

A Woman of Paradise: The Rebellious Queen of Pharaoh Part 1



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Fatemah Meghji**Abstract**

Perspectives about the ideal Muslim woman continue to be a kaleidoscope of various readings of different Muslim women throughout history. The four women of paradise, as cited in the hadith literature, refer to: Lady Maryam (Mary), Lady Asiyah (the wife of Pharaoh), Lady Khadijah (the wife of Prophet Muhammad), and Lady Fatimah (the daughter of the Prophet).¹

Although they are all considered to be historical figures and there is much to be said about them, only the first two have been mentioned in the Qur'an, and only Lady Maryam is mentioned by name.

Lady Maryam and Lady Asiyah are particularly noted in the chapter al-Tahrim as mathal, or role-models and examples for all of mankind. In this paper, we hope to provide a brief biographical sketch as well as an analysis of the verses related to Lady Asiyah from classical Sunni and Shi'i commentaries of the Qur'an. We also hope to touch on the attention that her famous sentence in Surah al-Tahrim has

warranted from the gnostics (urefa) in exegetical commentaries by the likes of Allamah Tabatabai (d. 1981).

Preamble

The four women of paradise, as cited in the hadith literature, refer to: Lady Maryam (Mary), Lady Asiyah (the wife of Pharaoh), Lady Khadijah (the wife of Prophet Muhammad), and Lady Fatimah (the daughter of the Prophet)².

Although they are all considered to be historical figures and there is much to be said about them, only the first two have been made direct reference to³ in the Qur'an, and only Lady Maryam is mentioned by name. Lady Maryam and Lady Asiyah are particularly noted in the chapter al-Tahrim as mathal, or role-models and examples for all of mankind:

Allah draws an[other] example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct, and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot.' And Mary, daughter of Imran, who guarded the chastity of her womb, so We breathed into it of Our spirit. She confirmed the words of her Lord and His Books, and she was one of the obedient. [66: 11-12] ⁴

They are noted as examples worthy of emulation due to their dedication to the truth and their relationship with God. While Lady Maryam, on account of her importance and her crucial role in Christianity, has been explored in much depth in Islamic literature, Lady Asiyah has not warranted as much attention. This may be because Lady Maryam is referred to more frequently in the Qur'an: She has been mentioned by name in the Qur'an thirty-four times and a chapter has been titled after her.⁵

On the other hand, in the verses regarding Lady Asiyah, she is not mentioned by name. Nevertheless, her place as one of the few women mentioned in a positive light in the Qur'an, her piety as an example for all of mankind, and her status as one of the four women of paradise in hadith literature, gives her a status in Islamic literature much unlike most other women.

In this paper, we hope to provide a brief biographical sketch as well as an analysis of the verses related to Lady Asiyah from classical Sunni and Shi'i commentaries of the Qur'an. We also hope to touch on several points that her famous sentence in Surah al-Tahrim has warranted in exegetical commentaries by the likes of Allamah Tabatabai (d. 1981), a gnostic (*'arif*). In the words of George Archer:

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.⁶

Outline

In this piece, we hope to briefly explore the verse in Surah al-Tahrim that speaks about the Lady Asiyah's famous words and her rank as an example for those who believe. In order to explore the verse, benefit from its wisdom, and truly take Lady Asiyah as an example, we will peruse various commentaries to see what the exegetes have said about her and the verse in question. We will explore a handful of Sunni and Shi'i commentaries, and then summarize the most valuable points.

To begin with, we will briefly sketch a summary of her life in Islamic literature. Following this, we will explore various commentaries: both Sunni and Shi'a and what they have said about Lady Asiyah. We will begin by exploring two Shi'i tafasir: Allamah Tabarsi's Majma al-Bayan, and Allamah Tabatabai's Tafsir al-Mizan. We have chosen Majma al-Bayan and Tafsir al-Mizan due to their significant contributions to the world of Shi'i tafasir.

They are arguably the two most significant and comprehensive tafasir produced by Shi'i scholars and are of the most influential. We will then explore two Sunni tafasir: Tabari's Jami al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an, one of the oldest Qur'anic exegeses in our reach, and Suyuti's al-Durr al-Manthur.

These two, are primarily traditional tafasir focused on citing traditions. Due to the scant exploration of Shi'i tafasir in English, we have chosen to pay particular attention to Shi'i tafasir on the verse, especially Allamah Tabatabai's in-depth exploration of the verse.

