

A Short History of a “Perfect Woman:” The translations of the “Wife of Pharoah” Before, Through, and Beyond the Qur’ānic Milieu

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A SHORT HISTORY OF A “PERFECT WOMAN:”
THE TRANSLATIONS OF THE “WIFE OF PHARAOH” BEFORE, THROUGH, AND
BEYOND THE QUR’ĀNIC MILIEU

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ABSTRACT: The woman who pulled the baby Moses out of the river Nile appears in many the most ancient and classical sources of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. She has been translated repeatedly to become whatever a given epoch needs her to become. She has been the figure of a surrogate mother who intercedes on behalf of endangered children. She has been a symbol of purification by water and conversion to new ways of life. She has been a martyr at the hands of an evil tyrant, and most recently, she has been kindling for feminist readings of Islam. This paper is a history of this woman’s re-invention and renaming over time, as she moved from the deep past, through the Jewish and Islamic scriptures and various hagiographies, and finally into our own day.

KEYWORDS: Wife of Pharaoh, Qur’ān, Tafsīr, Āsiya, Qur’ānic Women, Hagiography

SHORT TITLE: A History of a Perfect Woman: the Wife of Pharaoh

People of faith have a habit of fiddling around with what remains of the dead. Perhaps the body of a holy person needs to be moved because their resting place is in need of repair. Or, maybe a newer, more attractive shrine has been prepared. Or again, maybe there is some political gain to be had by snatching up a saint’s relics. In Christianity, this sort of activity is called a *translatio*; a translation. The translation of a saint implies a “transfer,” or “handing over.” Typically, translation in this sense has meant the movement of a physical corpse (or just a part of one) from some provincial locale – such as an unmarked grave or humble chapel – to a public shrine or other place of honor. Naturally, we can also see gleams of the more conventional modern meaning of translation at work as well. Something central is being moved, but is also bringing something along with it. Translation means something both changes and stays the same. (Rightly, *translatio* is also used in the language of the Council of Trent and elsewhere for the transformation of the soul by grace and works.) Thus for instance, *Nikolaos Thaumaturgos*, the “wonderworker” of fourth century Asia Minor, and *San Nicola di Bari*, the enshrined Italian relic of the twelfth century, partake of some shared reality. The translation of people from one context to another has often been critical to the continued vitality and revivification of the three major living currents of the

Abrahamic tradition. The saints are ever-brought from one context to another in which they live again, to tell new stories, or old stories in new ways.

This project is a short example of such a translation. Our quarry is a woman who is known by many names, but who the Qur'ān calls only 'the wife of Pharaoh' (*imra'at fir'awn*).¹ In her most ancient records, she is almost an elemental figure: a powerful mother image who lifts a baby out of water. Psychological readings of her could write themselves. In time, the heavy potentiality of this woman unfolds into a lineage that stretches from pre-history to our day. She will be read and re-read for thousands of years. In each epoch she will be translated and re-translated, named and re-named. She slowly moves from traditional biblical and post-biblical sources into the complex and sometimes mysterious religious milieu of the Qur'ān's first audience. There, the Qur'ān will do to her what it does to all of the biblical heritage it wields – she will be concentrated, refined, and presented as an ideal believer in this new community. Later Islamic traditions of Qur'ānic commentary, both canonized *ḥadīth* and formalized *tafsīr*, will give her a lasting name and paint her as a saint, a martyr, and "an example for the believers." By the twenty-first century of the Christian era, the wife of Pharaoh will become a touchstone for Islamic feminism and a champion of the righteous *muslima*.

RENAMING: THE DAUGHTER OF PHARAOH IN PRE-BIBLICAL, JEWISH, AND CHRISTIAN SOURCES

The figure who was later to appear in the Qur'ānic text as 'the wife of Pharaoh' is most clearly and directly a re-presentation of the 'daughter of Pharaoh' mentioned in the birth narrative of Moses (Exodus 2:5-10). Her story is well known. The unnamed Pharaoh had sentenced the male infants of the Hebrews to slaughter and so the mother of Moses places her baby in a basket and sets it in the Nile. While the daughter of Pharaoh was heading to the river with her entourage to bathe, the basket containing the baby Moses is 'drawn out' of the reed bed by an attendant. The Pharaoh's daughter "took pity on him," as she somehow recognized the child

¹ *Notes on language, format, and classical references:* Arabic terms have been adjusted to match the transliteration system used by the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. Greek terms have been likewise transliterated according to the "Scientific" system of the Library of Congress standards for "Greek, Ancient and Medieval (before 1454)." Transliterations from other languages appear in the manner that their respective modern sources have employed. Regarding citations of classical Islamic sources, there is unfortunately no standard that is meaningful in both Western critical and Islamic traditional literature. For this problem, I have used methods of citation that employ both, even though this is redundant. For Qur'ānic citations, I have used Ingrid Mattson's hybrid system that includes both *sūra* names and numbers (e.g., *al-Zalzala*, 99:1). *Ḥadīth* references include compiler's name, the *bāb* by name, and the reference number within the specific *bāb* (e.g., Muslim, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, 1).

as one of the condemned Hebrews. Miriam, the baby’s sister, appears and offers the services of the baby’s biological mother as a wet-nurse. Moses is returned to his birth family for an unclear period of time to suckle and sent back to the daughter of Pharaoh later. Thus “she raised him as her son. She named him Moses because, she said, I *drew him out of the water*.”² As the origin tales of great people tend to be, this story will be elaborated, explained, and reconfigured in future generations. Indeed, this daughter of Pharaoh is herself almost certainly such a re-imagining already. It would take little effort to read her as a humanization of the Mesopotamian deity Ishtar (considering the location of the story’s final redaction) and perhaps also, fitting with earlier oral tradition and the setting of the Exodus, an Egyptian goddess, such as Isis.³

