ANNALI DI SCIENZE RELIGIOSE

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Annali di Scienze Religiose is a periodical issuing from the research activities of the Department of Religious Studies at the *Università Cattolica di Milano* (Catholic University of Sacred Heart in Milan) which apply a multidisciplinary approach to religious phenomena and focus in particular on the three monotheistic religions and on religions of the ancient Mediterranean world. It features contributions from Italian and foreign scholars writing in the main European languages and Arabic. Each issue consists of a *monographic section* which determines the subtitle of the issue, a section of *lectures* with texts employing a scientific approach to a wide range of historical and comparative topics, a *miscellaneous section* presenting timely contributions on specific themes, and lastly a section of *critical notes* which contains reflections proposed by members of the Department of Religious Studies or relating to their publications. Every issue ends with the *Ambrosian Bibliography* and the *Joachimite Bibliography*, annual surveys of publications regarding the figures and works of Ambrose of Milan and of Joachim of Fiore.

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‘Let Women Be Silent in the Assemblies’ (I Corinthians 14. 34)

Women as Protagonists in Sacred Narratives: Textuality and Traditions in the Abrahamic Religions

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Marco Rizzi

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IDA ZILIO-GRANDI

ON WOMEN AS EXAMPLES IN THE QUR'ĀN

The present study intends to survey the female presence in the Qur'ān from a moral standpoint, rather than a historical/legendary or an ethical/legal one; that is to say, it will only incidentally cover the biographical explications proposed by the later exegetical literature, and only incidentally examine the behaviour required of women under Islamic religious law (*sharīʿa*). Both these aspects have already been sufficiently explored by scholars, whether western authors or Muslim exegetes addressing their coreligionists. This study will instead attempt to review the example offered by female figures considered by the Holy Book with regard to their 'characters' (*akhlāq*, pl. of *khuluq*) — exemplary, that is, both for women and, as we shall see, for men.

1. *Female Exemplarity*

In addition to Mary — the only woman to appear under her own name (Maryam) [1] — the Qur'ān does, to be sure, cite other women, both as positive and as negative examples, but always

[1] A fact that continues to arouse curiosity in the Islamic world. The question about the exceptionality of this figure, the only one specifically mentioned by name, was recently posed on the well-known fatwa website IslamQA, founded in 1996 by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid (b. 1961), receiving the unhelpful answer that 'God decrees whatever he wants' (*Allāh yaḥkumu mā yurīd*). See Qur'ān (hereafter = Q) 5:1 ‹https://tinyurl.com/56janums›. All websites cited in the present piece were consulted on 23 February 2025. The importance of Mary and her constant presence in Qur'ānic thought is attested besides by her many appearances (34), belonging to both the Mecca phase of Revelation (AD 610–622) and to the Medina phase (AD 622–632); as well as by the existence of a whole surah (Q 19) bearing her name.

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omits their personal names (*ism* or *ʿalam*), referring to them only in relation to the men of their family, sometimes using a patronymic (*nasab*) but more often a title describing their role (*laqab*) as daughters, wives or mothers.[2] This does not mean, however, that their significance is entirely exhausted by such kinship relations.[3]

From the lexical point of view, the exemplary nature of figures mentioned in the Qur'ān can manifest itself in various ways: this can often be through verbal formulae that enjoin remembering this or that emblematic figure,[4] while on other occasions the remembering is implicit and signalled simply by a conjunction such as *wa-* ('and […]');[5] or *wa-idh* ('and when […]'). More explicit cases employ derivatives of the verbal root *mthl* — resemble, be akin to, represent, etc. — and particularly with the action noun *mathal*, which can be translated as simile, example, parable, allegory, even proverb or motto.[6] *Mathal* occasionally has the sense of 'moral exemplar', when it introduces exemplary characters demonstrating goodness of being and propriety of action, characters to be imitated therefore; but it also appears, by contrast, when exemplifying malice and wrongdoing.[7]

A passage in The Forbidding surah (*al-Taḥrīm*, cf. *ḥarām*, 'unlawful', 'forbidden'), the main focus of the present study,

[2] An exception is 'the woman ruling over them' (*al-mar'a allatī tamlikuhum* in Q 27:23), being the Queen of Sheba, Bilqīs according to the tradition. Her interaction with Solomon appears in Q 27:15–44.

