

## Article

# Mary's Prophethood Reassessed: Overlooked Medieval Islamic Perspectives in Contemporary Scholarship <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a reevaluation of contemporary Western scholarship concerning the historical discourse on Mary's prophethood within Islamic tradition. Recent research has primarily focused on Andalusian scholars, such as Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī, and has neglected an essential aspect: the acknowledgement of Mary's prophethood by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, one of the founders of Orthodox Sunni theology. As a result, modern studies have reached conclusions lacking a solid foundation, due to their failure to consider this significant perspective. By incorporating this overlooked perspective, this study seeks to provide a more thorough and coherent understanding of the historical debates surrounding Mary's prophethood.

**Keywords:** Mary; Maryam; prophethood; gender and Islam; Ibn Ḥazm; al-Qurṭubī; al-Ash'arī; Ibn Fūrak; Ash'ariyya; Māturīdiyya



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## 1. Introduction

Mary's prophethood was a topic of medieval Islamic debate. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), a prominent polymath from Andalusia, passionately argued for the possibility of prophethood for women and designated four notable women mentioned in the Qur'an as prophetesses. These were Pharaoh's wife (known as Āsiya in Islamic sources), Moses' mother, Abraham's wife Sarah (Sāra), and Jesus' mother Mary (Maryam). Another scholar who emphasized Mary's prophethood was al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), a renowned exegete of Andalusian origin. In contrast, notable Qur'anic commentators like al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1319) promptly dismissed the concept of Mary's prophethood without providing detailed explanations.

The medieval debate surrounding Mary's prophethood has received attention from contemporary Western researchers. However, the modern studies in the West, as I will demonstrate in this paper, concentrate on the scholars of Andalusian origin, such as Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī, and they are unaware of the fact that prominent scholars from the East also supported Mary's prophethood, such as Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 935/6), a key figure in Orthodox Sunni theology, and his Ash'arī followers. As a result, contemporary research on the topic, which has reached conclusions founded on insufficient information, should be reevaluated in light of this overlooked aspect. This study contributes to this scholarly discussion by highlighting material that has been overlooked, and thereby offers a comprehensive understanding of the historical debates surrounding Mary's prophethood in both medieval and pre-modern periods. By filling in this gap, this work should lead to more well-founded conclusions in future studies on the topic.

In the following section, I will briefly examine the arguments in support of Mary's prophethood by Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī, both considered by certain modern scholars to be representatives of medieval "Western" Islam, as well as their critique by Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), a celebrated exegete, historian and traditionist. Then, in the next section, I will elucidate how contemporary scholars have arrived at broad conclusions based only on

Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī. In the following section, I will present information missing from contemporary scholarship, exploring al-Ash’arī’s ideas on Mary’s prophethood and the debates between two orthodox theological schools, al-Ash’ariyya and al-Māturīdiyya. Finally, I will reassess contemporary studies on Mary’s prophethood by incorporating the overlooked information and placing it in a new light.

## 2. The Prophethood of Women in “Western” Medieval Islamic Scholars and Its Critique

When considering the discourse on female prophethood, the first names that come to mind are Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī, both of whom hail from Andalusia. These scholars are notable for their extensive writings in support of the concept of Mary’s prophethood. It appears that Ibn Ḥazm was motivated by historical Andalusian debates on female prophethood.<sup>1</sup> It is highly likely that al-Qurṭubī, being aware of these debates, found it necessary to take a stance when providing commentary on the Qur’anic verses relating to Mary. Another notable personality from Andalusia who recognized Mary as a prophetess was the well-known Sufi, Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240); however, his acknowledgment has not garnered substantial attention in contemporary studies, likely due to its brevity.

In the 10th and 11th centuries in Andalusia, Muslim scholars engaged in intense debates concerning whether Mary should be recognized as a prophetess. Disagreements over the issue led to public unrest in Cordoba, ultimately resulting in the exile of scholars from both sides (Fierro 2002, p. 184). After some time, Ibn Ḥazm, who had witnessed the dispute in his youth, addressed the controversy in his comprehensive encyclopedic work, *al-Faṣl* (or *al-Fiṣal*). He outlined three main positions that had emerged during the controversy: one group rejected the concept of female prophethood, another advocated for it, and a third group remained undecided (Ibn Ḥazm n.d., vol. 5, p. 12).