Later, she will be named and renamed by both intra- and extra-biblical authors. The earliest possible surviving echo of the original figure appears in the first book of Chronicles (circa 300 B.C.E.). There is fleeting reference to one “Bithiah, daughter of Pharaoh” (4:18, Hb. *bithyah bat par’ōh*, Gk. *bitthia thygatros pharaō*). This Bithiah is hidden in the midst of a genealogy of Judah’s descendants without fanfare or further detail. Although there is no reason to assume that the two women are the same unnamed daughter of the same unnamed Pharaoh, as the mention does not grant any other explanation or elaboration, the two figures are often equated in later Rabbinical literature (Levi et. al. 231). But other than later tradition and back-reading, there is no obvious cause to say that this woman is meant to refer to *that* daughter of *that* Pharaoh. Even though there is not any further development of her character in the Chronicles mention, we may stretch out at least a nominally positive consideration towards this woman. Whoever she is meant to be, she is granted marriage to a Hebrew man and she is given the Hebrew name *Bithyah*, “daughter of the Lord.”

In the apocryphal Book of Jubilees (circa 150 B.C.E.), the daughter of Pharaoh is given another name, “Tharmuth” (47:5). She is supposedly the historical daughter of Rameses II himself (d. 1213 B.C.E.). This claim is

² Exodus 2:5-10 Compare the Egyptian *moses* (“to beget a son,” “to give birth”), to Hebrew *mosheh* (“expunged,” “pulled out of water”), or the Arabic zoological term *samak mūsā* (i.e. a “flounder”). Names using this root appear to have been common amongst Egyptian royalty during the late 17th and 18th dynasties (circa 1569-1390 B.C.E.), e.g. *Kamoses*, *Ahmoses*, and *Thutmoses*.

³ The classic reference is the infancy narrative of Horus, born to Isis on the banks of the river (Greenberg 198). There is of course some possible, though uncertain, symbolic relationship between the goddess and the women of the Pharaoh’s house. Also, the story bears marks of Mesopotamian mythology. For example, the account of Sargon, king of Akkad (circa 2300 B.C.E.): “My mother... she conceived me and in secret she bore me/ She set me in a basket of rushes with bitumen she sealed my lid/ She cast me into the river which rose not (over) me/ The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water/ Akki the drawer of water (took me) as his son (and) reared me/ While I was a gardener, Ishtar granted me (her) love.” (Boadt 165)

seconded by Josephus' *Antiquities* (circa 90 C.E.) where she is called, "Tharmuthis" (2:224, Day 377). Although no daughter of Rameses can be verified with such an epithet, John Day argues that there is an Egyptian origin to the name. "[I]t is most unlikely that Jubilees or Josephus had access to very ancient tradition: the name appears to be derived from that of Thermuthis [(*Tarenenutet*)] the Egyptian goddess of fertility and (appropriately) child nursing" (ibid.). Otherwise, the Jubilees' account is generally a direct paraphrased descendent of the Exodus text with little major addition or subtraction. The only exceptions are the appearances of the daughter of Pharaoh's name, (along with Moses' father and mother, called Amram and Yocheved, respectively) and the small addition that "Tharmuth... heard the voice of [the baby's] cries" while his basket sat to be discovered. 'Hearing cries' is an allusion to the auditory method of communication between God and His people in the Exodus account: as God tells Moses from the unconsumed bush, "I have heard the oppression of My people in Egypt; *I have heard their cries...*" (3:7) and also earlier, "*God heard their cries* and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (2:24). Like God himself will be for all the children of Israel, the daughter of Pharaoh answers the call of this one Israelite child who cries out to her.

The daughter of Pharaoh's development continued into the early Christian period, going wherever the story of Moses would take her. The oldest surviving Christian record of her is in a homily by the later-controversial Church father Origen (d. 254). When he allegorizes her, she is rebranded as the Church's specific mission to the gentiles. She is now unnamed again. Note the reoccurrence of her hearing as a central trait of her actions, Note too the introduction of her alienation from her family's house, as Christian women are made distant from their own houses by going down into the waters of baptism.

I think Pharaoh's daughter can be regarded as the Church which is gathered from the gentiles. Although she has an impious and hostile father, nevertheless, the prophet says to her, "Hear O daughter, and behold and incline your ear. Forget the people and the house of your father because the king has desired your beauty. This, therefore, is the daughter who leaves her father's house and comes to the waters to be washed from the sins which she had contacted in her father's house. (*Homily, On Exodus 2:4*)

Famed historian of early Christianity Eusebius of Caesaria (d. 339 C.E.) mentions the daughter of Pharaoh very briefly in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* (Gk. *Euangelikē Proparaskeuē*). Here she is renamed again, this time as 'Merris.' Also, this is the first time she is defined as the wife of a king, as well as the daughter of a pharaoh. "Merris, whom [her father, King Palmanothes] proposed to

a certain Chenephres, king of the regions above Memphis” (9:27). This slight bit of biographical data was obtained by Eusebius from the far more ancient Jewish historian Artapanus of Alexandria (circa 250-125 B.C.E., Brock 238), whose larger work has not survived independently of Eusebius. Soon after Eusebius’ redaction, the daughter of Pharaoh is also summoned in St. Gregory of Nyssa’s (d. circa 395) *Life of Moses* (which we will return to below).