[3] See Wadud 1999, 29–42.

[4] As in the following case: 'and mention (*udhkur*) in the Book Ishmael; he was true to his promise, and he was a Messenger, a Prophet […]. He enjoined his people to pray and to give alms', where the example concerns fidelity to the promise (*ṣidq al-waʿd*) of performing two religious obligations *ṣalāt* and *zakāt* (Q 19:54–55).

[5] As in the following passage: 'And Ishmael, and Idrīs, and Dhū al-Kifl, were all patient' (Q 19:56). Here the teaching has to do with patience, or constancy in the task (*ṣabr*).

[6] Zahniser 2004; Gril 2007. On the Islamic side, I would single out Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1981, 17–114, not least for the editor Saʿīd al-Khaṭīb's excellent introduction, on the meaning of *mathal* and its appearances in the Qur'ān, in the Sunnah of the Prophet, in classical Arabic and in contemporary common usage.

[7] Among the moral models classed as *mathal*, that of the pre-Islamic prophets, whose guidance was recommended to Muhammad (Q 6:90); that of Jesus (Q 43:57–58); of believers generally, as an example for all human beings (Q 47:3); and of Abraham 'and those with him' (Q 60:4–6).

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outlines the four exemplary feminine *amthāl* (pl. of *mathal*), two negative, followed by two positive ones:

> God sets forth as an example (*mathal*) of those who disbelieve the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot: they were beholden to two of Our righteous servants, but they acted treacherously towards them and the latter could not save them from God. Both were told 'You will enter into the fire together with the others'. And God sets forth an example (again *mathal*) of those who believe the wife of Pharaoh when she said: 'My Lord! build for me a house with Thee in the garden and deliver me from Pharaoh and his doings, and deliver me from the unjust people'. And again, 'Mary the daughter of Imran who guarded her chastity; and We breathed Our spirit into her; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations, and was one of the devout servants' (Q 66:10–12).[8]

This last passage ends The Forbidding surah, which belongs chronologically to the Medinan period, that is to say, subsequent to the move to Medina in 622. It is a relatively brief surah, notable for its reference to women. The surah opens with a brief mention of the Prophet's wives jointly (Q 66:1–2),[9] before

[8] See Abdel Haleem 2004.

[9] The prophet's wives, on the whole an indistinct group (*azwāj*), appear several times in The Allied Factions surah (Q 33:6.28–33.37.53). An exception, up to a point, is a wife, categorised as being among 'the honest, unwary but believing women' (*al-muḥṣanat al-ghāfilāt al-mu'mināt*, Q 24:23) — 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, who was involved in 'the affair of the lie' (*al-ifk*) and unjustly slandered. See Freyer Stowasser 2006, in particular 510–11. The anonymity of the Qur'ān was largely remedied by later literature, especially that dedicated to the 'causes of the Revelation' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), stories about the various historical events that fed into the contents of the Qur'ān. The sources agree on the names of Khadīja bint Khuwaylid, Sawda bint Zam'a, 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr, Ḥafṣa bint 'Umar, Zaynab bint Khuzayma, Hind — also known as Umm Salama — bint al-Mughīra, Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, Māriya the Copt, Juwayriyya, the Jew Rayhāna bint Zayd, Ramla — also known as Umm Ḥabība — bint Abī Sufyān, and Maymūna bint al-Ḥārith. Again according to the Tradition, other women married the Prophet but were separated from him at some point before the marriage's consummation. See Freyer Stowasser 1994, 86–87; Id. 2006, 507–09. The Prophet's wives were exceptional among Muslim women both for the rewards and the punishment reserved for them in the hereafter: in fact, they would be given a punishment twice as severe for any turpitude and a reward twice as glorious for their obedience to God and to His Envoy (Q 33:30–31). The subsequent tradition would make them, like Mary and the Pharaoh's wife, points of reference for the pious, but would also emphasise the irrationality,