We will also explore the plausible reasons why she has been mentioned in the Qur'an as an example to all believers and in the hadith as one of the four women of paradise. As such, we will go through the points that we ourselves found notable to take lessons from in the hopes of doing tadabbur (deep thinking/pondering) on the words of the Almighty.

Biographical Sketch of Lady Asiyah

The entry on Asiyah in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, published by the University of Leiden, says:

ASIYAH. This is the name given by the commentators to Pharaoh's wife, who is twice (xxviii, 9 and lxvi, n) mentioned in the Kur'an. She plays the same part as Pharaoh's daughter in the Bible, so that there is obviously confusion. In the second passage these words are put into her mouth: "My Lord, build me a house with thee in Paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his doings and deliver me from the wicked". In connection with this passage it is related that Asiyah endured many cruelties at the hands of Pharaoh because of her faith (she was an Israelite); and finally he even caused her to be cast down upon a rock; at her prayer God took her soul to himself, so that only the body fell on the stone. —It is also related that Pharaoh scourged her to death, but on Moses' praying to God she did not feel any pain. J. Horowitz explains the name as a corruption of Asenath, the name of Joseph's wife in Gen. xli, 45.7

Not much is said about her story, and information on her life is indeed limited, despite a perusal of hadith and tafsir literature. Shaykh Rizwan Arastu, in his recent *God's Emissaries: Adam to Jesus* does a good job of collecting related hadith sources and piecing her story together. As such, we have used the author's work as a reference point from which we will be narrating her story in brief, and we have also cited the sources that he has used.

According to the most common Muslim rendition of events, Lady Asiyah was the wife of Pharaoh and was actually an Israelite.⁸ Her father's name was Muzahim and it is reported that she was barren, much to the Pharaoh's dismay. As noted in the entry of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, in the Biblical tradition, this female figure is played by the Pharaoh's daughter, not his wife.

She is mentioned two times in the Qur'an, in two different scenarios. The first is when she finds Prophet Musa (a), still an infant, floating in a basket and suggests to the Pharaoh that they keep him:

Pharaoh's wife said [to him], '[This infant will be] a [source of] comfort to me and to you. Do not kill him. Maybe he will benefit us, or we will adopt him as a son.' But they were not aware. (28:9)

Thus, it is through her encouragement (and God's master-plan) and mercy over the child (perhaps increased due to her alleged barrenness, Arastu notes) that Prophet Musa (a) is raised in the house of Pharaoh, all the while being fed and cared for by his birth mother. In fact, according to a narration in *Bihar al-Anwar*, it is Lady Asiyah who named him: "Let us call him Moses, because I found him in the water among the reeds."⁹

Arastu notes that in Egyptian, "mu meant 'water' and sa meant 'tree' or 'reed.'"¹⁰ Arastu also notes that Prophet Musa's mother befriends Asiyah and that the two connect over their faith. He does not however, cite the source for this.¹¹

The second occasion in which she is mentioned in the Qur'an is in Surah al-Tahrim, where her station as a pious woman is noted and can be understood through her words, and where God presents her as an example for all of those who believe. The verse reads:

Allah draws an[other] example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct, and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot.' (66:11)

The common story narrated behind this verse is that this is what she said at the time of her death, when she was murdered by the Pharaoh for her belief in God. Although her assassination is not specifically stated in the Qur'an, it has been mentioned in the hadith and tafsir literature quite extensively, with little to no qualms amongst commentators and Muslim scholars.

In Arastu's rendition of events, heavily based on Allamah Majlisi's (d. 1698) *Bihar al-Anwar*, Lady Asiyah "had always been devoted to Moses and to the one God he served and had despised her husband. She

too had managed to conceal her beliefs from her husband all these years. But as she saw her husband's brutality spiral out of control, she grew more eager to disavow him, no matter what the cost."

After she saw him murder one of his servants and all of his children by burning them alive owing to their belief in God, Lady Asiyah cursed Pharaoh and his actions. He accused her of being insane to which she said, "I am not insane. I believe in God, who is my Lord, your Lord, and the Lord of all realms."

At this, he decided to punish and torture her severely. The description in the hadiths is quite gory and explicit, saying that "He forced her to lie on her back in the hot sand and had her wrists and ankles bound with rope and staked to the ground. He proceeded to torture her to force her to recant." It is here that she is said to have uttered the phrase mentioned in the Qur'an, imploring Allah to build her a house in paradise in proximity to Him.

