



SISTERS' WEEKLY · WOMEN OF JANNAH · PART 3

# Maryam bint 'Imran

*Chosen above the women of the worlds: the mother of 'Isa, from her mother's vow to the palm tree and the child who spoke in the cradle.*

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The lives of the great women of Islam, one part every Wednesday, told from the sources. A reference follows each statement: the Qur'an by surah and ayah, hadith by collection and number, and the early biographies by name.

Reports from the biographies and the historians are historical accounts and are not held to the standard of authentic hadith; the text says when a statement rests on such a report. Dates before the Hijrah are approximate.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Family of 'Imran

Maryam was the daughter of 'Imran, of the descendants of Dawud, of the tribe of Judah among the Children of Isra'il. She is the mother of 'Isa (peace be upon him), the last of the prophets sent to the Children of Isra'il, and she is honoured in Islam as one of the best women ever created. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) Her story is told in the Qur'an more fully than the story of any other woman, and it is told from before her birth.

The Qur'an introduces her family in a single verse that places them among the chosen households of mankind:

*Allah chose Adam and Nuh, and the family of Ibrahim and the family of 'Imran, above the worlds: offspring, one from another. And Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*

Qur'an Al Imran 3:33-34

The third surah of the Qur'an, Al 'Imran, "the Family of 'Imran", takes its name from this verse. Ibn Kathir explains that the 'Imran meant here is the father of Maryam, and that the family of 'Imran is Maryam and her son 'Isa, together with the household to which they belonged. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) He notes that there was another, earlier 'Imran, the father of Musa and Harun, who lived many centuries before, and that the two men should not be confused.

## Her lineage

The historians give her father's line as 'Imran ibn Basham, or in another report 'Imran ibn Mathan, going back through the kings of Judah to Sulayman ibn Dawud. Ibn Kathir records this genealogy from Muhammad ibn Ishaq and others, but he records it as the historians received it, largely from the People of the Book. (Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir; Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an itself does not give the names of her grandfathers. What it establishes is that she came from a household of righteousness, and that her people knew her family as such: when she later returned to them with her child, they said to her, "Your father was not a man of evil, nor was your mother unchaste." (Qur'an Maryam 19:28)

The historians say that her father 'Imran was a man of standing among the worshippers and scholars of Bayt al-Maqdis, and some describe him as the leader of their prayer. Her mother is named in these reports as **Hannah bint Faqudh**. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) These names come from the historians and from what the early Muslims took from the People of the Book, the material the scholars call *Isra'iliyyat*. The Prophet ﷺ taught that such reports are neither to be confirmed nor denied

unless something in the Qur'an or the Sunnah confirms or rejects them. (Bukhari 4485) They are mentioned in this part for their historical interest, and the text says where it relies on them.

### Zakariyya and his household

The household of 'Imran was joined by marriage to the household of the prophet **Zakariyya**, who served in Bayt al-Maqdis and who would become Maryam's guardian. The Prophet ﷺ, describing the Night Journey, said that in the second heaven he met Yahya and 'Isa, and he described them as *ibna khalah*, the sons of two sisters, that is, maternal cousins. (Bukhari 3430) Yahya was the son of Zakariyya, so Zakariyya's wife was closely related to Maryam.

The scholars differ on the exact relationship. The view of the majority, which Ibn Kathir reports from Muhammad ibn Ishaq and others, is that Zakariyya's wife, named in the reports as Ashya', the Elizabeth of the Christian accounts, was the sister of Maryam's mother, so that she was Maryam's maternal aunt; Yahya and 'Isa would then strictly be cousins once removed, and the Arabs used the word loosely. Others hold that Zakariyya's wife was Maryam's own elder sister, which fits the wording of the hadith more literally. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar) Either way, Maryam grew up within the family of a prophet, and the two births that the Qur'an tells side by side, that of Yahya and that of 'Isa, took place in one extended household.

## CHAPTER 2

# Her Land and Times

Maryam lived in the land the Qur'an calls "the blessed land", around Bayt al-Maqdis, the city later known to the Muslims as al-Quds, Jerusalem. (Qur'an Al-Isra' 17:1; Qur'an Al-Anbiya' 21:71) It was the land in which Ibrahim had settled, to which Musa had led the Children of Isra'il, and in which Dawud and Sulayman had ruled. At its centre stood the House of worship in Jerusalem, built in the time of Sulayman and later rebuilt, which the Qur'an calls *al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, the Farthest Mosque.

### The Children of Isra'il

By the time of her birth, many centuries had passed since Musa. The Children of Isra'il had been given the Tawrah and a long line of prophets, and the Qur'an records that they had also broken many of their covenants, disputed among themselves, and in some cases killed prophets sent to them. (Qur'an Al-Baqarah 2:87; Qur'an Al-Imran 3:112) They had suffered conquest and exile, returned to their land, and rebuilt the House of worship. In the time of Maryam the land was under the rule of the Roman empire, which governed through local kings and Roman officials. (Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir)



Religious life centred on the House in Jerusalem. It was served by priests and by men devoted to worship and to the study of the Tawrah. There were scholars among them who were sincere, and there were others whom the Qur'an and the Gospel alike criticise for making the religion a matter of outward form and worldly position. Into this setting came three of the last prophets of the Children of Isra'il within one lifetime: Zakariyya, his son Yahya, and 'Isa son of Maryam.

## Dedication to the House

Among the Children of Isra'il it was a known practice for a parent to dedicate a child to the service of the House of worship. The child would be raised there, serve the place, and devote his life to worship and to the study of the law, and he would not be expected to work for his family. Ibn Kathir explains the word *muhammad* in the Qur'an in this sense: one freed from every worldly duty to serve the House. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Such service was given to boys. That detail is the key to the first event of Maryam's story.

The Muslim scholars note that this practice belonged to the law of the Children of Isra'il. In the Shari'ah of Muhammad ﷺ a parent does not vow a child to the service of a mosque in this way, and the child is not taken out of the ordinary rights and duties of family life. The story is told in the Qur'an not as a ruling for us to imitate, but as an account of how Allah accepted a sincere intention.

