

# Women and Scriptures in the Arab World

**Hosn Abboud**

The subject of women and scriptures is very important, especially for Arab and Muslim women who are witnessing a phase of religious revivalism, which is keen on redefining Islam in many different ways. Moreover, to raise issues by women on women's rights in the context of the Arab world opens the discussion for reform and for a new interpretation of religious symbolism, rituals, and traditions. Historically, the interpretation of sacred texts by male exegetes and theologians exclusively has contributed to the oppression of women and to their exclusion from sacred space. However, rising literacy and awareness of their rights have led Arab women to increasingly access scriptural knowledge. Since the 1970s, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women including scholars, historians, literary critics, psychologists, feminist theologians, activists, and devout women attending to their rituals in the synagogue, the church, or the mosque, have studied the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the *Qur'an* throughout the Arab world.

Turning to women scholars in the Arab World who have undertaken scriptural studies and published specifically in the Arabic language, one will find only a few names, among them the *Qur'an* scholar Aisha Abdul Rahman (also known as Bint al-Shati'), featured in this issue. It should be noted that there is an obvious lack of interest among women scholars to pursue scriptural scholarship, either due to the difficulty of the subject matter or because universities and institutes of religious studies continue to exclude women or to rely on male leadership and traditional methods of education.

This issue of *al-Raida*, on women and scriptures in the Arab world, introduces the subject of Arab women's involvement in studying or living the sacred word. It includes critical essays, ethnographic studies, and journalistic pieces submitted by women or men scholars on a variety of subjects related to gender and women's rights and scriptures; from the spiritual quest and women's experience, to paradigmatic religious women in pictorial art and cinema – all in relation to the venerated Word of the God of the two monotheistic religions: Christianity and Islam. Special attention is given to the study of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, both in the New Testament and the *Qur'an*. Mary has a particularly important role in the beginning of Luke's Gospel and in the Gospel according to John. She has played a significant role in the development of early Christian theology beyond the New Testament. Mary is also one of the very few female figures named in the *Qur'an*, which puts her apart from other female figures, and gives her a story of her own. The *Qur'an*, moreover, seems to discuss issues of the feminine and the maternal and women's entry into sacred space through the figure of Mary.

Hosn Abboud's article "Is Mary Important for Herself or for Being the Mother of Christ in the Holy *Qur'an*?" is based on a lecture originally given at the forum of Christian-Muslim thought at the Near Eastern School of Theology. The question of whether the *Qur'an's* concern was with the person of Mary or with her relationship to Jesus was originally raised by the director of

the NEST, Dr. George Sabra, who invited Abboud to join the ongoing discussion between the Catholics and Protestants. Abboud redirects the question from a theological one to a feminist one, criticizing the religious discourse that emphasizes and values the role of the female in family relationships only. Female figures who are mentioned by name in the Greek and Arabic scriptures are always portrayed as mothers, sisters, daughters or wives, and rarely as persons in their own right. Abboud reviews the narrative accounts of Maryam (originally the Syriac rendering of the Greek name Maria), both in the Meccan and Medinan *Qur'anic suras* (or *Qur'anic* chapters), highlighting the high status that Mary enjoys throughout the *Qur'an*.

Johnny Awwad, in “Liberation and Universality: Women in Luke’s Gospel”, turns to Luke, the evangelist most sensitive to the role of women in the story of Jesus. Luke is also the New Testament writer who developed Mary’s role at length and reconfirmed the long history of women singing the praises of the Lord, namely the famous Mary song or Magnificat. In this article, the reader learns how to read Luke using a gendered perspective and to understand how Luke classified the women mentioned in his Gospel. Awwad highlights the Lukan technique of pairing, which he uses to analyze the narratives of men and women as portrayed by Luke. Professor Awwad, at the Near Eastern School of Theology, is the only scholar in Lebanon who teaches a course on “Women in the New Testament” in schools of theology.

Mahmoud Zibawi’s article entitled “The Annunciation to Mary, Mother of Jesus in Medieval Christian and Islamic Art of the Book” surprises the reader who may not be aware of the existence of pictorial art in medieval Islam. This article, which originally appeared in Arabic (in the weekly supplement to the Lebanese daily *An-Nahar*, August 15, 2009), seeks to show the veneration Mary enjoys in Islam. Zibawi makes a selection of miniature paintings depicting the annunciation scene to Mary in the Islamic Art of the Book, and discusses their artistic features and the schools which produced these art books and which were famous for being centers of culture, religion, and art in medieval Christianity and Islam.