The daughter of Pharaoh is renamed yet again in the mysterious Syriac compilation called “The Cave of Treasures.” In fact, here she is given two different names. Properly she is called “Shipur the daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh.” It has been suggested by Sebastian Brock that this name might be an echo of the midwife Shiphra, who according to Exodus 1:15 was charged with overseeing the birth of the doomed Israelite children. Little is said of Moses’ own infancy narrative in “the Cave of Treasures” account except Moses was “cast into the river,” and Shipur “took him up.” Also in the text is an alternate name for the Pharaoh’s daughter, which in different variations is spelled with the Syriac radicals MKRY or M‘ZD. Brock offers that the later of these may be a corruption of the name Merris used by Artapanus and Eusebius. Although there is no elaboration on her story, “the Cave of Treasures” mentions that Shipur/MKRY/M‘ZD died in the time before Moses fled to the land of Midian (ibid., 241). After the dawn of historical Islam, Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) would also borrow this Syriac version of Moses, adding one more possible name to the Pharaoh’s daughter – Ra‘osa. This name, which probably has a Greek origin, along with Merris, would later become standard to the Syriac authors (ibid.).

With the canonization of the Babylonian Talmud in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., the figure had progressed from a vague image of an Egyptian royal lady to an exemplar of early Jewish monotheism, in much the same way Origen Christianized her. It is not clear which account predates the other, or if there is a direct relationship between these two accounts which both turn the woman into convert. Whatever the case may be, by this period the trip of the daughter of Pharaoh to “bathe” in the river has now been completely transformed into a Jewish act of ritual purification, like Origen who had made the act a Christian baptism. “Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai [(circa late first century C.E.), he teaches] that she went down there to cleanse herself of her father's idols” (*Sotah* 12b, cf. Origen above). She somehow becomes aware of the presence of the Hebrew baby, and suggests rescuing him. Her servants are reluctant and protest. They refuse to break the decree of Pharaoh to kill all of the infant sons of the Hebrews. At this, according to Rabbi Yohanan ben Nafha (d. circa 280), the angel Gabriel appears and “beats them all to the ground,” (i.e. kills them) leaving only one handmaiden left alive to fetch the basket (ibid). In other tellings (e.g. *Ex. Rabbah* 1:23), rather than having a pure lady reach down into the muck of the reed bed, her arm miraculously stretches until she can grab hold of him without making herself a

mess (Kadari 2009).

THE WIFE OF PHARAOH: THE QUR'ĀN AND ISLAMIC CANONICAL LITERATURE

Within the conversation of the Qur'ān a century or two later, the woman remains nameless (like all Qur'ānic women save Mary). However, she has retained some of her earlier developments. In reference she is now and in Islamic retellings ever after the 'wife of Pharaoh' (perhaps as a development from Eusebius' account or some related source). More interestingly, rather than the essentially neutral maternal figure of the daughter of Pharaoh from the Exodus story and its descendents, the Qur'ānic wife of Pharaoh is saintly and an icon of piety. Furthermore, vocalization and hearing remain key traits in her Islamic depictions (like we have seen in the past as a voice in opposition to some other party, or the ear that hears the cries of the infant Moses). Like in both Origen and the Talmudists, the Qur'ānic wife of Pharaoh is depicted as vocally standing in opposition to someone else: either the Pharaoh or the people who represent his authoritative presence. Also, like the Talmudic account of Rabbi Shimon, those people remain a vocal chorus of opposition to the act of picking up a baby.

The more biblical of the two *āyāt* in which she is found occurs in *Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ* 28:9. After a standard Qur'ānic introduction - *bismillah*, *muqatta'āt*, revelatory announcement - the story running from verse 3 to 43 mirrors and re-envisions the first half of the book of Exodus. Pharaoh is oppressive and plots to kill the first-born sons of Israel. The biological mother of Moses receives communication (*waḥy*) from God to cast her son into the river. She does as she is commanded in a parodic opposition to the declarations of the false god Pharaoh. Then the people of Pharaoh (*'ālu fir'awn*) pick up the baby and fear that he was going to become an enemy to them.

[To which] the wife of Pharaoh (*imra'at fir'awn*) said, "A comfort of the eye for me and you (*qurratu 'aynin lī wa laka*). Do not kill him. Perhaps he may benefit us (*yanfa'anā*), or we may adopt him as a son." And they did not perceive (*wa hum lā yash'urūna*) (*al-Qaṣaṣ* 28:9).

It is unclear who is included in the *hum* which "did not perceive:" all those present including the wife of Pharaoh, or the entourage only. If the wife of Pharaoh is not included in the pronoun, there is an implication that the wife of Pharaoh has some other sort of knowledge, supernatural or not, that others lack. There is precedent for this line of argument in Gregory of Nyssa, who claims that she "saw the outward grace evident in him," (33). Whether this sort of miraculous knowledge about the baby factors into the imagination of the Qur'ān's early audience is unclear. The Qur'ānic text goes on to tell of the appearance of Moses'

sister and of the inability of the Egyptian women to nurse the baby, as “we had forbidden suckling mothers for him before.” (*al-Qaṣaṣ* 28:12) Therefore, at his sister’s suggestion, Moses is reunited with his own mother to be fed. The inability of other women to breastfeed Moses is not found in the Exodus account, but does appear in the pre-Islamic biblical commentaries, including both Gregory of Nyssa and Rabbinical sources:

In the midrashic depiction, the daughter of Pharaoh saw that Moses was hungry when she drew him forth from the Nile. She went around with him to all the Egyptian women, but Moses was not willing to nurse from any of them. Moses [miraculously] said: “The mouth that will speak with God will not suckle something impure” (Kadari 2009).

