

## ***Maryam: A Woman of Bethlehem***

**Created by Victoria Rue, M.Div., Ph.D.**

**Translated by Hind Abu Shkhadim**

### **Abstract:**

The play *Maryam: A Woman of Bethlehem* is the outcome of Dr. Rue's Fulbright research project (Fall 2018) in Bethlehem, Palestinian Occupied Territories. I taught at Dar Al Kalima University College of Arts (DAK) and Culture in Bethlehem, and interviewed thirty Palestinian Christians and Muslims, posing the initial question "who is Mary/Maryam in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bethlehem?" The Christian Mary, mother of Jesus, in Islam is Maryam, mother of Isa the prophet. She is deeply venerated in both communities. Palestinians offered their stories, speaking of their customs and daily lives using the iconic figure of Mary/Maryam.

### **Key Words:**

**Mary, Bethlehem, Maryam, community theatre, Palestine**

## **FORWARD**

**By Victoria Rue, M.Div., Ph.D.**

The lights go down. From the darkness of Dar Al-Nadwa, International Cultural Center in Bethlehem, Palestine, a crystalline voice sings "Ya Maryam El Bikr" (Oh, Virgin Mary), a haunting Maronite hymn popular with Christians and Muslims. The actress slowly makes her way through the audience invoking Mary/Maryam, "O Morning Star, shine in our temples, and enlighten our minds and our hearing and sight."<sup>1</sup> Stage lights slowly reveal another actress who joins her on stage as they finish the chorus. "...my mother and my hope, do not forsake me."<sup>2</sup> The one-hour play of *Maryam: A Woman of Bethlehem* has begun.<sup>3</sup>

This play is the outcome of my Fulbright research project (Fall 2018) in Bethlehem, Palestinian Occupied Territories.<sup>4</sup> I taught at Dar Al Kalima University College of Arts (DAK) and Culture

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Sabia translation (in Comments) : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCLEufjLRgw>

<sup>2</sup> The great Fairouz recorded the entire "Ya Mariam al Bikr":  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tV4xj63QWJo&t=29s>

<sup>3</sup> Two years before I had created and directed another play *Mary/Maryam in Christian and Islamic Traditions* in Santa Cruz, Ca. to foster interfaith dialog between Christians and Muslims. It enacted the scriptures of Christianity and Islam. See segments of it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-e40UzKeR4>

<sup>4</sup> My great thanks to: the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program, Dar Al Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, Bethlehem, Palestine, the Palestinian women and men who generously allowed me to interview them, and Dr. Kathryn Poethig for her insightful comments on this Forward.

in Bethlehem, and interviewed thirty Palestinian Christians and Muslims, posing the initial question “who is Mary/Maryam in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bethlehem?” The Christian Mary, mother of Jesus, in Islam is Maryam, mother of Isa the prophet. She is deeply venerated in both communities. Palestinians offered their stories, speaking of their customs and daily lives using the iconic figure of Mary/Maryam. Memorably, at the opening of the play in the Q+A, a Palestinian man, with his arms around his two sons, said “...this play celebrates our women, we do not celebrate our women enough.”

All my interviews with Palestinians were conducted in English. I edited and then shaped them into *Maryam: A Woman of Bethlehem*. My collaborator, Hind Abu Shkhadim, then translated the play into Arabic. It was performed in Arabic, with English subtitles. I directed the first performance in Bethlehem, January 2019. The play toured seven cities in Palestine that spring. Two Palestinian actresses, Waad Azzeh and Dalia Shakhtour, depicted the twenty-two characters of the play. Nadeem Abulaban and Ayham Ayesh provided musical interludes on the kanoun, oud and percussion.

Palestinians were generally unfamiliar with this form of community theater. Often someone asked, who wrote the play? And each time, in the Q+A following, the actresses would respond, no one wrote it. These are all things said by Palestinians who were interviewed. Every word is theirs. *Maryam: A Woman of Bethlehem* “overhears” the voices of these twenty-two characters from Bethlehem who range in age from 14 to 87 years old: high school and college students, theologians, clergy and a sheik, a university dean, an iconographer of Mary, and two senior founders of a Christian Liberation Theology center among others. The Muslims were Sunni; Christians were Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic (called the Latin Patriarchate), Lutheran. In all, Christian and Muslim Palestinians offer their stories, speaking of their customs and daily lives using the iconic figure of Mary/Maryam.

Palestinians were generally unfamiliar with this form of community theater. Often someone asked, who wrote the play? And each time, in the Q+A following, the actresses would respond, no one wrote it. These are all things said by Palestinians who were interviewed. Every word is theirs. Memorably, at the opening of the play in the Q+A, a Palestinian man, with his arms around his two sons, said “...this play celebrates our women, we do not celebrate our women enough.” During the play’s tour of Palestine, a woman at Al Kasabeh Theater in Ramallah said “Before the play Mary was something untouchable and significant, and after the play, I felt that any woman who is doing exceptional things, or doing things differently, could be Mary.”

It is crucial for non-Palestinians and those unfamiliar with Muslim or Christian stories to understand Bethlehem as religious geography and differing stories of Mary.

