

## A WOMAN OF PARADISE: THE REBELLIOUS QUEEN OF PHARAOH, PART II

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**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 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 Lady Asiyah's famous sentence in Surah al-Tahrim has warranted from the gnostics (*urefā*) in exegetical commentaries by the likes of Allamah Tabatabai.

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<sup>1</sup>In some Sunni 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 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 in this article.

## Notable Points

### Celebrating righteous rebellion

In Part I of this article, we looked at a handful of commentaries of the verses from Surah al-Tahrim, and as such, we have been able to discuss various points from the traditions on Asiyah. Next, we would like to go through some lessons that can be derived from her example, bringing together the points mentioned in the *tafasir* we discussed in part one. After all, her being a source of emulation was the reason that God brought forth her example.

Lady Asiyah is a beautiful example of righteous rebellion. It is her defiance of her tyrannical husband that is her saving grace. This point is rather interesting considering that, in discourse concerning Muslim women, there is often the notion of the ideal Muslim woman being subdued, submissive, and obedient.

However, stories like that of Lady Asiyah make it clear that it is only in submission to God and righteousness that submissiveness is seen as a positive feature. With regard to oppressors like Pharaoh who work actively against God, active and righteous rebellion is celebrated and admired. This is the central feature that makes Lady Asiyah so great; that is, her active resistance against her husband in the path of monotheism. It is only in her submission to the One God that she is celebrated, not in her unquestioning submission to her husband, the tyrannical demagogue we know as Pharaoh. She fights the admirable “good” fight.

Rawand Osman, in her *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi'i Islam*, writes

As Allamah Tabataba'i noted...her words followed her heart, and therefore, it is possible that she sets an example for religio-political jihad. Asiya refused to submit to the highest political and religious power, and she withstood tyranny by being steadfast in her faith and prayer. Her jihad is not necessarily an outward one, yet it is the foundation for active jihad. Imam 'Ali said, "The first kind of jihad that will overpower you is the jihad of your hands, then of your tongues, then of your hearts. He whose heart neither knows right conduct nor disapproves of indecency has a heart that has been turned upside down". While jihad with words or actions may be deemed either inevitable or contingent, jihad with the heart is indispensable, and without it the human becomes misshapen.<sup>2</sup>

Her actions are reminiscent of the following verse of the Qur'an:

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَعْطُكُمْ بِوَاحِدَةٍ أَنْ تَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ مِثْلَ خِزْفٍ وَمَنْ يَنْصُرْكُمْ فَسَيَكُنْ فِي كَيْدِنَا وَمَنْ يَخْلُبْكُمْ فَيَكْفُرْ بِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ فَسَيَكُنْ فِي كَيْدِنَا وَسَيَكُنْ فِي كَيْدِنَا  
عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ

*Say, 'I give you just a single advice: that you rise up for Allah's sake, in pairs or singly, and then reflect: there is no madness in your companion; he is just a warner to you before [the befalling of] a severe punishment.'* (Qur'an 34:46).

<sup>2</sup> Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi'i Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 63-64.

When we read this verse alongside the tradition we narrated in Part I in which Pharaoh accuses Asiyah of being mad and crazy, Asiyah's rising seems all the more in line with the Qur'anic spirit of rebellion and movement for the sake of God.

### **A woman's independence in her destiny**

Another point that can be taken from Asiyah's story is her spiritual independence and autonomy. Even though she is the wife of Pharaoh, her spiritual reality has nothing to do with him; they are spiritually polar opposites. One of the pivotal messages that the Qur'an emphasizes is that one's destiny and spirituality is in one's own hands. In Part I, we saw that Al-Tabari particularly noted the tradition that mentions this spiritual autonomy, and cited the verses of the Qur'an that allude to God's ultimate justice. Regardless of who your spouse is, your actions are your own and you alone will be answerable for them. This idea is mentioned in several verses of the Qur'an:

ثُمَّ تُؤَفَّىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

*...then every soul shall be recompensed fully for what it has earned, and they will not be wronged (Qur'an 3:161).*

الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ لَا ظُلْمَ الْيَوْمَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ  
الْحِسَابِ

*Today every soul shall be requited for what it has earned. There will be no injustice today. Indeed Allah is swift at reckoning (Qur'an, 40:17).*

وَلَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ إِلَّا عَلَيْهَا وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ثُمَّ  
إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

*No soul does evil except against itself, and no bearer shall bear another's burden; then to your Lord will be your return, whereat He will inform you concerning that about which you used to differ (Qur'an, 6:164).*

The phrase “no bearer shall bear another's burden” is quoted by al-Tabari in his commentary in relation to Asiyah's independence from Pharaoh's actions. The phrase is mentioned on four different occasions in the Qur'an. Two of them include:

مَنْ اهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا  
وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ مَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّىٰ نَبْعَثَ رَسُولًا