## CHAPTER 3

# Her Mother's Vow

The Qur'an begins Maryam's story with her mother, who is not named in the Qur'an and is called only "the wife of 'Imran":

*When the wife of 'Imran said: My Lord, I have vowed to You what is in my womb, dedicated to Your service, so accept it from me. You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.*

Qur'an Al Imran 3:35

The historians add a background to this vow. Muhammad ibn Ishaq, in a report that Ibn Kathir records, said that the wife of 'Imran had no children and had grown old. One day, sitting in the shade of a tree, she saw a bird feeding its young, and she longed for a child. She prayed to Allah to give her a child, and vowed that if He did, she would dedicate the child to the House in Jerusalem. Then she conceived. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) This is a report of the historians, without a chain to the Prophet ﷺ, and it may have been taken from the People of the Book. The Qur'an itself mentions only the vow.



The same reports say that her husband 'Imran died while she was still carrying the child. (Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) If so, the vow was carried out by a widow, and the child she bore was an orphan from birth. This too is from the historians, and the Qur'an does not mention 'Imran again after naming the family.

### The meaning of the vow

The words of the vow show three things. First, she gave the child before she knew anything about it: "what is in my womb." Second, she gave it entirely, "dedicated", freed from any claim of her own. Third, she asked only that Allah accept it, and closed her prayer with two of His names, the All-Hearing and the All-Knowing, as one who knows that her words have been heard and her intention seen. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The same request, "accept it from us", is the prayer that Ibrahim and Isma'il made as they raised the foundations of the Ka'bah. (Qur'an Al-Baqarah 2:127) The wife of 'Imran used the words of the builders of the House for the gift of her child to the House.

## CHAPTER 4

# Her Birth and Name

The child was a girl. The Qur'an records her mother's words at the birth:

*Then when she delivered her, she said: My Lord, I have delivered a female. And Allah knew best what she had delivered. And the male is not like the female. And I have named her Maryam, and I seek refuge for her and her offspring in You from Shaytan, the outcast.*

*Qur'an Al Imran 3:36*

Her first words are not a complaint but an explanation, spoken to Allah as if to excuse herself. She had vowed a child for the service of the House, and the service of the House, with its duties among men, was for boys. "And the male is not like the female": in this particular matter, the service she had vowed, a girl could not do what a boy would have done. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Between her words, the Qur'an places a short sentence of its own: "And Allah knew best what she had delivered." Ibn Kathir and other commentators explain that this is Allah's comment on her words. She thought she had brought something less than what she had vowed. Allah knew that the girl she held in her arms would be chosen above all the women of the worlds, and that from her, without a father, would be born one of the five greatest messengers. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)



## Her name

"I have named her Maryam." The commentators report that in the language of her people the name meant something close to "the servant", or "the worshipper", a woman devoted to Allah; this is how the mother named her, still holding to the purpose of her vow. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The meaning of the name comes from the explanations of the commentators and is not fixed with certainty, but the intention is clear from the context: the mother could not give a son to the House, so she gave a daughter, and named her for service.

Ibn Kathir notes that this verse is also a basis for naming a child on the day of its birth, which the Prophet ﷺ also did. He named his own son Ibrahim on the night he was born.

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Muslim 2315)

## The prayer for protection

Her mother then asked Allah to protect her daughter, and her daughter's offspring, from Shaytan. The prayer was answered, and the Prophet ﷺ described the answer in words recorded by both al-Bukhari and Muslim. Abu Hurayrah reported that he said: "There is no child born of the children of Adam except that Shaytan touches him when he is born, and he cries out from the touch of Shaytan, except Maryam and her son." Then Abu Hurayrah said: "Recite, if you wish: *And I seek refuge for her and her offspring in You from Shaytan, the outcast.*" (Bukhari 3431; Muslim 2366)

This is the first of the honours given to Maryam in authentic hadith. It concerns her and her son alone. The scholars explain that it does not mean that every other person is under the power of Shaytan, nor that other prophets were not protected from him in their lives and missions; it describes a specific protection at the moment of birth, granted because of the prayer of her mother. (Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar)

## CHAPTER 5

# The Casting of the Pens

The vow had been made, and the mother kept it. The historians report that she wrapped the child and carried her to the House in Jerusalem, and gave her to the scholars and worshippers who served there, saying in effect: "Here is the one I vowed."

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) She was the daughter of 'Imran, a man they had known and respected, and each of them wished to have the honour of raising her.

The Qur'an refers to what followed:



*That is from the news of the unseen which We reveal to you. You were not with them when they cast their pens to decide which of them should take charge of Maryam, nor were you with them when they disputed.*

**Qur'an Al Imran 3:44**

So the men of the House disputed over the guardianship of the child, and settled the matter by casting lots. The Qur'an calls the lots their "pens", *aqlam*: these were the pens with which they wrote out the Tawrah. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

## How the lots were cast

The commentators among the Successors, such as 'Ikrimah, as-Suddi and Qatadah, describe the manner of it. According to their reports, the men went down to a river, said to be the Jordan, and threw their pens into the water, agreeing that the one whose pen stood still against the current, or rose against it, would take her. The pens of the others were carried away, and the pen of Zakariyya stood firm, and so the guardianship fell to him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) These details come from the commentaries and are of the kind taken from the People of the Book; the Qur'an confirms only that lots were cast with their pens and that Zakariyya took charge of her.

Zakariyya had argued from the start that he had the better right, since his wife was her close relative. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The lot confirmed his claim. The Qur'an states the result in the next words of its account:

*So her Lord accepted her with a good acceptance, and caused her to grow in a good way, and placed her in the care of Zakariyya.*

**Qur'an Al Imran 3:37**

## A good acceptance

The mother had asked, "accept it from me". The answer came in three parts. Allah accepted her daughter, though she was a girl and the service had been vowed for a boy; He raised her well, in body and in religion; and He gave her a guardian who was a prophet. The commentators note that the phrase "a good acceptance" means that Allah accepted the girl in the place of the son that had been vowed, and accepted her fully. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Zakariyya was an old man by then. The Prophet ﷺ said of him that he was a carpenter, earning his living with his hands. (Muslim 2379) It was in the home and the care of this elderly prophet, who worked for his bread and served the House of Allah, that Maryam grew up.

