

Dr Celene Ibrahim

Ameliorating Gender Bias in Muslim Prophetology

In the sura of the Quran known as “The Prophets” (*al-Anbiyāʾ*), Maryam features as the final individual named in a series of over a dozen righteous figures, some of whom are described as “guiding imams,” others as recipients of divine mercy or as possessing “judgment and knowledge,” and others having been granted gifts and powers by God’s leave. Here, Maryam is described as chaste and, alongside her son, “a sign (*āya*) for the worlds” (Q 21:91). Elsewhere in the Quran, Maryam is “purified by her Lord” and “chosen” for the unique task of giving birth to a “Word” from the divine (Q 3:42). To be sure, other individuals in the Quran are given the task of delivering God’s revelatory “Word” (*kalima*) in the form of scripture: Maryam delivers this Word incarnate. Aside from the Prophet Muhammad, to whom, in an immediate sense, the whole of the Quran is directed, Maryam is the Quranic figure who has the most extensive conversations with divine messengers who announce her lofty status, foretell her miraculous pregnancy, and so forth. Maryam “was among the devoutly obedient” and “confirmed (*ṣaddaqa*) the words of her Lord and His books” (Q 66:12). In her youthful piety, she enjoys abundant divine provisions to the extent that they strike wonder in her prophetic caretaker (Q. 3:37). Given the example of this female figure, and others, what, then, is the nature of prophethood in the Islamic interpretive tradition such that an overwhelming majority of exegetes and theologians throughout Islamic history confidently exclude females from a category that is given admiration and the loftiest regard in Islamic sacred history? Are the rationales theologically and textually consistent, or do logical inconsistencies proffer grounds for alleging gender bias? Through an intra-textual reading of the Quran, including verses that touch on prophetology generally, such as Q. Yūsuf 12:109, al-Naḥl 16:43, and al-Anbiyāʾ 21:7, I offer suggestions for ameliorating religiously grounded sexism.



Dr Celene Ibrahim

Groton School

Celene Ibrahim is a multidisciplinary scholar whose works span Islamic intellectual history, gender studies, interreligious studies, and Muslim public theology. She is best known for *Women and Gender in the Qur'an* (Oxford University Press, 2020), which won the Association of Middle East Women's Studies Book Award and is forthcoming in several languages. She is the author of *Islam and Monotheism*, an accessible primer on Islamic theology (Cambridge University Press, 2022) and the editor of *One Nation, Indivisible: Seeking Liberty and Justice from the Pulpit to the Streets* (Wipf & Stock, 2019). Ibrahim is a trusted media commentator and is featured in the Netflix docudrama *Testament: The Story of Moses* (2024), among other films. She holds degrees from Brandeis University (MA/PHD), Harvard University (MDiv), Princeton University (AB), and serves on the Groton School faculty in Religious Studies and Philosophy.