Those who opposed female prophethood often cited Qur’anic verses like Q. 12:109, Q. 16:43 and Q. 21:7, which state, “We sent no messenger (*mā arsalnā*) before you [Muhammad] except men (*rijāl*).” Ibn Ḥazm challenged this argument by distinguishing between the Qur’anic terms “*risālah*” (messengership) and “*nubuwwah*” (prophethood). He argued that these verses referred to messengership, not prophethood. Based on the linguistic analysis of the term, he defined *nubuwwah* as the ability to receive divine messages (Ibid.). While the Qur’an does not inherently differentiate between the terms *nabī* and *rāsūl*, scholars generally draw a distinction between them. *Rāsūls* are seen as messengers who are given a religious law (*sharī'a*) in the form of scriptures, whereas *nabīs* are considered prophets who receive divine messages, but do not have their own *sharī'a*; rather, they adhere to the one given to the *rāsūls* (Kerr and Calis 2013, vol. 2, pp. 113–14).

Ibn Ḥazm’s interpretation of *nubuwwah*, defined as the capacity to receive divine messages, allowed him to extend the concept of prophethood to both men and women. He justified this position with specific Qur’anic verses that explicitly state that certain women were capable of receiving divine messages. For instance, he considered Moses’ mother a prophetess, based on Q. 28:7, which mentions her receiving a revelation (*wahy*). He also regarded Sarah, the wife of the Prophet Abraham, as a prophetess because she received divine messages through angels, as indicated in verses 11:71–73 and 51:29. Mary was, likewise, recognized as a prophetess, due to her receipt of divine communication through the appearance of an angel, as described in the Qur’an (Q. 3:42–47; Q. 19:17–21). Ibn Ḥazm even believed that Pharaoh’s wife, known as Āsiya in hadith sources, who protected Moses, attained the status of a prophetess, based on statements of praise in a hadith (Ibn Ḥazm n.d., vol. 5, p. 13). In the hadith in question, the Prophet is reported to have stated that both Mary and Āsiya reached *kamāl* (perfection) (Al-Bukhārī 2001, vol. 4, p. 158). According to Ibn Ḥazm, *kamāl* means prophethood because the perfect state for a human being is being a prophet.

Al-Qurṭubī presents the idea that Mary held the status of a prophet in his commentary on Qur’anic verse Q. 3:42<sup>2</sup> (Al-Qurṭubī 1964, vol. 4, pp. 83–84). He concludes that Mary should be recognized as a prophetess because she had direct communication with God through the angel Gabriel, as clearly stated in the Qur’an. Another key piece of evidence

from the Qur'an is the description of Mary as *siddīqa*, signifying her truthfulness and her unquestioning acceptance of God's plan without the need for a sign.<sup>3</sup> This quality distinguishes her from other (including male) prophets.

In addition to his discussion of Qur'anic verses, al-Qurṭubī refers to hadiths that underscore Mary's exalted status in Islamic tradition. Regarding the hadith that mentions Mary and Āsiya as having achieved *kamāl* (perfection), he emphasizes that the highest-ranking humans are prophets; therefore, the use of the word *kamāl* in the hadith implies prophethood (*nubuwwah*). However, as there are no verses explicitly stating that Āsiya received divine messages, as did Mary, this "perfection" does not imply Āsiya's prophethood. Al-Qurṭubī also cites other hadiths that highlight Mary as one of the most outstanding women in all of creation, alongside Āsiya, Khadija (the Prophet's wife), and Fātima (the Prophet's daughter). He goes on to assert that Mary is the most perfect woman from the beginning to the end of time, surpassing even some male prophets (Ibid.).