*Whoever is guided is guided only for [the good of] his own soul, and whoever goes astray, goes astray only to its detriment. No bearer shall bear another's burden. We do not punish [any community] until We have sent [it] an apostle (Qur'an, 17:15).*

وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ وَإِن تَدْعُ مُثْقَلَةٌ إِلَىٰ حِمْلِهَا لَا يُحْمَلْ  
مِنْهُ شَيْءٌ وَلَوْ كَانَ ذَا قُرْبَىٰ إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُمْ  
بِالْغَيْبِ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَمَنْ تَزَكَّىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَتَزَكَّىٰ لِنَفْسِهِ وَإِلَى  
اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ

*No bearer shall bear another's burden, and should someone heavily burdened call [another] to carry it, nothing of it will be carried [by anyone] even if he should be a near relative. You can only warn those who fear their Lord in secret and maintain the prayer.*

*Whoever purifies himself, purifies only for his own sake,  
and to Allah is the return (Qur'an, 35:18).*

The meaning of these verses is self-evident.<sup>3</sup> In chapter al-Tahrim, this message is brought forth very specifically, albeit in a different way, taking into account examples of women who were independent in their destinies. The chapter begins by reprimanding the prophets' wives for their behaviour; just because they are the prophets' wives does not mean they are absolved of their unrighteous conduct. The chapter ends by giving the examples of four women, two of whom were doomed to hell because of their unrighteous behaviour, even though they were the Prophet's wives and women of God:

ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا امْرَأَتَ نُوحٍ وَامْرَأَتَ لُوطٍ كَانَتَا  
تَحْتَ عَبْدَيْنِ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا صَالِحِينَ فَخَانَتَاهُمَا فَلَمْ يُغْنِيَا عَنْهُمَا  
مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا وَقِيلَ ادْخُلَا النَّارَ مَعَ الدَّاخِلِينَ

*Allah cites an example of the faithless: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of our righteous servants, yet they betrayed them. So they did not avail them in any way against Allah, and it was said [to them], 'Enter the Fire, along with those who enter [it]' (Qur'an, 66:10).*

Finally, it gives the examples of the two women who were righteous: Lady Asiyah—a woman of paradise despite her husband's doom to the hellfire—and Lady Maryam—an unmarried woman who achieved her station through her own actions and worship prior to her son, Prophet

<sup>3</sup> The phrase is also mentioned in Q.39:7 and Q. 6:164.

Jesus's, birth. Gender and relationships did not help or hurt these women in their path to God; rather, it was their beliefs, actions, and efforts that defined them and absolved or cursed them.

### Rejection of material wealth

Another admirable point about Lady Asiyah is her rejection of material wealth, a point that Allamah Tabatabai expands on. It is easy to accept faith when one is disenfranchised and has nothing to lose. A much more meaningful test is when one has everything to lose by embracing the faith and embraces it nevertheless. Despite losing their family, wealth, and life, they submit to God—this is precisely what Lady Asiyah paid for professing her faith in God. Although she was the Queen of Egypt, she rejected the position of power, wealth, and glory, for she saw something that was better: proximity to Allah. She rejected every possible material pleasure to have something was more worthy in her eyes, which was nothing other than a home in paradise in proximity to her Lord.

Her rejection of material wealth and her request for a home with God are reminiscent of the following two verses of the Qur'an:

وَلَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ أَزْوَاجًا مِّنْهُمْ زَهْرَةَ الْحَيَاةِ  
الدُّنْيَا لِنَفْسِنَهُمْ فِيهِ وَرِزْقُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ

*Do not extend your glance toward what We have provided certain groups of them as a glitter of the life of this world, so that We may test them thereby. The provision of your Lord is better and more lasting (Qur'an 20:131).*

وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِّنْ شَيْءٍ فَمَتَّعِ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا وَزَيَّنَّا لَهَا وَمَا عِنْدَ  
 اللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

*Whatever things you have been given are only the wares of the life of this world and its glitter, and what is with Allah is better and more lasting. Will you not exercise your reason? (Qur'an 28:60)*

The first verse mentions the “provision of your Lord”, which evokes the image of the home that Lady Asiyah requested—a home or shelter being one of the most basic types of provisions. The second verse mentions the same idea regarding that which is “with” or “before” (*inda*) God. Indeed, Lady Asiyah applied reason: she knew that what was with her Lord was better and longer lasting than the “glitter of the life of this world”. The phrase *al-hayat al-dunya*, referring to the material world, literally means “the lower life”. She chose the higher life and rejected the lower one. The lower life, the *al-hayat al-dunya* was nothing but material wealth and power.

