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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MIRJAM MARYAM/MARY, A COURAGEOUS AND LEARNED WOMEN

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1. Independent non partial philosopher The article falls under Humanities- Philosophy, Religious studies, and History of Art.

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Abstract

In this war torn world it is good to focus on what we have in common. This article focusses on Mary/Maryam, the mother of Jesus/Isa and her namesake Miriam, the sister of Moses. I read their stories in Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Quran, side by side. That gives a fascinating view of these women, so often presented in the arts. The Hebrew Bible shows Miriam as a courageous and intelligent girl, saving her baby brother Moses from Egyptian genocide. The Quran tells the same story with a few slight differences focussing on the dissident, the wife of Pharaoh. In the Hebrew Bible Miriam is a prophet, a learned woman teaching the Jewish women the Torah. The Quran is unique in telling the story of Mary/Maryam's youth, spent in the temple of Jerusalem, under the guidance of the high priest Zachariah. Here she learnt to read and became acquainted with the literature of her time. This story is not found in the New Testament but is amply illustrated in Christian art. Often Mary is pictured with a book on her lap, sitting in a temple like surroundings, and later, teaching her child Jesus to read. The announcement of the birth of Jesus/Isa runs parallel in both books. In Bible and Quran Mary/Maryam is sore afraid when told of her pregnancy. The reason lies in the Jewish Law of her time, sentencing unmarried pregnant women to death by stoning. In the Bible Joseph marries Mary, thus saving her and the baby from shame and untimely death. Maryam escapes into the desert. Alone, hungry and thirsty, she becomes desperate. An angel brings relief with a date palm tree, shown in Islamic art. In the New Testament, we see how Mary undergoes the consequences of the Roman occupation of Israel, and of the oppression by the Jewish king Herod. Mary and her small family are forced to flee. In combination the stories present an intelligent and learned woman, bravely following her calling in very oppressive times.

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Introduction:-

As a philosopher, without a specific religious denomination, I am fascinated by the similarities between (Hebrew) Bible and Quran. By setting these stories side by side, I hope to contribute not only to an enrichment of our cultural

understanding, but also to reconciliation between the religions involved. To this end I developed, with the Dutch Media group IKON, a website with Quran and Bible Side by Side. When the conflict in Gaza broke out I put its contents online on a shared English-Arabic website. It is designed as follows. Every story has a separate chapter, starting with Creation, going through all the stories they have in common, up to Heaven and Paradise Gardens. The reader can browse through the menu of the site and choose a story of his liking. Each chapter has a short introduction, leading up to two columns, left Bible and right Quran, showing the relevant texts side by side. The reader can follow the course of the story step by step. This makes it possible to recognise the similarities and notice the subtle differences. The website has the added advantage of allowing the reader to skip from one story to the next. And back. Some readers prefer a book. They can buy from Amazon a book called *Sharing Mary, Bible and Quran Side by Side*. The book is named after Mary because of her popularity in both Islam and Christianity. But the book contains all the stories which show similarities, starting from Creation and Adam, through Moses, Jesus etc. The book includes expert comments from various backgrounds. The title brings us back to Mary.

In this article I focus on a few of the common stories, concerning Mirjam- Mary- Maryam. I quote from Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Quran where relevant. This article refers to three chapters, the reader can find by clicking.

18 Moses/Musa

23 Zacharias, John, Mary/ Zakariya, Yahya, Maryam

25 Mary/Maryam and the birth of Jesus/'Isa

As said, this article is not written from a religious viewpoint, it is strictly non-partial, giving both Quran and Bible texts the respect due to them, as part of our common literary heritage. The story of these two special women are, in this article, illustrated with fine art, fine in the meaning of beautiful and inspiring images, by Jewish, Christian and Islamic artists.

MIRIAM

First comes Miriam, Hebrew for Mary, from the verb מרה (mara), 'to be rebellious'. The name Miriam has been associated with mutiny / rebellion / disobedience and bitterness, attributes formulated from the perspective of the 'powers that be'. In those days men in power were wary of independent thinking women, who might be understandably bitter about injustices. Miriam was one of them. The name also means 'beloved' and 'wished-for child'. She was the daughter of Amram and Jochebed and the sister of Moses and Aaron, leaders of the Jewish opposition to the tyrannical Egyptian Pharaoh. Miriam lived as a slave in a dictatorship; she knew what it meant to experience despair and hope, terror and deliverance, slavery and freedom. She and her family finally led the escape of the Jewish people from oppression in Egypt. The Exodus.

