of reproaches against the *ahl al-kitāb*. Al-Ṭabarī's charges against the *ahl al-kitāb* can in fact be grouped into four categories: they do not believe in God; the Christians lie about Muḥammad; the Christians claim that the Messiah is the son of God; and the Jews lie about both Jesus

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[173] Stowasser, <u>Women</u>, 72.
[174] Al-Ṭabarī, <u>Commentaire</u>, vol. 1, 192. From al-Ṭabarī's commentary on *al-Baqara* (2):62.

and Muhammad.[175] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on *Maryam* (19):34, for instance, summarizes the types of Christians that were present at the time of Islam's birth, the reproaches that were made against them, and the position of Islam in relation to them. While commenting on this verse, al-Ṭabarī cites a *ḥadīth* from Qatāda that reads,

> The children of Israel got together, and selected four groups. Each selected their most learned, and they debated about Jesus after his being taken up. One of them said: God came to the earth, and resurrected those whom He chose, caused to die those whom He chose, and then went back up to the Heavens. These are the Jacobeans. The third one said: You have lied. Then two of them said to the third one: You give your opinion. He said: He is the son of God. These are the Nestorians. The two said: You have lied. Then one of these two said to the other: Give your opinion on the matter. He said: He is the third of the trinity – God is a God, He ('Isā) is a God, and his mother is a God–and these are the Isrā'īliyāt, the kings of the Christians. The fourth said: You have lied. He is the servant of God, and His messenger, His spirit, and His word–and these are the *muslims*.

Yet, in accordance with certain Qur'ānic verses,[176] al-Ṭabarī states in his commentary that not all the Christians were unbelievers, and includes among the exceptions those like the Negus and his followers who "confirm the Unity of Allāh, the angels, the books, the messengers and the last day, apart from Muhammad (peace ...) and that criterion (*furqān*) which he brought."[177]

In any case, in the eyes of al-Ṭabarī, 'Isā and Maryam were in no way responsible for the distortion. Rather, the corruption of God's revelation resulted from their followers. For instance, as *Mā'ida* (5):119 suggests,[178] 'Isā is blameless in God's sight of the Christians' claim that he summoned them to worship him and his mother apart from God, "for his religion was none other than submission to Allāh."[179] Similarly,

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[175] McAuliffe, Qur'ānic Christians, 194. A more detailed epitome of the charges is given in Charfi, "Christianity," 109, 135.

[176] Such verses include *Al 'Imrān* (3):199, *Mā'ida* (5):82-83, *Yūnus* (10):94, *Ra'd* (13):43, *Naḥl* (16):43, *Anbiyā'* (21):7, *Isrā'* (17):107, *Zukhruf* (43):45. For an analysis of the commentaries made on these verses, see A. Charfi's article, "Christianity," and Jane McAuliffe's book, Qur'ānic Christians.

[177] Charfi, "Christianity," 137, quoting al-Ṭabarī.

[178] *Al-Mā'ida* (5):119 reads: "And behold! God will say: 'O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God'? He will say: 'Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, though I know not what in thine, for Thou knowest in full all that is hidden."

[179] Charfi, "Christianity," 135, quoting al-Ṭabarī.

Maryam is blameless of the accusations that are made against her by her people.

Commenting on *al-Nisā* (4):156,[180] al-Ṭabarī writes that *"they uttered against Mary a grave false charge* means: because of their lies against her and their accusations of fornication (*zinā*). And this is the gravest charge for they slandered her with this, doing so without evidence, and not clear proof. And so they slandered her with baseless accusations."[181]

B) Maryam, the Mother of 'Isā, in al-Ṭabarī's Presentation.

In this section, I propose to follow verse per verse al-Ṭabarī's commentary on the Qur'ānic passages regarding Maryam. The verses under consideration are *Āl 'Imrān* (3):35-37; 42-47; *al-Nisā* (4):156, 171; *al-Mā'ida* (5):76; *Maryam* (19):16-29; *al-Anbiyā* (21):91; *al-Mu'minūn* (23):50; and *al-Taḥrīm* (66):12. As a rendition of the entire commentary would be long and unnecessary, I will translate al-Ṭabarī's own words only when it is relevant to our subject. The rest I will summarize.[182] This commentary contains in addition detailed grammatical and linguistic explanations: these will not be rendered here, unless they are helpful to understanding the image of Maryam. Elements from the Ta'rīkh will be added in the form of footnotes when it is judged relevant to underline similarities and reveal divergences. The following accounts do not pretend to be exhaustive, but rather, inclusive of information depicting the image of Maryam.

Āl 'Imrān (3):35-37[183]: *Behold! a woman of 'Imrān said: "O my Lord! I do dedicate unto*

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[180] This verse is quoted below in the following section.

[181] *'Isā wa-Maryam*, 149. In the following pages, the passages referring to *'Isā wa-Maryam* are the result of my own translation.

[182] For the sources used in this rendition see the Introduction of this present study.

[183] The commentary on the verses *Āl 'Imrān* (3):35-37 is to be found in vol. 3, 156-157 of the Beirut, 1978 edition of al-Ṭabarī's Tafsīr. For reasons of space, in this chapter, I will give the page reference to the work *'Isā wa-Maryam*.

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Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So accept this of me: for Thou hearest and knowest all things."

When she was delivered, She said: "O my Lord! Behold I am delivered of a female child!"-And God knew best what she had brought forth-"And nowise is the male like the female. I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from the Evil One, the Rejected."

Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty: To the care of Zakariyā was she assigned. Every time that he entered (her) chamber to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! Whence (comes) this to you?" She said: "From God: for God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure."

Behold! A woman of 'Imrān. Al-Ṭabarī presents the *woman of 'Imrān* as the mother of Maryam and her name is Ḥanna.[184] Her husband 'Imrān is a descendant of Sulaymān (Salomon), son of the prophet Dawud (David).[185]

O my Lord! I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service (muḥarrarān). Al-Ṭabarī writes that this section of the verse means Maryam's mother dedicated her child to the exclusive service of God. He dwells in particular on the explanation of the term *muḥarrarān* which means for him "free from the occupations of this world."[186]

For Thou hearest and knowest all things. Al-Ṭabarī paraphrases this injunction as "You, O Lord, are the all Hearing of that which I say and ask, and the All-Knowing of that which I intend within my inner self, and what I want, nothing of my affairs – the secrets or the declared – is hidden from you."[187]

Al-Ṭabarī next goes on to explain the circumstances that led Ḥanna, the mother of Maryam, to make her dedication. The story has it that Zakariyā and 'Imrān were married to two sisters. The wife of 'Imrān was old and barren. One day, she saw a bird

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[184] Elsewhere she is said to be the sister of Elizabeth, who is the wife of Zakariyā and the mother of John the Baptist (Yahyā).

[185] The genealogy of 'Imrān is found as such in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh. Seeal-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī, The Ancient Kingdoms, vol. 4, trans. by Moshe Perlmann (State University of New York Press, 1987) 103. Interestingly, in this account, Maryam is said to be engaged to Joseph, whose genealogy is similar to 'Imrān's. They both are descendants of Salomon and David.

[186] 'Isā wa-Marvam, 42.

[187] Ibid.

feeding its young, the vision of which awakened in her the desire to have a child.

Consequently, she prayed God to grant her a child, and soon after that became pregnant.

To show her gratitude towards God, she dedicated her child to His service. 'Imrān

however died during her pregnancy.

Then a series of traditions from Ikrima, Rabī' and al-Suddī are cited which insist

on the fact that Ḥanna thought she was expecting a male child.

And nowise is the male like the female. According to al-Ṭabarī,

> the male is stronger in service, and more upright in such. And it is not proper for the female in some
> conditions to enter the temple and to render service to the church, because of that which afflicts her
> in terms of her monthly period and post-partum impurity.[188]

And I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from the Evil One, the

Rejected. In commenting on this line, al-Ṭabarī cites two *hadīths,* one from Abū

Hurayra and another from Qatāda, which assert that every child born on the Earth is

touched by Satan, except Maryam and her son.[189]

He made her grow in purity (nabatān) and beauty (ḥasanān). Al-Ṭabarī chooses to say

that God made her grow "perfectly."[190] His statement is corroborated by a *hadīth* from

Abū Amr.

To the care of Zakariyā. Al-Ṭabarī recounts that,

> Zakariyā also took charge of her according to the obligation imposed on him by God, doing so by
> casting lots which God chose for him. And the sign which he showed to his opponent, and which
> made him the worthiest of them and that his position was incontestable when they cast their lots
> – is based on that which has been related to us that Zakariyā and his opponents concerning
> Maryam, when they debated as to whom she would be with, threw their flints in the river Jordan.
> Some of the sages say the flint of Zakariyā stuck firm and that the water could not dislodge it,
> and that the flints of the others were swept away. God made that for Zakariyā that he was the
> most deserving of them. Others way that Zakariyā's flint rose to the surface while those of the

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[188] Ibid.

[189] In his Ta'rīkh, al-Ṭabarī includes a story that relates that Satan was not aware of the birth of
'Isā. When he heard about it from a group of frightened devils, he flew to find where the event had
occurred. "Iblīs wanted to approach it from above. But the angels' heads and shoulders that reached up to
heaven were over it. He then tried to reach it from under the earth but the angels' feet were firmly
entrenched below–lower than Iblīs expected. Thereupon he tried to enter among them, but shoved him
away." See al-Ṭabarī, Ancient Kingdoms, 115.

[190] 'Isā wa-Maryam, 44.

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others sunk with the flow of water and were swept away, and this was a sign that he was the most deserving of the people to her. Whichever case it was, there is no doubt that it was a decision from God in Zakariya's favour over his opponents that he was the most deserving of them to (Maryam's guardianship).[191]

A *hadith* from al-Suddi records that this mode of selection of a guardian for a newcomer in the service of God was a habit of the time, and that after Zakariya was chosen, he took her to the sanctuary. At this point, al-Tabari cites several *hadiths* which tell the story in similar terms. In one of the *hadiths* cited, though, there is no mention of the casting of lots. Rather, Zakariya, being the closest relative, naturally took charge of Maryam when her mother died.[192]

Every time that he entered (her) chamber (mihrab) to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. Al-Tabari writes that the food found with Maryam came from God. According to certain *hadiths*, this food consisted of winter fruits in the summer and summer fruits in the winter. Another *hadith* from Ibn Ishaq says that Zakariya found more food than the amount he had initially brought to Maryam. According to this *hadith*, it is said that Maryam was initially entrusted to Zakariya after the death of her mother. It is only later, after Zakariya announced that he could no longer take care of her due to economic difficulties, that a casting of lots took place to find her a new guardian. A carpenter by the name of Jarij was chosen.

The use of the term *mihrab* is significant enough to inspire al-Tabari to define it, in the course of which he emphasizes the great status Mary enjoyed. He describes it as "the front place of assembly and prayer place, and it is the most important part of the assembly place, and the most honoured position, the most noteworthy and so it is too in the mosques."[193]

The following verses (*Al 'Imran* (3):38-41) recount the announcement to

[191] 'Isa wa-Maryam, 45.
[192] This is the version given in al-Tabari's Ta'rikh. See al-Tabari, Ancient Kingdoms, 103.
[193] 'Isa wa-Maryam, 48.

Zakariyā of the conception of his son Yaḥyā. Zakariyā is quoted as praying to God for a child. Then the angels come to announce to him the good tidings of Yaḥyā, who will become a righteous prophet. Noting his old age and the barrenness of his wife, Zakariyā wonders about the likelihood of a pregnancy. To Zakariyā's surprise, the angels answer: "Doth God accomplish what he willeth." (Āl 'Imrān (3):40). So he asks God for a sign. He is then told that he will be stuck speechless for three days.[194] This passage is followed by a series of verses touching again on Maryam:

> Āl 'Imrān (3):42-47[195]: Behold! The angels said: "O Mary! God hath chosen thee and purified thee–chosen thee above the women of all nations.
> "O Mary! worship thy Lord devoutly: prostrate thyself, and bow down (in prayer) with those who bow down."
> This is part of the tidings of the things unseen, which We reveal unto thee (O Apostle!) By inspiration: Thou was not with them when they cast lots with arrows, as to which of them should be charged with the care of Mary: nor was thou with them when they disputed (the point.)
> Behold! The angels said: "O Mary! God giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to God;
> "He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. And he shall be (of the company of the righteous."
> She said: "O my Lord! How shall have a son when no man hath touched me?" He said: "Even so: God createth what he willeth: when He hath decreed a Plan, He saith to it, 'Be,' and it is!

Al-Ṭabarī suggests that this passage, introduced by *O Mary! God has chosen thee*, is the continuation of the story told in Āl 'Imrān (3):33-34[196].

Chosen thee above the women of all nations.[197] Al-Ṭabarī explains that Maryam's election to such a status is due to her obedience (*ṭā'a*) to God's Will. Al-Ṭabarī then cites a *ḥadīth* from 'Abdallāh b. Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib which asserts that the best women in

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[194] I do not provide al-Ṭabarī's commentary on these verses, since they are not directly concerned with Maryam.

[195] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on these verses can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsīr, vol. 3, 179-209 or in 'Īsā wa-Maryam, 68-73.

[196] Āl 'Imrān (3):33-4 reads "God did choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of 'Imrān above all people, – offspring, one of the other: and God heareth and knoweth all things."

[197] The full rendition of al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this phrase is given in Chapter Three, Section C.

Paradise, according to the Prophet, are Maryam, the daughter of 'Imrān, and Khadīja, the daughter of Khuwaylid. Another *ḥadīth* from Anas b. Mālik says that the best women in all the worlds are four: Maryam, Āsiya (the wife of Pharaoh), Khadīja and Fāṭima. A third *ḥadīth* from Ammār b. Sa'd, reports that the Prophet said that the superior excellence of Khadīja over the women of his community is comparable to that of Maryam over the women of the worlds.[198]

Our author goes on to say that Maryam was addressed by the angels verbally (*shifāhan*). He cites a *ḥadīth* from Ibn Isḥāq that gives the context in which Maryam was addressed by the angels. It was while she was out (of the Temple) to fetch some water that the angels came to announce her that she had been chosen. Then, "when Zakariyā heard this, he said: Truly the daughter of 'Imrān is eminent."[199] In this *ḥadīth*, Joseph is referred to as a young man whose parents had also dedicated him to the service of God.[200]

O Mary! worship (uqnutī) thy Lord devoutly. Al-Ṭabarī cites different sources to explain the meaning of *uqnutī*. According to some, this means to "extend your prayer," as in *atilī al-rukūd.* Others assert that it means "devote yourself only and sincerely to your Lord," as in *akhliṣī li rabbiki.* Others say that it means "obey your Lord." Al-Ṭabarī's preference is for the last interpretation.

And bow down (in prayer) with those who bow down. For al-Ṭabarī, "the bow (*rukū'*) and prostration to God (*sujūd*) mean humility (*khushū'*) and submission (*khuḍū'*) to Him in obedience and servitude ."[201]

Then, al-Ṭabarī summarizes the interpretation of the verse *Al 'Imrān* (3):43 as follows:

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[198] The discussion of these *ḥadīths* will be the purpose of Chapter III of this present study.
[199] 'Isā wa-Maryam, 68.
[200] Interestingly, Joseph is the main protagonist in Maryam's story as related in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh. See especially the chapter 'The story of Jesus Son of Mary and His Mother' in al-Ṭabarī, Ancient Kingdoms, 112-120. The same context is retained.
[201] 'Isā wa-Maryam, 69.

O Maryam! Devote yourself to the worship of your Lord, solely for His pleasure, and submit to obeying him, and to servitude along with those who have submitted to Him from His creation, thanking Him for that which He has bestowed upon you from having selected you and purified you from impurity and having preferred you to the women of the worlds of your time.[202]

This (dhālika) is part of the tidings of the things unseen. Al-Ṭabari says that *dhālika* links the story of Maryam and ʿĪsā with those of Adam, Noah and Abraham, just as the verse *Āl ʿImrān* (3):33,[203] which precedes the story of Maryam, suggests. In view of this fact, their stories must belong to those revelations concerning that which is hidden and which only the *ahl al-kitāb* and the monks knew about.

Which We reveal unto thee (O Apostle!) by inspiration. Al-Ṭabari says that this verse alludes to the fact that the Prophet was *ummī* (illiterate) and that he obtained knowledge of what is hidden directly from God. This attest, therefore, to his prophetic mission. The revelation of what is hidden also allows the Prophet, al-Ṭabari explains, to cut short the affirmations of the detractors among the *ahl al-kitāb*.

Thou wast not with them when they cast lots with arrows, as to which of them should be charged with the care of Mary: Nor wast thou with them when they disputed (the point). al-Ṭabari summarizes at this point what he had already said in his commentary on *Āl ʿImrān* (3):37.

