

Reading Mary alongside Maryam

By [Vicki Garlock](#)

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We were seated on chairs arranged in a circle in the aptly named Hospitality Room, men and women from Iran, Indonesia, Egypt, Japan, and the U.S. We were reading the Qur'an. Some were Muslims who many people would not consider Muslim; others were Christians who many people would not consider Christian. It was our semester-long Qur'an study group at [Jubilee! Community Church in Asheville, North Carolina](#). What we all had in common was a commitment to understanding the texts, practices, and beliefs of the others in the room.

Each December, I find myself thinking about those sessions. With Ramadan currently falling in the summer months, our connections to Islam can easily get lost in the winter holiday shuffle. That's somewhat ironic, since the story of the conception and birth of Isa (Jesus) to Maryam (Mary) is found in numerous passages. In fact, there is an entire *surah* (chapter) in the Qur'an titled "Maryam."

There is also a version of the story of Jesus' birth in the Islamic text *Qisas Al-Anbiya*. I was able to find an English translation by Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. as *Tales of the Prophets*. Though it is not scripture, the chapter "Jesus son of Mary" includes portions that relate directly to verses in the Qur'an:

When her days were accomplished, [Mary] went out into the wilderness by night and sat under a dry tree, which became verdant for her time. God also brought forth for her a spring of clear, running water. Yet when her pains became great, she said, "Would to God I had died before this and had become a thing forgotten, and lost in oblivion."

And he who was beneath her called to her, saying, "Be not grieved: now hath God provided a rivulet under thee." . . .

Jesus spoke to him [Mary's uncle] from the cradle and said, "Verily I am the servant of God; he hath given me the book of the gospel, and hath appointed me a prophet. And peace be on me the day whereon I was born, and the day whereon I shall die, and the day whereon I shall be raised to life."

Those of us in the Hospitality Room reading about Maryam couldn't have guessed at the headlines a year and a half later. On the one hand, we have Pope Francis speaking to huge crowds in Kenya as he [spreads a message of humility, peace, cross-cultural understanding, and interfaith dialogue](#). On the other hand, we have Donald Trump speaking to huge crowds in the U.S. as he [spreads a message of fear, prejudice, stereotyping, and hate](#).

Meanwhile, the type of Christian-Muslim dialogue we practiced in our Qur'an study group is happening, formally or informally, every day all over the world. In our study group, we spent much of our time exploring themes and characters found both in the Qur'an and the Bible. Because the Qur'an is poetic rather than narrative, references to core people and events are woven throughout the text.

There are *ayahs* (verses) about Allah creating the heavens, the earth, and Adam from clay. There is the story of Ibrahim (Abraham) being asked to sacrifice his son (Ishmael, in this case). And various Hebrew Bible figures, like Nuh (Noah), Ya'qub (Jacob), Ayyub (Job), Musa (Moses), and Dawud (David), are mentioned reverently. In all cases, the essential qualities of these biblical heroes are identical to what we learn through Christianity, even if the narrative details vary.

One widely used approach for such groups is [scriptural reasoning](#). Originally formulated by theologians and religious philosophers, SR has grown into a method of promoting interfaith dialogue and facilitating mutual understanding. There are guidelines available for starting your own group and text bundles that have been successfully used by others.

Here are other resources I've found valuable:

- [Searchable Qur'an](#). Type in a keyword/name, select a translation, and see what the Qur'an says. You can also search the Hadith, a record of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings.
- [Quranic Arabic Corpus](#). Enter a chapter and verse and make side-by-side comparisons of seven different English translations.

- *Approaching the Qur'an: Early Revelations*, by Michael Sells. I've heard Muslims and Christians praise this book. It translates key passages and adds great notes and explanations.
- [*The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*](#). Muslim-American academics and others heralded this recently published Qur'an, with commentary by Shi'ite and Sunni scholars. Daniel Burke, CNN's religion editor, thinks it [may even curb extremism](#).
- [Faith Seeker Kids](#). The organization I founded for interfaith children's education explores [the stories of Jesus' conception](#) and [birth](#) in both the Bible and Islamic texts.

This is grassroots interfaith work; it puts neighbors in dialogue with each other. It brings together those of us whose carts bump at the supermarket, whose children play on the same soccer field, who feel the same shock and horror when innocent people are gunned down. Starting these kinds of efforts doesn't need to wait until Ramadan. Christmas offers a perfect opportunity.