It is worth mentioning that, recently, some Lebanese, both Christians and Muslims, started celebrating every year the annunciation feast (*eid al-Bishara*), on the twenty fifth of March. They get together and share their veneration, rituals, and arts that are devoted to Mary and the symbols she represents. This initiative, which was launched by many Lebanese organizations and societies for inter-faith dialogue, aims at spreading the culture of peace and harmony among the Lebanese. It is an unprecedented initiative not only in the Arab world but also in the Islamic world.

Nancy Jabra’s article on “Women’s Marian Devotions in a Melkite Greek Catholic Village in Lebanon” deals with May and Corpus Christi, which are two devotions to Mary celebrated in a village in the Beqa’ valley of Lebanon. As she argues, these devotions, while not commanded in Christian scripture, have enabled women to carve out a spiritual place for themselves in a patriarchal church.

The late Aisha Abdul Rahman (1923-1998), an Egyptian *Qur'an* scholar, gave a lecture entitled, “The Islamic Conception of Women’s Liberation” to a Sudanese audience at Umm Durman University in Khartoum, Sudan in 1967. This lecture, which is being made available in the English language in this issue of *al-Raida*, is considered to be the first essay written by an Arab Muslim woman scholar on gender and the *Qur'an*. Her short interpretation of some key verses, which Muslim women scholars today are engaged in rereading and interpreting for the

sake of women's rights in Islam (e.g. Aziza al-Hibri, Fatima Omar Naseef, Amina Wadud, and Umayma Abu Bakr), is pioneering and enlightening. It is worth mentioning that Bint al-Shati', the pseudo-name of Aisha Abd al-Rahman, contributed seven books to the *Qur'anic* library. She is the first Muslim woman to write and publish a methodological rhetorical exegesis on the *Qur'an* (covering 14 Meccan suras), entitled *al-Tafsir al-bayani lil-Qur'an al-karim*.

Julia Droeber and Ines Weinrich contributed, separately, ethnographic studies using anthropological approaches to the subject of women and scriptures. Droeber's article, "Women and Writing in the Absence of 'Text'", explores the limitations of "texts" accessible to women in the context of a rural Kyrgyzstan community, in the former Soviet republic. She records incidences when either there is no written text to inform religious practice or when there is a text but women cannot read it. She demonstrates how women's religiosity can be less "orthodox" and scripture-based than men's. Her experiences with more performative religious practices make her wonder if the recent scholarly focus on "scripture" is not in effect harming the "unorthodox" religious experiences of marginalized groups.

In a similar context but in another *milieu*, a women's spiritual gathering, culminating in the practice of *dhikr* (i.e. invocation of God), is recorded by Ines Weinrich. Fifteen to thirty women come together on a weekly basis in a *Sunni* neighborhood in Beirut. They meet in the private house of the *sheikha* (i.e. woman religious leader) who leads the readings from "texts" and the performing section of *dhikr*. Here the Word of God is lived and expressed both as an act of reading (from scripture) and in an artistic form that involves chanting, rhythmic utterances, and bodily movements. The *sheikha*, a middle-aged woman who has a beautiful voice, is licensed by her *sufi* teachers (men and women) to be a leader of her own group. *sufi* Muslim women gatherings are therapeutic, empowering, and a learning experience for women who need to understand and live the divine word.

Lise Galal, also an anthropologist, treats the subject of "Sacred Women in Coptic Cinema" in the context of Egyptian Coptic revivalism. The movies about Coptic saints and martyrs produced in Egypt since 1987, including the two films discussed by Galal, are part of this revivalism. Galal retells the stories of the protagonists, and explores the themes and the "minority strategies" related to different historical contexts. She offers an analysis of the two films which differ in the strategies they draw on and the message they send to the Coptic audience among the young generation. Although Galal describes the Copts in Egypt as a Christian minority, expressing "a minority identity" and "minority experiences", it should be noted here that the Copts in Egypt do not like to refer to themselves as a minority group.

To what extent have women attained knowledge of the scriptures of the three monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Women scholars, especially in North America, have already contributed to the publication of important work on women in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the *Qur'an*. Women scholars in the Arab world have only recently started to contribute to this field, especially with regard to women and the *Qur'an*. This issue of *al-Raida* is an attempt to add to what is still a very nascent field of studies in the Arab world, but one that is very crucial if age-old patriarchal interpretations of scriptures and religious traditions are to be effectively challenged.