

Chapter 22

Unlikely Motherhood in the Qur'ān: Oncofertility as Devotion

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Introduction

As a new technology, oncofertility faces a whole host of ethical issues within and beyond the realm of religious studies. Within the framework of religious traditions, however, oncofertility faces unique challenges for each religious community. By considering the ethical implications of oncofertility in the context of particular religious communities, we might be able to discuss specific, tangible challenges in a fruitful manner. This chapter will discuss oncofertility in the context of Islamic conceptions of motherhood and Islamic legal discussions of sexuality, paternity, and the right to bear children. It will also provide a Qur'anic framework for Muslim women to think about their own choices when faced with the decision to utilize fertility interventions. The purpose of this chapter is to think through some of the competing narratives that a Muslim woman might consider as she makes her choices regarding oncofertility.

Mohammad's Wives: Mothers of Believers

While it true that some Muslims have large families, motherhood is not an essential part of woman in Islamic theology and law. In fact, 'womanhood' in Islamic scholarship is not necessarily compromised by a woman's infertility. An example of this in Muslim history can be found in the model of Muhammad's wives. Many Muslim scholars, historically and in the contemporary period, considered Muhammad's wives to be exemplars for all Muslim women. In general, Muhammad is considered to be the ultimate exemplar for all believers, but scholars noted that his "maleness" prevented him from being a "perfect" example for women. While Muhammad could be an exemplar for women concerning their spirituality, moral character, and ethics, his example was necessarily limited concerning issues strictly pertaining to the female body. Here, scholars drew on the example of Muhammad's wives to fill the prophetic gap, by presenting them as the model for ideal wives, mothers, and sisters. These scholars based their arguments on a selection of verses in the Qur'an that threaten Muhammad's wives with double the punishment for their sins while also offering them double reward for their righteous deeds. These verses read,

O Consorts of the Prophet! If any of you were guilty of evident unseemly conduct, the Punishment would be doubled to her, and that is easy for Allah. But any of you that is devout in the service of Allah and

His Messenger, and works righteousness,- to her shall We grant her reward twice: and We have prepared for her a generous Sustenance (Q. 33:30-31).¹

These scholars argue that the purpose of holding Muhammad's wives to a particularly stringent standard was that Muhammad's wives were meant to be emulated by other women. Thus, their sinful deeds would mislead many women, just as their righteous deeds would guide other women. Given the importance of Muhammad's wives as models for emulation, it is noteworthy that, with the exception of his first wife Khadijah, Muhammad did not have children with any of his other wives.

However, it is not enough merely look at the historical reality that Muhammad's wives did not bear children in order to understand Muslim ideals of womanhood. Despite the fact that lack of children did not compromise the womanhood of Muhammad's wives theologically and juridically, Muslims symbolically referred to them as the "Mothers of Believers." This symbolic title assigned to Muhammad's wives demonstrates the complex relationship between legal and theological Islamic discussions and the social mores of Muslim communities. By assigning the title of "Mothers of Believers" to Muhammad's wives despite the fact that most of them were not biological mothers, Muslims emphasized the social importance of motherhood in their understanding of womanhood. This disjoint between the biological and symbolic representation of Muhammad's wives highlights the tension often found between normative thought (Islamic law and theology) in Islam and Muslim practice. When studying normative Islamic sciences such as Islamic law one must always keep in mind that normative thought does not always translate into Muslim practice. In the case of oncofertility, whereas Islamic law might have an ambivalent attitude toward the new technology, Muslim attitudes might not be as ambivalent due to their particular social and cultural contexts where womanhood is defined by reproductive capacity.²

Islamic Law on Sex, Paternity, and the Right to Bear Children

While Islamic law is not a necessary determinate of social mores and practice, it is nevertheless, a useful reference for normative discussion on fertility intervention technology. As with *in vitro fertilization* (IVF), Muslim jurists are mostly concerned with establishing paternity when it comes to technology such as oncofertility. As long as ownership of the ovarian tissue remains with the woman from whom it is removed, and any future eggs are impregnated with sperm from her husband, the legal problems surrounding the new technology are minimal.³ If, on the other hand, the egg or sperm is donor, the juridical issues, surrounding IVF and oncofertility, become increasingly

¹ Abdullah Yusuf Ali. *The meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. Beltsville, Md: Amana Publications; 1997: Q. 33:30-31.