O Mary! God giveth thee glad tidings (yubashshiru) of a Word (kalima) from Him. The bulk of the commentary on this verse is concerned with the meaning of the word *kalima*. Al-Ṭabari interprets this verse to mean that God announces the good tidings to Maryam "on His part" (*bushrā min ʿindihi*). The good news is that Maryam will have a son whose name is *ʿĪsā, the Messiah, son of Maryam*. Al-Ṭabari, subsequently, gives other opinions on the subject. According to Qatāda, *bi kalimatin minhu* signifies the word *kun* (be). According to Ibn ʿAbbās, it means the name that God gave to ʿĪsā. Then al-Ṭabari summarizes his position as follows:

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[202] Ibid.

[203] Verse quoted above.

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The most correct is, in my opinion, the first view which is that the angels gave Maryam the tidings of 'Isa from God, the Exalted, in his prophethood and the Word which He ordered to be uttered to her, which is that God would create from her a child without a male parent or sperm.[204]

His name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary. Al-Tabari comments that "the praised one told His worshipers about the attribution of 'Isa and that he was his mother Maryam's son, negating thereby that which the heretics from amongst the Christians ascribed to God, be He praised, about sireship to God, and that which the Jews maligned his mother with from amongst the Jews."[205]

The following comments concern the status of 'Isa and his prophetic function. Commenting on *he shall speak to people in childhood and in maturity,* al-Tabari says that God alludes here to the integrity of 'Isa's mother and to 'Isa's early ability to speak as a proof of his prophethood.

She said: "O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?" He says: "Even so." Al-Tabari explains that:

> What the Praised one means by this is that Maryam, when the angels said to her *God giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him,* said: "Lord, how can I have a son – in what way can I have a son, from a husband that I shall wed and a spouse with whom I shall consort, or shall you cause to be in me a creation without a male or sperm, without any man touching me?" Whereupon God said to her: "So God creates what He wishes – meaning that it is in this manner that God will create from you a son for you, without any man touching you, and will make him as a sign for humankind and others. For He creates what He wishes, and makes what He wants, and gives a son to whom He pleases with and without carnal contact, and denies this from those whom He so wills from among the women – even if she have a husband, for it is not beyond His ability to create anything He wishes to come into being. All He has to do is order it if He so wishes, and say to it: Be and it is."[206]

Al-Nisa (4):156[207]: That they rejected their Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge.

Commenting on this verse, al-Tabari says that the phrase *they uttered against*

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[204] 'Isa wa-Maryam, 71.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid. 73.
[207] Al-Tabari's commentary on this verse can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsir, vol. 6, 9 or in 'Isa wa-Maryam, 149.

Mary a grave false charge "means: because of their lies against her and their accusations of fornication (*zina*). And this is the gravest charge for they slandered her with this, doing so without evidence, and not clear proof. And so they slandered her with baseless accusations."[208]

> *Al-Nisā* (4):171[209]: And His Word which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit (*rūḥ*) proceeding from Him.

Al-Ṭabarī repeats the interpretation of *kalima* that he offered in his commentary on *Āl-'Imrān* (3):46. Then he cites diverse *ḥadīths* explaining the sense of *rūḥ*. According to some, *rūḥ* implies the meaning of blowing (*nafkha*) which the Angel Gabriel breathed into Maryam's womb. Yet, for them, the blow is understood to come from God, and not the Angel, as God Himself ordered the blow to be created and breathed. According to others, *rūḥ* is to be understood as God's mercy. Others say that God created a *rūḥ*, shaped it, then sent to Maryam to make it the *rūḥ* of 'Īsā. Al-Ṭabarī concludes that all these interpretations are close to the truth.

> *Al-Mā'ida* (5):76[210]: His mother was a woman of truth (*ṣiddīqa*). They had both to eat their (daily) food.

Al-Ṭabarī explains that "here, God states that the mother of al-Masīḥ believed."[211]

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[208] Ibid., 149. Another accusation coming from Maryam's people is mentioned in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh. "Then the Israelites said, 'Only Zechariah made her pregnant; he used to have relations with her.'" See al-Ṭabarī, Ancient Kingdoms, 120.

[209] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse can be found al-Ṭabarī, Commentaire vol. 3, 537 or in 'Īsā wa-Maryam, 194.

[210] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsīr, vol. 6, 201-6 or in 'Īsā wa-Maryam, 247-9.

[211] Ibid., 249.

Maryam (19):16-29[212]: Relate in the Book (the story of) Mary when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East.

She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them: then We sent to her Our angel and he appeared before her as a man in all respects.

She said: "I seek refuge from thee to (God) Most Gracious: (come not near) if thou dost fear God."

He said: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son."

She said: "How shall I have a son seeing that no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?"

He said: "So (it will be): thy Lord saith 'That is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': it is a matter (so) decreed."

So she conceived him and she retired with him to a remote place.

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree: she cried (in her anguish): "Ah! Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!"

But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): "Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee;

"And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee.

"So eat and drink and cool (thine) eye. And if thou dost see any man say 'I have vowed a fast to (God) Most Gracious and this day will I enter into no talk with any human being.' "

At length she brought the (babe) to her people carrying him (in her arms). They said: "O Mary! truly an amazing thing hast thou brought!

"O sister of Aaron! thy father was not a man of evil nor thy mother a woman unchaste!" But she pointed to the babe. They said: "How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?"

Relate in the Book (the story of) Mary when she withdrew (intabadhat) from her family to a place in the East. Al-Ṭabarī explains that God told the Prophet: "Remember ... she betook herself from her family and sought solitude."[213] A tradition on the authority of al-Suddī says that Maryam went over to the side of a niche in a mosque because of her menstrual period. Explaining *a place in the East*, al-Ṭabarī cites traditions which mention a place "towards the east of the sun instead of west" or a place "abutting the rising sun."[214] On the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, he says furthermore that the Christians regarded the East as a *qibla* (direction of prayer) according to God's words *and she withdrew from her family to a place in the East*; hence they accepted the fact that the birth of ʿĪsā had taken place in this region.

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[212] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsīr, vol. 16, 45-64 or in ʿĪsā wa-Maryam, 404-17. This sequence is found almost word per word in al-Ṭabarī's Taʾrīkh. See al-Ṭabarī, Ancient Kingdoms, 112-3, 118-9.

[213] Ibid., 404.

[214] Ibid., 405.

She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them. Al-Ṭabarī says that "she took a curtain which covered her from her family and the people."[215] Traditions also understand the verse as meaning that God shaded her from the sun, or that the sun shaded her, preventing anyone from seeing her.

Then We sent to her Our angel (rūḥana) and he appeared before her as a man in all respects. supported by several traditions, Al-Ṭabarī explains that the angel is Gabriel(Jibrīl). On the authority of al-Suddī, "when Maryam became clean from her menstrual period, she was suddenly confronted by a man."[216] Al-Ṭabarī says that "God made him materialize before her in human form, perfect in body, i.e., in the form of a human being of proper form."[217]

She said: "I seek refuge from thee to (God) Most Gracious: (come not near) if thou dost fear (God). Al-Ṭabarī explains that Maryam was afraid of God's messenger when he appeared to her because "she thought he was a man who had come to take advantage of her."[218] Several traditions support this interpretation. A tradition on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih says that she did not perceive him except as a human being. Then, it was reported to al-Ṭabarī on the authority of Ibn Zaid that "she knew that the God-fearing person would restrain himself"[219] when he announced that he was a messenger from God.[220]

She said: "How shall I have a son seeing that no man has touched me and I am not unchaste (baghiyān)." Al-Ṭabarī reformulates the question as follows:

> How can I have a child? Is it from a husband whom I will marry and get him from him, or will God bring into being this child from the beginning, when no man has touched me in a manner

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[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.
[220] I do not provide al-Ṭabarī's commentary on the following phrase He said: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a holy son, as it does not provide essential information related to our topic.

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that is permissible through marriage, and [when] I have not been promiscuous since none has touched me in an unchaste manner that would normally be allowed, and I have not done that in an unchaste manner so that I have become pregnant through fornication.[221]

He said: "So (it will be): thy Lord saith 'That is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': it is a matter (so) decreed." Al-Tabari explains that the verse means that:

> the creation of that son whom I have said I shall give to you is easy, and it is not difficult for me to create him and give him to you without the agency of a male impregnating you . . . We may make this child which we shall give unto you as a sign and proof over the creation that I have given to you . . . as a mercy from us unto you, and for those who believe in him, and his truth which he has brought into being through you.[222]

So she conceived him and retired with him to a remote place. Al-Tabari cites several traditions explaining how the conception of 'Isa occurred. With a few variants, it is reported that Gabriel breathed down upon her womb or chest through the opening of her upper garment.[223] On the authority of al-Suddi, it is reported that "Zakariya's wife came to her in the night to visit her, and when Maryam opened the door to her, she detained her, and Zakariya's wife said: "I am pregnant" and Maryam said: I too am pregnant. The wife of Zakariya said: I find that what is in my stomach prostrates to that which is in yours, and this is His speech *Testifying the word of God.*"[224]

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree. al-Tabari writes that the traditions differ regarding the place to which Maryam betook herself to give birth to her child 'Isa. Some say it was the nearby territory of Egypt. On the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih, it is reported that at the end of her term, she was with one of her relatives called Joseph the Carpenter, and that they were heading towards the temple on Mount

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[221] Ibid., 406.

[222] Ibid.

[223] To give an account of 'Isa's conception in his Ta'rikh, al-Tabari quotes the equivalent Qur'anic account. See al-Tabari, Ancient Kingdom, 112-113.

[224] 'Isa wa-Maryam, 406.

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Zion, which they then served "industriously" and "zealously."[225] Then, the text of this *hadīth* reports a dialogue that took place between Maryam and Joseph. The narration in the Tafsīr runs as follows:

> The first person to deny the pregnancy of Maryam was her companion Joseph, and when he saw what had befallen her, he was taken by surprise, and it was stressful for him, taking him totally unaware. He did not know what would become of her. If he wanted to accuse her, he remembered her righteousness and piety, and that she did not once absent herself from him for a single moment. If he wanted to exonerate her, he looked at that which was clearly visible on her (i.e., her pregnancy). When this became rather pressing for him, he spoke to her. The first thing he said to her was that "it has occurred to me from your matter which I have feared. I have been extremely zealous about ignoring it and keeping quiet about it within myself, but now it has overcome me. I therefore see that speaking about it is healthier for me." She said: "Then say something good." He said: "I would not say anything but that to you, so tell me: does a crop grow without a seed?" She said: "Yes." He said: "Does a tree grow without rain to water it?" She replied: "Yes." He said: "And can there be a child without a father?" She said: "Yes. Do you not know that God, Blessed and Exalted be He, made the crops the day He created them without a seed? And do you not know that God, by His power, caused the tree grow until He seeks the help of water-and were it not for that water, He would not be able to make it grow?" Joseph said to her: "I do not say this, but I do know God, Blessed and Exalted be He, by His power over Whatsoever He wishes, says to that thing 'Be' and it is." Maryam said: "Do you not know that God-Blessed and Exalted be He-created Adam and his wife without female or male?" He replied: "Certainly." When she had said these things to him, it dawned upon him that what had come to her was from God, the Blessed and Exalted, and that it was not for him to ask her about it. This was because he saw her silence on the issue.[226]

Then, the report goes on to say that Joseph took care of her. God revealed to her that she should depart from the land for the safety of her child. She is said to have conferred about this to her aunt, who was pregnant with Yahyā. At that moment, while in the womb of his mother, Yahyā acknowledged 'Īsā in prostration. Joseph is then reported to have taken Maryam to Egypt. On the borders of Egypt, while feeding their donkey, the birth pains struck Maryam. "When she found them really intense, she betook herself to a date palm, and the angels sheltered her and covered her, standing in ranks surrounding her," concludes the *hadīth*.

Another tradition from Wabh b. Munabbih reports that when the pains struck her,

[225] Ibid., 407. This account is also found in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh. In fact, the following sequence involving Joseph constitutes the core of Maryam's story as related in the Ta'rīkh. See al-Ṭabarī, Ancient Kingdoms, 112-7.

[226] 'Īsā wa-Maryam, 407.

Maryam left her city of Eilat, to go six miles away to Bethlehem, where she delivered. *Ah! would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!* A tradition from al-Suddī records that she was in pain and ashamed before those present when she made that outburts. According to the *ḥadīth*, the meanings of the two injunctions are "How I wish that I had died before this agony which I now endure, and the grief of bearing a child without a husband," and "a thing forgotten, which is not asked about, such as the rag for the monthly flow, which once it has been used and discarded, is no longer used and is not mentioned."[227]

But a voice cried to her from beneath the (palm tree): Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee. Al-Ṭabarī's objective in commenting on this verse is to determine the source of this voice. He cites several traditions which say that Gabriel pronounced the injunction, and still others that insist it was 'Isā. For his part, al-Ṭabarī favours the interpretation that says it was 'Isā. Among the reasons al-Ṭabarī gives:

> she would not have pointed to him,[228] if God wished, unless she knew that he could speak in that condition (i.e. in this stage of infancy), and because of that which she was aware and had been assured of it by his address to her by his speech: *Do not grieve*. . . The words (of the verse) then mean that the newborn called out to her from under her, Do not Grieve O Mother, *for thy Lord has provided a rivulet beneath thee.* Yunus . . . from Ibn Zaid has told me that *But a voice called out to her from beneath,* Do not grieve: to which she said: 'How can I not grieve when you are with me, and I have no husband, so that I may say that you are from him, nor am I a slave that you are from my master, I have no excuse to provide to the people *Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten, out of sight!'* Whereupon 'Isā said to her: 'I will speak on your behalf.'[229]

So eat and drink and cool thine eye: al-Ṭabarī comments that,

> Here, God says to eat of the fresh dates which fall on you, and drink of the water of the rivulet which your Lord has caused underneath you and do not fear hunger or thirst, . . . and please yourself and be happy in your giving birth to me and do not grieve, . . . and your eye should rest on your child.[230]

And if thou dost see any man say 'I have vowed a fast (ṣawm) to (God) Most Gracious

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[227] *'Isā wa-Maryam,* 408.
[228] Here reference is made to *Maryam* (19):29.
[229] *'Isā wa-Maryam,* 408.
[230] Ibid.

and this day will I enter into no talk with any human being.' Al-Ṭabarī here cites several

traditions regarding the meaning of *ṣawm* (fast). They concur in reporting that she

withheld herself from food, drink and speech, yet, they differ regarding the reason why

God ordered her to abstain from speaking to others. Some say that,

> God ordered thus, for there was no manifest proof in her favor with the people, this is because
> she came, being unmarried, with a child, and was thus ordered to withhold from talking so that
> the speech of her son might suffice for her.[231]

For instance, a *ḥadīth* on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd goes: "Speak to the people and

greet them, for that woman knew that no one would believe her that she had conceived

without a husband." Al-Ṭabarī adds, "he meant by 'that woman' Maryam, on whom be

peace."[232]

Others say that her silence and the child's speaking on her behalf constituted a sign for

both Maryam and her son. Finally, others say that those who fasted in that day and age

used to refrain from speaking to the people in addition to avoiding food and drink..

At length she brought the babe to her people, carrying him. They said: O Maryam! Truly

an amazing (fariyān) thing thou hast brought! Al-Ṭabarī writes that in these verses God

recounts that when 'Īsā spoke on her behalf, "she became confident in herself, and

subjected herself to the will of God, and she carried him until she came to her

people."[233] Then, al-Ṭabarī goes on to cite several traditions that take the meaning of

fariyān to mean "tremendous" or "mighty." Another tradition on the authority of Wahb

b. Munabbih reports that *fariyān* means "something of wantonness rather than

goodness."[234]

O sister of Aaron! Al-Ṭabarī cites several traditions concerned with establishing the

identity of this Aaron. One group of traditions state that this injunction is addressed to

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[231] Ibid., 412.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid.

Maryam, "attributing to her righteousness, since people of righteousness among them were called Aaron; thus it is not Aaron, the brother of Moses." Others say that "the term refers to Aaron, the brother of Moses, and Maryam was attributed to him as his sister because she was one of his descendants." Finally, others say that it is a reference to a heretic among Maryam's people, so they ascribed her to him (so as to incriminate her.) According to al-Ṭabarī, "the correct information in the discussion on this issue is what the Prophet has provided, which we have already related, i.e., that she was ascribed to a man from her tribe."[235]

Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste (baghiyān). Al-Ṭabarī interprets this verse to mean that her father did not do "immoral things," and that her mother was not a "fornicatress."[236] Then, al-Ṭabarī quotes a tradition on the authority of al-Suddī in which it is related that God "did not say *baghiyatān* (in the feminine) because this description is specific to women and not men, and so it follows the structure of *imra'atun ḥā'id* – a menstruating woman, and *ṭalīq*, a divorced woman." *But she pointed to the babe.* Al-Ṭabarī writes that she did so to indicate that her people should talk to her son in the cradle.