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speaking of one wife in particular who told others something that the Prophet had confided to her (Q 66:3). After noting the indiscretion of this wife, the text turns to two other wives (using a dual form of address), enjoining repentance (*tawba*) on both of them, and threatening Mohammad's divorce (*ṭalāq*, cf. *ṭallaqa-kunna*) from all his wives — since the feminine plural is employed — and their replacement with others 'better than you' (*khayr min-kunna*); better, it is specified, in so far as they are 'Muslims (*muslimāt*), believers (*mu'mināt*), pious (*qānitāt*), penitent (*tā'ibāt*), devout (*'ābidāt*), who practice fasting (or are emigrants, *sā'iḥāt*),[10] both women who have had husbands or who are virgins (*thayyibāt wa-abkāran*)" (Q 66:5).

The passage thus enumerates certain characteristics desirable in wives, and in women generally, whether divorced, widowed or not yet married. But clearly these are qualities that transcend genders and are applicable to everyone in the Muslim community.

2. *Shared Qualities*

Of prime importance is *tawba*, or repentance,[11] a disposition towards reconversion or retracing one's steps (synonym *nadam*), which can also indicate forgiveness (synonyms *maghfira* and *ghufrān*) especially when attributed to God one of whose Names is *al-Tawwāb*, 'He who forgives much'.[12]

There follows a mention of putative 'Muslim' wives *muslimāt* (Q 66:5), with an implied reference to Islam, pacific submission to God, conversion to His definitive final Word as revealed through the Prophet Muhammad. *Islām*, in the Qur'ān, can also have an ahistorical sense of surrender to the divine will, which is independent of Islam as a religion in so far as it is applied earlier in sacred history — to Abraham, for example, who is described as *muslim* in The Family of 'Imrān surah (*Āl 'Imrān*, Q 3:67) and who, according to The Cow surah (*al-Ba-*

greed and fragility they shared with other women in the world. See Freyer Stowasser 2006, 515–19.

[10] See below.

[11] Cf. *in tatūbā*, 'if you two repent to God', Q 66:4.

[12] See Zilio-Grandi 2013; Khalil 2018.

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qara, Q 2:131), *aslama*, that is, converted. Likewise the 'Arab' son of the patriarch Ishmael, who together with his father invokes God to include him among those who are subject to Him (*min al-muslimīn la-ka*), again according to The Cow surah (Q 2:128); and Noah, too, who the Jonah surah describes as having received a divine command to convert (*umirtu an akūna min al-muslimīn*, Q 10:72); and Joseph, son of Jacob, according to the Joseph surah (Yūsuf, Q 12:101). It is even used in relation to Jesus' disciples, as stated in, again, The Family of 'Imrān surah (Q 3:52).

The surah we are looking at next moves on to the *mu'mināt* or 'believing' wives (still in Q 66:5), bringing in 'faith' or *īmān*, the basic condition of adherence to Islam, which involves both the inner and outer being of the believer, including, according to the definition generally agreed on by the jurists, the declaration by the tongue (*iqrār bi-al-lisān*), the belief in the heart (*i'tiqād bi-al-qalb*), and the action by the limbs (*'amal bi-al-jawāriḥ*).[13] Deriving from a verbal root meaning to believe and affirm the truth, but which also expresses security, tranquillity and trust, *īmān* rests, according to tradition, on six 'pillars', which are — in the order listed in the religious literature — faith in God, in the angels, in the heavenly books, in the prophets, in the Day of Judgement and in the divine fiat (*qadar*).[14]

With the expression *qānitāt* or 'devotees' the Book refers to *qunūt*,[15] a quality which expresses, according to the principal medieval dictionaries,[16] a general obedience to the will of God (synonym *ṭā'a*), humility and modesty of demeanour (synonym *khushū'*), and a calm soul in receipt of His decrees (synonym *istikān*). *Qunūt* may also refer to a special invocation (*du'ā' al-qunūt*) to be added at the end of the prescribed prayers, such as the following, taught by the Prophet to his grandson Ḥasan ibn 'Alī and reproduced, with minor variations, in several well-

[13] E.g. ‹https://tinyurl.com/277hzr2z›.