² Serour GI. Bioethics in artificial reproduction in the Muslim world. *Bioethics*. 1993; 7(2-3): 207-17.

³ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islam and biomedical ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2009:110. Even when jurists consider modern technology for purposes of fertility – such as IVF – to be "morally reprehensible," they concede that it is still a legally acceptable procedure, as long as the egg and sperm are from within the marital couple.

problematic due to the analogy to adultery and questions of paternity.⁴ In Islamic law, establishing the patrilineal lineage of a child is paramount. For example, patriarchal concerns for paternity is the main reason that adoption is not permitted in Islamic law – a person can become the legal custodian and guardian of a child, but cannot make paternal claims on that child.⁵

Once paternity is established through the husband, however, Islamic law is generally ambivalent toward reproductive technologies. The ambivalence of Islamic law with technologies that enhance fertility is linked to its surprisingly lenient stance on issues related to the conception of womanhood and reproduction. For instance, although there are strict regulations in Islam regarding sexual partners – it is only permissible to engage in sexual relations with one’s wives and/or concubines – procreation is not the sole purpose of sex in marriage. Sex for pleasure is perfectly acceptable and even meritorious. To this end, birth control is permitted in Islamic law, as long as it carries the consent of both spouses.⁶ Similarly, although there are taboos against abortion in the Muslim world, jurists consider abortion to be a permissible act, in some schools up to 120 days into the pregnancy. The reason for this is theological rather than scientific and is based on a prophetic tradition (*hadīth*) wherein Muhammad was reported to have said that the spirit (*rūh*) of God is breathed into a fetus at 120 days. Until the spirit is breathed into a fetus, the fetus is not considered to have an independent claim on life and is merely an extension of the mother. As Abdulaziz Sachedina explains, the fetus “in utero” does not have “independent and absolute inviolability.”⁷ However, once God’s spirit enters the body – after 120 days – then abortion is prohibited unless it is undertaken to save the life of the mother.

The main question that technologies such as oncofertility raise in Islamic law is whether infertility is considered a “disability” or a “disease” – understood legally as “harm” – that would necessitate the use of oncofertility for treatment. This is an important question since the preservation of life is considered to be a central objective (*maqṣad*) of Islamic law. If life is threatened, it is obligatory to preserve it by any means necessary. Although motherhood is considered sacred in Islam,⁸ as demonstrated above, it is not considered an essential part of womanhood. The womanhood of Muhammad’s wives was not compromised by their lack of biological offspring. Hence, it would be difficult to argue that infertility was considered to be either a “disability” or a “disease” which might in turn threaten life and thus make obligatory technologies such as IVF and oncofertility that enable women to bear children. Therefore, oncofertility would not be deemed a “necessity” for infertile women. Nevertheless, Islamic law considers offspring of men

⁴ Sachedina, *Islam and biomedical ethics*, p. 119. Donor eggs are less of a problem than donor sperm in Islamic jurisprudence, since the juridical concern is primarily the paternity of a child. Besides, polygamy is permitted in Islam, so the issue of the donor egg is less problematic than the donor sperm. For additional discussion on the issue of homogenic insemination, see Arbach O. Ethical considerations in Syria regarding reproduction techniques. *Med Law*. 2002; 21(2):395–401.

⁵ For more on adoption in Islam, see Inhorn MC. “He won’t be my son”: Middle Eastern Muslim men’s discourses of adoption and gamete donation. *Med Anthropol Q*. 2006; 20(1):94–120.