How can we speak to one who is a child in the cradle? Al-Ṭabarī states that "they had thought that her pointing to him was making a mockery of them."

Al-Anbiyā (21):91[237]: And (remember) her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of Our Spirit and We made her and her son a Sign for all peoples.

And (remember) her who guarded her chastity (farj). Al-Ṭabarī writes that the commentators differ on the meaning of *farj.* Some say that God means that "she guarded

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[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid., 413.

[237] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsir, voL 17, 67 or in 'Isa wa-Maryam, 467.

her actual private parts in that she eschewed sexual immorality." Others say that God

means by *farj* "the neck of her upper garment, in that she kept Gabriel away from there

before realizing that he was a messenger from her Lord and before knowing who he

was." Al-Ṭabarī concludes this point by saying that "the better of the two positions with

us is that of those who state that *guarded her chastity* means eschewing sexual

immorality, since that is the stronger of the two interpretations."[238]

And we breathed into her from our Spirit. Al-Ṭabarī explains that God means "we

breathed in the neckline of her dress." For the interpretation of Spirit (*rūḥ*), he refers to

a previous occasion, which he does not however specify.[239]

We made her and her son a Sign for all people. Al-Ṭabarī specifies that Maryam and 'Isā

are a sign "for the people of their time, to whom they may look and on whose matter

they might reflect, and know the magnitude of our (God's) sovereignty and power over

that which we wish." Then al-Ṭabarī goes on to explain that "sign" (*āya*) is in the

singular – and not in the dual – because the meaning of the verse is that "we (God) made

the two of them as a sign and a proof from us, each one of the two as a proof of God and

the magnitude of His power, and each of the two is to be taken as representing the other

since their issue in that which guided to God is a singular one."[240]

Al-Mu'minūn (23):50[241]: And We made the son of Mary and his mother a Sign: We gave them both shelter on high ground affording rest and security and furnished with springs.

And We made the son of Mary and his mother a Sign. Al-Ṭabarī explains that

God "made the son of Maryam and his mother a proof for us among the people whom

they were, and a proof of our power over the creation of bodies without any source, as

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[238] Ibid.

[239] Most probably verse *Maryam* (19):22. See above.

[240] Ibid.

[241] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary of this verse can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsīr, vol. 18, 19-20 or in 'Isā wa-Maryam, 469.

we brought in being the creation of 'Isā without a father. A tradition of the authority of

Qatāda states that Maryam bore 'Isā without a father for him, "and for this reason the

āya is singular in mentioning Maryam and her son."[242]

We gave them both shelter on high ground. After citing several traditions that suggest

different locations for this high ground, al-Ṭabarī concludes that "the most correct of

these opinions on this issue is that it is a high place of security and clear springs."[243]

Al-Taḥrīm (66):12[244]: And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into her (body) of Our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations and was one of the devout.

And Mary, the daughter of 'Imrān who guarded her chastity. Al-Ṭabarī says that

God links this verse with a preceding one – *And God sets forth, as an example to those*

who believe.[245] For al-Ṭabarī, the phrase *Who guarded her chastity* means that "she

prohibited Gabriel, on whom be peace, access to the neckline of her dress." Al-Ṭabarī

adds that "anything that is in a woman's garment in terms of a hole or opening is called

a *farj.*"

We breathed into her (body) of our Spirit. Al-Ṭabarī summarizes what he has already

said on the subject. The verse means "we breathed into the neck of her dress, and this is

her *farj.*" Finally *Of Our spirit* means "from Gabriel and he is *al-rūḥ,*" while *And she*

testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and she testified to the truth of words of

her Lord, and was one of the devout means that "she believed in Jesus, who is the word

of God, . . . and the Torah and the Gospel, and she was of those who are obedient."

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[242] Ibid.

[243] Ibid. In his Ta'rīkh, al-Ṭabarī identifies the *high ground* as being Egypt. See his Ancient Kingdom, 116.

[244] Al-Ṭabarī's commentary of this verse can be found in the 1978 edition of his Tafsīr, vol. 28, 110 or in 'Isā wa-Maryam, 538.

[245] *Al-Taḥrīm* (66):11.

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C) Maryam, the Embodiment of the Sinless Female.

In the light of the preceding section, al-Ṭabarī's rendering of Maryam's story shows that the Qur'ān left ample room for the early exegetes to embellish the tale with hagiographic material. The resulting narrative of her life seems to fulfil two purposes. On the one hand, as has already been mentioned, Maryam's story is intermingled with theological considerations, such as the affirmation of the oneness and creative power of God. On the other, her story is intended to serve as "an example to those who believe."[246] Chosen and purified above the women of all nations,[247] Maryam embodies the image of the ideal pious female. The Islamic tradition in the beginning had attributed the concept of sinlessness (*'iṣma*)[248] to the (male) prophets. For them, this concept is understood at the spiritual level, but also guarantees a constant purity at the physical level.[249] In the case of Maryam, her story seems to be an attempt to attribute the concept of sinlessness to a female exemplar. Yet, in the light of the above commentary, Maryam's gender appears to be problematic in the eyes of al-Ṭabarī and his predecessors, since female bodily functions such as menstruation and defilement are regarded as signs of impurity. While Maryam's spiritual status is blameless in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis, the question of her physical state of purity is one of the major preoccupations of the traditions he selects and his subsequent comments. The ambivalence between her spiritual status and her physical state will be the focus of this section.

The most apparent aspect of Maryam's life is the direct participation of God in the key events of her existence, each of which is punctuated by a miracle. Ever since her

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[246] *Al-Taḥrīm* (66):11.
[247] Here reference is made to *Āl 'Imrān* (3):42.
[248] E. Tyan, "'iṣma," in *Encyclopeadia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).
[249] Stowasser, *Women*, 77.

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own miraculous conception, foreshadowed by her mother's vow to dedicate her to the service of God, Maryam is bound by divine obligation. The selection of Zakariyā or Joseph as her guardians appears to have been the work of God through the casting of lots. Even her upbringing was orchestrated by God who makes her grow *in purity and beauty*,[250] which al-Ṭabarī takes to mean "perfectly."[251] The believer is reminded of God's presence in her life as she grew up, especially in the light of the accounts of the miraculous food that was found in her chamber – miraculous either in its abundance or its unseasonal nature. This however pales before the triple sequence of miracles which is the most revealing of divine intervention in Maryam's life: the annunciation of the conception of 'Isā by the angel Gabriel; the conception itself; and the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. A final miracle marks her return to her people, when she prompts 'Isā to speak from his cradle and answer the accusation made against her.

All of these miracles contribute in showing that Maryam and her son are a "sign" (*āya*) from God.[252] Al-Ṭabarī points out that the word "sign" is in the singular in both verses and explains that "each of the two [Maryam and 'Isā] is to be taken as representing the other."[253] Al-Ṭabarī insists on the fact that their bond with one another guarantees their immunity from false accusation and misunderstanding of their status on the part of unbelievers. On the one hand, Maryam's constant identification with 'Isā allows the exegetes to argue that he was not the son of God, but rather the son of Maryam, as 'Isā is frequently identified in the Qur'ān.[254] On the other hand, 'Isā intervenes to defend the integrity of his mother at a critical moment in her life, i.e.,

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[250] *Āl 'Imrān* (3):37.
[251] The definition of what "perfectly" means in al-Ṭabarī's eyes will become clear later in this section.
[252] *Al-Anbiyā* (21):91 and *Al-Mu'minūn* (23):50.
[253] See above, 70.
[254] This matronymic occurs 23 times in the Qur'ān, 16 times as 'Isā, Ibn Maryam, and seven times as Ibn Maryam alone or with some other title. See Geoffrey Parrinder, Jesus in the Qur'an (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 22. Parrinder notes that "this is surprising since Son of Mary occurs only once in the Bible."

when she returned to her people to face their accusations of *zina* (fornication). Thus exonerated, Maryam is presented in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis as a sign of purity.

God's involvement in Maryam's life appears to be intrinsically linked with her elevated piety. Several elements in her story point to her high spiritual status. First of all, the accounts of her story emphasize her ancestry and privileged network of relationships. The sources cited by al-Ṭabarī have traced her genealogy through her father 'Imrān back to the prophet David. Her mother's genealogy is not as prestigious, yet she is shown to have been a devout woman, whose desire for a child is heard and granted by God. The impeccable status of her parents is also emphasized in *Maryam* (19):28 which reads "thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste (*baghiyān*)." At one point the Qur'ān, as we have seen, identifies Maryam as the sister of Aaron.[255] The early commentators, as shown in al-Ṭabarī's exegesis, were well aware that Maryam could not have been the actual sister of Aaron, brother of Moses, and tried in some cases to explain this as a reference to her descent from him, or in others as reflecting a custom of her time to refer to people of righteousness in her tribe as "Aaron." These traditions emphasize again her righteousness by associating her with a righteous man. Equally, the guardians to whom Maryam was entrusted were also devoted to the service of God. Zakarīyā was himself a prophet and subject to miracles, such as the conception of his son, who was also to become a prophet. Maryam's second guardian, Joseph, is said to have been a youth devoted to the service of God, dedicated to this task at birth by his parents. Interestingly, Joseph is said to have had a genealogy similar to that of 'Imrān, in attestation of his righteousness. In addition, Maryam's story is inseparable from her son's, the prophet 'Īsā, as may be seen in the Qur'ān's narrative. Ultimately, Maryam's immunity from fault is guaranteed by the exceptional fact that Satan did not prick her at birth.

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[255] *Maryam* (19):28.

Maryam's righteousness is corroborated by her devotion and obedience to the will of God. Commentators relate that after the death of her mother, Maryam lived in the temple under the protection of Zakariyā. Her position in the *miḥrāb* (a place of honor as al-Ṭabarī describes it) and her *bow(ing) down with those who bow down*, suggests the intensity of her piety. In al-Ṭabarī's view worship and obedience are closely linked. Thus when Maryam is told to *worship (uqnutī) thy Lord devoutly*, al-Ṭabarī does not necessarily take it to mean "extend your prayers" as others have suggested, but rather "obey your Lord." Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on *al-Taḥrīm* (66):12 summarizes his description of Maryam's piety. He writes that "she believed in Jesus, who is the word of God, . . . and the Torah and the Gospel, and she was of those who were obedient."[256] Thus, Maryam's life, as depicted above, reflects her mother's wish that she be *muḥarrarān*. This word has been translated into English as "the special service to God,"[257] but al-Ṭabarī understands it to mean "free from the occupations of this world."[258]

Maryam's perfection, as al-Ṭabarī describes it, is a combination of righteousness, devotion and obedience. Consequently, Maryam is granted the highest spiritual title: she was *chosen over the women of the worlds*. Al-Ṭabarī explains that this election is due to her obedience towards God. Elsewhere, he also records Zakariyā's remark after he heard that the angels had addressed Maryam: "Truly, the daughter of 'Imrān is eminent."[259] The high status of Maryam in the eyes of al-Ṭabarī is corroborated by his attributing to her, on one occasion, the supplication 'on whom be peace,'[260] usually reserved in the Islamic tradition for Gabriel and all the prophets besides Muḥammad.

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[256] See above, 71
[257] This is Y. 'Alī's rendering.
[258] See above, 55.
[259] See above, 59.
[260] See above, 68.

Thus, Maryam would seem to fulfil the requirements of the perfect prophet,[261] were it not for her gender. The traditions dwell a lot on the fact that, against all expectations, Hanna's child was a female. Discussing the interpretation of *Al 'Imrān* (3):35, al-Ṭabarī cites several traditions that report that the mother of Maryam expected a male child when she made her dedication to God. This reveals the obstacle of being a female in the service of God, but at the same time it demonstrates Maryam's exceptional status. Reflecting the attitude of his time, al-Ṭabarī explains that the disadvantage of the female with respect to the male in the service of God is caused by her menstruation.

Thus, while the purity of Maryam is not in question at the spiritual level, her purity at the physical level is another matter. For lack of constant physical purity,[262] al-Ṭabarī is concerned to present her free from physical impurity at the moment God intervenes in her life. Traditions on the authority of al-Suddī are particularly revealing of this attempt. Al-Suddī is reported to say that at some point in her life, Maryam went out to the side of the niche because of her menstrual period. Then, he adds, once Maryam was free of this condition she was suddenly confronted by a man, i.e., Gabriel in a human form. The early exegetes' discomfort surrounding menstruation is shown in their struggle with the meaning of *a thing forgotten*, which, on the authority of al-Suddī is defined as that "which is not asked about, such as the rag for the monthly flow, which once it has been used and discarded, is no longer used and is not mentioned."[263]

Similarly, al-Ṭabarī's report marks an insistence on the fact she *guarded her*

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[261] Some exegetes such as Ibn Ḥazm (284-456/ 994-1064) and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) have argued that Maryam was a prophet (*nabī*) because she was addressed by angels. See Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary," 178. Yet al-Ṭabarī does not mention this possibility of interpretation.

[262] Later exegetes such as Abū al-Futūḥ Rāzī and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā contend that Maryam was free from menstruation and defilement. But this is clearly not the case in the account given by al-Ṭabarī. In fact, according to B. Stowasser, the understanding of physical purity as freedom of menstruation and defilement has "remained marginal to the consensus-based doctrine that defined Mary's purity in ethical terms." See Stowasser, Women, 78.

[263] See above, 67.

farj.[264] Commenting on this Qur'ānic phrase, al-Ṭabarī explains that she eschewed

sexual immorality. Al-Ṭabarī also cites other reports which assert that Maryam was

scared at the sight of the man whom she did not at first recognize as Gabriel and whom

she thought he was a man who had come to take advantage of her. Some traditions say

that, in her fright, she shielded her *farj,* meaning in this case the neck of her upper

garment, and did so before realizing that it was Gabriel who had approached her and

that he bore a message from her Lord. Commenting elsewhere on the verse *I was not*

unchaste (baghiyan),[265] Al-Ṭabarī takes the opportunity to explain what she meant by

this, using almost legal terminology to assure us that Maryam was innocent of the

charge of promiscuity or fornication.

Interestingly, although classical Muslim commentators generally agree that

Maryam was a virgin before the conception of 'Īsā,[266] the word *batūl* (virgin) is not

mentioned in the Qur'ān.[267] In fact, her virginity is assumed in light of 'Īsā's conception

occurring without the agency of a male impregnating her. The traditions describing the

way in which 'Īsā was conceived are at pains to determine whether Gabriel blew the *rūḥ*

into the neckline or sleeve of Maryam's garment, or whether his breath reached her

chest or her womb. In any case, these traditions are careful to depict the act as involving

a minimum of physical contact.

Her female condition and the risk of impurity it involved in the eyes of the early

exegetes is connected with the triple sequence of: seclusion before and after her

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[264] The meanings of *farj* in Arabic are multiple as have seen above. The English rendering varies between "shame" and "chastity."

[265] Interestingly, the same word *baghiyan* is used when the Qur'ān asserts that her mother, a married woman, was not unchaste.

[266] Stowasser, Women, 78.

[267] Smith and Haddad note that *batūl* is itself a Christian term. See Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary," 163 n. 8. Yet it is mentioned in the *ḥadīth.* The earliest reference to this is found in Ibn Hanbal, Musnad. This title is also applied to the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima in some instances, although it is not found in al-Ṭabarī. See for instance the sixteenth century exegete Kāshānī. For more details on this topic, see McAuliffe, "Chosen," 23.

conception of 'Isā; her suffering at his birth; and her silence upon her return to her people. She isolates herself because her menstruation prevents her from staying at the temple.[268] Once pregnant, she isolates herself in a remote place.[269] At the birth of her child, she experiences great pains. Crying *Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!* she is depicted as feeling deeply her shameful condition, which al-Ṭabarī expresses as "How can I not grieve when you are with me, and I have no husband, so that I may say that you ('Isā) are from him, nor am I a slave that you are from my master. I have no excuse to provide to the people."[270] Then, God enjoins her to enter into a fast (*sawm*), which is understood to entail complete silence on her part. Al-Ṭabarī explains that "some say that God ordered thus, for there was no manifest proof in her favor with the people; this is because she came, being unmarried, with a child, and was thus ordered to withhold from talking so the speech of her son might suffice from her."[271] What is remarkable is that at each stage of this sequence, Maryam receives God's support. At the moment of 'Isā's birth, Maryam is miraculously given fresh dates and water from a rivulet. After the comforting words of 'Isā *from beneath,* "she became confident in herself, and subjected herself to the will of God, and she carried him until she came to her people," knowing that 'Isā would speak on her behalf and that her integrity would thereby be preserved.

Maryam's piety and obedience to the Will of God is commonly considered to a model for Muslim women to emulate, as *al-Taḥrīm* (66):11 suggests. Yet, at the same time, it is often noted that Maryam's extraordinary status is a difficult goal for ordinary women to acheive. This is particularly true in relation to her virginity. It is interesting to note that in al-Ṭabarī the traditions he has selected and his own comments are less

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[268] Her legend does not say whether her departure was temporary or permanent following the onset of her puberty.