The denser, and also more distinctly Qur’ānic allusion to the wife of Pharaoh appears in *Sūrat al-Ṭahrīm* in which she herself cries out for help from God, and mysteriously asks for a house in paradise away from her own husband.

And God struck an example for the believers: the wife of Pharaoh when she said, “Lord, build for me a house with you in the Garden, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his workings, and deliver me from the wrongdoers,” (*al-Ṭahrīm* 66:11).

The passage contains two segments: the creative action of God in His “striking of examples,” and the quoted building of a house (*bayt*) in the Garden as deliverance from wrongdoers (*al-zālimīn*). The second half, regarding the house in the Garden, although keeping with the general trend of vocalization in opposition to another party, is not particularly noteworthy by itself. However as we shall see, this line will be used by all later Islamic exegetes to define her saintly character. Questions will be raised about the statement’s context (e.g., why does she need deliverance from her own husband, and when in her life did she say this?) and content (e.g., why does she ask for a house and what is that nature of her relationship to Pharaoh?). All the later *mufasssīrūn* will agree with the claim of Origen’s homily on Exodus that the woman’s former house must be abandoned because it is corrupted by Pharaoh, and so she needs a new one. The more novel piece of data that nearly all the post-canonical Islamic sources will agree with is that she asks to see this house immediately before or during her execution at her own husband’s orders.

The first part of the *āya*, God’s “striking of an example” (*wa ḍaraba allāha mathlan*), is a common formula in the Qur’ān, and relates the wife of Pharaoh with a number of other similar *āyāt*. The root *ḍrb* appears some fifty-eight times in the Qur’ān, most often (twenty-two times) in the verbal, third-

person, active, perfect form *daraba* - “he beat, struck, smote, or hit” (Lane 1777). Of this subset, the majority of uses (seventeen times) refers to a creative act in which either God or a human agent ‘strikes a *mathal*’ (“a likeness,” “an example,” “a metaphor”).⁴ Of the *amthāl* struck by God, most refer to specific persons or groups of people, however the *mathal* may also be a city, a covering, or the “example” of the Qur’ān itself (and/or the examples contained therein.)

The “striking” contained in this verse also helps to seal together a chiasmic set of references to four noteworthy women, all of whom are juxtaposed to a specific biblical prophet. The preceding verse is “God struck an example for the unbelievers, the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot...” (*al-Ṭahrīm* 66:10). The believing character of the wife of Pharaoh (that is, a good woman with a wicked husband) is contrasted to the wives of Noah and Lot (that is, wicked women with good husbands). The *āya* following these two (*al-Ṭahrīm* 66:12) continues the sentence from the second of them (*al-Ṭahrīm* 66:11): “And God struck an example for the believers: the wife of Pharaoh [...] and Mary, the daughter of ‘Imrān...” with which a set of four women is complete: two virtuous and two wicked. The symbolism and reflexivity of these three *āyāt* and the four women they invoke can be plotted as follows.

Qur’ān, 66:10-12	Woman	Belief	Prophet	Action/Imagery	Related, Extra-Qur’anic Imagery
(66:10) God struck an example for the unbelievers: the wife of Noah	Wife of Noah	Unbelief	Noah	The Fire, betrayal	The flood, the ark
and the wife of Lot: they were under two of Our upright servants but they betrayed them and they profit nothing before God but they were told “Get into the Fire along with those who enter!”	Wife of Lot	Unbelief	Lot	The Fire, betrayal	Sexual misconduct
(66:11) And God struck an example for the believers: the wife of Pharaoh when	Wife of Pharaoh	Belief	Moses	The Garden “she said...” Pharaoh and his	The river, the basket

⁴ The other four *āyāt* suggest a human being moving: i.e. “striking the Earth” (*Āl ‘Imrān* 3:156, *al-Nisā* 4:101, *al-Mā’ida* 5:106) or traveling in the cause of God (*al-Nisā* 4:94). *Daraba* is otherwise an act of creating examples or likenesses, like the striking of a coin or the indentation of a seal. See: e.g., *Ibrāhīm* 14:24, “God struck an example of,” *Ibrāhīm* 14:45 “We struck an example,” *al-Nahl* 16:74 “You all do not strike examples,” *al-‘Isrā* 17:48 “what examples He strikes for you all,” *al-Kahf* 18:11 “We struck a veil over their ears (that is, the People of the Cave),” *al-Furqān* 25:39, *al-Ṭahrīm* 66:10 “We struck examples,” *al-Rūm* 30:28 “He struck examples,” *al-Rūm* 30:58, *al-Zumar* 39:27, “We have struck for humanity in this Qur’ān all kinds of examples,” When a human agent “struck,” it is always seen as a negative act of idolatry, that is false *mathal* (e.g. *a;-Zukhruf* 43:17).

she said, “Lord, build for me a house with you in the Garden, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his workings, and deliver me from the wrongdoers.”				Workings The Wrongdoers	
(66:12) and Mary the daughter of ‘Imrān whose body was chaste, and we breathed into her Our Spirit, and she swore to the truth of the words of her Lord and his scriptures, and she was one of the devout.	Mary	Belief	Jesus	Our <i>rūh</i> , “swore to... the words,” the Lord and his <i>kutub</i> , the devout	virginity