Another figure of Andalusian origin, the renowned Ibn al-'Arabī, also acknowledges Mary as a prophetess. In a brief statement found in his *Futuhāt*, Ibn al-'Arabī notes,

The Prophet said, "Many among men reached perfection while among women Mary, daughter of 'Imrān, and Āsiya, the wife of the Pharaoh [reached perfection]." Men and women share the same rank of perfection, with men surpassing in the utmost perfection (*akmaliyya*) if not in perfection (*kamāliyya*). In other words, both men and women attain perfection through prophethood (*nubuwwah*), but men surpass in messengership (*risālah*) and mission (*bi'tha*)". (Ibn al-'Arabī 1911, vol. 3, pp. 88–89)

Clearly, Ibn al-'Arabī, like Ibn Ḥazm, interprets *nubuwwah* as divine communication devoid of preaching, as he deems the responsibility to preach (*bi'tha*) to be a part of *risālah* and attributes it specifically to men. Throughout his writings, he consistently addresses the concept of gender equality and advocates for the accessibility of spiritual roles (including the role of prophet, as seen here) to both men and women. He emphasizes the inclusivity of spiritual stations and degrees for individuals of all genders, rejecting the idea that specific roles are exclusively designated for one gender or the other (Chodkiewicz 1995, pp. 108–10).

In contrast to the brief dismissal of Mary's prophethood by renowned Qur'anic commentators such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and al-Bayḍāwī, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) offers a more detailed rebuttal. In his commentary on verses like Q. 5:75 and Q. 12:109, he challenges the concept of female prophecy by highlighting verses that appear to designate messengership exclusively to men. While critiquing scholars like Ibn Ḥazm, who argued for female prophethood based on Qur'anic accounts of divine communication with women like Sarah, Moses' mother, and Mary, Ibn Kathīr argues that, despite their esteemed positions, these women did not meet the criteria for prophethood according to Sunni orthodoxy (Ibn Kathīr 1999, vol. 3, pp. 158–59 and vol. 4, pp. 422–23). According to him, the divine communication received by these Qur'anic women differed from the "prophetic revelation" received by the prophets. For instance, he interprets the *wāḥid* received by Moses' mother, mentioned in Q. 28:7, as "inspiration" (*ilhām*) rather than "divine revelation" (Ibn Kathīr 1986, vol. 1, p. 239). Additionally, he emphasizes that, although Mary is highly regarded, the Qur'an depicts her as a righteous woman (*siddīqa*) rather than a prophet. Interestingly, Ibn Kathīr portrays Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī as opposing female prophecy, and credits him with mentioning a "consensus" (*ijmā'*) within Sunni orthodoxy against female prophecy (Ibn Kathīr 1986, vol. 1, p. 239 and vol. 2, p. 59; Ibn Kathīr 1999, vol. 3, p. 143 and vol. 4, p. 362). This is intriguing because al-Ash'arī takes a contrary stance, as I will demonstrate in this study. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Ibn Kathīr, a leading traditionalist recognized for his critique of rationalist theology like Ash'arism,<sup>4</sup> rarely cites al-Ash'arī's ideas in his *Tafsīr*, except on a few occasions when he aims to support his own positions. Consequently, Ibn Kathīr's misrepresentation of al-Ash'arī can be interpreted as an effort to garner public support for the rejection of female prophecy.

In summary, Ibn Ḥazm's analysis is deeply rooted in a linguistic examination of the Qur'an and Hadith. He views *nubuwwah* as divine communication, and his conclusions

are influenced by his literalist approach to the verses. This approach allows him to extend prophethood to women, and he supports his arguments with Qur'anic verses and hadiths. Al-Qurtubī emphasizes Mary's wholehearted acceptance of God's message, along with the divine messages she received through interactions with the Angel Gabriel. His argument is firmly grounded in the overall portrayal of Mary in the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions, depicting her as a figure of exceptionally high spiritual standing. This elevated spiritual status places her above other female figures in the Qur'an, and even above some male prophets. Ibn al-'Arabī bases his argument for Mary's prophethood on his brief interpretation of the concept of *kamāl* in the hadith, understanding it as indicative of prophecy. Ibn Kathīr's dissent, on the other hand, stems from the absence of explicit statements in the Qur'an and Hadith that designate Mary and other women as prophetesses.