Earlier when still under the authority of the Pharaoh, Miriam saved the life of her baby brother Musa/Moses through clever planning, quick wit and courage, and indeed plain disobedience to the Pharaoh's decree. The Egyptian Pharaoh was committing genocide by killing the male Jewish children living in Egypt. The mother of one Jewish baby, Musa/Moses hid him in a basket in the bulrushes in the Nile river, she sacrificed her motherhood to save his life. Obviously she was heartbroken to part with her child. The baby was found by the daughter of the Pharaoh who wanted to adopt him. Then came Miriam with her clever and daring plan.

QURAN

And she (the mother) said to the sister of (Moses):

BIBLE

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter,

“Follow him.” So she (the sister) watched him in the character of a stranger. And they did not know. And we ordained that he refused suck at first, until (his sister came up and) said: “Shall I point out to you the people of a house that will nourish and bring him up for you and be sincerely attached to him?” Thus We restored him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve. Holding: 66-11

"Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the maiden went and called the child's mother. Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. Exodus 2:9



Finding Musa by the wife of Pharaoh in the water of the Nile
(The location is still a tourist attraction in Egypt)

تواریخ جامع Persian Jami' al-tawarikh, Rashid al-Din Hamadani, Iran. Mongol rule, Ilkhanid Court Tabriz, Badhdad 714 A.H.1314 C.E. Now University of Edinburgh, Scotland University Library.

In the Quran it is not the daughter but Asiya, the wife of the Pharaoh, who adopts Moses. Below she is pictured with the Pharaoh who has Moses on his lap.



Pharaoh with the boy Musa, and his wife Asiya. Fāḩnama, India, 1610-1630
© Nour Foundation,
Khalili Family Trust

Asiya resisted the cruel tyranny of her husband. She wanted to be good and so obtain a place in the Paradise Gardens promised to all upright people. Muslim, Jews and Christians.

"O my Lord! build for me, in nearness to You, a mansion in the Garden, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from those that do wrong". Quran, The Holding: 66-11

In the beautifully colored painting of the Pharaoh family the child Musa/Moses is reaching out to the lady on the left, probably his mother. Asiya on the right is gesticulating to her husband in disagreement. Left is the mother if Moses bringing him books, the Tora. So in the story of Musa there are three women who show independent thinking and the courage to disobey the tyrannical ruler of their times.

In the Hebrew Bible Miriam is hailed as a prophetess, who with her brothers Moses and Aaron, led her people out of Egypt and through the Red sea. Miriam guides the Jewish women and teaches them the Tora, (Madrash Targum Micha 6:4)

"When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them:

"Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea."

Hebrew Bible New International Version, Exodus 15: 19-21



Marc Chagall, Miriam, sister of Moses, dances with her friends to celebrate the deliverance of Israel (Exodus, XV,19-21) Marc Chagall 1958

THE EDUCATION OF MARYAM

In the Quran Maryam, the mother of Isa (Jesus) is clearly linked to Miriam. Her family addresses her as “sister of Aaron.” 19 Maryam, 27

Her father was Imran, Arabic for the Hebrew name Amram, Miriam’s father. The Quran story of Maryam starts before she was born. When her mother was pregnant her husband, a priest in Jerusalem, died. In remembrance of him she dedicated the fruit of her womb to Allah, expecting a son to walk in his father’s footsteps.

“When she was delivered, she said: “O my Lord! Behold! I am delivered of a female child!”
Allah knew best what she brought forth...” 3 Al Imran, 36

In keeping with her promise the girl was commended to the Lord. She was to live in the Temple in Jerusalem as soon as she was old enough.

“Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty: She was assigned to the care of Zakariya.....Every time that he entered (her) chamber to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said:

“O Maryam ! Whence (comes) this to you?” She said: “From Allah: for Allah provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure” Quran, 3 Al-‘Imran: 35-37

The story of Maryam’s wonderful childhood in the Temple is not to be found in the Bible, but it did circulate unofficially (and secretly?) among Christian artists. The story is told in the Pseudo Gospel by James, in 150 AD. But it was banned by the Pope

The theme was taken up by Christian artists. Someshowed the little girl entering the Temple in Jerusalem in the care of the high priest Zachariah. Below is a particularly beautiful rendering of Maryam in blue, anxiously grasping her skirt. She eagerly stretches her other arm towards her new foster father, who welcomes her at the top of the stairs.