The image of the Pharaoh’s wife reemerges during the appearance and development of the *aḥādīth* and the *ta’wīl/tafsīr* literature in the latter half of the second Islamic century. Within these soon-to-be canonical sources, she is only mentioned in a handful of surviving prophetic traditions. In all of these *aḥādīth* she is referred to as one amongst a group of other righteous women. The lists always include Mary and at least one of the wives of the Prophet. A typical account is this one narrated by Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī (d. 52/672). It is presented in three versions by Bukhārī⁵ (d.256/870) and once by Muslim⁶ (d. 261/875), with minimal variation or elaboration, and repeated by the other compilers of *aḥādīth* with little or no change. In content all four instances in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* mirror the following example:

Abū Mūsā narrated that the Prophet of God said, “Many men have reached the state of perfection, but among women none have reached this state save Āsiya the wife of Pharaoh and Mary the daughter of ‘Imrān. And certainly the superiority of ‘Ā’isha to other women is like that of *tharīd* to other dishes. (Bukhārī, *aḥādīth al-anabyā’*, 32)

All four of the *aḥādīth* in question repeat the Qur’ānic equation of the wife of Pharaoh, always named as Āsiya, with Mary the mother of Jesus, and attribute perfected excellence to both. Also all four compare ‘Ā’isha bint Abū Bakr to *tharīd*,⁷ with the strong implication - though never claimed overtly - that ‘Ā’isha is comparable to the other two women. Whether this cluster of sayings can be truly attributed to Abū Mūsā (and for that matter to the Prophet), or if they are a

⁵ See Bukhārī, *aḥādīth al-anabyā’*, 32 and 42, and *al-aṭ‘ama* 25. These *aḥādīth* share a clear literary relationship to several others (e.g. Bukhārī, *al-aṭ‘ama*, 30) but only these three mention the wife of Pharaoh.

⁶ See Muslim, *faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 105.

⁷ *Tharīd* or *mathrūd*: “Bread crumbled or broken into small pieces with the fingers and then moistened with broth... generally having some flesh-meat in it.” (Lane 334)

later fabrication is, of course, unknowable.⁸

Whatever the origins of these narrations, the name Āsiya would remain the name of the Pharaoh's wife in all later Islamic traditions. Not found in the Qur'ān or any pre-Islamic sources, the name is something of a puzzle. It would be tempting to find some relationship between the Arabic Āsiya and the Syriac Ra'osa, but how this would have occurred without at least one missing intermediate structure seems problematic. According to Lane's *Lexicon*, *āsiya*, is a feminine term for a "healer," or a "physician," with the possible connotation of a woman who performs female circumcisions (61). Or, in an alternate, but far less common, spelling the *tā' marbūṭa* is dropped in favor of an *alif*, as in *āsiyā*, "sorrowful," or "mournful," or even the name of the continent, "Asia." (Malak 146) A *ḥadīth* appearing in the *Jāmi'* of al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892) would also provide the wife of Pharaoh with her lasting Islamic patronymic, "daughter of Muzāḥim" (*bint Muzāḥim*).⁹ Muzāḥim was a name to be found amongst the early centuries of the *umma*, with the connotations of "one who pushes vehemently," "a bull or bull elephant," (Lane 1221) although this does not provide clarification. Again, some distant relationship to the Syriac radicals attributed to the woman herself, MKRY and M'ZD, and thence back to the much older name Merris, is alluring. But without some explanation of how this stretch could have happened, requiring several major changes and/or intermediate sources that could account for the linguistic shift and the shift from a woman's given name to a patronymic, the lure must be noted but not swallowed.

ĀSIYA BINT MUZĀḤIM: ISLAMIC COMMENTARIES

In attempting to connect the only two verses of the Qur'ān that mention her, early

⁸ Abū Mūsā, although by oath an ally to the caliphate of 'Alī, had some reservations against fighting with 'Ā'isha, and would not willingly send troops to aid either party, resulting in his expulsion from the governor's seat of Kufa. Later, 'Alī was to appoint him as a neutral moderator between himself and Mu'āwiya, although again, his true allegiance remained unclear. (Madelung 254) A *ḥadīth* which gives such a glowing description of 'Ā'isha, whether it truly comes from Abū Mūsā's mouth or not, has at least questionable political motives, if not questionable historicity.

⁹ "It was narrated from Anas bin Mālik that the Prophet, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Enough for you amongst the world's women are Mary the daughter of 'Imrān, Khadīja the daughter of Khuwaylid, Fāṭima the daughter of Muḥammad, and Āsiya the daughter of Muzāḥim, the wife of Pharaoh." (al-Tirmidhī, *al-manāqib*, 273) The full name Āsiya bint Muzāḥim also appears in a *ḥadīth* attributed to Ibn 'Abbās in which the Prophet draws four lines in the sand and declares they stand for, "The best women in Paradise: Khadīja daughter of Khuwaylid, Fāṭima daughter of Muḥammad, Mary the daughter of 'Imrān, and Āsiya daughter of Muzāḥim, the wife of Pharaoh."