While Muslims and Christians share Mary/Maryam, the birth narrative differs. Bethlehem’s central holiday is Christmas and its pilgrims represent global Christianity. The Bethlehem of Christmas carols and the contemporary town are very different. The centerpiece of Bethlehem is Manger Square, a large limestone plaza where the ancient Church of the Nativity and Mosque of Omar face each other, flanked by souvenir stores and pilgrimage churches (Ethiopian, Arab Orthodox, Roman Catholic). Bethlehem is just 6.2 miles south of Jerusalem. Yet with checkpoints and the Occupation Wall, Bethlehem is now cut off and encircled by illegal Israeli

settlements. While formerly a Christian-dominant city, the Christian population is waning. In 1948 when Israel was founded, 86 percent of Bethlehem and surroundings were Christian. Today, 12 percent of some 30,000 inhabitants are Christian. The majority population are Sunni Muslim.

Bethlehem is Jesus's birthplace. But it is his mother who dominates the city's icons, holy sites, and affections of local Palestinian Christians and Muslims. In fact, in my interviews, I would ask, how does Mary as a Jewish woman complicate her 21<sup>st</sup> century perception? Christians and Muslims alike said, not at all. They perceived her as Palestinian. Perhaps this is yet another effect of Israel's apartheid system that separates and divides people, history, traditions. But Palestinians know Mary/Maryam as a powerful mother of a powerful son living in Palestine, and therefore a Palestinian woman. Though the common Christian depiction of Mary is a faith-filled, obedient woman, in the play she is often referred to as a part of the resistance.

The Christians I interviewed were Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic (called the Latin Patriarchate), and Lutheran with quite different theologies of Mary, but they share the Christian story of Bethlehem. Mary is engaged to Joseph in Nazareth and learns from the angel Gabriel that she will conceive "by the spirit" and give birth to Jesus. Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem to register when the Roman emperor Augustus declares a census. Jesus is born in a stable and set in a manger "because there was no room in the inn." The site of that birth is now a tiny chamber in the Church of the Nativity. The hillside where angels appear to shepherds proclaiming Jesus' birth is now called "Shepherds Field" in Beit Sahour, adjacent to Bethlehem. When Mary and Joseph flee Bethlehem to Egypt because Herod will kill all the first-born boys in Bethlehem, they stop in a cave (the Milk Grotto) near the Church of the Nativity. There, legend has it that some of her breast milk falls on the ground and turns the cave walls white. Today, Christian and Muslim women with fertility problems make a tea from the white powder scraped from the cave.

In Islam, Maryam is different from the Christian Mary. She is a brave single mother, faith-filled, self-reliant, and courageous. Maryam is the only female figure named in the Qur'an and her name appears thirty-four times. Surah/chapter 19 is named after her. Unlike the Christian text, the Qur'an refers to Mary's parents and her own miraculous birth.<sup>5</sup> The Qur'anic story further depicts her as a pure young girl who prayed all day in her mihrab/prayer room. She was not engaged or married. The only person she communicates with was Zachariah (he is a prophet of Allah in the Qur'an). Similar to the Christian story, the angel Jibril/ Gabriel appears to her. Maryam conceives when the Spirit was breathed into her (21:91; 66:12). Unlike Christian Mary, Maryam withdraws alone to a "remote place" to give birth. (19:22).

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, "Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten." But he called her from below her, "Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be contented. And if you see from among humanity anyone, say, "Indeed, I have vowed to the Most Merciful abstention, so I will not speak today to [any] man.' "<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There is a parallel backstory on the conception of Mary and her growing up in the Christian Gnostic Infancy Gospel of James.

<sup>6</sup> Q19: 23—26. Sahih International translation of the Qur'an.

Maryam then gathers herself and the infant Isa/Jesus and returns to her village. When the villagers accuse her of being unchaste, she keeps her silence, but points to the infant who miraculously speaks for her, declaring he is a prophet and the dutiful son of his mother. And indeed, Isa, the son of Maryam/ Isa ibn Maryam is his name in many parts of the Qur'an.

While these differences in Mary/Maryam's Christian and Muslim narratives are generally known, Palestinian audiences were still astonished at her many interpretations found in the play. A Muslim woman at Al Kasabeh Theater in Ramallah said "Before the play Mary was something untouchable and significant, and after the play, I felt that any woman who is doing exceptional things, or doing things differently, could be Mary." A Birzeit University student remarked: "The play gave many opinions that as a Muslim I didn't know before. This makes me accept these different points of view in my community. These points of view exist in the community--- like the atheist ---and we are neglecting them, neglecting this reality. Also, we cannot assume that all Christians or all Muslims think the same. They have many points of view. Like this play."

Having returned from my six months in Palestine, I turn now to a different audience for our play—a U.S. version. Much of the background above will be incorporated into the U.S. script. It is my hope that with performances in the U.S. of *Maryam: A Woman of Bethlehem*, the resilient, courageous voices of the Palestinian people and their faith-filled traditions can be heard over the din of our senseless foreign policy and its blind support of Israel's apartheid occupation.

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