### **Asking for a home**

What is beautiful is the type of provision Lady Asiyah asks God for in verse 11 of chapter al-Tahrim. *Bayt* in Arabic generally means home. She implores God for a true home, a place of refuge in proximity to Him. In *al-Tahqiq fi Kalimat al-Qur'an*, Hasan Mustafawi says that *bayt* originally means staying somewhere during the night.<sup>4</sup> This is also the term that God chose to describe the ka'ba. In 3:96, He says, “Indeed the

<sup>4</sup>Hasan Mustafawi, *Al-Tahqiq fi Kalimat al-Qur'an*, Volume 1, 358. Accessed with *Jami al-Tafasir*, NOOR Software.

first house to be set up for mankind is the one at Bakkah<sup>5</sup>, blessed and a guidance for all nations.” The word ‘home’ denotes a place of rest and refuge, and as such, it is reasonable that Asiyah would ask for such a place from the tiring oppression she was suffering from. It also makes sense that ‘bayt’ be the term that God would choose for His house, the kaaba, as the first place designated for worship for mankind. After all, it is beyond no doubt that worship and refuge with God is the best type of rest and refuge. The special relationship that night has with worship makes the word *bayt* even more appropriate in this usage.

That Lady Asiyah asked for a home is extremely thought-provoking as it is clear that in this world she was a spiritual refugee; her only home was that of her husband’s—a place that was not her own, and neither could she be comfortable in it. In the verse, she specifically asks for a house for herself (*li*), and, considering how she had no home of her own in this world, it is not surprising that she ask for a house in heaven where she could truly be free to express her beliefs and be comfortable. After all, what is a home without comfort and autonomy?

In relation to this, Osman makes an interesting point. The only other time *ibne li* (build for me) is mentioned in the Qur’an is from none other than Asiyah’s husband, the Pharaoh himself. She writes:

It is interesting that request that God build her a home in heaven, is similar in form only to Pharaoh’s words, “Pharaoh said, ‘Ha-ma-n, build for me a tower, that haply so I may reach the cords, the cords of the heavens, and look upon Moses’ God; for I think that he is a liar”

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<sup>5</sup> The ancient name of Mecca.

[40: 36–7]. While she asked God for a home near Himself, Pharaoh asked Ha-ma-n for a tower that he may go to the heaven and check if Moses' God really exists. These verses not only show Asiya's faith, but the contrast with the silliness of Pharaoh's words reveals a disparity in their understanding of Moses' message.<sup>6</sup>

### Her status as martyr

In addition to the reasons stated above for her lofty status, Lady Asiyah achieved the status of becoming a martyr—a status considered to be of utmost importance and value in Islam. The word *shahid*, meaning both “witness” and “martyr”, could also denote the spiritual visions in which Lady Asiyah witnessed paradise. In gnostic literature, *shuhud* refers to spiritual visions of reality. However, she was also a martyr. Recognizing her as a martyr who gave up her life in the way of God is an interesting way to think of one of the four women of Paradise; Lady Asiyah and Lady Fatimah, according to the popular Shi'i view,<sup>7</sup> are the two women from among these four whom have become martyrs in the path of God. Regarding those who have been slain in the way of God, the Qur'an says:

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ فَرِحِينَ بِمَا آتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَيَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَلْحَقُوا بِهِمْ مَنْ خَلْفَهُمْ أَلَّا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

<sup>6</sup> Osman, 63–64.

<sup>7</sup> According to the most common view of Twelver-Shi'i's, the Lady Fatimah died as a result to injuries to her rib.

*Do not suppose those who were slain in the way of Allah to be dead; no, they are living and provided for near their Lord, exulting in what Allah has given them out of His grace, and rejoicing for those who have not yet joined them from [those left] behind them, that they will have no fear, nor will they grieve (Qur'an 3:169–170).*

The verse evokes an image very much in concordance with verse eleven of Surah al-Tahrim, where we are left with no doubt that Lady Asiyah lives provided for by her Lord.

### **Conclusion**

There are numerous lessons we can take from the examples or *mathal* that God has provided us with in the Qur'an. As guidance is the Qur'an's primary goal, we need to focus on these examples for their relevance to our lives and the ways in which they are meaningful lessons in our path to achieving God's pleasure. Although not much has been said about Lady Asiyah in our *tafsir* and hadith literature, we have enough to paint a vague picture of her life and the torture she undertook under the tyrannical reign of Pharaoh. We have more than enough to benefit from her being brought forth as an example, and there is much to admire of her unrelenting piety.

With the limited resources available to us, we can still gain an accurate idea of the status that she reached with God and learn from her life in several ways, some of which we have noted here. She has been used as an example by many in her plight for the freedom of her faith under an arrogant husband, and her righteous rebellion in the service of God serves as an example that we can hopefully emulate. Understanding that

our destiny is in our own hands, that our actions are ours alone, and that having a husband who is a demagogue and tyrant should not be a barrier to our faith is indeed inspiring. It should come as no surprise then that the rebellious Queen of Pharaoh is one of the women of paradise.

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