The Qur'an notes, in the verse about the pens, that the Prophet ﷺ had not been present at any of this: "You were not with them." The story of Maryam was told to him by revelation, more than five centuries later, in a city of idol worshippers who knew nothing of her. The Qur'an presents this as one of the signs of his prophethood. (Qur'an Al Imran 3:44; Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

## CHAPTER 6

# The Mihrab

Maryam grew up in the House in Jerusalem, under the care of Zakariyya. The Qur'an describes her place there with one word, *al-mihrab*. In later Muslim usage the mihrab is the niche in the wall of a mosque that shows the direction of prayer. In the Qur'an it has its older meaning: a raised, private chamber, the most honoured place in a building, set apart for worship. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The commentators say that Zakariyya set aside such a chamber for her within the House, where she lived and worshipped, and where no one entered except him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir)

The historians add that he would lock the door behind him when he left, and that she grew up there in prayer, fasting and remembrance, so that she became known among the worshippers of the House for her devotion. (Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an itself describes her, at the end of the surah of at-Tahrim, as "among the devoutly obedient", *al-qanitin*, the word used for those who stand long in prayer and humble themselves before Allah. (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:12)

## Provision from Allah

Then the Qur'an records something that Zakariyya noticed in her chamber:

*Whenever Zakariyya went in to her in the mihrab, he found provision with her. He said: O Maryam, from where do you have this? She said: It is from Allah. Indeed, Allah provides for whom He wills without measure.*

*Qur'an Al Imran 3:37*

The Qur'an does not say what the provision was. The commentators among the Successors, Mujahid, 'Ikrimah, Sa'id ibn Jubayr and others, said that he would find with her the fruits of summer in the winter, and the fruits of winter in the summer. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Whatever it was, Zakariyya, who was her only visitor and her guardian, knew that he had not brought it, and no one else had come in.

Her answer was short. She did not claim anything for herself, did not explain how it came or describe any vision. She said only, "It is from Allah," and added a general truth: Allah provides for whom He wills without measure. The scholars of 'aqidah cite this verse as evidence for *karamat*, the honours that Allah grants to His righteous servants who are not prophets, by which something beyond the usual course of things happens for them. Maryam was not a prophet, according to the majority of the scholars, as will be explained in Chapter 16; the provision in her chamber was an honour from Allah to a righteous woman. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Sharh al-'Aqidah at-Tahawiyah)



## The orphan's food

The historians also report that in a year of drought and hardship Zakariyya found himself unable to support her, and the men of the House cast lots again to decide who would provide for her. The lot fell to a carpenter named Jurayj, or Yusuf, who supported her from his earnings; and he found that a little food in her hands became much. (Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) This report is from the historians and the material of the People of the Book; Ibn Kathir records it, but it has no chain to the Prophet ﷺ, and the Qur'an speaks only of the provision Zakariyya found.

The figure of a carpenter named Yusuf who looked after Maryam is central in the Christian accounts, where he is her betrothed husband. The Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah say nothing of any betrothal, and the Qur'an is clear that no man had touched her. (Qur'an Maryam 19:20; Qur'an Al Imran 3:47) Muslim scholars therefore do not accept from these sources anything that suggests a marriage.

### CHAPTER 7

## Zakariyya's Prayer

What Zakariyya saw in Maryam's chamber moved him to a prayer of his own. The Qur'an places the two events side by side:

*There Zakariyya called upon his Lord. He said: My Lord, grant me from Yourself good offspring. Indeed, You are the Hearer of prayer.*

*Qur'an Al Imran 3:38*

"There", *hunalika*: at that place and that moment. Ibn Kathir explains that when Zakariyya saw Allah provide for Maryam out of season, without means, he hoped that the One who did this could give him a child in his old age, against every ordinary expectation. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) He was very old, his hair was white, and his wife had been barren all her life.

(Qur'an Maryam 19:4–5; Qur'an Maryam 19:8)

The surah named after Maryam opens with the same prayer, told in more detail. Zakariyya called on his Lord in secret, and said that his bones had grown weak and his head had filled with white, and that he had never been disappointed in calling on Him. He feared for what his relatives would do with the religion after him, and asked for an heir who would inherit from him and from the family of Ya'qub. (Qur'an Maryam 19:2–6) The scholars explain that what he wished his heir to inherit was prophethood and knowledge, not wealth.

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir)



## Yahya

The answer came while he stood praying in the mihrab. The angels called to him that Allah gave him the glad tidings of Yahya, "confirming a word from Allah, and a leader, and chaste, and a prophet from among the righteous." (Qur'an Al Imran 3:39) The commentators explain that "a word from Allah" means 'Isa son of Maryam, who is called "a word" because he was created by Allah's word "Be". Yahya would be the first to confirm him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Zakariyya asked how he could have a son when he had reached old age and his wife was barren. He was told: "Thus Allah does what He wills." He asked for a sign, and was told that his sign would be that he would not speak to people for three days except by gestures, while he remained able to remember and glorify his Lord.

(Qur'an Al Imran 3:40–41; Qur'an Maryam 19:7–11)

The birth of Yahya prepared the way for what was to come. A son was born to a father in great old age and a mother who had never borne a child. It was a wonder, but it was a wonder within the usual means: a husband and a wife. What would happen to Maryam would go further: a son with no father at all. Allah showed the first wonder in the house of Zakariyya before He showed the second in the house of Maryam.

Maryam was close to all of this. Zakariyya's wife was, according to the reports discussed in Chapter 1, her aunt or her sister, and Yahya was her young cousin. Ibn Kathir mentions a report that the two women met while both were expecting, and that Zakariyya's wife said she felt the child in her womb bow to the child in Maryam's. (Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) This is from the Isra'iliyyat, close to an account in the Christian Gospel of Luke, and it is neither confirmed nor denied.

## CHAPTER 8

# Chosen and Purified

Before the news of her son, the angels brought Maryam news about herself. The Qur'an records it:

*And when the angels said: O Maryam, Allah has chosen you and purified you, and has chosen you above the women of the worlds. O Maryam, be devoutly obedient to your Lord, and prostrate, and bow with those who bow.*

*Qur'an Al Imran 3:42–43*

In this address the word "chosen" comes twice. Ibn Kathir explains that the first choice was the choice of her for the service of the House and for the honours of her upbringing, and that the second was the choice of her above all women for what was to come: to be the



mother of a messenger born without a father. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Between them comes "purified": purified from every vice, from unbelief and from the faults of character, and, the commentators add, from the slander that her people would later speak against her.

### Angels speaking to a woman

The angels addressed Maryam directly, as they had addressed Sarah, the wife of Ibrahim, with the news of Ishaq. (Qur'an Hud 11:71–73) This led some scholars, among them Ibn Hazm, to hold that Maryam was a prophet, along with a few other women. The great majority of the scholars of Ahl as-Sunnah reject this. They point to the verse "We did not send before you except men to whom We revealed" (Qur'an Yusuf 12:109) and say that the angels speaking to someone does not in itself make them a prophet. They hold that the highest rank of Maryam is the one the Qur'an itself gives her: *siddiqah*, a woman of complete truthfulness and faith. (Qur'an Al-Ma'idah 5:75; Tafsir Ibn Kathir) This is the view of Ibn Kathir and of the main body of scholars, including the Hanafis.