Presentation of the virgin in de Temple, detail
Tiziano Vecellio, 1534, Galleria dell’ Accademia, Venice, Italy

The temple offered the best and highest education in those days, but exclusively for boys. It was her mother’s ‘mistake’ that made it possible for this girl to enter the Temple of Learning. In the many years she spent there she must have learnt to read and acquired knowledge of the important documents of the time. Mary with a book on her lap is a recurring theme in Christian art. When the angel came to announce the birth of Jesus she seems to have been reading. The Annunciation is often painted in a noble environment, the artist’s rendering of a room in the temple. This Quranic story and its Christian picturing show Mary/ Maryam as a highly educated woman. It seems that Allah intended for her to receive an education then reserved for boys so as to prepare her to receive the divine word, and to educate her son.

The story of Mary’s upbringing in the temple was excluded from the Bible, although an early Christian version of the story was available. Perhaps the Church Fathers did not like the idea of Mary being their intellectual equal? The Evangelium of James, (150 AD) a biography of Mary supposedly written by a younger brother of Jesus, telling of her upbringing in the temple, was condemned by Pope Innocent I in 405. However, in spite of this it was taken over almost completely by another apocryphal work, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, (625AD). To finally make its way to the Quran in 632 AD

In the meantime Christian artists celebrated the intellectual Mary by picturing her, as said, with a book on her lap, in a temple-like environment. Below she again conceives by receiving God's word in a stream of light words.



Simone Martini

Annunciation

Sienna 1333

Now in Uffizi
Florence

Maryam had the capacity to teach her son Jesus/’Isa to read and understand their Jewish heritage. As an adult he might have remembered his mother telling him how, due to the Law, she was nearly stoned to death. To catch Jesus out he was confronted with a woman “caught in adultery.”

“Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that she should be stoned. But what do You say?... ”

When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman,

He said to her, Neither do I condemn you.” Bible NKJV John 8 5, 10-11.



Mary teaching Jesus to read,
detail,
Master of Basel, 1450,
Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland

THE ANNUNCIATION

The story of how Mary heard that she would become the mother of Jesus/ Isa is very similar in Bible and Quran. Above we saw a rendering by the Christian monk Fra Angelico. We could note the grand temple surroundings and Mary with a book on her lap. Mary is enlightened, again she conceives by receiving the Word in the beam of light.

But no gladness Mary is “sore afraid” as the New Testament formulates it. As the image below shows she was really scared. Backing away from the angelic messenger in horror.



Simone Martini Annunciation

Sienna 1333

Now in Uffizi Florence

BIBLE

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin, Mary, betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph. But when she saw the angel, she was troubled.

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus.

Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

Luke 1 26-36

QURAN

We sent to her Our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects.

She said: “I seek refuge from you to (Allah) Most Gracious: (come not near) if you fear Allah.”

He said: “Nay, I am only a messenger from your Lord, (to announce) to you 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?”

19 Maryam 16-22

In both Quran and Bible Mary is scared when the angel comes to bring her, supposedly, good tidings. She immediately starts defending herself, as if in a court case.. The reason should be sought in the cruel Jewish law of her time, concerning women, who were betrothed to be married but turned out not to be a virgin.

“If no proof of the young woman’s virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father’s house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death.”

Hebrew Bible, Deutoronomy 22: 20-21

It was the right, if not the outright duty, of the deceived husband to throw the first stone.

In the New Testament the story continues as follows:

“Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But as Joseph was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel said,:

“Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit.”Matthew 1:18-20

Thus the problem of the pregnant Mary was solved. But further ordeals awaited her.

THE TROUBLES OF MARY AND JOSEPH



Marc Chagall,

Madonna of the village,

1938 – 1942

The birth of Jesus is mostly seen as a happy event. There are many beautiful paintings of mother and child, surrounded by angels. That view is also expressed by the Jewish painter Marc Chagall.

But it was not that easy. Mary lived in a country under Roman occupation. According to a Roman decree Joseph had to return to the place of his birth, Bethlehem, to register there for the Roman census. His heavily pregnant wife had to make that strenuous journey, hoping to be back home for the delivery. That was not to be. Upon arrival the couple realized that it was very busy with other Jews returning to Bethlehem for the Roman census. There was no place in any inn, but luckily a friendly innkeeper, seeing the plight of the mother to be, offered them his stable. Suddenly the birth pangs came. The baby was born in that smelly stable and laid in the manger of the innkeeper's animals, an ox and an ass. This well-known 'Nativity' has been painted many times by Christian artists, with angels, the visiting shepherds and the three wise men from the East.

Less known is the massacre of the Innocents. It is like a return to the times of the Pharaoh and the genocide of Jewish boys with which this article began. This time it is the Jewish King Herod himself who ordered all boys of his own people, of two and younger to be slaughtered. He was afraid that a newly born child would usurp his throne and murder him. He had heard from Wise men from the East that a new born baby who would become king. Herod really had nothing to fear. For the baby Jesus was destined to become a spiritual, not a worldly leader. Nevertheless Herod's irrational fear led to a massive slaughter of baby boys.