[269] Accounts vary as to whether or not she was accompanied by Joseph.

[270] See above, 61.

[271] See above, 68.

concerned with her virginity and its persistence than with the fact that she might have engaged in immoral sexual behavior. In light of the preceding analysis, we note that the discussions surrounding her physical purity, as found in al-Ṭabarī, have two purposes. On the one hand, the purpose of stressing Maryam's virginity before 'Isā's conception is to prove his prophethood. However, the problem of Maryam's continued virginity after the birth of 'Isā is not discussed in al-Ṭabarī.[272] In general, the prevailing of a woman's virginity for the rest of her life might imply that she was not interested in marriage. As the Islamic tradition as a rule encourages the institution of marriage, it is understandable that al-Ṭabarī should not insist on the benefits of the prevailing of imitating Maryam's devotion to virginity.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the commentaries on the phrases dealing with Maryam's *farj* and *baghīyān* focus to a great extent on the understanding that she was never promiscuous before or outside marriage. To the outside observer, this type of insistence would seem out of context as neither the Qur'ān nor the traditions allude that Maryam was ever married. Perhaps this explains why the exegetes chose to comment Maryam's chaste behavior since it was more applicable to the lives of (ordinary) women of their time than the ideal of virginity that Christians apply to her.[273] In addition, in accordance with (Islamic) marriage precepts, al-Ṭabarī's commentary highlights Maryam's maternity,[274] as an example of submission to the will of God that should be emulated by Muslim women.

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[272] This attitude reflects the classical and modern Islamic positions on Maryam's virginity. See Stowasser, Women, 78.

[273] McAuliffe, "Chosen," 27.

[274] In the writings of exegetes of the formative period of Islam, Maryam's legend symbolizes what, in Jungian terminology, may be called the positive aspect of the Great Mother (feminine) archetype. This universal archetype is expressed in different religious traditions and cultures with symbols such as maternity, womb, water and tree. These elements are especially noteworthy in the Muslim depiction of Maryam's legend. For more details, see Erich Neumann, The Great Mother, An Analysis of the Archetype (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

Interestingly, except for an uncertain allusion in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh,[275] no mention is made of Maryam's death in our sources. In fact, the last we hear of Maryam in the Qur'ān is when ʿĪsā affirms that he will be dutiful to his mother.[276] The legend of Maryam in fact seems to live on forever, and is given new life in the comparisons made between her and other model women of the Islamic tradition – a development that will be explored in the next chapter.

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[275] Al-Ṭabarī, Ancient Kingdoms, 102.
[276] Maryam (19):32-3.

CHAPTER III: Al-Ṭabarī's Depiction of Khadīja and Fāṭima, Two Exemplary Female Muslims.

The previous chapter pointed to the fact that the Arabic word *muslim* reflects two layers of understanding. On one level, *muslim* refers to the individual submission of the believer, while on the other, it retains the notion of adherence to the group of people believing in Islam, the Muslim community *par excellence*. The communal understanding of the word is corollary to the Muslims' consciousness of belonging to a specific religious community. The Qur'ānic message and the political and social conflicts that arose at the time of the Prophet are moreover indicative of the fact that his mission set itself against the contemporary social order and world view, and promised new horizons. Now, it is difficult to know to what extent the contemporary followers of the Prophet, not to mention Muḥammad himself, were conscious of themselves as the originators of a completely new community. The lack of (auto)biographical material dating back to this crucial period of history prohibits the giving of a definite answer. As a matter of fact, the earliest biographies of the Prophet and his Companions were only written down, as far as we know, some 150 years after the death of the Prophet. In the process of building its identity, the Muslim community has consciously sought to follow the precedent of its founders, i.e., the Prophet and his Companions. Thus, in an attempt to define themselves through the representation of the past and its most prominent protagonists, succeeding generations of Muslims have retrospectively reconstructed the lives of the Prophet and his Companions (including the female Companions). In the hands of later Muslim scholars, the Prophet and his most faithful followers underwent a process of idealization reflecting the concerns and needs of the period when these accounts were

written down.[277] As Gordon Newby asserts, sacred biographies, such as the biographies of the Companions of the Prophet have come to be understood, "both recount the process through which a new religious ideal is established and, at the same time, participate in the process."[278] The Companions' biographies found in early Islamic literature are characterized by a mixture of historical data and hagiographic elements, making "the junction between tendential shaping and explicit event-related data" difficult to find.[279] The process of idealization of the main protagonists of the nascent Muslim community, as recorded in the *hadīth* literature, early biographies[280] and chronicles, will be the focus of the first section of this chapter. The second section will be devoted to the specific case of Khadīja and Fāṭima. In this section, al-Ṭabarī's account in his Ta'rīkh will be taken into consideration. A final section will focus on al-Ṭabarī's commentary on *Āl 'Imrān* (3):42, and will analyze the selected traditions that offer a comparison between Maryam and these two Muslim women.

A) The Early Muslim Accounts of the Main Protagonists of the Nascent Muslim Community.

The search for the historical lives of the founders of religious traditions has been a century-long concern in Western scholarship. The work of the German scholar Albert

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[277] In her book on 'Ā'isha, D. Spellberg writes accordingly that "even the earliest Arabic written sources on 'Ā'isha's life already capture that life of legacy, an interpretation, not simply because of the issue of chronology or mode of transmission, but because of the distinctly different historical contexts in which the later written preservation of her recorded life took place." Legacy, ibid. 2.

[278] Gordon Newby, The Making of the Last Prophet, A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) 16, quoting Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps, The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion (The Hague: Mouton, 1976) 3.

[279] Ibid., 22.

[280] An early extant work on the biographies of the Companions of the Prophet is Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr. In this work, Ibn Sa'd has included some four thousand Muslims who narrated *hadīth*. A special chapter, *fī al-nisā'*, is dedicated to some six hundred biographies of women.

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Schweitzer, published in English as The Quest of the Historical Jesus, was among the
factors which inspired Orientalists to, in their turn, "take stock of the work that has
been done [on the Prophet Muḥammad], gather up the assured results that have been
won, and note the trends of critical scholarship indicating the lines of investigation that
the future will have to follow."[281] A. Jeffery indicates, however, that the scarcity of
primary sources from Muḥammad's own time prevents us from reaching any confident
conclusions as to the events of his life. These constraints on research have forced
scholars to apply different methodologies in analyzing the personage of Muḥammad as
it appears in later Muslim discourse. Approaches vary from condescending and
discrediting accounts to the application of social scientific methods to more apologetic
attempts. Every approach has highlighted a different aspect of the life of the Prophet,
yet each has failed to give an exhaustive apprehension of his life. According to Earle
Waugh, this lack of comprehensiveness is to be expected. He writes:

> The reason is not the defectiveness of the methods, but the assumption that a historical biography
> can hope to exhaust what the Prophet both was and now appears to be. A much fairer starting point
> is to acknowledge that Muḥammad cannot be located on any single plane, whether it be social,
> political, psychological, or religious. In history of religions terms, he is a paradigmatic figure.[282]

In their search for models, the early Muslims considered the Prophet's sayings and deeds
as sources of emulation. Thus, the early Muslim scholars were not necessarily concerned
with the recording of specifically historical data. Rather, they focused on the recording
of what Muḥammad was believed to have said and done, thereby, highlighting the
exemplary behavior of the Prophet. The literature in which the biographical components
of the Prophet are found includes historical material as well as mythical elements. The
analysis of a work such as Ibn Isḥāq's Sīra shows that the process of idealization of the

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[281] Arthur Jeffery, "The Quest of the Historical Mohammed," Moslem World 16 (October 1926)
327.

[282] Earle Waugh, "The Popular Muḥammad, Models in the Interpretation of an Islamic
Paradigm," in Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of
Arizona Press) 42.

Prophet had started in the generations following his death and had by then absorbed

hagiographic elements of *isrā'īliyāt* inspiration.[283] As Gordon Newby asserts, "Ibn

Ishāq's end product is a combination of what some have called myth and history,

resulting in 'mythomorphism.'"[284] By mythomorphism the author means that the

biographer describes the subject in terms of already existing ideal types. For instance,

the appearance of a concept such as *'isma* is only reflective of the passage of

Muhammad's personage from a historical context to a mythical framework. By means

of recording the traditions in circulation in his own day and providing his own

comments, al-Tabarī reflects the spiritual aspirations of the early Muslims,[285] just as he

participated in the shaping of a new Islamic self-image.

Included in the process of creation of new Islamic images were the Companions

of the Prophet. Although the Qur'ān describes and acknowledges in some verses[286] the

merit of the Companions, there is no reference in scripture to their enjoying immunity

from error. Rather, the Qur'ānic message to the followers of the Prophet stipulates that

they are in need of guidance, counsel and exhortation.[287] Yet, in a fashion similar to the

case of the Prophet Muhammad, the *hadīth* literature, biographies and chronicles of

early Islam all depict the Companions with a mixture of historical reference and

mythical embellishment. In the end, they came to be portrayed as the true embodiment

of Islam. For instance, the canonical collections of *hadīth* by al-Bukhārī (d. 240/870)

and Muslim (d. 245/875) both include a chapter on the *fadā'il al-sahaba* (the virtues of

the Companions). The Companions' biographies grew with the need to assess their

integrity as early transmitters of *hadīth*. For the early traditionalists, the appraisal of the

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[283] Newby, Last Prophet, 2. The author asserts that "when early Muslims incorporated salient aspects of the Jewish and Christian methods of treating holy persons and texts, the details, the anecdotes, and the themes naturally followed." Ibid., ix.

[284] Ibid., 17.

[285] Muhammad's recording of his deeds and sayings had also a legal purpose.

[286] See verses Al 'Imrān (3):100, Fath (48):18, Fath (48):29.

[287] Tayob, "Islamic Historiography," 93.

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Companions' impeccable morality was to have a double impact: it justified reliance on the *hadīth* material and spurred the idealization of the close followers of the Prophet, who then also became sources of emulation.

Among the Companions, the early Muslim biographers and traditionists also expanded on the lives and roles of the female Companions, especially the Prophet's consorts. The number of the Prophet's wives is generally said to have been fourteen, although early Muslim biographies vary on the number.[288] The fact that they lived on an intimate basis with the Prophet meant that they received special attention. But the Prophet's wives also acquired a prestigious status in the Qur'ān. In *al-Aḥzāb* (33):6, the Qur'ān attributes to them the honorific title "Mothers of the Believers." This injunction supports the Qur'ānic assertion in *al-Aḥzāb* (33):32 that they are "not like any of the (other) women." Yet their high status is not free of compromise. In a study in which she analyses the Qur'ānic verses referring to the wives of the Prophet,[289] Barbara Stowasser writes that

> it is by linking dignity with obligation, elite status with heightened moral responsibility, that an aspect of God's *sunna* (His law for the world) is here defined. Numerous divine reprimands addressed to Muhammad's wives in the Qur'an establish their special responsibility to overcome their human frailties and ensure their individual worthiness.[290]

Now, the Qur'ān never specifically names the wives of the Prophet. It therefore fell to the early exegetes to attribute the *asbāb al-nuzūl* for such verses and to identify the specific wives of the Prophet involved in the events that prompted the revelations. In this process, a significant amount of material recorded in the traditions describing the wives' behavior for paradigmatic purposes, as well as for purposes of legal codification,

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[288] Stowasser, Women, 86.

[289] The verses covered by her study are *al-Nūr* (24):11-26, *al-Aḥzāb* (33): 4, 6, 28-29, 30-34, 37-38, 40, 50-53, 55, *al-Taḥrīm* (66):1-5

[290] Ibid., 85.

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entered the exegetical tradition.[291] In the *hadīth* literature, they emerge as exemplars of virtue and righteousness. Yet, interestingly, they also appear "as ordinary women possessed and motivated by petty jealousies."[292] Various explanations for the inclusion of such female characteristics into the Ḥadīth are offered by B. Stowasser:

> Traditions depicting the women as "ordinary females" may, firstly, stem from the Hadith's exegetic function by which the Qur'ānic materials of rebuke and censure directed at the Prophet's wives were legitimate topics for pious concern. Secondly, the women's family ties, hence their relations with rival political cadres in early Muslim history, in all likelihood made them fitting targets for enhancing, or, conversely, disparaging detail. Thirdly, the Hadith also developed what may be called a "typology of pettiness" that employed the theme of the women's jealousy in formulaic fashion to "explain" a number of occurrences whose original nature was unknown, or unacceptable, to later Muslim traditionists. [...] Fourthly, the fact that scholarly consensus continued to support and make great use of these traditions is related to the generally low opinion of women's nature expressed in medieval religious nature as a whole.[293]

Yet, interestingly, in the cases of Khadīja and Fāṭima, the reader seems to be spared these "petty" descriptions. As a wife of the Prophet, Khadīja enjoys a special status, as we shall see in the following sections. Yet it is important to note at this point that most of the Qur'ānic revelations concerning women's issues were made in Medina,[294] long after Khadīja had already died. It is only posthumously that she was attributed the title of Mother of the Believers.[295] In addition, her monogamous relationship with the Prophet spared her from a situation of rivalry with other wives.

As the daughter of the Prophet (and Khadīja), Fāṭima obviously did not belong to the group that the early exegetes defined as the wives of the Prophet. It can be assumed, though, that she had regular contact with the Prophet's household, for it is recorded that, in some cases, she acted as a mediator between the Prophet and his wives.[296] For instance, Denise Spellberg recounts that

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[291] Such as the lawfulness of marriage with the former wife of an adopted son, or the codification of the rules on *hijāb.*

[292] Ibid., 107.

[293] Ibid.

[294] Ibid., 102.

[295] Spellberg, Legacy, 154.

[296] Ibid., 36.

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certain disgruntled spouses sent the Prophet's daughter Fatima to him demanding equity of treatment. The Prophet queried his daughter about her mission, asking, "Do you not love what I love?" When Fatima responded in the affirmative, her father replied that he "loved 'A'isha." Fatima left vowing never again to press the matter.[297]

Elsewhere, Fāṭima is said to have been on bad terms with the first Caliph Abū Bakr. On the authority of 'Ā'isha, al-Ṭabarī reports that,

> Fāṭimah and al-'Abbās came to Abū Bakr demanding their [share of] inheritance of the Messenger of God's land in Fadak and his share of Khaybar['s tribute]. Abū Bakr replied, "I have heard the Messenger of God say: 'Our [i.e., the prophets' property] cannot be inherited and whatever we leave behind is alms [i.e., to be given in charity]. The family of Muḥammad will eat from it.' By God, I will not abandon a course which I saw the Messenger of God practicing, but will continue doing accordingly." Fāṭima shunned him and did not speak to him about it until she died. 'Alī buried her at night and did not permit Abū Bakr to attend [her burial].[298]

Yet, this event is reflective of the political conflicts that occurred after the death of the Prophet. It did not affect her role as an exemplary woman. In fact, Fāṭima seldom appears in early Muslim accounts in a context of rivalry for the Prophet's attention.

Therefore, contrary to the *ḥadīth* depiction of the Prophet's other consorts,[299] Khadīja and Fāṭima are depicted as "unequivocally ideal"[300] women. Their depiction, as we shall now see, reflects the exemplification of the ideal pious woman, based on the best of Qur'ānic female models.

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[297] Ibid. (Here she quotes Muslim, Sahih Muslim, and al-San'ani, Musannaf).

[298] Al-Ṭabari, The History of al-Tabari, The Last Years of the Prophet, trans. and annot. by Ismail Poonawala (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 196.

[299] For example, Denise Spellberg notes that "'A'isha would be associated not just with the best of Qur'ānic images – Maryam, the mother of Jesus, and Asiya, the wife of pharaoh, but also with more problematic female figures of Zulaykha' and the wives of the prophets Lot and Noah. The range of 'A'isha's associations with Qur'ānic female figures was far greater than any other historical Muslim woman because her persona was impossible to reconcile with the simple prescriptives of perceived positive feminine attributes." See Spellberg, Legacy, 193.

[300] Ibid.

B) The Depiction of Khadija and Fatima in al-Tabari's Ta'rikh.

Al-Tabari appended to his Ta'rikh a work entitled Dhayl al-Mudhayyal min Ta'rikh al-Sahaba wa al-Tabi'in (The Supplement to the Supplemented: Biographies of Companions and Their Successors). Aiming at conciseness, al-Tabari limits himself to the recording of a minimum of biographical data. In the case of Khadija and Fatima, their biographies are limited to recounting their descent, whom they married, the number of children they bore, and when they both died. This type of information is probably the closest to what we might call purely historical data. Indeed, the lack of additional personal accounts and anecdotes is an unfortunate fact. To find more substance to their stories, the reader is asked by al-Tabari to refer to his Ta'rikh, where Khadija's and Fatima's personal lives are recounted in correlation with the Prophet's.[301] In the case of Fatima, elements of her personal life also appear in conjunction with her husband 'Ali b. Abi Talib.