⁶ Sachedina, *Islam and biomedical ethics*, p. 127

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116

and women a basic marital right. For this reason, husbands and wives are permitted to divorce each other for infertility and impotence, respectively.⁹

Muslim women choosing to undergo oncofertility procedures would face few obstacles from Islamic law.¹⁰ However, Muslim women might face hurdles from their communities, theologies, and their personal understanding of the role of God in their infertility. As Sachedina points out, Muslim women might feel that by choosing to engage in fertility-enhancing technology, they are demonstrating a lack of trust in God and that they are not “submitting” to His will in the matter of their infertility.¹¹ Submission to God, being the lexical meaning of “*Muslim*,” is an important value for believers to embody. Hence, it would be a serious religious and personal obstacle if Muslim women felt that using technology such as oncofertility to preserve the possibility of having children – when God might have removed this possibility for them by the natural means of disease – meant that they were insufficiently submissive to God. To this end, I offer the model of three women in the Qur’ān – the divine scripture for Muslims – that may help Muslim women understand technology such as oncofertility as a “divinely sanctioned” intervention that might preserve their fertility.

Unlikely Conception as Divine Intervention: Sarah, the Wife of Zakhariah, and Mary

The Qur’ān relates the story of three women who miraculously become pregnant through divine intervention. Pregnancy is a miracle in the case of two of these women because they are barren and in the case of the third because she is a virgin. The two barren women are Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and the unnamed wife of Zachariah. The virgin who miraculously becomes pregnant is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In the case of Sarah, the Qur’ān narrates that angels appeared at Abraham’s home with “good” news. When they announced to Sarah that she would bear a son named Isaac, she responded with dismay and bewilderment, saying “Woe unto me! Will I bear a child when I am an old woman, and my husband here is an old man? That would indeed be a strange thing!”¹² The angels rebuked her saying, “Are you bewildered by God’s decree?” and ended by invoking God’s mercy and blessings on the house of Abraham.

In this Qur’ānic story, angels appear as messengers from God and speak to Sarah directly, who responds to them in her own voice. The interaction between Sarah and the angels is

⁹ Ibid., p. 108. While the right for husbands to divorce their wives for infertility is straightforward, wives must have already stipulated in their marriage contract that they can seek a divorce for impotence. In either case, infertility and impotence become legitimate causes for divorce.

¹⁰ For more detailed discussion on Islamic law encouraging the use of assisted-reproduction technologies, see Serour GI. Islamic perspectives in human reproduction. *Reprod Biomed Online*. 2008; 17(Suppl 3):34–8.

¹¹ Sachedina, *Islam and biomedical ethics*, p. 114

¹² My translation of Q. 11:72. The entire story spans Q. 11:69–74. This story is intertwined with the story of Lot. The angels, in this narration, were on a mission charged by God to deliver both the good news to Abraham and Sarah of Isaac and also to destroy the people of Lot. The convergence of these two events in one story is worth exploring further but beyond the scope of this chapter.

not mediated by Abraham. In the context of this story, the “good” news of a son is offered to Sarah, without her having asked for it. Sarah does not pray to God for a son, but rather a named son – Isaac – is offered to her, unprompted. Upon hearing news of a son, Sarah is not overcome with joy and gratitude. She does not treat this news as “good”. Rather she seems bewildered, dismayed, and worried about having a child in old age, when neither she nor her husband¹³ are young and capable of raising a child. When Sarah voices these concerns, treating the news as if it were a tragedy (“woe unto me!”), she is rebuked by the angels who emphasize God’s will in the decision for Sarah to have a son, reminding her that this is a blessing rather than a tragedy. Abraham’s reaction to the news of Isaac is not captured in this narrative.