### Prayer with those who pray

The command that followed was a command to worship: to be devoted, to prostrate and to bow. The commentators say that Maryam took this command so seriously that she stood in prayer until her feet swelled. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) "With those who bow" refers to the congregation of the worshippers in the House; the scholars note that in her case this meant joining in their worship, while remaining in her own place apart.

Ibn Kathir notes here that the Prophet ﷺ also spoke of her rank, and he quotes the hadith of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim: "The best of its women is Maryam daughter of 'Imran, and the best of its women is Khadijah daughter of Khuwaylid." (Bukhari 3432; Muslim 2430) The scholars explained "its women" as the women of her time, for Maryam, and the women of this Ummah, for Khadijah. Her rank is treated more fully in Chapter 16.

## CHAPTER 9

# The Annunciation

The central event of Maryam's life is told twice in the Qur'an: in Surah Al 'Imran and in Surah Maryam. The account in Surah Maryam gives the scene:

*And mention in the Book Maryam, when she withdrew from her family to a place towards the east, and placed a screen between herself and them. Then We sent to her Our Spirit, and he appeared to her as a man, well formed.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:16–17*



"Our Spirit" here is Jibril, the angel of revelation. The scholars agree on this. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)  
He came to her in the form of a man, complete in his form and appearance, so that she would not be terrified by his true form.

The commentators differ about why she had withdrawn and placed a screen between herself and her family. Some said she had gone apart for worship; others said she had withdrawn for a need of her own, such as to wash, which is why she screened herself. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) "Towards the east" is a place to the east of the House in Jerusalem. Ibn 'Abbas is reported to have said that this is why the Christians face the east in their worship. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

## Her refuge in Allah

A strange man had appeared in a place where she was alone. Her first words were a prayer for protection:

*She said: I seek refuge in the Most Merciful from you, if you fear Allah.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:18*

The scholars dwell on these words. She did not cry out, nor did she speak to him harshly. She sought refuge with Allah, by His name the Most Merciful, and reminded the stranger of his duty to fear Allah. Ibn Kathir notes that she was a woman of such chastity that her first response to the sight of a man in her private place was to seek refuge with Allah from him. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

*He said: I am only the messenger of your Lord, to give you a pure boy. She said: How can I have a boy when no man has touched me, and I have not been unchaste? He said: Thus it will be. Your Lord says: It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us. And it is a matter already decreed.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:19-21*

## The word from Allah

The account in Surah Al 'Imran adds what the angels told her about the child:

*When the angels said: O Maryam, Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, 'Isa son of Maryam, honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and among those brought near to Allah. He will speak to people in the cradle and in his maturity, and he will be among the righteous.*

*Qur'an Al Imran 3:45-46*

Several things in this verse should be noted. The child is named before he is born. He is called "son of Maryam", named by his mother, because he had no father; the Qur'an calls him this in more than twenty places, and Maryam is the only woman whose child is named



after her in the Qur'an. He is given the title *al-Masih*, the Messiah; the commentators gave various explanations of the word, among them that he wiped over the sick and they were healed, or that he travelled much over the earth. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) And he is called "a word from Him", because he was created by Allah's command "Be", without the means through which every other human being, except Adam and Hawwa', has come into being.

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Maryam asked the same question again: "My Lord, how can I have a child when no man has touched me?" The answer: "Thus Allah creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it: Be, and it is." (Qur'an Al Imran 3:47) The scholars point out the difference between the answer to Zakariyya and the answer to Maryam. For Yahya, born through ordinary means, Allah "does" what He wills. For 'Isa, born without a father, Allah "creates" what He wills. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The angels went on to describe her son's mission: he would be taught the Book and wisdom, the Tawrah and the Injil; he would be a messenger to the Children of Isra'il; he would shape the form of a bird from clay and breathe into it and it would become a bird by Allah's permission, heal the blind and the leper, and give life to the dead by Allah's permission; and he would confirm the Tawrah and make lawful some of what had been forbidden to them. (Qur'an Al Imran 3:48–50) Every miracle is said, in the Qur'an's words, to be "by the permission of Allah". And his message would be: "Indeed, Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. This is a straight path." (Qur'an Al Imran 3:51)

## CHAPTER 10

# To a Far Place

The Qur'an tells how she conceived in two verses that use the same image:

*And she who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into her of Our spirit, and made her and her son a sign for the worlds.*

*Qur'an Al-Anbiya' 21:91*

*And Maryam, daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. And she affirmed the truth of the words of her Lord and His Books, and she was of the devoutly obedient.*

*Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:12*

The commentators explain that Allah commanded Jibril, and Jibril breathed into the opening of her garment, and the breath reached her and she conceived by the command of Allah. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) "Of Our spirit" is a phrase of honour, like "the House of Allah" or "the



she-camel of Allah": the spirit was created by Allah and is attributed to Him to honour it. The scholars are firm that it does not mean that any part of Allah entered into Maryam or into her son. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

Both verses open with the same description of her: "she who guarded her chastity". Before the Qur'an speaks of the miracle, it speaks of her purity. It is the first thing the Qur'an says of her when it holds her up as an example to the believers. (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:11–12)

## To a far place

The account in Surah Maryam continues:

*So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a remote place.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:22*

The Qur'an does not say how long her pregnancy lasted. The commentators differ. Some, such as Ibn 'Abbas in a report, said that she conceived and delivered within a short time, an hour, because the Qur'an joins the events with "so". The majority said that she carried him for the usual months, like any other woman, and that the joining words do not require that the events were immediate. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Ibn Kathir prefers the second view.

Where she went is also not stated in the Qur'an. The commentators report that she went out of Jerusalem, away from her people, and the well-known view is that she came to Bayt Lahm, Bethlehem, a short distance to the south. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) A hadith of the Night Journey, recorded by an-Nasa'i, says that Jibril told the Prophet ﷺ, when he prayed at a place on the way to Jerusalem: "You have prayed at Bayt Lahm, where 'Isa was born." (Nasa'i 450) The scholars have discussed the strength of this narration; some graded it acceptable, while others pointed to weakness in parts of its chain.