According to al-Tabari,

Among the women who died in Mecca before the Prophet's Emigration [to Medina] was his wife, Khadijah, daughter of Khuwaylid b. Asad b. 'Abd al-'Uzza b. Qusayy. Khadijah's *kunyah* was Umm Hind. Hind, after whom she was named, was her son from Abu Halah b. al-Nabbash b. Zurarah, her husband before [she married] the Prophet. She died three years before the Emigration, at the age of sixty-five . . . Khadijah died in the month of Ramadan that year and was buried in al-Hajun.[302]

Also in his Dhayl al-Mudhayyal, al-Tabari records that,

She bore [Abu Halah] two sons, Hind and Halah. Halah died, whereas Hind lived to see [the advent of] Islam and was converted . . . According to [Abu 'Ubaydah] Ma'mar b. Muthanna: Hind was passing through al-Basrah, and died there. The market was canceled that day, and there was no loading and unloading of ships. They said: "The brother of Fatimah, the brother of Fatimah, may God bless her! (*Salawat allah 'alayha*)."[303]

Khadija is also mentioned in a chapter entitled "*Biographies of the Women Who*

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[301] Landau-Tasseron's "Foreword" to al-Tabari, Biographies, xx-xxi.
[302] Al-Tabari, Biographies, 3-4.
[303] Ibid., 79-80.

Embraced Islam during the Prophet's Lifetime."[304] There, it is said that her *kunya* was

Umm Hind, and that Hind was the name of one of the daughters whom she bore to her

first husband 'Atīq b. 'Ābid b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Umar b. Makhzūm. This contrasts with the

aforementioned report that said that Hind was the name of a son whom she bore to her

second husband Abū Hālah. Then al-Ṭabarī reports that Khadīja was the Prophet's first

wife, and that she bore all his children except Ibrāhīm, who was the son of Māriya (the

Copt). Khadīja died "in Ramaḍān of the year 10 after [the beginning of] the

prophethood of Muḥammad, at the age of 65." She was carried from her house to be

buried at al-Ḥajūn and the Prophet descended into her grave.[305]

However, the bulk of Khadīja's life is recounted in al-Ṭabarī's <u>Ta'rīkh</u>. Quoting

Hishām b. Muḥammad, al-Ṭabarī reports that "the Messenger of God married Khadījah

when he was twenty-five years old. At that time, Khadījah was forty years of age."[306] On

the authority of Ibn Isḥāq, al-Ṭabarī reports that

> Khadījah bt. Khuwaylid b. Asad b. 'Abd al-'Uzzā b. Quṣayy was a wealthy and respected merchant. She used to employ men to engage in trade with her property and gave them a share in the profits, for Quraysh were a trading people. When she heard of the Messenger of God's truthfulness, reliability, and nobility of character, she sent for him and proposed to him that he should go to Syria and engage in trade with her property.[307]

The tradition goes on to say that Muḥammad accepted the offer. During his trip

to Syria, he was accompanied by Khadīja's slave, Maysara. Halting to rest, the Prophet

sat in the shade of a tree near a monk's cell. Looking at the scene, the monk told

Maysara that "no one has ever halted beneath this tree but a prophet," and that he had

seen the two angels shading him. Upon their return to Mecca, Khadīja's slave reported

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[304] Ibid., 161.

[305] Ella Landau-Tasseron explains that "Descending into the grave of the deceased was apparently a pre-Islamic custom, at least in Medina. It was sometimes, but not regularly, practiced by the Prophet in person. . . . The practice continued in early Islam. . . . However, it is not included among Muḥammad's funerary practices as recorded by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah." Ibid., 11-12 n. 43.

[306] Al-Ṭabarī, <u>The History of al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad at Mecca</u>, trans. and anno. by W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 47.

[307] Ibid., 47-48.

to her the exchange that he had had with the monk.

Then, the tradition narrates that,

Khadijah was a resolute, intelligent and noble woman, and in addition to this God wished to ennoble her, so when Maysarah told her these things she sent for the Messenger of God and, it is reported, said to him, "Cousin, your kinship to me, your standing among your people, your reliability, your good character and your truthfulness make you a desirable match." Then she offered herself to him in marriage. Khadijah was then the most distinguished of the women of Quraysh in lineage[308] the most highly honored, and the wealthiest, and all the men of her tribe would have been eager to accept this proposal had it been made to them. When she made this offer to the Messenger of God he told his uncles about it, and Hamzah b. ʿAbd al-Muttalib went with him to Khuwaylid b. Asad and asked for (his daughter) Khadijah's hand on Muhammad's behalf. Khuwaylid married Khadijah to the Messenger of God, and she bore all his children except for Ibrāhīm. They were Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Umm Kulthūm, Fātimah, al-Qāsim – from whom he received his kunyah of Abū al-Qāsim – al-Tāhir (sic), and al-Tayyib. Al-Qāsim, ai-Tahir (sic), and al-Tayyib died during the Jāhiliyyah, while all of his daughters lived until Islam, became Muslims, and emigrated with him to al-Madinah.[309]

Then, al-Ṭabari cites a tradition on the authority of al-Wāqidī which says that, according to some accounts, Khadīja made her father drunk so that he would more easily consent to marry her to Muḥammad. But al-Wāqidī says both accounts of the circumstances surrounding Khadīja's marriage to Muḥammad are false because her father had died before the Sacrilegious War, which is thought to have occurred when Muḥammad was twenty years of age. Rather, according to al-Wāqidī, it was Khadīja's uncle ʿAmr b. Asad who married her to the Messenger of God. In any case, the traditions recount that both Muḥammad and Khadīja were married with the consent of their guardians.

Interestingly, at the end of this section on Khadīja's marriage to Muḥammad, al-Ṭabari adds:

Khadijah's house at that time was the house which is still known today and called Khadijah's House. It is related that Muʿāwiyah bought it and turned it into a mosque in which people could pray. He rebuilt it in the form in which it exists today without alteration. The stone which is at the door of the house to the left as you go in is the stone beneath which the messenger of God used to sit to shelter himself when people threw stones at him from the houses of Abū Lahab and ʿAdi b. Hamrā' al-Thaqafi, behind the house of Ibn ʿAlqamah.[310]

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[308] The details of her genealogy are given in al-Ṭabari, The Last Years of the Prophet, 127.

[309] Al-Ṭabari, Muhammad at Mecca, 48-49.

[310] Ibid., 50.

In further accounts in al-Ṭabari's Ta'rikh, Khadija is pictured as an unconditional supporter of Muḥammad's first signs of prophethood and as the first believer in the new message professed by her husband. She was the first to witness the Prophet's psychological state after he had been contacted by the Angel Gabriel. On the authority of 'Ā'isha, al-Ṭabari reports that:

> [Muḥammad] grew to love solitude and used to remain in a cave on Ḥirā' engaged in acts of devotion for a number of days before returning to his family. Then he would return to his family and supply himself with provisions for a similar number of days. This continued until the Truth came to him unexpectedly, and said, "Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God.'" (Describing what happened next,) the Messenger of God said, "I had been standing, but fell to my knees; and crawled away, my shoulders trembling. I went to Khadijah and said, 'Wrap me up! Wrap me up!' When the terror had left me, he came to me and said, 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God.'"
> He (Muḥammad) said: I had been thinking of hurling myself down from a mountain crag, but he appeared to me, as I was thinking about this, and said, "Muḥammad, I am Gabriel and you are the Messenger of God." Then he said, "Recite!" I said, "What shall I recite?" He took me and pressed me three times tightly until I was nearly stifled and was utterly exhausted; then he said: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created," and I recited it. Then I went to Khadijah and said, "I have been in fear for my life." When I told her what had happened, she said, "Rejoice, for God will never put you to shame, for you treat your kinsfolk well, tell the truth, deliver what is entrusted to you, endure fatigue, offer hospitality to the guest, and aid people in misfortune."
> Then she took me to Waraqah b. Nawfal b. Asad[311] and said to him "Listen to your brother's son."[312]

In another account, al-Ṭabari reports

> Then [Muḥammad] went to Khadijah and said, "Khadijah, I think that I have gone mad." "No, by God," she said. "Your Lord would never do that to you. You have never committed a wicked act." Khadijah went to Waraqah b. Nawfal and told him what had happened. He said, "If what you say is true, your husband is a prophet. He will meet adversity from his people. If I live long enough, I shall believe in him."
> After this, Gabriel did not come to him for a while, and Khadijah said to him, "I think that your Lord must have come to hate you." Then God revealed to him: "By the forenoon, and by the night when it is still, your Lord has not forsaken you, nor does he hate you."[313]

On the authority of Ibn Ḥumayd, al-Ṭabari reports the same story using similar expressions.[314] Another tradition on the authority of Ibn Ḥumayd indicates Khadija's presence while Muḥammad is in contact with the Angel Gabriel. It says,

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[311] The translators note that "Waraqah was Khadijah's cousin, their fathers being brothers. He was counted as a ḥanif and is sometimes said to have become a Christian; he had certainly studied the Bible." Ibid.

[312] Ibid., 68.

[313] Ibid., 70.

[314] Ibid., 72.

[Ibn Ḥumayd] was told that Khadījah said to the Messenger of God, to keep him steadfast in the prophethood with which God had ennobled him, "Cousin, can you tell me when this companion of yours who visits you comes?" He replied, "Yes," and she said, "Tell me then, when he comes." Gabriel came to him as before, and the Messenger of God said to Khadījah, "Khadījah, here is Gabriel who has come to me." She said, "Yes? Come and sit by my left thigh, cousin." He came and sat by her, and she said, "Can you see him?" He replied, "Yes," and she said, "Move around and sit by my right thigh." He did so, and she said, "Can you see him?" He replied, "Yes," and she said, "Move around and sit in my lap." He did so, and she said, "Can you see him?" Her replied, "Yes." Then she was grieved and flung off her veil while the Messenger of God was sitting in her lap. Then she said, Can you see him?" and he replied, "No." At that she said, "Cousin, be steadfast and rejoice. By God, this being is an angel and no devil."[315]

For this reason, Khadīja is said to have been the first among "the people of the Qiblah to respond to the Messenger of God's call."[316] Khadīja is also depicted as learning and performing the first rituals of Islam. On the authority of Ibn Ḥumayd, al-Ṭabarī reports that

The Messenger of God went to Khadījah and performed the ablution for her in order to show her how to purify herself for prayer, as Gabriel had shown him. She performed the ablution as he had done, and then he led her in prayer as Gabriel had led him, and she followed his actions.[317]

Finally, it is said that her death, along with Abū Ṭālib's, was a great affliction to the Messenger of God.[318] However, at this point, al-Ṭabarī does not report any other details on the Prophet's grief after Khadīja's death.

Al-Ṭabarī's information on Fāṭima is even more sparse than that on Khadīja. This is quite interesting, considering the importance that the image of Fāṭima would acquire in the centuries to follow, especially in the Shīʿī tradition.

In his Dhayl al-Mudhayyal, al-Ṭabarī reports that,
In the year 11/632, on 3 Ramaḍān/November 22, Fāṭimah, daughter of Muḥammad, passed away, at the age of twenty-nine or so.
Opinions differ as to the time of Fāṭimah's death. According to Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿAlī, she died three months after the Prophet, whereas, according to Yazīd b. Abī Ziyād-ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥārith, it was eight months [after the Prophet]. [On the authority of ʿĀʾisha and ʿUrwa,] Fāṭima died six months after the Prophet, and this is the sound [account], according to Ibn ʿUnar [al-Wāqidī]. She died on Monday the 3rd of Ramaḍān 11/November 22, 632.
According to Jaʿar [al-Ṣādiq] b. Muḥammad, her kunyah was Umm Abīhā [mother of her

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[315] Ibid., 73. The translators note that "the thought is that an angel respects a woman's modesty, whereas a devil or demon would not." Ibid., 73 n. 115.

[316] Ibid., 77, 82, 86-7.

[317] Ibid., 78. See also ibid., 81.

[318] Ibid., 115.

father].[319]

On the authority of Abū al-Ḥamrā', al-Ṭabarī further reports that the latter "lived in Medina for seven months during the Prophet's lifetime; each day at dawn I saw the Prophet come to the door of 'Alī and Fāṭimah and call "to the prayer, to the prayer; indeed, 'Allāh simply wishes to take away the foulness from you and to purify you thoroughly.' "[320]

In the rest of al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh, the information supplied regarding Fāṭima is given in correlation with either her father, the Prophet Muḥammad, or her husband, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. According to al-Ṭabarī, " this year [2/623-4], a few days before the end of Ṣafar (which ended September 1, 623), 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib married Fāṭimah."[321] At the time of the expedition of Uḥud, al-Ṭabarī says: "When the Messenger of God got back to his family, he gave his sword to his daughter Fāṭimah and said, 'Wash the blood off this, my daughter.' Then 'Alī gave her his sword and said, 'Wash this one too, for by God it has served me well today.' " Finally, al-Ṭabarī reports that, in the year 3/624-5, "Fāṭimah became pregnant with al-Ḥusayn; it is said that there were only fifty days between her giving birth to al-Ḥasan and her conceiving al-Ḥusayn."

Except for the events that led to Fāṭima's conflict with Abū Bakr, as has already been mentioned, al-Ṭabarī does not include any significant additional information regarding her. At best, she is mentioned *en passant*, and almost always in connection

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[319] Al-Ṭabarī, Biographies, 12-13. Interestingly, the translator notes that "this appellation is found in the context of the Nuṣayrī-'Alawi religion, where it refers to belief in reincarnation. Fāṭimah is believed to be the reincarnation of Aminah, the Prophet's mother, who is in turn the reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. As proof of this argument Fāṭimah, Umm Abīhā, is adduced." Her source is Sulaymān b. Ahmad al-Ṭabarānī, "Majmū' al-a'yād," 175. She adds, "Fāṭimah, however, is commonly compared by the Shī'is to the Virgin Mary without involving the doctrine of reincarnation of this strange *kunyah*." Ibid., n. 49.

[320] Ibid., 155. This refers to the Qur'ānic verse *al-Ahzab* (33):33.

[321] Al-Ṭabarī, The Foundation of the Community, 18. In another account, al-Ṭabarī gives a later date in that same year. He reports that " 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib married Fāṭimah in Dhū al-Ḥijjah, at the beginning of the twenty-second month." Ibid., 92.

with her father or her husband.[322]

Al-Ṭabarī's accounts of Khadīja and Fāṭima are therefore remarkably scarce, especially when we compare it with the importance that these two women played, and still do, in the Islamic tradition. Several reasons might be advanced to explain this apparent situation. First of all, Khadīja's death occurred before the Prophet's mission attained any real success. Similarly, Fāṭima's death followed quickly after the Prophet's own death, i.e., before the new Muslim community had embarked on recording the Prophet's words and deeds as indices of emulation. Islamic literature reveals that Muhammad was, at the beginning of his prophetic mission, rejected by most of his contemporaries and was at first considered as a poet and a trouble-maker, one among others. Who would then have bothered to record the details of his wife's and children's lives? In addition, prior to the advent of Islam, as seen in the first chapter of this thesis, the "recorders of history," the *akhbāriyūn*, tended to concentrate primarily on the military expeditions, or the *maghāzī*, of their ancestors and contemporaries, and gave less attention to social life and particularly the lives of their women.[323] The early Muslims' search for models most likely started, or at least intensified, after the Prophet's migration to Medina and especially after his death, and consequently naturally turned their attention towards the Prophet's family. Yet, Khadīja and Fāṭima had already died, so they could not speak for themselves.[324] It can be assumed that Khadīja's and Fāṭima's stories were reconstructed from what remained in the collective memory of the Companions. As this source was overwhelmingly focused on

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[322] Al-Ṭabari, The Last Years of the Prophet, 64, 110.

[323] If there was a parallel trend of recording women's lives at the time, it has not reached us, nor did it catch the attention of the early Muslim scholars.

[324] Spellberg describes a different situation for 'Ā'isha. She lived long after the death of the Prophet, and was involved in the political controversies around the issue of the succession of the Prophet as a leader of the Muslim community. For instance, many *hadiths* record her stand against 'Ali, notably at the Battle of the Camel. She also became a transmitter of *hadith*. Her status as a transmitter attracted the attention of early biographers. These two reasons most probably explain why her biographical data is found in greater quantity than Khadīja's or Fāṭima's.

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Muḥammad, and later the rightly guided Caliphs, it explains in part why the biographical data pertaining to Khadīja and Fāṭima is almost always recounted in correlation with their husbands.