It is reported that she sees paradise and smiles before her soul is taken from her body due to the "pleasure of God's acceptance."¹² With this brief introduction, we will now enter our discussion of Qur'anic exegetical literature, beginning with three Shi'i exegetes.

Shi'i Commentaries

Majma al-Bayan

Tafsir Majma' al-Bayan was written by Abū Ali Fakhr al-Dīn Ibn Hasan Tabarsī (d. 1154), more commonly known as Allamah Tabarsi. This tafsir, written in Arabic, was modelled after Shaykh Tusi's (d. 1067) historical tafsir al-Tibyan. In his discussion on this verse, Allamah Tabarsi states that Lady Asiyah attained faith when she saw the miracle of Prophet Musa (a) in his competition against the magicians (i.e. when his rod turned into a snake that devoured that of the magicians). He goes on to say that:

... because her faith became apparent to Pharaoh, he forbade her (from her faith). As such, Lady Asiyah refused and rejected the Pharaoh's demands, and as such, the Pharaoh (may God's curse be upon him), crushed her hands and feet with a nail under the burning sun. He then ordered that a large rock be put over her chest. As death approached, she said 'My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise.' Then, God the Almighty brought her towards paradise and (currently) she is eating and drinking in paradise (narrated from Hasan and Ibn Kaysan). It has also been said that she saw a castle in paradise made from pearls and that is when God took her soul from her body. After that, the large rock was thrown onto her soulless body, so she never felt the pain from it and from Pharaoh's torture. Salman says: She was being tortured under the sun, and every time they would leave her alone, the angels would surround her and she would see a castle in paradise.¹³

With regards to the next part of the verse where she says "and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct," Tabarsi says that this is referring to his 'din', i.e. religion.¹⁴

Tafsir al-Mizan

One of the most influential contemporary Shi'i exegesis of the Qur'an is Allamah Tabatabai's (d. 1981) Tafsir al-Mizan. Although the fifteenth century (according to the hijri lunar calendar) saw a plethora of new exegetical works from amongst Shi'as, the most influential and pivotal work of the century was none other than the exegesis of the entire Qur'an written by the well-known Iranian mystic and philosopher, Allamah Tabatabai.

As such, we have chosen to use his work in order to address the verse. As a mystic with his own philosophy and unique hermeneutics in Qur'anic exegesis, Allamah Tabatabai references several points in the commentary of this verse that point to a deeper understanding of the verse. Due to its importance, brevity and depth in content, we have chosen to translate and include most of the commentary related to this verse here.

Allamah Tabatabai begins by saying that when Lady Asiyah makes her prayer of "My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise," in a sense, God is summarizing all of her hopes and wishes in the path of her worship. He goes on to say that:

... when the faith (iman) of a person reaches perfection, their exterior (dhahir) and interior (batin) will be fully in line with each other, i.e. one's heart and tongue will be in unison with each other. Such a person will not say anything except that which they will do, and they won't do anything except that which they say. And they don't entertain hopes, and their tongues do not say anything, except for that which they seek to do with their actions. Because God brought this lady forth as an example, and alluded to her special status in her worship, he narrates the prayer that she called with, and (it is this prayer) that shows the type of her holistic obedience to Him.

Throughout her life, it was exactly this wish that she was after –, that God would build a home for her in paradise, and that He would save her from the Pharaoh and his evil actions. So, the wife of Pharaoh implored to her Lord for mercy, and this request was to become close to God. This closeness to God had preference over closeness to the Pharaoh. This closeness to the Pharaoh was also accompanied by every type of pleasure; In his court, she could find everything that her heart desired, and even those wishes that didn't usually reach a person, could be found there. As such, it is obvious that the wife of Pharaoh had closed her eyes from all of the pleasures of the life of this world. And this was not because it was not in her reach, but rather, all of these were available in abundance to her. Even with that, she had closed her eyes from it, and she was attached to the glory that lied with God, and to His proximity. She had attained faith in the unseen, and stood strong and upright with her faith until she left this world.

And this step that the wife of Pharaoh took in her path to serving God, is a step that can be an example for anyone who wants to follow in this path. It is because of this aspect that God summarized her hopes and her state throughout her entire life in one short prayer; a prayer that does not give any meaning except that she had cut herself off from all comforts of this world, from anything that caused inattention

to God, that she has sought refuge with her Lord, and that except for attaining proximity to God, she has no other wishes or desires, and that she is choosing a home in His house of mercy.