The second barren and elderly couple who receive a child miraculously from God are Zachariah and his wife. In this Qur’anic story, Zachariah – and not his wife – is center stage. According to this narrative, Zachariah is overwhelmed with anxiety about being alone and not having offspring, so he prays to God for a pure child. God fulfills Zachariah’s prayer, providing him with a son who will be a prophet. In one narration of this story, God responds to Zachariah’s prayer by saying, “So We responded to his prayer and We granted him Yahya: We cured/corrected his wife for him.”¹⁴ The news is delivered to Zachariah either through the voice of God Himself or through the voice of angels.¹⁵ As with Isaac, Zachariah’s son is also named by God; his name is Yahya, commonly known as John the Baptist. Although Zachariah had initially prayed to God for a son, acknowledging that he was elderly and infirm and his wife was barren, he is nevertheless amazed when he hears the news of a son. His amazement, unlike Sarah’s, is joyous. God responds to Zachariah’s amazement by emphasizing His role as “Creator,” saying, “This is easy for Me – even as I created you when before you were nothing.”¹⁶

The wife of Zachariah does not make an appearance in this story – all that is known of her is that she is barren. There is no discussion about how she might feel about giving birth at such an old age, or about raising a child with an elderly, infirm husband. In this story, God “corrected/fixed/cured” Zachariah’s wife, presumably of barrenness, so that she could conceive a child for her husband. The patriarchal nature of this story is difficult to avoid – that barrenness in old age is treated as if it were unnatural and in need of curing/correction and that the barrenness of Zachariah’s wife was ‘corrected’ for the sake of her husband without discussion of her personal desire and agency raises a number of questions. Still, this story offers a model for pursuing children despite natural impediments. While Sarah received a child without praying for one, Zachariah’s wife must bear a child as a result of her husband’s efforts in actively seeking a child from God. In these stories, having children, despite natural biological impediments such as old age and barrenness, is a miraculous and divine event.

¹³ In the narration of this story, Abraham is actually more concerned about the fate of the people of Lot in this story.

¹⁴ My translation of Q, 21:90 with Yusuf Ali’s translation. Abdullah Yusuf Ali. *The meaning of the Holy Qur’an*.

¹⁵ There are at least three versions of this story in the Qur’an. See, Q. 3: 37–41, Q. 19:1–15, Q. 21:89–91

¹⁶ This is my translation of Q. 19:9. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali. *The meaning of the Holy Qur’an* for a variation of this translation.

The final story of a miraculous conception in the Qur'ān concerns Mary, mother of Jesus. This story might be especially relevant for young women considering oncofertility as an option, because in the Qur'anic story Mary is a young, unmarried woman who becomes pregnant by socially unacceptable means.¹⁷ Throughout the Qur'ān, the most emphasized point about Mary is that though her pregnancy might be socially “illegitimate,” her purity is not affected by her pregnancy. Rather, it only increases her in purity. Mary is referred to as the purest of women in the Qur'ān.¹⁸ Another relevant aspect of the Qur'anic story of Mary is that Mary becomes pregnant by means of an angel that appears in human form.

Though this story is narrated in several parts of the Qur'ān, the basic story-line relates that Mary secluded herself away from her family. The text implies that this seclusion was motivated by a spiritual quest. While Mary is in seclusion, God sends an angel to her in the form of a “well-proportioned” man.¹⁹ It is not clear in the text how this man approaches Mary, but we can assume that he violates some social decorum, because she seeks refuge from him with God.²⁰ It is unlikely that she would have sought refuge from him unless she felt alarmed or threatened by his behavior. The angel reassures her that God sent him to her saying, “I am a messenger from your Lord, sent to give you the gift of a pure son.”²¹ Mary suspiciously asks “How will I have a son when no man has touched me and I am not an unchaste woman?”²² The angel responds that this is the will of God and cites God as saying the same words He uses with Zachariah, “This is easy for Me.” In this story, God further assures Mary that her conception of a son is a blessing from God (echoing the angel's words to Sarah) and that He intends to make her a “sign” for people. The story goes on to detail Mary's birthing experience, vividly capturing her anguished state. At one point, wishing that she had died rather than endure the pains of childbirth, Mary cries out “Woe unto me! Would that I had died before this and been a thing forgotten.”²³ God does not abandon Mary in her childbirth, but provides her with a spring and a date tree to nourish her. When she is able to walk again, Mary returns to her people with a child in tow. Unsurprisingly, she faces the accusation of unchasteness from her community, who wonder how she could have conceived this “illegitimate” child when her parents were good people. In order to defend herself, Mary points to her baby, who then speaks to the people with claims of prophethood. Thus, Mary's miraculous conception and her speaking baby become a sign from God for the people.