[14] See Zilio-Grandi 2020, 3–4, from Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875). The story is widespread: among the works providing a fuller version there is that of Khaṭīb n.d. ‹https://sunnah.com/mishkat/1›.

[15] Cf. Q 2:238.

[16] E.g. Lisān al-'arab by Ibn Manẓūr, see ‹wiki.dorar-aliraq.net/lisan-alarab/قنت›.

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known works of Tradition — those, that is, collecting the sayings and deeds of Muhammad:

> Lord, guide me and let me be among those Thou hast guided, forgive me and let me be among those Thou hast forgiven, take care of me and let me be among those Thou hast taken care of, bless for me what Thou hast given me, save me from the evil of what Thou hast decreed to be evil, Thou art the One who commands and no one commands Thee, and the one whom Thou protect shall not be humiliated, nor shall he who is Thine enemy be honoured. Blessed be our Lord and let Him be exalted.[17]

Mention of 'devout' wives (*'ābidāt*, we are still with *Q 66:5*) takes us to the heart of religious practice. Its premise is the condition of being a 'servant'(*'abd*) which includes generally all creatures, human and otherwise, in their relationship with God who is their Master (*rabb*); and it also references the *'ibādāt* which are, in the legal tradition, the five individual obligations, the 'pillars of Islam' (*arkān al-islām*).

The passage concludes with a mention of wives described as *sā'iḥāt* (Q 66:5): this expression has been interpreted by the exegetical tradition [18] both as 'fasting' (synonym *ṣā'imāt*), referring to the obligatory abstinence during the month of Ramadan (*ṣawm*), and as 'emigrants' (*muhājirāt*), as in the hegira (*hijra*), the Muslim community's removal from Mecca to Medina.[19] Here too, whether we are speaking of fasting or emigration, what is being expected of these women applies equally to all Muslims. We only need to think of a rather similar sequence in masculine form that appears in The Repentance surah (*al-Tawba*) describing 'believers' in the masculine form, meaning there male 'believers' (*mu'minūn*, Q 9:112).[20] Following the habitual

[17] In particular, those composed by Abū Dāwud al-Sijistānī (d. 888), al-Tirmidhī (d. *c.* 932), al-Nasā'ī (d. *c.* 915), Ibn Māja (d. 886) and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (m. 855). For a comparison, see ‹dorar.net/hadith/sharh/80296›.

[18] E.g. al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and al-Jalālayn, https://www.altafsir.com (*ummahāt al-tafāsīr*).

[19] For more detail on both explanations, see Ṭabarī, commentary on Q 66:5 ‹https://tinyurl.com/48ktave4›.

[20] *Al-tā'ibūn*, *al-'ābidūn* […], *al-sā'iḥūn* […]. It is worth noting that in this case the ambiguity between 'fasting' and 'emigrating' is absent and the exegetical tradition is unanimous in a 'fasting' reading.

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pattern of Qur'ānic discourse, passing, that is, from the negative to the positive, The Forbidding surah proceeds from the threat of hell (Q 66:6–7) to an exhortation to repent (*tawba* again) and thence to a vision of paradise — a 'Garden beneath which rivers flow' (Q 66:8). An appeal to the Prophet that he sternly combat unbelievers (Q 66:9) leads into the passage quoted above in full (Q 66:10–12) containing the examples of the four women, two negative and two positive *mathal*.