The historians add that during these months she hid her state from people, and some report that the first to notice it was the carpenter Yusuf who served the House, and that she answered his questions in a way that showed him the truth. (Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir) This is from the Isra'iliyyat. The Qur'an tells only that she withdrew, alone, to a far place, and that it was there that the pains of birth came upon her.

## CHAPTER 11

# Under the Palm Tree

The Qur'an describes the birth in a few verses that are among the most tender in the Book:

*And the pains of birth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said: I wish I had died before this, and had been a thing utterly forgotten.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:23*



She was alone, far from her family, with no midwife and no other woman beside her. The pains drove her to the trunk of a palm tree, to lean on it or hold on to it. The commentators report that it was a dry trunk, in winter, bearing no fruit. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

### "I wish I had died before this"

Her words have been discussed carefully by the scholars. She did not wish for death out of objection to the decree of Allah, nor out of doubt in the promise she had been given. Ibn Kathir explains that she knew she would be tested by people because of this child, that they would not believe her, and that they would accuse her after she had been known among them as a worshipper devoted to the House. Her wish was the wish of a chaste woman that she had never come to a moment in which her honour would be questioned.

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The scholars draw from her words that a person may feel and express such distress in a great trial without blame. They also note that the Prophet ﷺ forbade wishing for death because of a harm that befalls one, and taught that a person who must say something should say: "O Allah, keep me alive as long as life is good for me, and take me when death is good for me." (Bukhari 5671) The commentators explain that Maryam's words were spoken in the overwhelming pain of childbirth and the fear for her religion and honour, not as a deliberate request; and Allah answered her at once with comfort.

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar)

### "Do not grieve"

*Then he called to her from beneath her: Do not grieve. Your Lord has placed beneath you a stream. And shake towards you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you fresh, ripe dates. So eat and drink, and be content.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:24-26*

Who called to her? The commentators give two views. One, reported from Ibn 'Abbas and others, is that it was Jibril, who called from the lower part of the valley. The other, reported from Mujahid and al-Hasan, is that it was 'Isa himself, newly born, who spoke to his mother from beneath her. Ibn Kathir reports both views. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The word translated "stream", *sari*, is explained by most of the commentators as a small river or spring of water, which Allah caused to flow for her. A minority took it to mean a noble chief, referring to 'Isa; the first is the view of the majority. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)



## Shake the trunk

The scholars have long drawn attention to the command "shake towards you the trunk". A woman in the pains of childbirth could not shake a palm tree. A strong man could not shake a palm trunk enough to bring down its fruit. Yet she was told to make the effort, and Allah brought the fruit down. The scholars cite it as a sign that Allah provides, but that His servants are still to take the means within their reach. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The fruit was *rutab*, fresh ripe dates. The commentators mention that fresh dates are among the best foods for a woman after childbirth, and some of the early scholars said that nothing is better for a woman who has given birth than fresh dates, or dried dates if fresh ones are not available, citing this verse. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) She was given water to drink from the stream below her, fruit to eat from the tree above her, and the words "be content", literally "let your eye be cool", the Arabic expression for happiness and peace of mind.

## CHAPTER 12

# The Vow of Silence

The same address told her what to do when she met people:

*And if you see any human being, say: I have vowed a fast to the Most Merciful, so I will not speak today to any person.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:26*

The commentators explain that the "fast" meant here is a fast from speech. Among the Children of Isra'il, a vow of silence was a known act of devotion, and it was permitted in their law. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) She was not to argue or defend herself. She was to say, by gesture, that she had vowed not to speak, and to let Allah answer for her.

The scholars explain the wisdom of this. No word of hers could have convinced people of a birth without a father. Any explanation would have sounded like an excuse, and she would have been drawn into a dispute about her own honour. By remaining silent she left the answer to the one sign that no one could deny. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

## Silence in the Shari'ah

The scholars note that this kind of vow was part of the law of earlier nations and is not part of the Shari'ah of Muhammad ﷺ. Ibn 'Abbas reported that the Prophet ﷺ, while delivering a sermon, saw a man standing in the sun, and was told that he had vowed to stand and not sit, not to take shade, not to speak, and to fast. The Prophet ﷺ said: "Tell him to speak, to take shade, to sit, and to complete his fast." (Bukhari 6704) The fast he kept, because fasting is an act of worship in Islam. The silence, the standing in the sun and the refusal of shade he



set aside. For this reason the Hanafi and other scholars hold that a vow of complete silence is not binding on a Muslim, and that silence from evil speech, not silence from all speech, is what is praised in this religion. (Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar)

## CHAPTER 13

# Return to Her People

Then Maryam did what required more courage than anything before it. She did not stay hidden in the far place. She picked up her son and returned to her people:

*Then she came with him to her people, carrying him. They said: O Maryam, you have certainly done a thing unheard of. O sister of Harun, your father was not a man of evil, nor was your mother unchaste.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:27-28*

The word they used, *fariyy*, means something enormous and shocking, a thing beyond the ordinary. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Their words contained an accusation, and they reminded her of her family: her father had been a righteous man, her mother a chaste woman. How could the daughter of such parents, raised in the House of worship, come to them with a child and no husband?

## "Sister of Harun"

The phrase "sister of Harun" has a history in Islam. Al-Mughirah ibn Shu'bah said that when he went to Najran, the Christians there asked him: "You recite 'O sister of Harun', yet Musa was before 'Isa by such and such a time." When he came back to the Prophet ﷺ and asked him, he said: "They used to name people after the prophets and righteous people before them." (Muslim 2135)

So Maryam was not the sister of Harun the brother of Musa, who had lived many centuries earlier. The scholars give two explanations, both supported by this hadith. One is that she had a brother named Harun, named after the prophet, as was the custom. The other is that she was called "sister of Harun" in the sense of being his descendant or like him in righteousness, as an Arab is called "brother of Tamim" for being of the tribe of Tamim; some of the commentators said that Harun's descendants were the family of the priests who served the House, and that her people were reminding her of the sacred line to which she belonged. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Either way, the hadith settles the question that the people of Najran raised.



## She pointed to him

*So she pointed to him. They said: How can we speak to one who is in the cradle, a child?*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:29*

She kept her vow and did not speak. She pointed to the infant in her arms. To the people this gesture seemed to add mockery to her offence. The commentators report that they were angered by it and said that her pointing to the child was worse than what she had done. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) Then the child spoke.