Another possible explanation for the scarcity of biographical data on these two figures is that the *ḥadīth* literature focuses primarily on the political controversies that arose following the death of the Prophet. Their lack of involvement in these issues, due to their early deaths, reduced the likelihood that information regarding them would be included amongst what the early Muslim community considered important to safeguard. Furthermore, no event directly involving Khadīja and Fāṭima seems to have, to my knowledge, prompted the revelation of a Qur'ānic verse, in the eyes of Sunnī exegetes, at least; and therefore this factor might have reduced the early exgetes' search for *ḥadīths* as possible references of *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

These are the most likely factors behind Khadīja's and Fāṭima's relatively minor presence in the *ḥadīth* literature, as well as the reason of al-Ṭabarī's limited interest in these two women in his Ta'rīkh. Nor would al-Ṭabarī find much more information about Khadīja in biographical dictionaries, for the simple reason that she was not a transmitter of traditions, which would have reduced the early biographers's interest in her.

Finally, al-Ṭabarī's traditionalist perspective renders his idealization of these two women quite sober and literal, especially if we compare his depiction of Khadīja and Fāṭima with the imaginative Sufi and Shīʿī accounts of later periods. Nonetheless, al-Ṭabarī's "selectivity reflects a shared Sunnī and Shīʿī reverence for Khadīja and Fāṭima in the fourth/tenth century."[325] As a matter of fact, his Qur'ān commentary on *Āl ʿImrān* (3):42 gives a more precise idea of al-Ṭabarī's position of the elevated status on Khadīja and Fāṭima, as we shall now see.

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[325] Spellberg, Legacy, 172.

C) An Analysis of al-Tabarī's Reverence for Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima.

As was mentioned earlier, no Qur'ānic verse seem to make a direct, or even indirect, reference to Khadīja and Fāṭima. At best, the early exegetes associated these two women with two Qur'ānic expressions. As mentioned previously, Khadīja was posthumously given the title of "Mother of the Believers," while Fāṭima is also regularly included in the description of the Qur'ānic phrase *ahl al-bayt*.[326] There is at least another instance, though, one of particular interest for our study, in which Khadīja and Fāṭima are mentioned in various commentaries on a Qur'ānic verse. This concerns the traditions reported in the commentary on *Al 'Imrān* (3):42, which reads: "O Maryam! God hath chosen thee and purified thee–chosen thee above the women of all the worlds."[327] A selection of these traditions are found in al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse, as follows:

> The meaning of God's word *chosen thee* is: selected you, and elected you to obey Him, and that which He has made specific to you from His Munificence. His words *purified thee* mean: to purify your religion from any doubt or impurities that the women have for religion. *God hath chosen you above the women of all the worlds* means that He has selected you above the women of all the worlds in your time, because of your obedience towards Him, and He has preferred you above them as has been related from the Messenger of God when he said: "The best of its women are Maryam, daughter of 'Imrān, and Khadīja, daughter of Khuwaylid." By "best of its women," he means "the best women of Paradise."
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> Hussayn b. 'Alī al-Saddā'ī informed me on the authority of 'Abdallāh b. Ja'far who said: "I heard 'Alī say in 'Irāq that he heard the Prophet saying: 'The best of its women are Maryam bt. 'Imrān, and the best of its women are Khadīja.'"
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> Yūnus told me . . . on the authority of 'Abdallāh b. Ja'far b. Abī Ṭalib that the Messenger of God said: "The best women in Paradise is Maryam bt. 'Imrān, and the best of the women of Paradise is Khadīja bt. Khuwaylid."
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> Bishr told us . . . on the authority of Qatāda, that about the words of God *Behold! The angels said: O Mary! Verily God hath chosen thee and purified thee, and chosen thee above the women of all the worlds*, it was mentioned to us that the Prophet of God used to say: "Know of Maryam, daughter of 'Imrān, the wife of Pharaoh, Khadīja, daughter of Kuwaylid, and Fāṭima, daughter of Muḥammad are (above) the women of the worlds." Qatāda said: "It was mentioned to us that the Prophet of God

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[326] Ibid., 157. See also Goldziher, "Ahl al-bayt," in Encyclopeadia of Islam, new ed. (Leiden; E. J. Brill, 1960).

[327] A. Yusuf Ali translates the word *'ālamīna* as "nations." Such translation reduces the meaning of *'ālamīna* to a terrestrial level, where as the Arabic word may also referred to other worlds such as those of the angel and the jinns. Therefore, in the following pages, I will translate *'ālamīna* as "worlds."

used to say: 'The best women who rode the camels are the righteous women of the Quraysh, gentle towards the child in its childhood, and looking after the possessions of their husband.'" Qatāda said: "And it was mentioned to us that he used to say: 'Were I to know that Maryam rode a camel, I would not have selected any over her.'"

Al-Ḥasan b. Yaḥyā told us . . . on the authority of Qatāda regarding *O Mary! Verily God hath chosen thee, and purified thee, and chosen thee above the women of all the worlds*, that he said: "Abū Hurayra used to say that the Prophet said: 'The best women who rode the camels are the righteous ones of the Quraysh, gentle towards the child in its childhood, and looking after the possessions of the husband.'" Abū Hurayra said: "And Maryam never rode a camel."

I was told that 'Ammār said, on the authority of Ibn Abī Ja'far from his father, regarding *Behold! The angels said: O Mary! Verily God has chosen you and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all the worlds*, that he said that Thābit al-Bunānī used to relate from Anas b. Mālik that the Messenger of God said: "The best women of the worlds are four: Maryam bt. 'Imrān, Āsya bt. Mazāhim, wife of Pharaoh, Khadīja bt. Kuwaylid, and Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad."

Al-Muthannā informed me, from Abū Mūsā al-'Ashārī who said: "The Messenger of God said: 'Many attained perfection among the men, but none attained perfection among the women except Maryam, Āsya, wife of Pharaoh, Khadīja bt. Khuwaylid and Fāṭima bt. Muḥammad.'

. . .Al-Muthannā told me . . . that he heard 'Ammār b. Sa'd say: "The Messenger of God said: Khadīja has been favoured above the women of my *umma* as Maryam has been favoured above the women of the worlds.'"[328]

Al-Ṭabarī's selection of these traditions calls for several remarks. First of all, the most striking aspect of this commentary is probably the paradox that, on the one hand, Maryam is described in the Qur'ān as *the* woman chosen above all women of the worlds, and that, on the other hand, the selected traditions assert that the other three women (Khadīja, Fāṭima and Āsya) are equal to her in status. Al-Ṭabarī was probably aware of the paradox, for, before listing the traditions on the subject, he introduces an element that solves the contradiction, an element of time. Basically, al-Ṭabarī asserts that Maryam is indeed chosen above all the women of the worlds, but of her time only, not of all times.[329] So the time restriction allows al-Ṭabarī to present and support the

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[328] 'Isā wa-Maryam, 68.

[329] This notion of time seems to be consistent in al-Ṭabarīs interpretation of the Qur'ānic phrase "of the worlds," *'ālamīna*. Commenting on *al-Fātiha* (1):1, al-Ṭabarī defines *'ālamīna* as follow: "Le terme *'ālamīna* est le pluriel du mot 'ālam (monde) qui lui-même est déjà un pluriel puisqu'on nomme ainsi l'ensemble des peuples et des communautés d'une même époque, ou l'ensemble des hommes ou l'ensemble des êtres qui forment l'une de ces communautés ou encore l'ensemble des hommes ou l'ensemble des jinns." See al-Ṭabarī, Commentaire, vol. 1, 46. Commenting on *al-Baqara* (2):47, al-Ṭabarī explains, "dans le passage, "Je vous est favorisées par rapport aux mondes," l'expression "aux mondes" (*'ālamīna*) est un pluriel et désigne les catégories d'êtres ayant vécu à la même époque que ces anciennes générations des Fils d'Israël."

traditions that compare Maryam with other women, without ever contradicting with the Qur'ān or ever the traditions recorded on the authority of the Prophet.

Second of all, in the biographical data gathered from al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh on Khadīja and Fāṭima, there is no traces of comparison with Maryam to be found.[330] Interestingly, the only explicit comparison of Maryam with a woman of Muḥammad's entourage is to be found in al-Ṭabarī's Ta'rīkh in correlation with 'Ā'isha.[331] Yet her absence from al-Ṭabarī's commentary on Āl 'Imrān (3):42 is noteworthy. In any case, various semantic parallels encountered in al-Ṭabarī's works among Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima are to be noted.

In the series of traditions cited by al-Ṭabarī, Khadīja is mentioned not only as being among the women "above all the women of the worlds," but also among "the best women," and "the most excellent women in Paradise," along with Maryam. Similarly, although not specifically referring to Maryam, Khadīja was counted among the "Mothers of the Believers," as has already been mentioned. Although al-Ṭabarī did not refer to this honorific title in his works, he was most probably aware of it, as this reference was found in Ibn Isḥāq's work.[332] Khadīja's honorific title establishes a link with a biological function that is also prominent in the image of Maryam, i.e., her motherhood, who is frequently referred to as the mother of 'Īsā.

Leaving the semantic level of analysis, we also find striking similarities in the structure of Khadīja and Maryam stories. In al-Ṭabarī's account of Khadīja, her biography leaves no hint of possible sexual misbehavior on her part. Although Khadīja

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[330] Al-Ṭabarī could not have been unaware of these traditions when he wrote his Ta'rīkh, for his Tafsīr was completed, at least up to the 3rd sura, by the time he undertook the writing of his Ta'rīkh.

[331] Al-Ṭabarī, The Foundation of the Community, 7. In that tradition, 'Ā'isha is reported having said, "There are nine special features in me that have not been in any woman, except for what God bestowed on Maryam bt. 'Imrān." For a detailed analysis of these nine features, see Spellberg, Legacy, Chapter 2.

[332] Ibid., 154. In Chapter one, above, we saw that al-Ṭabarī became very familiar with Ibn Isḥāq's work while he was traveling in search for knowledge.

was married twice before becoming the Prophet's wife, this was done in all legality, as the insistence on the fact that Khadīja had obtained the consent of her guardian to marry Muḥammad proves.[333]

Another common point between Maryam and Khadīja is their maternity. As a matter of fact, Maryam's maternity is central to her story, especially since it is said to have happened miraculously upon God's decree. Khadīja is said to have given birth to seven children during her marriage with Muḥammad. The sources do not seem to be concerned, though, with the fact that the seven births happened after she was 40 years of ages. There is no hint either at the possibility that these births were the work of a miracle from God.

A third common aspect is Maryam's and Khadīja's purity in their belief in God. We have already seen that for Maryam, her purity and obedience to the Will of God is an essential trait of her personage. Similarly, al-Ṭabarī's account insists on Khadīja's distinguished lineage. She is described with the greatest qualities, and God is said to have intervened in her life, to have ennobled her by marrying her to Muḥammad. Khadīja's purity in belief is also shown in her unconditional support of Muḥammad. Just as al-Ṭabarī understood Maryam's devotion to mean that she believed in 'Īsā, who is the word of God, and the Torah and the Gospel,"[334] Khadīja is portrayed in a similar way. In al-Ṭabarī's account, she is convinced of the truth of her husband's spiritual experience from the beginning of his prophetic mission. This is supported by a tradition found in Ibn Ḥanbal's Musnad (not in al-Ṭabarī) in which the Prophet is reported to have answered one of 'Ā'isha's jealous comments on Khadīja. It says,

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[333] This reflects what I said earlier about the fact that the verses of Maryam alluding to her virginity incited al-Ṭabarī to define what sexual immorality meant for him, and for the culture he belonged to, i.e. the limiting of sexual activity to within the bounds of marriage. Interestingly, in Ibn Sa'd biographical work, Khadīja is given the attribute "the pure," al-ṭāhira. The verb from the same root is used in the Qur'ān for Maryam in Āl 'Imrān (3):42. This additional parallel suggests that physical purity was not synonymous with sexual abstinence at that time, but with moral sexual conduct.

[334] See above, Chapter 2.

No indeed, Allah has not replaced her with a better. She believed in me when I was rejected. When they called me a liar she proclaimed me truthful. When I was poor, she shared with me her wealth and Allah granted her children though withholding those of other women.[335]

On one occasion, Khadīja is recorded as having been present when the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muḥammad. Although it is not reported in al-Ṭabarī that she actually saw the Angel, the apparition of Gabriel while she was in Muḥammad's company shows Khadīja's elevated spiritual status. Traditions consistently report that she was the first to convert to Islam, and she was shown as learning the prayers as Muḥammad progressively received ritual instructions from his Lord. This shows Khadīja's devotion, just as Maryam was instructed "to bow down with those who bow down."[336]

As far as Fāṭima is concerned, a semantic parallel with Maryam is to be noted in the attribution to her of certain honorifics by early Muslims. Among the traditions quoted by al-Ṭabarī on *Al 'Imrān* (3):42, Fāṭima is described along with Maryam as "among the women of the worlds," and one of the four "best women of the worlds." It is noticeable that in al-Ṭabarī's accounts, two honorific injunctions usually reserved for the prophets are attributed to both Maryam and Fāṭima. Once al-Ṭabarī follows the name of Maryam with the expression "Peace be upon her." Elsewhere, he records a tradition where the injunction "May God bless her"[337] follows the name of Fāṭima. Interesting too is al-Ṭabarī's selection of a tradition on the authority of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, which gives her *kunya* to be Umm Abīhā, i.e., the mother of her father. This title

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[335] Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, quoted in Spellberg, Legacy, 155.

[336] Khadīja's unconditional support for her husband's spiritual mission has prompted some scholars to wonder what faith she belonged to before converting to Islam. In his article "Khadijah, Mohammed's First Wife," E. Jurji suggests that she most probably belonged to that group of people who professed some monotheistic beliefs aside from the already existing monotheistic religions at the time of Muḥammad. Khadīja's cousin, and Muḥammad himself, are said to have been *ḥanīf*. See E. Jurji, "Khadijah, Mohammad's First Wife," Moslem World 26/2 (1936) : 197-9. Little is actually known about this group and it leaves much room for speculation. Yet it suggests that Khadīja was a *muslim* before the *umma* existed, as was Abraham.

[337] Al-Ṭabarī, Biographies, 79-80. The translator notes that this is "a formula used specifically after mention of the Prophet's name. As a rule, other formulas are used after mention of the Prophet's family, such as "peace be upon him/her" or "may God be pleased with him/her." " Ibid., 80 n. 379.

describes her as the mother of a Prophet, as Maryam was the mother of 'Isā. It might also well be a reference to the care Fāṭima provided to her father while his was suffering from his fatal illness. At the very least, it is a reference to her biological function as a woman, that of maternity.[338]

At the structural level, Maryam's and Fāṭima's stories follow similar patterns. Fāṭima is free of allegations as to her sexual morality; consequently, it assures her physical purity. In addition to her faultless descent from Muḥammad, the trustworthy, and Khadīja, the pure, Fāṭima's purity in belief is indicated in the fact that Muḥammad pressed both her and her husband 'Alī to pray, for "Allāh simply wishes to take away the foulness from you and to purify you thoroughly." This is similar, as has been seen in the previous chapter, to the idea that Maryam's purification by God's grace and her devotion to God are intrinsically linked.

Furthermore, Maryam and Fāṭima are closely related to a prophetic figure. Fāṭima is shown in some sources as supportive towards her father, Muḥammad. In al-Ṭabarī's account, however, this is only suggested. Their close relationship is at least quite clearly recorded in one instance in al-Ṭabarī's commentary on Āl 'Imrān (3):42. Al-Ṭabarī reports,

> Al-Muthannā told me from Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Amrū b. 'Uthmān that Fāṭima, daughter of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī told him that Fāṭima, daughter of the Messenger of God said: "One day, the Messenger of God came in, and I was with 'A'isha. He whispered something to me, and I cried, then he whispered (again), and I laughed. 'A'isha asked about the matter. I said: I would be preempting things if I were to tell you the secret of the Messenger of God. And so she left me alone. When he died, 'A'isha asked her about it and she said: 'Yes, he whispered to me and said that Gabriel used to go over the Qur'ān once a year with him, and that he had done this twice. And that there was no prophet except that he lived half as long as the prophet before him, and that 'Isā, his brother had lived for 120 years. Now he was 60 years old, and that he felt he would die this year. No woman of any nation would undergo what you (Fāṭima) would endure, so do not be lesser than a woman in your patience.' She said: 'I cried,' whereupon he said: 'You are the head of the ladies of

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[338] After all, Fāṭima was also the mother of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the two closest male heirs of the Prophet.