In this story, divine intervention manifests itself in the form of an angel who appears to Mary as a well-proportioned man. This man becomes the means by which Mary conceives Jesus. Although an angel is an intermediary between God and Mary in her

¹⁷ There are several stories about Mary in the Qur'ān. A couple of places where the story of her miraculous conception is discussed are Q. 3:42–59 and Q.19:16–35.

¹⁸ Q. 3:42 reads “Behold! the angels said: “O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee – chosen thee above the women of all nations.” Abdullah Yusuf Ali. *The meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*. Q. 3:42.

¹⁹ Q. 19:17.

²⁰ Q. 19:18.

²¹ Q. 19:19.

²² Q. 19:20.

²³ Q. 19:23.

conception of Jesus, the birth of Jesus in the Qur'ān is compared to the creation of Adam. "The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: "Be" and he was."²⁴ Similarly, though Sarah and Zachariah's wife become pregnant by natural means within the institution of marriage, their conceiving of Isaac and John the Baptist is also attributed to the creative power of God. Further, becoming pregnant in unlikely circumstances did not compromise the chastity or submissiveness to God of any of the above-mentioned women. In fact, these women conceive children as a sign of their submission to God, who chooses them to conceive prophets. Sarah represents this submission most clearly because she is not overtly excited about bearing and raising a son at her age, yet is resigned to God's will. Mary also expresses her submission to God by bearing a son despite the social censure she is likely to face as a result of giving birth out of wedlock. Thus, the "unnatural" and miraculous conception by Sarah, the wife of Zachariah, and Mary represent a model for contemporary Muslim women who hope to preserve their fertility and conceive through "unnatural" means involving human intervention. Human and angelic mediation in these stories do not diminish the creative power of God, but rather reaffirm it.

Conclusion

What might be called the "Islamic" approach to motherhood, fertility and sexuality is complex, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory. Motherhood is not an essential part of womanhood, but it is nevertheless a sacred duty that is closely connected to God's creative power. While most of Muhammad's wives offer a model of womanhood that is not fixed to biological motherhood, their status is nevertheless intertwined with the symbolic power of motherhood. They are the "Mothers of the Believers," yet most did not have children. Juridically, the purpose of sex in marriage is not solely procreation, and birth control and abortion are permissible. However, the right to have children is a basic spousal right, and infertility and impotence form legitimate grounds for divorce. When there is infertility or impotence, Muslim jurists are open to technological advances that enhance women's ability to bear children so long as paternity is safeguarded. While there is often pressure to procreate in Muslim communities, Muslims also stress the importance of being content with God's will in the matter of one's (in)fertility.

Given the centrality of submitting to God's will, pursuing "unnatural," human efforts to enhance fertility might be seen as subverting God's will rather than submitting to it. The stories of Sarah, the wife of Zachariah, and Mary are incidents of divinely sanctioned unnatural conceptions narrated in a patriarchal context, which raise as many questions as they answer. Why is barrenness in old age – a natural phenomenon – something that needs to be corrected, fixed, or cured? Why is women's agency in bearing children secondary to the desires of their husbands, lineage, or divine decree? Still, these stories offer new ways for women to think about their choices when making a decision about their own fertility. If barrenness is natural and therefore representative of God's will, seeking and conceiving a child despite such "natural" barriers can also be indicative of God's will. Given the variegated contexts of Muslim women facing the choice of using oncofertility, Muslim women will relate to the examples of Muhammad's wives, Sarah,

²⁴ Abdullah Yusuf Ali. *The meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, Q. 3:59.

the wife of Zachariah, and Mary in different ways. They might relate more or less to one model or another or not relate to any of them at all. Nevertheless, these Qur'anic stories offer a religious framework for women to think about understanding their choices for fertility as harmonious with rather than subversive of Divine Will.

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