### CHAPTER 14

## The Child Speaks

The first words that 'Isa son of Maryam spoke to people are recorded in the Qur'an:

*He said: I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. And He has made me blessed wherever I am, and has enjoined upon me prayer and zakah as long as I live, and to be dutiful to my mother, and He has not made me a tyrant, wretched. And peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive.*

*Qur'an Maryam 19:30-33*

The scholars have noticed that the very first thing he said was "I am the servant of Allah", 'abdullah. Before anything else, before defending his mother, he declared his own servanthood. Ibn Kathir comments that these words are a rebuttal, from the cradle, of everything that would later be claimed about him: the first word he spoke was that he was a servant of Allah, not a god and not the son of a god. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

### His words for his mother

His words cleared his mother. A child who speaks in his first days, declaring himself a servant and prophet of Allah, was not the child of sin. And among the things he said he had been commanded was *birran bi-walidati*, "dutiful to my mother". He mentioned his mother alone. The scholars point out that Yahya, in the same surah, is described as "dutiful to his parents", in the plural, while 'Isa speaks of his mother only, because he had no father.

(Qur'an Maryam 19:14; Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The Qur'an returns to this event elsewhere, in the list of favours that Allah will remind 'Isa of on the Day of Judgement: "Remember My favour upon you and upon your mother, when I supported you with the Holy Spirit, and you spoke to people in the cradle and in maturity." (Qur'an Al-Ma'idah 5:110) The favour was to her as much as to him.



## The three who spoke in the cradle

The Prophet ﷺ said: "None spoke in the cradle except three: 'Isa, ..." and then he told the story of Jurayj, a worshipper of the Children of Isra'il who was falsely accused of fathering a child and was cleared when the infant spoke and named his true father, and of a third child. (Bukhari 3436) It is notable that in two of the three cases the speech of the infant cleared someone of a false accusation of unchastity. Allah defends the honour of His righteous servants.

The Qur'an does not say what happened between Maryam and her people after the child spoke, nor how she lived in the years that followed. The historians report various things, among them that she and her son later travelled to Egypt to escape a king who sought the child, and that they returned to the land of Isra'il when he was older, settling in a village called Nazareth, from which his followers came to be called Nasara.

(Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir; Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir) These accounts come from the People of the Book and parallel what is found in their Gospels. Some commentators connected them with a verse of the Qur'an: "And We made the son of Maryam and his mother a sign, and gave them refuge on a high ground, a place of rest with flowing water." (Qur'an AL-Mu'minun 23:50) The commentators differ on where this high ground was. Ibn Kathir reports views that it was in Damascus, in Ramlah, or in Egypt, and that the most likely is that it was the place of the birth itself in Bayt al-Maqdis, where there was a stream and a palm tree. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

### CHAPTER 15

## Slander and Truth

Most of her people did not accept the sign. The Qur'an records that among those who rejected 'Isa were some who spoke against his mother:

*And because of their disbelief and their saying against Maryam a great slander.*

*Qur'an An-Nisa' 4:156*

The "great slander" was the accusation of unchastity. Ibn Kathir explains that some of those who disbelieved accused her of adultery, despite the sign of the child who spoke in the cradle, and some of them persisted in this. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The Qur'an places this slander among the crimes of those who broke their covenant with Allah, alongside their unbelief in His signs and their killing of prophets. (Qur'an An-Nisa' 4:155–156)

The Qur'an itself is the answer. It names her as "she who guarded her chastity" twice; it calls her a *siddiqah*; it says that Allah "purified" her and chose her above the women of the worlds. (Qur'an AL-Anbiya' 21:91; Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:12; Qur'an AL-Ma'idah 5:75; Qur'an AL Imran 3:42) Six centuries



after her, when her own people had long disputed about her, the Qur'an declared her innocence to the Arabs, who had known nothing of her. For a Muslim, the purity of Maryam is part of faith, because it is established by the Book of Allah.

## The end of 'Isa on earth

The same passage of Surah an-Nisa' goes on to speak of the plot against her son:

*And their saying: We killed the Messiah, 'Isa son of Maryam, the messenger of Allah. They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them. Those who differ about it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except following assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.*

*Qur'an An-Nisa' 4:157-158*

This is the belief of Muslims: 'Isa was not killed and was not crucified. Allah raised him, alive, to Himself. Who was crucified in his place, and how the likeness was cast, the Qur'an does not say; the commentators mention various reports, most of them from the historians, and none of them is established by an authentic hadith. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The Qur'an continues: "And there is none of the People of the Book except that he will surely believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them." (Qur'an An-Nisa' 4:159) Abu Hurayrah, after narrating the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ that 'Isa son of Maryam will descend as a just ruler, break the cross, kill the swine and abolish the jizyah, recited this verse in support of it. (Bukhari 3448) Ahl as-Sunnah believe on the basis of these authentic hadith that 'Isa will return before the Last Day, follow the Shari'ah of Muhammad ﷺ, and then die a natural death, and that the Muslims will pray over him. (Abu Dawud 4324)

The Qur'an does not say what happened to Maryam after her son was raised, how long she lived, or where she died. The historians mention various reports, none of them established. A Muslim does not need more than what Allah has told.

## CHAPTER 16

# Her Rank in Islam

No woman is praised in the Qur'an as Maryam is praised. Allah says she was chosen, and chosen again above the women of the worlds; that she was purified; that she guarded her chastity; that she affirmed the truth of the words of her Lord and His Books; that she was of the devoutly obedient; and that she was a *siddiqah*. (Qur'an Al Imran 3:42; Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:12; Qur'an Al-Ma'idah 5:75) The Prophet ﷺ added to this in several authentic hadith.



## The perfect among women

Abu Musa al-Ash'ari reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Many among men reached perfection, but none among women reached perfection except Maryam daughter of 'Imran and Asiyah the wife of Fir'awn. And the superiority of 'A'ishah over other women is like the superiority of *tharid* over other food." (Bukhari 3411; Muslim 2431) The scholars explain "perfection" here as completeness in faith, worship and virtue. Asiyah, the subject of Part 4 of this series, is joined with Maryam here and again at the end of Surah at-Tahrim, where Allah gives the two of them as the examples for the believers. (Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:11-12)

## The best of the women of the worlds

'Ali ibn Abi Talib reported that he heard the Prophet ﷺ say: "The best of its women is Maryam daughter of 'Imran, and the best of its women is Khadijah daughter of Khuwaylid." (Bukhari 3432; Muslim 2430) Anas ibn Malik reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Sufficient for you among the women of the worlds are Maryam daughter of 'Imran, Khadijah daughter of Khuwaylid, Fatimah daughter of Muhammad, and Asiyah the wife of Fir'awn." (Tirmidhi 3878) These four women are often called the best women of Paradise. Part 1 of this series told the life of Khadijah, and Part 2 that of Fatimah.