3. *The Wives of Lot and Noah*

These women, wives of two prophets, two 'true servants' (*min 'ibādi-nā al-ṣāliḥīn*, Q 66:10), exemplify unbelief (*kufr*) and a consequent condemnation to the nether regions. Their error is betrayal, or *khiyāna*, one of the gravest sins, being the opposite of loyalty or *amāna* (cf. *īmān*, 'faith').[21] As we have noted: 'They acted treacherously towards them (*khanatā-humā*), and the latter could not save them from God. Both women were told "You will enter into the fire together with the others"'. The tradition has it that Lot's wife betrayed her husband because she gave away the presence of visitors in their house, Noah's by going around claiming that her husband was mad.[22] In the former case the betrayal consisted of disclosing a secret (*ifshā' al-sirr*), in the latter, a failure of a wife's moral — and legal — duty of fidelity and loyalty (*amāna*) towards her spouse.

Here again, the moral connotation applies to both genders: the noun *khiyāna*, expressly deployed in the Medina surah of The Spoils of War (*al-Anfāl*, Q 8), appears there in the context of covenants made by the Prophet, and to their underhand violation by the enemy, a violation that moreover followed that enemy's earlier betrayal of a covenant with God (Q 8:71). In verse 27 of The Spoils of War surah, an equivalence is drawn between the betrayal of agreements between persons and the betrayal of God and the Prophet. The Book of Islam states that God does not guide (*lā yahdī*) the plots of traitors (Q 12:52) and, employ-

[21] See Dhahabī 1437, 149–50.

[22] For more detail, see Ṭabarī, commentary on Q 66:10 ‹https://tinyurl.com/3p8cv7s4›.

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ing a recurrent expression of some strength, declares that traitors are those whom God 'does not love' (*lā yuhibbu*) (Q 8:58). According to a saying of the Prophet, the hypocrite (*munāfiq*) is distinguished in three respects: 'when speaking lies, when making a promise does not keep it, and when he guarantees loyalty he betrays (*idhā u'tumina khāna*)'.[23] Another of Muhammad's sayings holds that every quality (*akhlāq*) may be found in the believer except for betrayal and lying (*khiyāna*, *kidhb*).[24] To put it more simply, betrayal, like lying, will result in the culprit's exclusion from the community of believers.

4. *Pharaoh's Wife*

In the following — and last — verses of The Forbidding surah (Q 66:11–12), we find Pharaoh's wife (*imra'at Fir'awn*), subsequently named Āsiya [25] by the tradition, which has her a Jew and gives her the patronymic bint Muzāḥim; and finally Maryam.[26] Both are cited as an example (*mathal*) for 'all those who believe' (*li-lladhīn āmanū*), adopting, incidentally, the masculine form.

As we saw above, Pharaoh's wife is pictured pleading to God: 'My Lord! build for me a house with Thee in the garden and deliver me from Pharaoh and his doings, and deliver me from the unjust people' (Q 66:11). Glossing this passage, al-Tabarī (d. 923) explains in his great commentary: 'This means seeking refuge in God (*al-isti'ādha bi-llāh*), being ready to appeal to Him (*al-iltijā' ilay-hi*), seeking salvation from him (*al-khalāṣ*

[23] Dhahabi 1437, 149.

[24] Dhahabi 1437, 150; see also Ṣādiq, 1437/2013, which considers Qur'ānic verses, sayings of the Prophet and other ancient authorities, the exegetical and juridical traditions up to the contemporary age on the question of betrayal: ‹https://tinyurl.com/3u38s3rz›.

[25] See Castillo Castillo 1987–1988, 131–52; Tottoli 2009, with bibliography.

[26] According to traditional exegesis and the narratives relating to the vicissitudes of the divine messengers, the so-called 'stories of the prophets' (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*), Maryam and Āsiya also share in the Prophecy or *nubuwwa*. See, for example, the statement of the medieval Andalusian exegete Qurṭubī ‹https://www.altafsir.com/› and Zilio-Grandi 1997, 101–02, and see below regarding Mary. They also share the fate of being wives of the Prophet Muhammad in the afterlife, together with his earthly wives; cfr. Freyer Stowasser 1994, from the *Qiṣaṣ* of Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373).