### 3. Contemporary Scholarship on Mary's Prophethood

Contemporary scholars who explore the historical Islamic discussions regarding Mary's prophethood have arrived at diverse conclusions touching upon broad themes such as gender roles in Islam, distinctions between the Islamic West and East, and variations within different Islamic theological and scholarly traditions. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all these contemporary scholars draw their conclusions based on inadequate information, as they are unaware of discussions on the subject that took place in the Islamic East and among Orthodox Sunni scholars. In this section, I will offer a review of the selected literature on this topic.

Some studies interpret the medieval debates on Mary's prophethood as representing a significant theological divide within Islam. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, for instance, asserts that the Marian prophethood defended by Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurtubī was strongly rejected as a "heretical innovation" by the "consensus-based Sunni theology" (Stowasser 1994, p. 77).<sup>5</sup> Stowasser argues that this rejection was grounded in the authority of verses 12:109 and 16:43, as well as in considerations of purity. She states,

In orthodox definition, purity includes (constant) physical purity, a state unattainable to women because of menstruation. This legalistic notion has informed scripturalist interpretation of the issue of Mary's prophethood and also the definition of Mary's Qur'an-proclaimed purity. (Ibid.)

However, Stowasser's argument lacks specific citations to substantiate her assertions, leaving her viewpoint unsupported in scholarly discussion.

Aliah Schleifer offers a comprehensive examination of varying perspectives on the topic of Marian prophecy among Muslim scholars, presenting arguments from both proponents and opponents. Notable figures discussed include Ibn Ḥazm, al-Qurtubī, Ibn Kathīr, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, along with others whom she identifies as remaining silent on the matter, such as Ibn al-'Arabī and Rūzbihān Baqlī.<sup>6</sup> Upon evaluation of these viewpoints, she presents her own conclusion, stating that,

The strongest and most cohesive arguments have been put forward by those who accept Mary's prophethood, as they are clearly based on a logical understanding of the Qur'anic passages and the sound hadiths, while those who reject her prophethood have used arguments which appear to be unconvincing, or even specious. (Schleifer 1998, p. 93)

Schleifer identifies multiple flaws in the argument opposing Mary's prophethood, which relies on the Qur'anic verses (Q. 12:109, Q. 16:43 and Q. 21:7) that specify messengers as men. First, it assumes that there is no distinction between a prophet (*nabi*) and a messenger (*rasūl*), which is not necessarily true, as the verses specifically refer to messengers. Second, it takes the phrase out of context by focusing on the word *rijāl* (men), when the intention could have been to emphasize that messengers were ordinary human beings inspired by God, rather than angels or other creatures. Third, it wrongly interprets *rijāl* to exclusively mean males, when in Arabic, as in English, the masculine form can be inclusive of both genders (Schleifer 1998, p. 75). Emphasizing Mary's inclusion in the

Qur'an in both a chapter named after her and alongside other prophets in the Chapter al-Anbiyā' (Prophets), Schleifer concludes that Mary "had the attributes and the experiences of prophets, and there is no satisfactory argument against her having achieved their status, she should be logically classified as a prophetess, although this should not be regarded as proven beyond dispute" (p. 94).

Maribel Fierro focuses on the polemics surrounding female prophecy in tenth and eleventh century Andalusia. She contributes to the discussion by contextualizing the debate within Islamic theological disputes and the historical developments of the time, when Christian conversions to Islam peaked (Fierro 2002, pp. 183–98). Focusing on the views of Ibn Hazm and al-Qurtubī, she explains how this debate was a part of broader theological discussions regarding the nature of miracles and their attribution to prophets versus saints. She emphasizes that the Andalusian debate on female prophecy did not necessarily reflect a higher status of women in Andalusian society, but rather arose during a period of significant Christian conversion to Islam. This context may have led scholars to designate Mary as a prophetess in order to emphasize her prophetic status as a point of similarity between Islam and Christianity, despite the theological differences regarding her "divine" role as the "mother of God".