Umm Salamah reported that the Prophet ﷺ, in the year of the conquest of Makkah, told Fatimah privately that she would be the leader of the women of the people of Paradise, "except for Maryam daughter of 'Imran". (Tirmidhi 3873) The scholars discussed which of these women has the higher rank, Maryam, Khadijah, Fatimah or 'A'ishah, and expressed different views. Many held that Maryam is the best of them because of this hadith and because of the verse "chosen above the women of the worlds"; others held that the women of this Ummah are better in some respects, and that "the worlds" in the verse refers to the people of her time. The scholars discussed this with respect for all of them, and the matter does not need to be settled for a Muslim to honour each of them.

(Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar)

## A siddiqah, not a prophet

The Qur'an says of her: "The Messiah son of Maryam was not but a messenger; messengers have passed before him. And his mother was a *siddiqah*. They both used to eat food." (Qur'an Al-Ma'idah 5:75) Ibn Kathir explains that the highest rank given to her in this verse is *siddiqiyyah*, the rank of complete truthfulness and faith, the rank that comes after prophethood. Had she been a prophet, the verse, which is listing her highest qualities, would have mentioned it. He reports that this is the view of the majority of the scholars, against Ibn Hazm and a few others who held that she, Sarah and the mother of Musa were

prophets because they received the speech of angels or revelation. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) The mainstream position of Ahl as-Sunnah, and of the Hanafi scholars, is that prophethood was given only to men.

The same verse ends with a simple observation: "They both used to eat food." The commentators explain that whoever needs to eat, also needs everything that follows eating, and that such a one is a created being in need, and not a god. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

### She never rode a camel

A small detail in al-Bukhari shows how carefully the Companions understood these comparisons. The Prophet ﷺ praised the women of Quraysh as the best of the women who ride camels, for their compassion to their children and their care of their husbands' property. Abu Hurayrah added: "And Maryam daughter of 'Imran never rode a camel." (Bukhari 3434) He meant that the praise of the women of Quraysh did not place them above Maryam, who was not of the Arabs and was outside the comparison.

## CHAPTER 17

# 'Isa son of Maryam

It is not possible to tell the life of Maryam without speaking of her son, and of what has been said about him. The Christians hold that 'Isa is divine, the son of Allah and one of three persons of a Trinity, and many of them give Maryam titles of veneration that follow from that belief. Islam holds that 'Isa is a servant of Allah and His messenger, born of a virgin mother by the command of Allah, and that Maryam is a woman of the highest rank, but a created servant of Allah like her son. The Qur'an addresses the question directly and calmly, and with respect for both mother and son.

### Like Adam

*Indeed, the example of 'Isa in the sight of Allah is like that of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him: Be, and he was.*

*Qur'an Al Imran 3:59*

This verse was revealed, the commentators report, in the context of the delegation of the Christians of Najran who came to the Prophet ﷺ in Madinah and argued with him about 'Isa. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Ibn Hisham) Its argument is simple. If being born without a father made 'Isa divine, then Adam, created without father or mother, would have greater claim. Both were created by the word "Be". The Prophet ﷺ invited the delegation to a *mubalahah*, a mutual invocation of Allah's curse on whichever side was lying; they declined, and agreed instead to pay tribute. (Qur'an Al Imran 3:61; Bukhari 4380)



## Word and spirit

The Qur'an calls 'Isa "His word, which He cast to Maryam, and a spirit from Him". (Qur'an An-Nisa' 4:171) The Christians took similar language to mean that he shared in divinity. The same verse of the Qur'an, however, begins: "O People of the Book, do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do not say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, 'Isa son of Maryam, was only a messenger of Allah," and it ends: "So believe in Allah and His messengers, and do not say Three. Desist; it is better for you. Allah is only one deity. Exalted is He above having a son." (Qur'an An-Nisa' 4:171)

The Prophet ﷺ included this belief in the testimony of faith itself. 'Ubadah ibn as-Samit reported that he said: "Whoever testifies that there is no god but Allah alone, with no partner, and that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger, and that 'Isa is the servant of Allah and His messenger, and His word which He cast to Maryam, and a spirit from Him, and that Paradise is true and the Fire is true, Allah will admit him to Paradise, whatever his deeds." (Bukhari 3435) The honour of 'Isa and of his mother is part of the creed of every Muslim.

## The question on the Last Day

The Qur'an describes a scene on the Day of Judgement in which Allah will ask 'Isa about what was said of him and his mother:

*And when Allah will say: O 'Isa son of Maryam, did you say to people: Take me and my mother as two gods besides Allah? He will say: Glory be to You. It was not for me to say what I had no right to. If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is in my self, and I do not know what is in Yours. Indeed, You are the Knower of the unseen. I said nothing to them except what You commanded me: Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. And I was a witness over them as long as I was among them, but when You took me up, You were the Watcher over them, and You are Witness over all things.*

*Qur'an Al-Ma'idah 5:116-117*

The commentators note that this verse speaks of taking Maryam as a deity alongside her son. Ibn Kathir explains that the verse refers to those who exaggerated in their veneration of her, and that there were among the Christians those who directed prayer and devotion to her. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) In the answer of 'Isa there is no anger, only humility before Allah and a plain statement of what he had taught.

## Without excess

The Prophet ﷺ warned his own Ummah against doing to him what had been done to 'Isa. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab reported that he said: "Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians exaggerated in praising the son of Maryam. I am only a servant, so say: the servant of Allah and His messenger." (Bukhari 3445) The Muslim position is that of the Qur'an: to love and honour 'Isa and Maryam above most of creation, and to worship Allah alone.

The Prophet ﷺ also said: "I am the closest of people to 'Isa son of Maryam in this world and the Hereafter. The prophets are brothers of one father; their mothers are different, and their religion is one." He also said that there was no prophet between himself and 'Isa. (Bukhari 3443; Bukhari 3442) Muslims believe in 'Isa as one of their own prophets, and in Maryam as one of the best of their own women. There is no need, in speaking of her, for hostility towards others who also honour her; the Qur'an's own manner is to state the truth and to invite.