mufassir Muqātil ibn Sulaymān¹⁰ (d. 150/767) would incorporate new information, like midrashic accounts (*isrā’īliyyāt*) and other material of more uncertain origins. Indeed, it is this sort of method, used seemingly with a heavy hand, that historically has kept Muqātil on the sidelines of traditional Islamic scholarship, despite his antiquity. In this case, he inserts a paraphrased addition after the line where the wife of Pharaoh calls the baby a comfort for the eyes and asks that he not be killed (*al-Qaṣaṣ* 28:9). Āsiya therefore says, “*a comfort of the eye for me and you. Do not kill him*, for surely, he was brought in from another land and is not from the sons of Israel” (*Tafsīr Muqātil* 29:9) Whether she is supposed to be lying in defense of the child, or if she is simply supposed to be mistaken about the baby’s origins is not explained. In his further comments, Muqātil, like the *ḥadīth* references, replays the comparison of the wife of Pharaoh with Mary and ‘Ā’isha, and thus we can guess (but only guess) that she is willingly defending Moses as she is by this point a clearly ideal figure of womanhood. In Muqātil’s commentary we can also see Āsiya as a precursor to a problem that would have been quite common in the earlier centuries of Islam. In the time in which Muqātil was working inter-religious marriages between new converts and their non-Muslim husbands was causing familial strife. His exegesis from *al-Ṭahrīm* 66:11:

And He said, *And God struck an example for those who believe*, He means Muslim women who are married to unbelievers, so that the wives of the unbelievers will not harm her with anything for converting to Islam. He said of ‘Ā’isha and Ḥafṣa,¹¹ “The two of them are not sinful like the wife of Lot, but they are like *the wife of Pharaoh* and Mary in obedience.

The daughter of Pharaoh had previously been an emblem for Jewish inter-familial religious tension in the Talmud, and likewise for Christian women according to Origen. Muqātil in an identical fashion uses the wife of Pharaoh to show that that the call to religious truth is stronger than the allegiances of family and marriage.

According to Claude Gilliot, the period of proto-*tafsīr* reached its apogee and the practice of Qur’ānic exegesis found its essentially permanent core elements in al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*. In al-Ṭabarī there is the first fully hagiographic account of Āsiya, which includes

¹⁰ By traditional historical reckoning, Muqātil ibn Sulaymān predates any of the canonical collections of *ḥadīth* by a century. The dating of both this very early example of formal *tafsīr* and the final collections of *aḥadīth* are questionable. However, it seems more likely that the source of the *ḥadīth* of the four perfect women (whether it is truly *ṣaḥīḥ* or some sort of forgery) is older than Muqātil’s exegesis, as the opposite would require that the patronymic was dropped, while maintaining other key elements which the texts share.

¹¹ Ḥafṣa bint ‘Umar (d. 44/665) was the daughter of the later caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d.23/644), as well as another of the Prophet’s wives after the death of her first husband.

more specific details of her virtues. Like most of the material from his *Jāmi‘*, al-Ṭabarī’s material is a composite from older ‘supercommentaries’ which are no longer extant (Bosworth). There is now a new concern, which has been built upon Muqātil’s comment above: are women to be blindly obedient? The case of the Āsiya is a useful social artifact to the role of wives in Islamic cultures: if the wife is an upright person, but her husband is not, does she have the right to disobey or even harm him?

The Exalted said to mention *and God struck an example for the believers [...] the wife of Pharaoh* who believed in God and His Unity, and trusted in His messenger Moses. She was under the [greatest of the] enemies of God, the unbeliever, but she did not harm her unbelieving husband, for she was a believer in God, and it was for God to use His creation, and the burden is not visited on any other. And each soul has its reward, thus she said, *Lord, build for me a house with you in the Garden*. So God fulfilled her [request] and built for her a house in the Garden. (al-Ṭabarī, on *al-Ṭahrīm* 66:11)

Following this, al-Ṭabarī gives us a pair of slightly differing tales of her suffering martyrdom under Pharaoh. Keeping with the Syriac sources, her death (which is completely absent from the biblical text) is somehow significant. Although unlike the Syriac authors, Ṭabarī gives stories of how the wife of Pharaoh met her end. Citing two different *asānid*, Ṭabarī’s first account tells us very briefly that, “the wife of Pharaoh was tortured by the sun,” that is, she was condemned to death (or perhaps only torture?) by exposure. However, the angels arrive and use their wings to shade her body, and with that “she found her house in the Garden.”

In the second story from al-Ṭabarī, she also is condemned (this time to be crushed or pressed to death by a stone, the intention is ambiguous) but again is spared from her pain by divine intervention. She was waiting to see who was victorious in the contest between Moses and Pharaoh. “And she was told that Moses and Aaron won, and she said, ‘I believe in the Lord of Moses and Aaron.’” Pharaoh was enraged by the betrayal and ordered his people to find the largest stone they could. “If she stands by what she claimed, drop it on her. If she takes back what she claimed, she will return to being my wife.” The servants arrive with the stone and prepare to crush her with it:

When they came to her, she lifted her vision to Heaven and in Heaven she saw her house. So she continued to say [what she had said] and so God snatched away her spirit. And the stone was cast onto a body that did not have a spirit in it (*ibid*).

If we can keep this passage in its intended context as an explanation of *al-Ṭahrīm* 66:11, the story is elaborating on the sets of juxtapositions already present within the Qur’ānic text. In all the previous Islamic sources in which Āsiya has appeared, she is always paired with the other perfected woman of pre-Islamic history, Mary. I believe this case is no different. Although Mary does not appear here directly, this second story is constructed to continue the parallelisms between 66:11 and 66:12. Both women are praised in the Qur’ān for having professed their beliefs aloud; here Āsiya’s life or death hinge on her verbal affirmation or denial of embracing Islam. Or also, Mary has the *ruh* of God breathed into her, and her chastity is declared. Āsiya has her *ruh* taken out of her by God, by which she escapes pain and physical corruption. And further, this mirroring can work two ways if we read the active element as not the people but the *ruh*: the *ruh* which is in Āsiya is her own spirit, which escapes death. The *ruh* which is in Mary is not her own spirit, but God’s, the prophet Jesus, who according to most readers of the Qur’ān throughout history, also escaped bodily death as his execution began.