The Massacre of
the Innocents,

detail,

Giotto 1305,
Padua Italy

Fortunately Joseph had been warned by an angel, and he managed to bring his wife and baby son to safety. The place where they sought refuge is still a tourist attraction in Egypt.

So this small vulnerable family was on the move again, this time as fugitives. Ironically Mary fled to Egypt, from where Miriam had escaped with her brothers. So we are now back to the beginning of this article. The small family travelled through Gaza. Ironically now the place where Palestinians, Muslims are massacred by the present Jewish ruler. This is the place to mention the quote placed at the beginning of the website Quran and Bible Side by Side

A quote from the Hebrew Bible.

" If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; ...
....And the Lord will reward you."

Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Proverbs 25:21

MARYAM ALONE IN THE DESERT

The Quran story takes another turning. There is no Joseph, no man to protect her and her baby. To escape from the death penalty Maryam fled into the desert. There she was fated to deliver her baby in hot, dry loneliness.

"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): ‘Do not grieve ! for your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you; and shake toward yourself the trunk of the palm-tree: It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon you. So eat and drink and cool (your) eye.’”¹⁹ Maryam, 22-26



Maryam (Mary) at the palm tree with baby `Isa (Jesus), from Stories of the Prophets (Qışaş al-anbiyā), by Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Nishapuri. c. 1570, Persian miniature on vellum , The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

A similar image is to be seen below. Mary is sitting next to the palm tree. The fence indicates that she is separated from society. She is alone but for the baby. `Isa has a fiery halo. In Arabia fires sometimes escape spontaneously from the earth, and are considered a divine sign. Mary's child is adorned with a fiery halo like other Quranic

prophets. Mary is not. She sits on a carpet with flowers, to remind us of the Paradise Gardens to which we will return to after an upright life.



Virgin Mary and Jesus,
detail,
miniature from Falnama, Persian/Moghul
origin, 1600,
Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam

So the baby was born, and mother and child miraculously survived in the desert, thanks to the Angel, the brook, the date palm and of course courageous Maryam..
But that was not the end of Maryam's troubles. When she returned to her family (her father and mother had died) they gave her a terrible scolding, turning her deceased parents against her.
Even the link with Miriam is used against her by calling Maryam the brother of Aaron.

"O sister of Aaron! your father was not a man of evil, nor your mother an unchaste woman!"

But Maryam pointed to the babe Isa that spoke as follows:

"I am indeed a servant of Allah. He has made me a prophet; And He has made me blessed "(He) has made me kind to my mother. So Peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)." Quran, 19 Maryam, 27-33

In the beautiful Islamic work of art below we see her with her guardian, the high Priest of the Jerusalem temple where she grew up. Isa, Zakariy and his son Yahya/John have fiery halos, showing them to be prophets. Mary simply wears a head scarf, hanging down on her back.



Zakariya,
Yayha, Mayam and
the child Jesus.
Detail.
Falnama India,
1610,
Nour Foundation,
Khahlili
Family Trust

Conclusion:-

This article shows a common heritage, words and art, between the Islamic, the Christian and the Jewish heritage. A non-partial analysis was made of Quran and Bible texts placed side by side, illustrated with Jewish, Christian and Islamic art. The focus was on the story of Maryam/Mary and her namesake Miriam.

The Quran relates how Maryam became a learned woman, having been educated at the Temple in Jerusalem, under the guidance of the high priest Zachariah. The story, although not in the Bible, circulated among Christian artists, who portrayed Mary with a book, and as teaching her son Jesus to read. Maryam/Mary was, like her ancestor Miriam, who saved her brother Moses from genocide by the Egyptian dictator, a clever, strong and courageous woman. These ladies overcame terrible troubles caused by the powers of their time. In both books the pregnant Mary/Mariam had to deal with the harsh law entailing the death penalty for women who were pregnant before wedlock. By angelic intervention Mary was saved by Joseph. But she had to travel when highly pregnant because of a Roman decree and deliver in a stable. After the baby Jesus was born, she and her small family had to flee from the murderous king Herod.

Mariam was on her own. To escape death by stoning she fled to the desert, where she was nearly overcome by thirst, hunger and despair. Thanks to angelic intervention she pulled through, only to be scolded by her family.

This article shows that placing Bible and Quran stories and texts side by side, together with fine art, can promote reconciliation between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions.

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