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min-hu) in times from adversity and disaster, to share in the life of the just, and the habits (*sunan*, pl. of *sunna*) of the prophets and the messengers'.[27] Again regarding Pharaoh's wife, especially interesting is the commentary of the Tunisian reformer Muḥammad Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973), *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* (roughly: 'Liberation and Enlightenment'),[28] which identifies her as exemplifying a quality known as *taqwā*. The verbal form that *taqwā* comes from, *ittaqā* (root *W-Q-Y*), brings with it the ideas of caution, fear and preservation. In its religious sense, *taqwā* is therefore that which protects us from what we fear, which is to say, disobedience to God and its subsequent punishment. A combination of devotion, fear of God and awareness of His presence, *taqwā* is a fundamental ethical value, a central element of the Muslim faith, which necessitates certain physical and moral actions, and which affects both the interior and exterior lives of the faithful.[29] The same Pharaoh's wife appears in another Qur'ānic passage, in The Story surah (*al-Qaṣaṣ*, Q 28:8–9): when the pious lady gathers up the newborn baby Moses, certain that he will gladden her eyes, and suggests to her husband that they adopt him. She would of course later plead with God to save her from Pharaoh and his wicked plans, and indeed from the whole 'people — or band — of the sinful' (*qawm al-ẓālimīn*). The commentary of Ibn 'Āshūr[30] is also interesting *apropos*. That author, in fact, emphasises the divine inspiration in favour of the good (cf. *mulhima li–l-khayr*) otherwise: *ilhām* — God's revelation to men individually, as opposed to His revelation to men generally through prophets — that God imparted to the woman, making her his instrument for saving Moses' life. He insists, too, on her human compassion since, in contrast to her wicked husband, she saved the child even though his skin colour and facial features suggested a foreign ethnicity.

[27] Ṭabarī, commentary on Q 66:11 ‹https://tinyurl.com/3zzw2cx7›.

[28] On the importance and at the same time the scant attention generally devoted to this work by Western scholars, I refer the reader to Nafi 2005. As an example of his exegesis, at once traditionalist and modernising, see Mubarak 2018.

[29] See Atwell 2023, who also reviews previous contributions by Izutsu 1964. See also Ohlander 2005; Rahman 1983.

[30] ibn 'Āshūr, commentary on Q 28:9 ‹https://tinyurl.com/2hp4yy58›.

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5. *Mary, the Daughter of ʿImrān*

Pharaoh's wife is paired with Mary — who is, as we said at the outset the only woman in the Qur'ān to be awarded her personal name.[31] It is true that the name often occurs in the context of a Jesus matronymic, such as *ʿĪsā ibn Maryam* (Jesus, son of Mary),[32] or *al-Masīḥ ibn Maryam* (Christ, son of Mary);[33] or even the simple *Ibn Maryam* (son of Mary).[34] None the less, it would be wrong to think that the Qur'ānic Mary is always reduced to being merely the mother, albeit a miraculous one, of a major prophet, when she is also a figure in her own right of much greater depth than that.[35]

In the verse we are looking at (Q 66:12) Jesus is actually not present at all, and Mary appears only with her own patronymic or *nasab* (*Maryam ibnat — sic*! — *ʿImrān*). As the celebrated theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) explains in his work on exemplary Qur'ānic figures: 'God has ordained three kinds of woman: the unbelieving woman tied to a pious man [like the wives of Lot and Noah], the pious woman tied to an unbelieving man [like Pharaoh's wife], and, lastly — as in Mary's case — an unmarried woman (*ʿazbā'*), not tied to anybody, […] whose single state is in no way to her detriment'.[36]

What Mary represents is an example of chastity, or at the very least discretion in her behaviour (*aḥṣanat farja-hā* — lit-

[31] Even today, the pious believers usually add the title of 'Virgin' (*Maryam al-ʿAdhrā'*), as well as the eulogy *ʿalay-hā al-salām*, 'peace be upon her', which is a feminine version of that reserved for the pre-Islamic prophets.