As the commentary tradition continued, the pious woman referred to by just two *āyāt*, who is now permanently and universally called Āsiya, continued to balloon and gain added dimension and detail. In fact, nearly all the *mufasssīrūn* who are somehow dependent on al-Ṭabarī, which is essentially the whole of the body of classical formal exegesis, repeat some variation of one, both, or a fusion of the Āsiya stories from the *Jāmi’*. By the beginning of the fourth century of the *Hijra*, a lengthy account of Āsiya’s life appears in the *Stories of the Prophets (Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’)* of al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035).

He cites *al-Ṭahrīm* 66:11 in full and tells us that Āsiya was actually born an Israelite, and that she was never a practitioner of polytheism, but always worshipped the One God in secret.¹² One day, presumably long after the beginning of the prophetic career of Moses, she looked out a window and witnessed Pharaoh torturing and killing a handmaiden¹³ with whom she had been a friend. After the woman’s death, Āsiya had a vision that foretold her own martyrdom. “And when the handmaiden died, Āsiya saw the angels taking her spirit heavenward, for God Most High so desired as a result of her high estate and willed the best for her.” When she saw Pharaoh after this, she warned him that he was marked for divine retribution, and in turn he accused her of being mad, or being “afflicted by the [same] demons that got a hold of your companion.” Pharaoh called for Āsiya’s mother (who would have also been an Israelite), in

¹² That a holy person born into a polytheist society was never personally a polytheist is a standard trope. Similar statements about Noah, Abraham, and Muḥammad abound.

¹³ The story says that the handmaiden is in the service of the wife of Hizqīl, who according to John Renard, is equated “to the anonymous “believer among Pharaoh’s kin who had kept his faith secret (*Ghāfir* 40:28), who is said to have fashioned the floating cradle in which Asiya found baby Moses” (Renard 131).

order to have her ask her daughter to recant, which she refused.

So Pharaoh ordered that she be stretched between four stakes and tortured to death, may God have mercy on her. And that is the meaning of God's words, *Pharaoh, the one with the stakes* (cf., *Ṣād* 38:12).

Then Tha'labī also tells us that Ibn 'Abbās said that,

Moses passed by her while [Pharaoh] was tormenting her and she complained to him by a hand gesture, so Moses called out to God that he might alleviate her suffering. After that she suffered no more from Pharaoh's torture until she died from it." At this point she asks God for her house in the Garden, and seeing it she laughed (Renard 132).

By the time of Ibn al-Farrā' (d. 516/1122), the surviving biblical and talmudic sources of the daughter of Pharaoh returned more overtly to the story and were applied to create yet another Islamic vision of Āsiya. Ibn al-Farrā' was working in a milieu in which the methods and working of the Islamic scholarly sciences were increasingly fixed. As a master of the Shāfi'ī school of law, as well as a scholar specializing in *ḥadīth* transmission, he was particularly sensitive to the sources of his information (Robson). Like Tha'labī a century earlier, al-Farrā' attributes his rendition of Āsiya to the oft-cited Companion Ibn 'Abbās, although the Jewish midrashic influence on his source is quite apparent. In his version of Moses' infancy narrative, al-Farrā' says that because Āsiya bint Muzāḥim "did not have a child of her own, she was the most generous of people," but unfortunately, she was also severely sick with leprosy. "And Pharaoh gathered all of the doctors of Egypt and the sorcerers to look at her." And they said to him, "O King, it cannot be cleaned away except by the sea." They gave a certain magical formula and specific time for her to wash herself, and the entourage went to the shores of the Nile to perform the deed. She put water on her face and the little ark with Moses in it was spotted by Pharaoh himself. Using a tree to reach out to it, the people of Pharaoh each tried to open it up but they could not. "From the depths of the coffin Āsiya saw a light that the others could not see, and she opened the door and there was a boy in a small bed, and there was a light between his eyes." She was thus healed and adopted Moses as her own son.

We can see a number of elements brought in from both Qur'ānic and biblical sources. The magicians of Pharaoh make an appearance, and like in the later story of the transformation of staffs into serpents (Exodus 7:10, *al-A'rāf* 7:116) and the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 8-12, *al-A'rāf* 7:130), the polytheists' magic is bested by the miracles of Moses. Also, the miraculous curing of leprosy is reported. In the Qur'ān, Moses miraculously turns his hand white (*baydā'*, *al-*

A'rāf 7:108) but it is not clear how this is to be understood. However, in the Exodus account (4:6), Moses is given the ability to turn his hand “leprous, as snow” (Hb. *mesūra'at kashshāleg*, Gk. *leprōsa ōsei chiōn*) and then to return it to its original state. This account seems to depend on the biblical depiction of Moses' ability to cure leprosy. We can also see the return of the trend by which the noble woman does not have to sully herself to get the baby, but rather than her arm growing miraculously like in the *Exodus Rabbah* 1:23 story above, a tree is used. But still with normal length arms, only she can access the baby, as only she can open up the basket. Like in Gregory of Nyssa, al-Farrā' tells us that 'Āsiya has the ability to see something in the baby that others cannot see. The accounts of Rabbi Shimon and Origen, in which her trip to the Nile in order to be cleansed of impurity, are now merged with the Islamic assumption that holy individuals cannot have been former polytheists, and so the spiritual filth of *shirk* is brought in by the presence of the magicians, who were not present at the river in any of the older stories. The need for the morally blameless woman to be cleansed however, is thus explained by the addition of Āsiya's leprosy.