Paradise, except for Maryam, the virgin. He died that year."[339]

One has to look at previous and contemporary sources to gather more details on her closeness to her father. For instance, Muhammad's veneration for his daughter is shown in a tradition that describes her, in her father's eyes, as "the best" of his family. Elsewhere, Muhammad describes her as "part of me," adding that "what hurts her, hurts me."[340]

In their search for female models, the early exegetes recorded in al-Tabari's work found in Khadija and Fatima the most suitable women for purposes of idealization. The scarcity of information about their historical lives has allowed them to build the essential elements of the emerging vision of the ideal women within an Islamic framework. A significant common aspect between these three women is their consanguinity to, or at least, their close relationship with, one or more prophetic figures. A second important aspect is their support for this Prophet's mission and their devotion to God. The third common function is their motherhood. Fourthly, emphasis is placed on their physical purity. The purity of Khadija and Fatima described in al-Tabari's works does not focus so much on virginity or lack of menstruation and defilement, as is found in some Shi'i accounts;[341] rather, Khadija's and Fatima's physical purity is guaranteed by their faithful commitment to their husband. The same focus on sexual morality within the bond of marriage was one of al-Tabari's foci in Maryam's story, as was shown in the preceding chapter. Khadija's and Fatima's close relationship with the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the scarcity of information about their lives at the

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[339] 'Isa wa-Maryam, 68. A similar hadith is found in Ibn Hanbal, Musnad. It reads: "The Prophet told me that he would die of the illness with which he was then afflicted. Then I cried. He whispered that I would be the first of his family to follow him [in death]. Then I laughed." Quoted in Spellberg, Legacy, 158.

[340] Ibid., 157.

[341] See Stowasser, Women, 78; J. McAuliffe, "Chosen," 22-3.

disposal of early Muslim exegetes made these two women the perfect candidates for models of emulation by the Muslim Community. The rapid idealization of their status soon placed them to an equal footing with the highly esteemed Qur'ānic figure of Maryam, the mother of 'Isā.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages, we confined ourselves to the study of Maryam, the mother of 'Īsā, Khadīja, the first wife of the Prophet, and Fāṭima, his daughter, in al-Ṭabarī's works. Yet, thanks to the prominence of this author, as well as to the context in which he wrote, the study provides more than just al-Ṭabarī's opinion on these exemplary women. In the first chapter of this thesis it was shown that the scholarly contribution of al-Ṭabarī is indebted to the traditionalist conception of scholarship that developed in the hands of the generations of Muslims who lived between the time of the Prophet's death and his own lifetime. As a matter of fact, al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* and *Ta'rīkh* are usually regarded as the climax of this scholarly project. Because al-Ṭabarī's works rely so heavily on *hadīth* literature (assumed to refer back directly to the time of the Prophet and his Companions) it is safe to say that al-Ṭabarī's works are reflective of the gradual emergence of specifically Islamic dogma and the Islamic self-image.

One of these images, which has been the focus of this thesis, involved the construction of female models of emulation for the Muslim community. As we have seen, the Qur'ān does provide "examples for those who believe." Perhaps surprisingly, the most eminent Qur'ānic female figure is Maryam, the mother of 'Īsā. We saw furthermore that al-Ṭabarī's reliance on Bible-related material while commenting on the verses on Maryam is heavy. This is quite remarkable, as it is usually asserted that the *isrā'īliyāt* material fell into disfavor shortly after the composition of Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra*. At least this was the case when Muslim jurists, in their search for the authoritative sources of law, came to doubt the veracity of the *isrā'īliyāt* traditions. However, as Barbara Stowasser remarks,

> In medieval establishment exegetic literature on the Qur'ānic women figures...this "falling out of favor" of *isrā'īliyyat* cannot be discerned... In Islamic exegetic literature, the Bible-related traditions continued to impart to the faithful hagiographic detail on the women figures of Islam's sacred history, which included illustration and clarification of points of Islamic doctrine and even

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ritual. At the same time, they helped to enforce some of the sociopolitical values underlying the medieval Islamic worldview. Thus, Bible-related traditions, including their symbolic images of the female's defective nature, were seemlessly integrated into an Islamic framework.[342]

Al-Ṭabari's commentary on the verses regarding Maryam include various traditions from Wahb b. Munabbih and Ibn Isḥāq, who are recognized as the two main authorities responsible for having circulated *israʾīliyāt* material. As a matter of fact, the most substantial traditions on Maryam are based on traditions recorded on the authority of these two early scholars. The prominence of Joseph as a protagonist in Maryam's story in al-Ṭabari's Tafsīr and Taʾrīkh, and his utter absence from the Qurʾān, suffice to support Stowasser's statement. Stowasser explains this phenomenon by the fact that medieval Islamic society, in which al-Ṭabari lived, was far more patriarchal than had been the early Islamic community in Mecca and Medina.[343] This evolution would be caused by the influence of antecedent religious traditions during the Islamic conquests, traditions which "left their imprint on the emerging medieval Islamic civilization, including much that had to do with women's status questions."[344]

To say the least, al-Ṭabari's views on women are reflective of his milieu, the predominant worldview of his time, his scholarly position and his personality. Although it is difficult to determine the most influential of these factors on his writings in general, or on his writings on women's issues in particular, his style remains impersonal and normative throughout his work. As a male scholar of his time, al-Ṭabari provides a definition of the ideal believing woman that is limited to a very few natural and social functions. For him, the ideal woman is defined in terms of obedience to the Will of God and to His righteous male viceregents, of fulfilling the duties of motherhood, and maintaining physical purity. Interestingly, contrary to other accounts in the Muslim

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[342] Stowasser, Women, 23.
[343] Ibid.
[344] Ibid. See also Stowasser's comment on how the *hadith* regarding some women's issues document only one side of the argument, mostly the restrictive. Ibid., 105.

literature that define a woman's physical purity by her virginity or her freedom from menstruation and defilement, al-Ṭabarī defines physical purity as morally engaged sexuality, as was shown in the second chapter of this thesis.

If this thesis has highlighted the similarities between the figures of Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima, the comparison between these three female models is also indicative of other motives behind their depiction in the sources, such as the position of Islam in respect to other religious traditions. The first chapter of this thesis included a section on the early Muslims' sense of history. It showed that al-Ṭabarī's <u>Ta'rīkh</u> is an expression of history as orchestrated by God. Throughout history, God is thought to have sent messengers to bring salvation to their people. Although Muslims consider Muḥammad as the Seal of the Prophets, they also recognize all the Prophets of the biblical tradition from Abraham to 'Īsā. Therefore, the comparison of historical figures from the Prophet Muḥammad's time with the preceding prophets of the Abrahamic tradition ensured a continuity with already well-established traditions, and at the same time confirmed the spiritual legitimacy of Islam. As Gordon Newby asserts,

> Not only is Muḥammad defined by mythomorphic process, but so are the members of his family. . . . So we see (in the Muslim literature) Muḥammad's grandfather, 'Abdu-l-Muttalib, and Muḥammad's father, 'Abdullah, represented as mythomorphs of Abraham and Isaac. 'Abdu-l-Muttalib, in preparation for the restoration of the Meccan well of Zamzam, slept one night in the Hijr, the area near the Ka'bah containing the graves of Hagar and Ishmael.[345]

In their turn, we see Khadīja and Fāṭima represented as "mythomorphs" of Maryam.

The preference for Khadīja and Fāṭima over other females of the Prophet's entourage is clear in al-Ṭabarī's works. First, their familial and spiritual closeness to the Prophet certainly makes them perfect candidates. Secondly, the accounts on their lives leave no hint at controversies over sexual misbehavior, or even, suspicions of thereof. Thirdly, the fact that their deaths occurred early in the history of the nascent Muslim community prevented them from taking part in the political dissensions that followed

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[345] Newby, <u>Last Prophet</u>, 18.

the death of the Prophet. This is probably why, unlike ‘Ā’isha, the two women are generally highly esteemed in both Sunnī and Shī‘ī Islam. Finally, the scarcity of biographical information about them at the disposal of the early Muslims, as is reflected in al-Ṭabarī, certainly facilitated the legendary development of their lives according to the Qur’ānic framework of the ideal believing woman.

The comparison between Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima has had another impact as well. It has allowed the image of Maryam to survive and expand through the veneration accorded to the Muslim female models. This is revealing of her highly regarded status in the Islamic tradition and her acceptance as a pivotal figure in the establishment, most notably, of Islamic precepts on the ideal believing woman. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes:

> Every religious tradition experiences a kind of periodic rejuvenation, a return to the source and a revival of the spiritual energies of that tradition ... Every once in a while in our life there must be a period of rejuvenation of our spiritual energies, of our imagination and even of our memory; otherwise we wither away and die spiritually and mentally if not physically. This is much more true in the case of a living tradition, which is not just an organism which is born and dies like us, but is a reality which continues to live over the ages as long as God wills.[346]
> We have the same reality within the Islamic tradition: a particular person represents a kind of spiritual progeny or continuity of an earlier saint.[347]

In similar terms, we can say that Maryam’s comparison with Khadīja and Fāṭima, among other factors, ensures the survival and constant rejuvenation of her image in the Islamic tradition.

Although the comparison between the three women creates a link between Islam and antecedent religious traditions, it has another, ulterior motive. This is reflected in al-Ṭabarī’s works, where the terms defining the comparison place Islam not merely on an equal footing with the religions preceding it, but in a position of superiority over

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[346] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Some Observations on the Place of ‘Aṭṭār within the Sufi Tradition,” in Colloquio Italo-Iraniano Sul Peota Mistico Fariduddin ‘Aṭṭār (Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei, 1978) 18-19.
[347] Ibid., 11.

them. Al-Ṭabarī's belief that each revelation sent by God cancels the previous one, is reflected in his comparison between Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima. As a matter of fact, al-Ṭabarī is careful to insist on the fact that Maryam's status as best of all the women of the worlds applied to her own time only. Al-Ṭabarī's time restriction reflects the early Muslim community's growing consciousness of itself as independent and superior to other traditions. The resulting superior ranking accorded to Khadīja and Fāṭima on the basis of these criteria reflects the early Muslim community's need to identify itself with models that were culturally and communally relevant to them – in other words, with female models that were not only *muslim*, but Muslim.

This present thesis has described the traditional classical views on Maryam, Khadīja and Fāṭima, as these have been "canonized" in al-Ṭabarī's works. Although the status of these women shifted in his and others' hands from a historical basis to an ahistorical, or mythical, perspective, al-Ṭabarī's presentation of their idealization is certainly expressed in a sober style, especially if we compare it with the more esoteric accounts of these three women found in the Sufi and Shīʿī traditions. Al-Ṭabarī's rendition is at least one expression of the "potential" of these women's images, to use Earl Waugh's terminology.[348] Yet the images that we have seen in this study are far from the only ones in the Islamic tradition (as is made clear in the appendix to this thesis). More comparative studies of this kind, limited to particular periods and trends, would be beneficial in bringing out the role these women play in Islam. Truly, the "potential" for such images is inexhaustible.

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[348] Waugh, Popular Muhammad, 48.

APPENDIX

Maryam, the Mother of 'Isā, and Rābi'a al-'Adawīya in the Islamic Tradition: A Comparison of Two Woman Saints[349]

In a eulogistic poem dedicated to Rābi'a al-'Adawīya (d. ca801), the twelfth

century writer Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār[350] assigns her a spiritual standing of the highest

degree. He calls her "the second spotless Mary."[351] The mother of "Isā (Jesus) is in fact

among the four women[352] that Islamic Tradition usually recognizes as spiritual

models,[353] while the Sufi literature frequently honors her as well. Al-Baqlī (d. 1209) says

of Maryam that her being is "the very substance of original sanctity."[354] A contemporary

scholar[355] reports that the Sufis particularly loved Maryam for she was often taken to be

symbolic of the spirit that receives divine inspiration and thus becomes pregnant with

the divine light. Equally, Rābi'a's exclusive love for God has had a profound impact on

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[349] This paper was initially published in the Journal of Religion and Culture, 12 (1998) : 37-48, published by Concordia University, Montreal. In this reproduction, the content has not been altered; it was only revised to match the format and transliteration system of this thesis.

[350] His date of birth is usually given circa 540 A.H. and his date of death circa 617 A.H. See Barbara Helms, "Rābi'ah al-'Adawīyah as Mystic, Muslim and Woman" (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1993) 30.

[351] Margaret Smith, Rābi'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam (Philo Press: Amsterdam, 1974) 4. 'Attār's commentary is also translated as "deputy of pure Maryam" in Helms, "Rābi'a," 86, and as "that apostle of Mary's purity" in Javad Nurbakhsh, Sufi Women (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1983) 26.

[352] "A tradition often cited is that in which the best women of the world are identified as Mary, daughter of Imran; Khadija, wife of the Prophet; Fatima, daughter of Muhammad; and Asiya, wife of Pharaoh." Quoted from Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," The Muslim World, 79 (JulyOctober 1989) : 179, n86. The authors refer to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Sharqawi and al-Qurtubi.

[353] According to Muslim interpretation, the name Maryam (Mary) means "the pious." See A. J. Wensick, "Maryam," in Encyclopedia of Islam, 2d edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill).

[354] Al-Baqlī, Tafsir 2,7 as quoted in English by R.J. McCarthy, "Mary in Islam," in Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue, ed. by Alberic Stacpoole (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1983) : 202-210.

[355] Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) 429. Annemarie Schimmel also points out that "images alluding to Jesus and Mary occur more frequently in Jaladdin (Rumi)'s poetry than in any other comparable poetical work." Ibid., 318.

the Islamic mystical tradition. Her piety, ascetic self-restraint and gnosis allowed Louis

Massignon to call her "the saint *par excellence* of the Sunnite hagiography."[356] Thus the

comparison between the two figures penned by 'Aṭṭār, famous for his biographies of

Sufi saints, is not surprising. The purpose of this study will be to expand on this

comparison and find other similarities that will help illustrate the image of the ideal

pious woman in Islam.

Any comparison between the two figures however contains its own limitations.

What we know of their respective lives is almost entirely legendary. The story of

Maryam in the Qur'ān is short on details and no more information is revealed of her life

after she gives birth to 'Īsā. The available accounts of Rābi'a's life, moreover, written a

few centuries after her death, relate only what was then believed about her. Yet, in our

search to discover the qualities expected of pious Muslim women, it is the beliefs

surrounding them that are more relevant to us than exact accounts of their actual lives.

In this study, we will first discuss the similarities in the protection God is believed to

have extended over the two saints. Then we will look at the characteristics of their

devotion to God and the magnitude of their purity.

The Qur'ānic term *walī* is most often translated as "saint," although the latter

equivalent does not quite do justice to the former. In Arabic, *walī* means someone

"under special protection, friend."[357] In a way, a saint, in Islamic terms, is a person in a

relationship of *walāya* with God and this relationship is most notably expressed by the

granting of His protection. In the cases of Maryam and Rābi'a, God's protection is

assured in three similar ways: their prenatal dedication to Him, their protection from

Satan and the occurrences of *karāmāt* – miracles.

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[356] Louis Massignon, Textes Inedits Relatifs a la Mystique Musulmane, quoted in Smith, Rābi'a,
3.

[357] Schimmel, Mystical, 199.

The two birth stories are vivid examples of prenatal dedication to God. The Qur'ān is explicit about Maryam's birth.[358] Elderly and barren, the wife of 'Imrān suddenly finds herself pregnant. Hoping for a boy, she gratefully dedicates the child to the service of God. Contrary to all expectations, however, she gives birth to a girl whom she names Maryam. She nonetheless prays God to welcome her child into His service. He accepts and entrusts her to the protection of the Prophet Zakarīyā. Although the unfolding of Rābi'a's birth is quite different, it still contains the same symbolic value. Rābi'a, meaning the fourth, was born into conditions of extreme poverty. Yet her father, a pious man who had vowed to depend only on God, refused to ask his neighbors for help. The same night, as the man fell asleep, the Prophet Muḥammad visited him in a dream and told him: "Don't worry," he said, "the daughter just born to you will be a great saint; 70,000 of my followers will venerate her."[359] Then the Prophet advised Rābi'a's father to write a letter to the Amir who had missed the previous Friday's prayer, telling him that he could make up for it by giving the poor man 400 dinars. When the Prophet tells the man "not to worry," he implies that no worry is necessary because his daughter is a *walīya* – meaning protected by God Himself. As the Qur'ānic verse *Yūnus* (10):63 suggests, "Surely God's friends – no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow."[360]

Another similarity between Maryam and Rābi'a is their immunity from Satan. According to a *ḥadīth*, "Every descendant of Adam experiences the touch of Satan except Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, and her son." In another version, it is said that "Not a descendant of Adam is born but he is touched by Satan and he comes out crying,

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[358] Maryam's birth is related in verses *Āl 'Imrān* (3):31-33.

[359] Quoted from Charles Upton, Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rābi'ah (Putney, Vt: Threshold Books, c1988) 9.

[360] The Qur'ānic verses in this paper are quoted from Arthur Arberry, The Koran Interpreted (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

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except Mary and her son."[361] This explains one aspect of Maryam's purity – lack of fault

in the soul – as it is implied in *Al 'Imrān* (3):42: "Mary, God has chosen thee, and

purified thee; He has chosen thee above all women." According to 'Aṭṭār, Rābi'a had

also reached such a level of purity that "even Iblis (Satan) did not have the courage to

go around her."[362] One night, as she was sleeping, a thief entered her room and grabbed

her mantle. Each time he tried to run away with it, the door would disappear. Each time

he dropped the veil, the door would reappear. After a while, the thief heard a voice

telling him: "She has entrusted herself to Us all these years. Since the Devil is afraid

here, how can a thief like you even dare to circle her *chaddur*? Begone, you rogue,

because if one friend falls asleep, the other Friend is vigilant and awake."[363] This

anecdote attests quite clearly to the special relationship she enjoys with God.