[32] Q 2:82.254; 3:31–32; 4:156.169; 5:19.50.76.82.109.112.114.116; 9:31; 19:35; 23:52; 33:7; 43:57; 57:27; 61:6.14.

[33] Q 5:17.72.75; 9:31.

[34] Q 23:50; 43:57.

[35] The bibliography on Mary in the Qur'ān in Western languages is limitless. In order not to overburden the notes here, I will refer only to Zilio-Grandi 1997, and the bibliography contained therein; Freyer Stowasser 1994, 69–82; Id. 2003, 288–96, with bibliography; Tatari – von Stosch 2022, notable for its Islamic-Christian perspective. The specific bibliography on the Islamic side is less extensive. Among the most recent publications in Arabic, I would point out ʿUtba 2005; a work by a woman, ʿAbd al-Samīʿ 2022; and a poetic collection by the Egyptian al-Mursī n. d. On Mary and also the mother of Moses as prophetic figures, see Fierro 2002. On the famous Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) regarding the prophecy of women, see Ibrahim 2015.

[36] ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1981, 265.

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erally 'protective of her opening');[37] of sincere adherence to divine revelation (*ṣaddaqat kalimāt rabbi-hā wa-kutubi-hi*, 'she believed in — or verily embodied — the message in the Lord's Book'.[38]

The same passage has her a model for the fulfilment of moral and religious obligations, the *qunūt* already cited in relation to the putative wives of the Prophet, which represents — as we have seen — a bedrock of Islamic morality. However, in the particular case of Mary, we should note that she is included 'among the devout' (masculine plural: *kānat min al-qānitīn*), making the Virgin a model for all believers, men included.[39] The use of the masculine here has not escaped the attention of the exegetes. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), an author who was especially alert to grammatical nuances in the Qur'ān, writes:

> Were you to ask me why *al-qānitīn* is masculine, I would reply that *qunūt* is an attribute (*ṣifa*) that can be applied to any pious person (*man qanata*) be they male or female, and the masculine form takes precedence over the feminine (*ghalaba dhukūru-hu ʿalāināthi-hi*). 'Among' (*min*) expresses the partitive aspect (*tabʿīḍ*), but it may also be that it expresses here a suggestion of origin (or provenance, *ibtidāʾ al-ghāya*) given that she was from devout ancestry in that she belonged to the lineage of Aaron the brother of Moses.[40]

Another Qur'ānic mention, picked up by a number of authors in their commentaries on The Forbidding surah lists Mary among 'those — masculine rather than feminine — who worship' (*min al-rākiʿīn*, Q 3:43), again adopting the male gendered plural. The usually wise Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), among others, explains it thus: 'Because following the example (*iqtidāʾ*) of men […] is better than following the example of women'.[41]

[37] The exegesis also concerns clothing openings, such as the neckline.

[38] Cf. *ṣiddīqa* or 'a woman of truth' in Q 5:75.

[39] Zilio-Grandi 1997, 93–103.

[40] Zamakhsharī, commentary on Q 66:12. Based on it Rāzī, commentary on Q 66:12.

[41] Rāzī, commentary on Q 3:43.

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6. *Feminine Exemplarity vs Binariness*

The Qur'ān will usually express itself in binary terms and is careful to distinguish between men and women;[42] which is why commentators seek to explain the Qur'ānic use of masculine grammatical forms when referring to a woman. A clear example of binariness can be found in The Combined Forces surah (*al-Aḥzāb*, Q 33:35) where the Book holds out the promise of paradise addressing 'Muslim men and Muslim women' (*inna al-muslimīn wa-l-muslimāt*) separately, 'male and female believers' (*al-mu'minīn wa-l-mu'mināt*), 'pious men and women' (*al-qānitīn wa-l-qānitāt*), 'men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth' (*al-ṣādiqīn wa-l-ṣādiqāt*), 'men who are patient and women who are patient' (*al-ṣābirīn wa-l-ṣābirāt*), 'who are humble' (*al-khāshi'īn wa-l-khāshi'āt*), 'who give alms' (*al-muṣaddiqīn wa-l-muṣaddiqāt*), 'who fast' (*al-ṣā'imīn wa-l-ṣā'imat*), 'who preserve their chastity' (*al-ḥāfiẓīn furūja-hum wa-l-ḥāfiẓāt*), and 'often repeat the name of God' (*al-dhākirīn Allāh kathīran wa-l-dhākirāt*).