There is reason to suppose that the Islamic story of Āsiya, while being informed by Christian sources, may have itself come to inform them in turn. In al-Zamakhsharī's (d. 538/1144) *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqqā'iq al-Tanzīl*, the following short story is relayed, built upon a fusion of several earlier *tafsīr* accounts. His account would offer little to the greater Islamic story of Āsiya, but there are a few interesting additions, one of which may be significant to later Christian history: here the great stone with which she is tortured is a millstone:

And the wife of Pharaoh was Āsiya bint Muzāḥim. It was said that she was the maternal aunt ('*amma*) of Moses, peace be upon him... She was tortured by Pharaoh. According to Abu Hurayra," she was wedged down with four pegs and "she was laid on her back, and a millstone (*raḥā*) was put on her chest." She laughs and Pharaoh calls her mad, and "he ordered her to receive an [even] greater stone, and she prayed to God to divide her spirit from her, and so the stone was thrown on the body but the spirit was not in it.

In 1928, John Walker argued that extra-Qur'ānic accounts of Āsiya are directly related to the rise of the twelfth century cult of St. Catherine of Alexandria. Aside from his work's anti-Islamic unpleasantness, he has an enticing comparison: both women were martyrs from the royal family of Egypt, both are defined by relationships to Moses, both are tortured with stakes and either a millstone or a wheel, both tortures fail and perish by other means with angelic assistance (Walker 1928, 48). He is not sure which story is the source of the other, as by the twelfth century there was open communication between the very ancient Sinai

monastery at the supposed site of Moses' encounter with the Burning Bush (later named St. Catherine's after her relics' miraculous *translatio* there at an unclear medieval date) and the crusading Frankish nobles. Such an investigation is beyond the scope of this effort, however, as the accounts of Āsiya as a martyr significantly predate the earliest account of St. Catherine (who although she is said to have lived in the fourth century, does not appear in literature until at earliest the tenth), it would seem the source is Islamic, not Christian (Walsh 2007, 3).

CONCLUDING NOTES ON A TRANSLATION OF A MODERN MUSLIM WOMAN

Like so much of the material of the Qur'ān, there is always new life and new possibilities for the re-reading of this unnamed woman associated with an unnamed Pharaoh. As we have seen, her story, while only a subplot of the Moses adventures, returns again and again to be refreshed by the passing generations. And we can see evidence that Āsiya's story is on the verge of yet another re-presentation. Noted scholar and advocate of traditional Islamic cultures Annemarie Schimmel, in the final years of her life, published a short piece on the feminine in Islam with the simple but provocative title *My Soul is a Woman* (*Meine Seele ist eine Frau*). She reflected on the women of the Qur'ān and the later authoritative sources, the wife of Pharaoh included, and argued that they were the means by which women saw themselves in the revelation.

Although the Qur'ān [...] speaks of a number of other female figures, some of them, and others not mentioned in the Qur'ān, were invented by later exegetes or simply created by popular piety. These women were given names and their stories were steadily embellished and elaborated, with the result that they have come to serve as role models for women (Schimmel 1995, 55).

But the latest reading of Āsiya, however, goes beyond even this. A quick online search for Āsiya pulls up dozens of links to (English language!) websites of Islamic women's organizations, support group forums, feminist collectives, and *Muslima* blogs. The rise of scholarship on and popular piety of Muslim women naturally turns back to the Qur'ānic and post-Qur'ānic sources and finds the raw material on the wife of Pharaoh waiting to be translated anew. It is the continuation of a very old trend – even older than historical Islam.

For the progressive, Āsiya has become a symbol of women's liberation from calcified, and some would argue, un-Islamic, views of women found in such abundance. It is easy enough to see this potential in a "perfect woman" who earned glory not by following in her authoritarian husband's shadow but in

defying him publically. She chooses faith (even unto death) before blind obedience to her husband. "There's Asiya who was the wife of the [P]haraoh, who became exalted because she went against her husband, not because she served her husband [...] she was granted Paradise and an exalted position over all women not because she was this doting wife" (Rouse 2004, 171). Āsiya can now be used as proof that the Qur'ān argues for the value of the individual woman, not for the man to whom she is associated. "[T]he wife of the unbelieving Pharaoh is of those who believe and is saved by God." The Qur'ān says that each soul must account for "herself," and *Guard yourself for such a day when one soul shall not avail another.* (*al-Baraqa* 2:123, Barlas 2002, 118) And Amina Wadud, citing the example of the women of *al-Tahrīm* 66:10-12, even argues for a grander reading, still. Women like Āsiya prove that the human ideal transcends gender itself. The Islamic tradition is not concerned with gender, but is instead concerned with belief:

These 'examples' which Allah specifically 'cites' for the readers are usually interpreted as being exclusively for women. Yet the verse identifies them as examples for 'those who believe' and those who disbelieve.' In other words, they are non-gender specific examples (Wadud 1999, 34).

We have seen that the bones of this Near Eastern story, though never more than a few lines or a mere footnote to larger stories, has the energies enough to be revived repeatedly over long centuries. The woman at the heart of this all has called by so many names (Bithiah, Tharmuth, Merris, Shipur, Ra'osa, Āsiya). She has been translated time and again to be an icon of what people need her to be. She has been maternal Nile goddess and yet a daughter of the One Hebrew God; a forerunner of converts and Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women oppressed by their own families. She is a sign for those who would believe, and comfort for those who suffer for that belief. And now, we can start to detect this latest translation, as a woman who in the name of God struggles for her own freedom from oppression, and thus is the midwife for another possible future.

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