Hosn Abboud reads the debate as the result of distinctions between the Islamic "East" and "West" in terms of their approach to gender. She focuses on the interpretations of Andalusian scholars like Ibn Hazm and al-Qurtubī, who viewed women as potential prophets, as opposed to Eastern exegetes who did not share this belief, such as al-Tabarī, al-Rāzī, and al-Zamakhsharī (Abboud 2014, pp. 130–47).<sup>7</sup> Emphasizing the influence of societal factors, such as the status of women, on these Eastern and Western interpretations, Abboud suggests that Andalusian scholars were more open to the idea of female prophecy, due to the relatively high status of women in their societies. She concludes that "Western" scholars advocated a pro-woman stance, while "Eastern" scholars adopted an "androcentric" approach. She states, "By excluding Maryam's prophethood, traditional exegetes excluded women from religious authority in general and deprived them of claiming their spiritual equal rights" (p. 147).

M. Zakyi Ibrahim also extensively examines Ibn Hazm's theory regarding female prophecy, ultimately concluding that "even though logically argued according to his literalist propensity, [his theory] lacks sufficient proof ..." and the "Qur'ān does not support his [Ibn Hazm's] conclusions" (Ibrahim 2015, p. 97). Ibrahim also brings attention to the alleged "Western" inclination to accept the concept of female prophecy, incorporating the viewpoint of another commentator from Andalusia, Abū Hayyān (d. 1344). However, Ibrahim wrongly interprets Abū Hayyān as stating "that not only was Maryam a prophet by the simple fact of God's inspiration, but also, a prophet/messenger [*rasūl*] by just as clear a declaration" (Ibid., pp. 92–93).<sup>8</sup>

A comprehensive study regarding Mary's prophecy was published by Younus Y. Mirza, in which he discusses the writings of Ibn Hazm and al-Qurtubī, which advocate for the notion of Mary's prophethood, and the writings of Ibn Kathīr, which counter the notion. In his conclusion, Mirza challenges the perspective that sees a dichotomy between Eastern and Western Muslim scholars in their approach to women. He further attributes the fact that Mary's prophethood was not widely accepted by Muslim scholars due to the popularity of Ibn Kathīr's commentary in Islamic scholarship. He states, "Attitudes towards Mary's prophetic status could have been entirely different if al-Qurtubī's *Tafsīr* had become more widespread, and overtaken Ibn Kathīr's in popularity" (Mirza 2021, p. 86).

Certain contemporary works make attempts to substantiate Mary's prophethood by portraying scholars who do not explicitly assert that Mary is a prophet as implicit supporters of her prophethood based on their overall perspectives. For instance, in the book *Mary in the Qur'an*, the authors exert significant effort to identify scholars outside the confines of the Andalusian context who endorse the idea of Marian prophecy. Moreover, they interpret al-Ghazzālī's (d. 1111) incorporation of Mary among the prophets in his

renowned work, *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, as his subtle endorsement of Mary’s status as a prophet ([Tatari and Stosch 2021](#), pp. 231–32).

#### 4. Mary’s Prophethood in Abū Al-Hasan Al-Ash’arī and “Eastern” Scholars

It is interesting that all the contemporary studies mentioned so far seem to have neglected a crucial detail—namely, that Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī (d. 935/6), one of the founders of the orthodox theology, regarded Mary as a prophetess, as he emphasized the prophethood of four women mentioned in the Qur’ān. This idea was attributed to al-Ash’arī by Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Hasan Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015/6), a renowned theologian who compiled al-Ash’arī’s teachings. Ibn Fūrak states,

[Al-Ash’arī] used to differentiate between the prophet (*nabī*) and messenger (*rasūl*) and say, “Every messenger is a prophet but every prophet is not a messenger. There were four prophetesses (*nabiyyāt*) among women, but there was no messenger (*rasūl*) among them,” in accordance with the verse “We have sent [*irsāl*] no one before you except men,” and with the hadith “There were four prophetesses among women.” In this way, he used to combine between the verse and the hadith. ([Al-Ash’arī 1987](#), p. 174)