## CHAPTER 18

# Her Name in the Qur'an

Maryam is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an. Every other woman in the Book is described rather than named: the wife of Adam, the wife of Nuh and the wife of Lut, the wife of Ibrahim, the mother of Musa and his sister, the wife of Fir'awn, the wife of the 'Aziz of Egypt, the Queen of Saba', the wife of 'Imran, the wives of the Prophet ﷺ and the woman who disputed with him. Maryam alone is called by her name, and her name occurs in the Qur'an thirty-four times, most often in the phrase "'Isa son of Maryam". (Qur'an Maryam 19:16; Qur'an At-Tahrim 66:12) The scholars have offered reasons for this. One that many have mentioned is that, because her son was to be called by her name, "'Isa son of Maryam", her name had to be known; another is that the Qur'an named her in order to establish her innocence before the world by name.

## The surah named after her

The nineteenth surah of the Qur'an is called **Surah Maryam**. It is the only surah named after a woman. It is a Makki surah, revealed in Makkah before the Hijrah, in the years of persecution. (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) It tells, in order, the stories of Zakariyya and Yahya, of Maryam and 'Isa, of Ibrahim and his father, of Musa and Harun, of Isma'il and Idris, and the prayers and prostrations of the prophets, and then turns to the questions of the Hereafter. Its verses have a recurring rhyme and a gentle rhythm, and the name of Allah most used in it is *ar-Rahman*, the Most Merciful, which occurs in it sixteen times, more than in any other surah. Maryam herself uses it when she seeks refuge from the stranger, and in her vow of silence. (Qur'an Maryam 19:18; Qur'an Maryam 19:26)



Another surah is named after her family: Surah Al 'Imran, the third surah, revealed in Madinah, which tells the story of her birth and upbringing. Between the two, the Qur'an tells the life of Maryam from before her birth to the moment she pointed to her son in the cradle.

### Surah Maryam at the court of an-Najashi

Surah Maryam played a part in the history of the first Muslims. When the Muslims who had emigrated to Abyssinia were pursued there by envoys of Quraysh, the Najashi, the Christian king of Abyssinia, called the Muslims before him and asked them about their religion. Ja'far ibn Abi Talib spoke for them. The Najashi asked him whether he had anything with him of what their Prophet had brought from Allah, and Ja'far recited to him the opening of Surah Maryam. Umm Salamah, who was present and who narrated the event, said that the Najashi wept until his beard was wet, and his bishops wept until their scrolls were wet. The Najashi said: "This and what was brought by 'Isa come from one and the same lamp." In one wording the name is Musa, in another 'Isa. He refused to hand the Muslims over. (Musnad Ahmad; Ibn Hisham)

The next day the envoys of Quraysh told him that the Muslims said something terrible about 'Isa son of Maryam. He called them again and asked what they said about him. Ja'far said: "We say about him what our Prophet brought: he is the servant of Allah, His messenger, His spirit and His word which He cast to Maryam, the virgin, the chaste." The Najashi took a stick from the ground and said: "By Allah, 'Isa son of Maryam does not exceed what you have said by the length of this stick." (Musnad Ahmad; Ibn Hisham) The scholars of hadith have graded this narration of Umm Salamah, which Imam Ahmad recorded through Ibn Ishaq, as having a good (*hasan*) chain.

It was the story of Maryam, told as the Qur'an tells it, that brought the first refuge to the Muslims outside Arabia. Umm Salamah herself, who narrated the scene, will be the subject of a later part of this series.

### Her place in history

Maryam grew up an orphan in the house of a prophet, in the service of the House of Allah. She received the angels, accepted the decree of Allah, gave birth alone under a palm tree, and returned to her people carrying her son, with nothing to defend herself but silence and trust in Allah. She was slandered by many of her own people, and exaggerated by many of those who came after them. The Qur'an, revealed six centuries later in a land she never saw, named her, cleared her, and placed her among the examples for the believers until the end of time.

Nothing is established of her later life or of her death. What is known of her, the Qur'an has given, and that is more than is given of any other woman.



## AT A GLANCE

# Timeline of Her Life

| APPROX. DATE                      | EVENT                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Before her birth                  | Her mother, the wife of 'Imran, vows the child in her womb to the service of the House in Jerusalem. Her father dies, according to the historians. |
| Her birth                         | Born a girl and named Maryam; her mother seeks refuge for her and her offspring from Shaytan. Brought to the House.                                |
| Her childhood                     | Lots are cast with the pens; Zakariyya becomes her guardian. She grows up in the mihrab, where provision comes to her from Allah.                  |
| Her youth                         | Zakariyya prays for a son and is given the glad tidings of Yahya. The angels tell Maryam she is chosen above the women of the worlds.              |
| The annunciation                  | Jibril comes to her in the form of a man with the glad tidings of 'Isa. She conceives by the command of Allah and withdraws to a far place.        |
| c. 600 years before the Prophet ﷺ | Birth of 'Isa under the palm tree, by most reports at Bayt Lahm. The stream, the dates, the vow of silence.                                        |
| Soon after                        | She returns to her people carrying him. He speaks in the cradle and clears her.                                                                    |
| His mission                       | 'Isa preaches to the Children of Isra'il. Most reject him; some slander his mother.                                                                |
| The end of his time on earth      | He is not killed or crucified; Allah raises him to Himself. Nothing is established of her later life or death.                                     |
| c. 615 CE                         | Ja'far recites Surah Maryam before the Najashi in Abyssinia.                                                                                       |

The Qur'an and the authentic hadith give no dates for her life. The interval of about six hundred years between 'Isa and the Prophet ﷺ is from the report of Salman al-Farisi in Sahih al-Bukhari 3948.



## Sources

|                                    |                                                    |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| The Qur'an                         | Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah, Ibn Hisham, from Ibn Ishaq |
| Sahih al-Bukhari                   |                                                    |
| Sahih Muslim                       | Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim, Ibn Kathir              |
| Sunan Abi Dawud; Jami' at-Tirmidhi | Qasas al-Anbiya', Ibn Kathir                       |
| Sunan an-Nasa'i                    | Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah, Ibn Kathir                 |
| Musnad Ahmad                       | Fath al-Bari, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani               |
|                                    | Sharh al-'Aqidah at-Tahawiyyah                     |

Qur'an and hadith are given in English meaning. Please refer to the Arabic in the mushaf and the books of hadith. Reports of the historians and of the People of the Book (Isra'iliyyat) are marked as such in the text and are neither confirmed nor denied.

*Next Wednesday, in sha Allah: Part 4, Asiyah bint Muzahim.*