It has been said that the name “wife of Pharaoh” who is an example for the believers, has been mentioned in the traditions as Asiyah. When she says **“My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise,”** in this prayer, she is requesting a home that should both be in proximity to God and also in paradise, and this is to the fact that in paradise. Homes are in proximity to God, (in the same way that) God has said: **“They are living and provided for near their Lord,” (3: 169).**

In addition to this, one’s presence in proximity to God and closeness to him is a special type of intangible spiritual blessing, whereas a permanent home in paradise is a tangible spiritual blessing, and as such, it makes sense that a servant of God would request both from Him... 15

The reason that Allamah Tabatabai’s points with regards to this verse are so significant and extraordinary is because he touches on the idea that this is perhaps not a prayer that literally came out of Lady Asiyah’s mouth, but that this is something where “God summarized her hopes and her state throughout her entire life in one short prayer.”

Here, the narrator is being attributed to God. It is true that He is narrating her reality and truth, and that does not affect the truth of her saying this; however, it could be said that this quote is speaking from the language which is a reflection of the true state and reality of matters, as opposed to a literal and explicit language referring to something she said with her physical mouth. Taking this into consideration, her words take on a deeper significance.

They are not simply the words of a martyr dying in pain and under torture, but rather a reflection of her spiritual reality. With this in mind, we can later explore the notable points and lessons that we can derive from this verse and her story in depth.

Sunni Commentaries

Jami al-Bayan fi Ta’wil al-Qur’an

Abū Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī (d.923), in his famous tafsir Jami al-Bayan fi Ta’wil al-Qur’an, mentions some of the traditions and points that were stated in the Shi’i tafasir discussed above. In the stories of the prophets, there is considerable overlap between the Sunni and Shia tradition and this should not come as a surprise.

With regard to Lady Asiyah, Tabari says, “The disbelief of her spouse did not harm her, and she was a believer in God, and it was from the qada (destiny) of God in His creation that ‘No bearer shall bear another’s burden’ (17:15), and that each soul gets what it has earned.”¹⁶

He also narrates a tradition that Allamah Tabarsi also narrated from Salman (here, unlike Tabarsi, Tabari

mentions the entire chain of narrators), with regards to Lady Asiyah seeing a vision and her soul leaving her body before the punishment was inflicted on her by the Pharaoh. He also mentions other traditions which we have cited and will not repeat here.

He also discusses God's justice and every person's autonomy in their destiny. With regards to Lady Asiyah, he says with certainty: "By God, the disbelief of her husband will not harm his wife whilst she was obeying Her Lord, so that you will know that God is a just judge and He does not take His servant except with their own sins."¹⁷

Al-Durr al-Manthur

Abū al-Facīl 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Abū Bakr ibn Muhammad Jalāl al-Dīn al-Khucayr al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) in his tafsir, *Dar al-Manthur*, mentions Lady Asiyah, before his commentary on the verse in question (i.e. 66: 11), in the fifth verse of Surah al-Tahrim which reads as follows:

It may be that if he divorces you his Lord will give him, in [your] stead, wives better than you: [such as are] muslim, faithful, obedient, penitent, devout and given to fasting, non-virgins and virgins. [Q.66:5]

Suyuti narrates from Tibrani from Ibn Mardawiyah, from Buraydah that, "God has promised His Prophet (s) in this verse, that he will marry him to the non-virgin, Asiyah (a), the wife of Pharaoh, and to the virgin, Maryam, daughter of Imran."¹⁸ Since neither Lady Asiyah, nor Lady Maryam was alive at the time of the Prophet (s), it is self-evident that this marriage is supposedly going to take place in the afterlife.