According to the tradition this passage was revealed after Umm Salama wife of the Prophet had complained that the Qur'ān always dealt with men rather than women.[43] An interesting story, this, because it contradicts the idea that in Arabic — as in several European languages — the masculine is universal relative to the human species generally and valid over and above the specifics of gender, while the feminine is a distinct gender, usable only in given situations. This clashes with the notion, expressed for example by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), a leading representative of the Zahiri school of law, which gives primacy to the literal meaning of Qur'ānic expressions, that the masculine always applies to males and females together.[44]

Another important instance can be found in The Light surah: 'Tell the (male) believers (*mu'minīn*) to cast down their eyes and guard their private parts (*furūja-hum*) […] Tell the

[42] As noted by Wheeler 2009.

[43] Cited by, among others, Ṭabarī, commentary on Q 33:35. See also Wheeler 2009.

[44] Turki 1978, 54. On the 'feminist' views of Ibn Ḥazm, see Adang 2002.

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(female) believers (*muʾmināt*) to cast down their eyes and guard their chastity (*furūja-hunna*)' (*al-Nūr*, Q 24:30–31).

7. *Conclusions*

The Forbidding surah (Q 66) lends itself more than others to a discussion of female exemplarity because it gives expression in feminine grammatical forms to the constituent elements of the Islamic religion — in particular repentance or *tawba*; submission to the divine will or *islām*; faith or *īmān*; obedience, humility and tranquillity before God or *qunūt*; and finally *siyāḥa*, whether in the sense of prescribed fasting (*ṣawm*) or emigration (*hijra*).

Female examples take on a greater importance in the last three verses (Q 66:10–12), where four women are put forward as general models (*amthāl*) — without, that is, gender connotations — of certain positive and negative moral qualities or characters (*akhlāq*). The wives of Lot and Noah are both cited as (bad) examples of all who do not believe (*alladhīn kafarū*) with regard to betrayal or *khiyāna*. As for positive models, proposed to all believers (*alladhīn āmanū*), we are given Pharaoh's wife seeking God's help against the adversities and animosities of life. The Marian example, of particular significance here, is instead one of chaste conduct (*iḥṣān al-farj*), of fidelity to the Revelation (*taṣdīq*) and of fulfilment of one's obligation of obedience to God, both inwardly and in outward religious practice (*qunūt*). Female models, then, but offered as exemplary for male morality also.

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Abstracts

This essay looks at the feminine presence in The Forbidding surah (*al-Taḥrīm*, Q 66) with particular emphasis on morality, and examines the qualities, positive or negative, supposedly embodied by women, while noting that these are generally values shared by both women and men. It shines a light particularly on the four women mentioned at the end of the surah, each of whom is proposed as a good or bad moral model (*mathal*) for men also.

Keywords: Qur'ān, The Forbidding surah (*al-Taḥrīm*), women, *akhlāq*, Āsiya, Mary.

Questo saggio analizza la presenza femminile nella sura La dichiarazione di illiceità (Q 66), con particolare attenzione alla morale, ed esamina le qualità, positive o negative, che si suppone siano incarnate dalle donne, notando che in genere si tratta di valori condivisi sia dalle donne che dagli uomini. In particolare, viene fatta luce sulle quattro donne menzionate alla fine della sura, ognuna delle quali viene proposta come modello morale buono o cattivo (*mathal*) anche per gli uomini.

Parole chiave: Corano, sura della Dichiarazione di illiceità, donne, *akhlāq*, Āsiya, Maria.

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