In both Maryam's and Rābi'a's cases, God's protection is also expressed in the

occurrence of miracles. It is interesting to note, however, that most of the miracles that

are related of them are not directly caused by them. To be exact, they normally occur in

their presence. For instance, when Rābi'a was a slave, she used to pray all night. Once,

her master saw a lantern shining above her that could not be explained. Another

example involved the appearance of food, a common phenomenon with Maryam and

Rābi'a, as with most saints.[364] In the Qur'ān it says that "Whenever Zachariah went in

to her in the Sanctuary, he found her provisioned. 'Mary,' he said, 'how comes this to

thee?' 'From God,' she said. Truly God provisions whomsoever He will without

reckoning."[365] On another occasion, surprised by birth pangs near a palm-tree, Maryam

is told: "Shake also to thee the palm-trunk and there shall come tumbling upon thee

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[361] Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary," 164.

[362] Quoted from Helms, "Rābi'ah," 53-54.

[363] Quoted from Nurbakhsh, Sufi Women, 38.

[364] Schimmel, Mystical, 207.

[365] *Al 'Imrān* (3):34.

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dates fresh and ripe."[366] Food is also given miraculously to Rābi'a. An anecdote relates

that, finding herself in need of onions, Rābi'a's servant suggested that she ask the

neighbors. "Forty years now," Rābi'a replied, "have passed since I vowed to God, the

Majestic and Transcendent, never to request anything from anyone but Him. Forego the

onions." Suddenly a bird swooped from the skies and cast a few perfectly peeled onions

into the frying pan.[367] Once, Rābi'a put her food away from the fire in order to complete

her prayer. Hasan al-Basri recounts that when "she then approached the kettle to serve

the meat; it was boiling, by the Power of God."[368]

Rābi'a also had the power to produce miracles.[369] One day, when al-Basri

challenged her to pray two *rakats* while floating on water, Rābi'a threw her prayer

carpet into midair, challenging him to perform prayers with her there, where everyone

could see. Seeking to console al-Basri's wounded feelings, she added, "Fishes also do

what you did, while what I do is but a mosquito's performance. Real work transcends

both."[370] Rābi'a's point in exercising her miraculous power was to show that *karāmāt*

should not be sources of pride. Her attitude reflects the general Islamic distrust of

miracles. As Annemarie Schimmel says, "the great masters consider miracles snares in

the way toward God . . . It is much easier to perform miracles and attract the interest of

the masses than to pursue the hard path of spiritual training and constant struggle with

the subtlest ruses of the lower self."[371] Thus, the miracles that surround Maryam and

Rābi'a are not to be understood as a source of pride and distraction from God. As signs

of their special status and the assurance of having their needs met by God, these

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[366] *Maryam* (19):25.

[367] Nurbakhsh, Sufi Women, 38.

[368] Ibid., 49.

[369] Rābi'a's power was apparently not shared with Maryam.

[370] Nurbakhsh, Sufi Women, 39.

[371] Schimmel, Mystical, 212.

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miracles are also recurrent manifestations of the creative power of God. Their miracles are instances of *kharq al-'āda* – "what tears the customs."[372] In other words, these miracles occur when God wants to disrupt the chain of cause and effect to which we are accustomed. After all, the greatest miracle Maryam is granted is the conception of 'Isā without a human father. "When He decrees a thing He does but say to it 'Be,' and it is."[373] It is with the same commandment that God brings back to life, in the middle of the desert, Rābi'a's dead donkey.

Another significant type of *karāmāt* is their interactive and direct relation to God. On several occasions, Maryam and Rābi'a ask God questions, and the responses are often given verbally, described usually as a "voice." Once, Maryam cries out: "Would I had died ere this, and become a thing forgotten!" And a voice "that was below her called to her, 'Nay, do not sorrow; see, thy Lord has set below thee a rivulet.'"[374] After breaking her wrist,[375] Rābi'a calls to God "Are you satisfied with me?" Immediately a voice answers her: "Don't worry – on the Day of Resurrection your rank will be so high that even the closest companions of God will envy you."[376] Through their communications with the Divine, Maryam and Rābi'a attain direct knowledge, which allows them to avoid having to comply with certain religious norms. The following adage related to saintship also applies to them: "the good deeds of the pious are the bad deeds of those who are brought near."[377] Rābi'a's and Maryam's celibacy, although not condoned by the representatives of a Shari'a-oriented interpretation of Islam,[378] were an

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[372] Ibid., 206.

[373] *Al 'Imrān* (3):47.

[374] *Maryam* (19):25.

[375] Anecdote related in Helms, "Rābi'a," 74.

[376] Quoted from Charles Upton, Doorkeeper, 9.

[377] Schimmel, Mystical, 204.

[378] "[Rābi'a] was profoundly outside [the social norms of her time]; and how disturbing it must have been to the fathers of that community to be faced with a living exemplar of the spiritual life who would accept neither the material nor the "spiritual" rewards that community had to offer. Her refusal

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expression of their love for God and their refusal to accept any intermediary between them and Him.

We just saw the passive connotation of *walī*[379] – one whose affairs are led by God. The saint has also an active demeanor that expresses itself in the performance of worship and obedience. This aspect is very strong in the sainthood of Maryam and Rābi'a.

There are many interpretations in the Traditions of the two occasions mentioned in the Qur'an when Maryam seems to doubt the will of God. In verses *Āl-'Imrān* (19):20, 30,[380] it seems that Mary doubts the omnipotence of God and the two verses could be seen as a mark of disobedience to the mission God has given her. But Islamic commentators have interpreted these verses otherwise. In fact, no question is raised as to Maryam's obedience to God. Her reaction to the annunciation is instead explained by her wonder at God's power.[381] As for the other verse, it is explained that her wish to die was caused by pity for her people who would certainly reject her and her progeny, and therefore the will of God; or by fear of being called the wife of God and Jesus the son of God; or by the shame of her situation – that is, having born a child without a father.[382] Therefore in the eyes of the Islamic exegetes, the might of God remains unchallenged and Maryam symbolizes absolute submission to God's power and will. Similarly Rābi'a does not challenge the will of God, and even welcomes it plainly. Rābi'a is famous for

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called into question the whole Islamic (and Semitic) tendency to identify community consensus with the Will of God - and yet they could not reject her; her piety, her renunciation, her gnosis could not be veiled." Charles Upton, Doorkeeper, 16.

[379] Schimmel, Mystical, 199.

[380] "How shall I have a son whom no mortal has touched, neither have I been unchaste?" (*Maryam* (19):20); "Would I had died ere this, and become a thing forgotten!" (*Maryam* (19):30).

[381] Barbara Stowasser, Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation (NewYork: Oxford University Press, 1994) 79, 163n. 108. Haddad and Smith, "The Virgin Mary," 169, 176. It is important to recall that Maryam is seen as an exemplary believer, meaning that she should welcome without doubt what God puts on her path.

[382] Ibid.

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having, from an early age, no other concern but to find satisfaction with God. Orphaned, she was about to be caught by a slave-trader. While running to escape him, she fell and broke her wrist and cried out: "O God! I am an orphan, and am about to be a slave - on top of that, my wrist is broken. But that's not what I care about; the thing I have to know is: are you satisfied with me?"[383] Not as explicit in the case of Maryam, Rābi'a's renouncement of worldly matters and obedience to God takes the form of austere asceticism. The goal of the ascetic Rābi'a was to purge herself from the carnal self and free herself from worldly temptations. On several occasions she was offered material support by her friends. But she consistently refused any other help than God's. Refusing the offer of a friend, she says: "Verily, I should be ashamed to ask for the worldly things from Him to whom the world belongs, and how should I ask for them from those to whom it does not belong?"[384] It is through asceticism that she learnt to blend her will with God's. Once, after a week spent with fasting and prayer, she was about to break her fast when a cat knocked over her plate of food. Then as she reached for some water, the lamp went out and in the darkness, the jar dropped and broke. Then she heard a voice saying: "O Rābi'a, you have a desire and I have a desire, I cannot combine my desire and your desire in one heart."[385] Rābi'a's own interpretation of the situation is expressed as follows: "When I heard this warning, then I separated my heart from worldly things and so cut off my worldly hopes that for thirty years every prayer which I have performed, I have prayed as if it were my last ..."[386] Her obedience to God led her to accept illness and suffering as expressions of His will. It is related that one day her head was struck by some boughs and began to bleed, but she paid no attention to it. When someone said to her, "Do you not feel the pain?" she said: "My concern is to accommodate myself to His

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[383] See above, footnote 26.
[384] Smith, Rābi'a, 21.
[385] Quoted from ibid., 22.
[386] Ibid, 22.

will; He has made me occupied with something other than the tangible things which you see." The obedience to God of these two women reached the levels of annihilation of the self.

The Qur'ān gives a sparse account of Maryam's forms of devotion. In *Maryam* (19):16 and *Āl 'Imrān* (3):37, we read that Mary is entrusted to the protection of Zakarīyā and resides in the temple. Yet, Islamic tradition has developed her story and gives more details of her devotion to God. She is usually believed to have lived in a niche – *miḥrāb* – in the temple.[387] The reference to the *miḥrāb* suggests that her childhood and adolescence were spent in devotions and free from the taint of worldly matters. Rābiʻa was also well-known for her constant devotion to God.[388] It was said that she would perform a thousand *rakas* (units of prayer) in a single day and night and friends witnessed her daily prayers and night-long vigils. Her legend says that even as a slave she spent her nights praying, and that she also fasted. Once freed from her master, she retired into the desert to devote her life to worship. This could be paralleled symbolically with Maryam's retreat to an "eastern place."[389] If Maryam took refuge in an eastern place to receive the divine word (ʻĪsā), Rābiʻa equally isolated herself in the desert in a cell to seek proximity with God and also to receive the divine light. Rābiʻa is also said to have performed the pilgrimage to the Kaʻaba three times.[390] Yet, the particularity of Rābiʻa lies in the motive underlying her acts of worship: Love. As she herself exclaims: "Is it not enough for us that we have been ordered to worship Him? That if there were no Heaven or Hell we should not obey Him?! Does He not deserve to

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[387] Smith and Haddad, "Virgin Mary," 164-65.

[388] Helms, "Rābiʻah," 74-5.

[389] "And mention in the Book Mary when she withdrew from her people to an eastern place, and she took a veil apart from them; then We sent unto her Our Spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault." (*Maryam* (19):16). The Qur'ānic way to say eastern place (*mashraqa*) is ambiguous. It could also mean "a chamber looking east."

[390] Helms, "Rābiʻah," 76.

be worshiped without any [secondary concern]?"[391] Once Rābi'a was seen with fire in

one hand and water in the other. Asked what was the meaning of this, she replied: "I am

going to light fire in Paradise and to put water on to Hell so that both veils (i.e.,

hindrances to the true vision of God) may completely disappear from the pilgrims and

their purpose may be sure, and the servants of God may see Him, without any object of

hope or motive of fear."[392] Her Love for God was such that there was neither room for

loving the Prophet Muhammad nor even hating Satan.[393] Her message is that a prayer

whose motive is fear of Hell or hope for Paradise is hypocritical and insincere by

implication. Rābi'a's notion of omnipresent love for God can be related to the notion of

longing of the soul (*shawq*). Al-Sarraj speaks of *shawq* as "the fire of God Most High

which He has kindled in the hearts of His saints, so that it may burn up in their hearts all

vain desires and wishes and hindrances and needs."[394] It is also on this point that we can

find a common ground between Maryam and Rābi'a. Entirely obedient to God's will,

Maryam is one of the two female symbols of the longing soul mentioned in the

Qur'ān.[395]

In trying to prove the extraordinary spirituality of female saints, Sufis have

called them "men." This is what 'Attār does in the case of both Mary and Rābi'a. 'Attār

relates: "When tomorrow on the Day of Judgement, they call 'O you men!' the first

person who will step [forward] into the line of men will be Maryam."[396] Elsewhere, he

writes that because of Maryam's perfection, she can be called a man since "among

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[391] Ibid., 82.

[392] Smith, Rābi'a, 98-9.

[393] Ibid., 99. "My love for God leaves no room for hating Satan." She also says: "O Prophet of God who is there who does not love thee? But my love to God has possessed me that no place remains for loving or hating any save Him."

[394] Ibid., 91.

[395] Schimmel, Mystical, 434. According to Schimmel, the other woman is Zulaykha.

[396] Helms, "Rābi'ah," 86.

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women are some who are perfect and knowledgeable and who attain the standard of men - they are in a real sense men."[397] Consistent in his comparison between holiness and spiritual manhood, 'Aṭṭār justifies his inclusion of Rābi'a's biography among biographies of Sufi men by saying: "When a woman is a man on the path of God, she cannot be called a woman." He also says of her that "she was not a single woman, but a hundred men over, . . . and though a woman, [she] was the crown of men."[398] This attribution of masculinity to the two female saints can only be fully grasped once we understand the interplay between the two meanings attached to the word "man" and "woman." The first meaning of man and woman refers to the male and female gender. In Sufi literature, the concept of woman also often alludes to the lower soul (*nafs*) that is at the source of worldly temptations and desires.[399] On the other hand, the notion of man, which refers to the higher soul – perfection – expresses best the high ambition of Sufism.[400] Thus, to phrase the idea in more modern terms, we could say that every one (male or female) that follows Satan is impure and far from God, and every one that is pure and sinless is close to Him. In this sense, Maryam's and Rābi'a's "manhood" takes on its full meaning: it affirms their exceptional spirituality in comparison to most of the women, but also most of the men – in other words, most of the souls. It is also relevant to notice at this point that, at this level of perfection, gender becomes an illusion. 'Aṭṭār writes that "in *tawḥīd* when will the existence of 'I' and 'you' remain, let alone that of 'man' and 'woman.'? " Ḥasan al-Baṣri is reported to have said: "I spent twenty-four hours with Rābi'a [talking] about *ṭarīqa* and *ḥaqīqa*, in a way that it neither occurred to me that I am a man, nor did it occur to her that she is a woman."[401] This is probably why

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[397] Quoted from Stowasser, Women, 78.
[398] The two last citations are quoted from Helms, "Rābi'ah," 86.
[399] Yet, some Sufis, like Ibn al-'Arabi, see in woman the ideal receptacle for God's Love and Light. See on the positive aspects of womanhood, Schimmel, Mystical, 429.
[400] Ibid., 426.
[401] Quoted from Helms, "Rābi'ah," 92.

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Sufism has been the most welcoming place for women to express their spirituality in Islam, as the popular veneration of female saints attests. Numerous shrines in honor of woman saints can be found all over the Islamic world. Yet, if spiritual manhood is easily recognized in saints like Maryam and Rābi'a, it is the highest title that the Islamic tradition has conferred upon them. A few exegetes[402] have suggested that Maryam was indeed a prophet because she fulfilled the necessary requirement of the *nabiya*[403] – she was talked to by angels. The apostle (*rasul*) is sent to a people with a message from God and is a position reserved for men. Nevertheless, the Islamic consensus denies the possibility of Maryam being a prophet. If any "signs" of prophethood are involved, to use the Qur'ānic terminology, these belonged to 'Isā and not to Maryam. At best, she is simply honored by being mentioned in relation to one. Their argumentation is based on the observation that, although she is spiritually a "man," in the eyes of most exegetes, she is still a female body and therefore subject to physical impurity, often caused by menstruation.[404] In the Sufi tradition, the distinction between prophets and saints is also based on a differentiation between spirit and body. To them, the end of saintship – spiritual purity – is only the beginning of prophethood – spiritual and physical purity.[405] In this context, a saint in a female body can hardly claim to the prophetic status.

The similarities between Maryam's and Rābi'a's legends are plentiful and fertile in symbolism. Their prenatal dedication to the Divine, their protection from Satan and their miracles are clear signs of God's protection for His chosen ones. Yet these predispositions are closely linked with their extraordinary ability to submit to His will and their renunciation of worldly matters in order to reach spiritual purity. Ideal pious

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[402] Such as Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī. See Haddad and Smith, "The Virgin Mary," 177-78.
[403] Ibid., 177.
[404] An account of the debate on the spiritual and/or physical purity of Maryam is given in ibid., 172-175. Rābi'a is also reported to have menstruated. Helms, "Rābi'ah," 78.
[405] Schimmel, Mystical, 203-204.

women, Maryam and Rābi'a are usually thought to be models for Muslim women as a whole. Limiting their influence to their gender would imply a misunderstanding of their genderless spirituality. Rather, they are symbols for any soul longing for God, whether male or female. Again, as the Sufi tradition teaches us, human perfection is found in submission to the Divine.

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