With regard to the verse in question, i.e. verse 11, Suyuti also cites many of the same hadiths that have been narrated above (albeit some of them with different syntax but identical meaning). He mentions the hadith wherein the Pharaoh's disbelief did not harm Lady Asiyah in the slightest and that she had a vision of her home in paradise while she was being tortured under the sun.¹⁹ With regard to her vision, Suyuti mentions a few different traditions which we thought were worthy of citing here:

1. From Ibn Abi Shibah and Abd ibn Hamid and Ibn Jarir and Ibn al-Mundhir and... from Salman: "The wife of Pharaoh was being tortured under the sun, and when they would leave her (for a short period of respite), the angels would surround her and she would see her home in paradise."
2. From Abu Ya'la and al-Bayhaqi (with a reliable chain from Ibn Hurayrah): "The Pharaoh had tied his wife to four poles by her hands and feet, and when they would leave her, the angels surrounded her. Then she said 'My Lord, build for me, near you, a house in paradise,' and then she was shown her house in paradise."
3. From Abd ibn Hamid from Ibn Hurayrah: "The Pharaoh had tied his wife by four poles and laid her down on her chest, and he put on her chest a millstone... so, she raised her head to the sky and said

‘My Lord, build for me, near you, a house in paradise...’ so God opened her house in paradise and she saw it.”

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It is interesting to note the Arabic words that are usually used in these traditions, especially the word *kashafa* which is commonly associated with supernatural visions where one perceives a reality usually beyond the perception of others. In the last tradition cited, the word *faraja* is used which is also interesting due to its association of being an opening and a type of comfort for a person, which seems to be why God showed Lady Asiyah her home in heaven: to comfort her passing from this world as she was being tortured by Pharaoh.

1. In some hadith literature, albeit much rarer, ‘Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr and the wife of the Prophet (s) is also cited to be amongst the women of heaven. However, the general consensus is that the four are the ones who are mentioned here. This is what Suyuti also cites in his tafsir al-Durr al-Manthur. Shi’i hadith literature also refer to the four mentioned here.
2. In some hadith literature, albeit much rarer, ‘Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr and the wife of the Prophet (s) is also cited to be amongst the women of heaven. However, the general consensus is that the four are the ones who are mentioned here. This is what Suyuti also cites in his tafsir al-Durr al-Manthur. Shi’i hadith literature also refer to the four mentioned here.
3. The Lady Fatimah has been referred to in various instances in the Qur’an as several verses were revealed about her. However, these references are indirect and knowledge of them would require a familiarity with the ahadith literature.
4. The text and translations for all verses of the Qur’an, unless quoted from another text, have been taken from www.tanzil.net [9] and are the translations of Ali Quli Qarai.
5. A quick search of the word Maryam on www.tanzil.net [9] brought forth this number.
6. George Archer, "A Short History of a "Perfect Woman:" The translations of the "Wife of Pharaoh" Before, Through, and Beyond the Qur’anic Milieu," MATHAL 3, no. 1 (2013): 1, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/mathal/vol3/iss1/2> [10].
7. H.A.R Gibb, THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM, VOLUME I (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 710.
8. Rizwan Arastu, GOD’S EMISSARIES: ADAM TO JESUS (Dearborn: Imam Mahdi Association of Marjaya, 2014), 344. It is mentioned in Ibn Athir’s history that she was Israeli, and that she was barren in Bihar al-Anwar. Bihar al-Anwar, Volume 13, p.38, tr. 9, as cited here in Arastu’s God’s Emissaries.
9. Arastu, GOD’S EMISSARIES, 344. Translated and originally cited from Bihar al-Anwar, Volume 13, p.4 and p.7, tr. 7.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid, 344.
12. Arastu, God’s Emissaries, 408, referencing Bihar al-Anwar, Volume 13, p. 164, tr. 7.
13. Fadl ibn Hasan Tabrasi, Majma al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an Volume 10, (Tehran: Naser Khosrow Publications, 1993), 480. Accessed with Jami al-Tafasir, NOOR Software. Translation rendered by myself.
14. Ibid.
15. Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai trans. Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Musawi Hamadani, Tarjume Tafsir al-Mizan Volume 19 (Qum: Islamic Publications Office of Seminary Masters Association Qum Islamic Seminary, 1995), 577. Accessed with Jami al-Tafasir, NOOR Software. Translated from the Farsi with reference to the original Arabic by myself.
16. Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, Jami al-Bayan fi Ta’wil al-Quran Volume 28, (Beirut: Dar al-Marifat, 1992), 110. Accessed with Jami al-Tafasir, NOOR Software. Translation rendered by myself.
17. Ibid.
18. Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Al-Darr al-Manthur fi Tafsir al-Ma’tthur Volume 6, (Qum: Publication of Ayatollah Mar’ashi Najafi

Library, 1984), 244.

19. Ibid, 265.

20. Ibid.

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