Several points merit discussion regarding this statement by Ibn Fūrak. First, should we question the authenticity of this idea attributed to al-Ash’arī by Ibn Fūrak, given that it does not appear in al-Ash’arī’s extant works? There are compelling reasons not to doubt the authenticity of the idea. To begin with, Ibn Fūrak was a prominent theologian who compiled al-Ash’arī’s teachings. He is considered an important figure who systematized and transmitted al-Ash’arī’s thoughts, along with Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), who was his contemporary and fellow student. He lived in a time period that was close to al-Ash’arī’s era, and attended the lectures of his disciples, such as Abū al-Hasan al-Bāhilī and Ibn Mujāhid al-Tā’ī.<sup>9</sup> While more than a hundred books were attributed to al-Ash’arī, only five exist today. It is likely that most of his writings were accessible to Ibn Fūrak, because he mentions, in the introduction of the book *Mujarrad*, that he collected al-Ash’arī’s thoughts from his writings. He also mentions that if the teachings were not found in written texts, he systematized them based on al-Ash’arī’s principles ([Al-Ash’arī 1987](#), p. 9). Regarding al-Ash’arī’s belief in female prophethood, it is highly probable that Ibn Fūrak transmitted it from a written source, because it is associated with specific Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions. Another noteworthy point is that Ibn Fūrak presents almost identical information in his *Sharḥ ‘alā al-Ālim wa al-muta’allim*, without crediting it to al-Ash’arī ([Ibn Fūrak 2009](#), pp. 59–60). This indicates Ibn Fūrak’s concurrence with al-Ash’arī regarding female prophethood, thereby strengthening the credibility of attributing this viewpoint to al-Ash’arī.<sup>10</sup> In short, there is no basis to question the credibility of the ascription made by Ibn Fūrak, who commanded prominent scholarly authority within the Ash’arī tradition.

The second issue pertains to the absence of any specific mention of Mary in the statement, which employs a more general term, “four women prophetesses” (*arba’ nabiyyāt*). This phrase is derived from a so-called hadith that al-Ash’arī only partially referenced. In the complete version of the hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said, “Truly there were four prophetesses among women: Eve, Āsiya, Moses’ mother, and Mary” ([Al-Qurtubī 1964](#), vol. 9, p. 274). Therefore, we can deduce that al-Ash’arī advocated for Mary’s prophethood, even though he did not explicitly name her. This hadith cannot be found in any of the hadith sources, not even in collections of weak or fabricated hadith. An intriguing aspect of the hadith is its inclusion of Eve as one of the prophetesses. Ibn Hazm, however, substitutes Sarah, the wife of Abraham, for Eve. According to Ibn Hazm, Sarah was a prophetess because she received divine messages through the angels when they foretold the birth of her son, Isaac (Q. 11:71–73; Q. 51:29). Although Ibn Hazm did not explicitly discuss Eve’s prophethood in this context, her prophethood also aligns with his reasoning.

Third, it becomes evident that al-Ash’arī’s belief is founded on the distinction he draws between *nubuwah* and *risālah*. According to his perspective, merely receiving a divine

message qualifies an individual as a *nabī*, because this term is inherently linked to the act of receiving such a message. Furthermore, Ibn Fūrak explores an alternative interpretation of the term *nabī*, in addition to its meaning of receiving messages, linking it to the concept of “high place,” and thus connecting it to concepts such as “merit,” “honor,” and “esteem.” This interpretation implies that the term could be regarded as an honorary title ([Ibn Fūrak 2009](#), pp. 59–60). Notably, *nabīs* are not always assigned the duty of imparting the divine message. On the other hand, *rasūls* are mandated to preach and teach, as the literal meaning of *rasūl* implies. They are sent to address the people with the specific purpose of conveying the divine message. In this context, it is important to clarify that, while every *rasūl* is a *nabī*, not every *nabī* holds the status of a *rasūl*. Consequently, al-Ash’arī’s standpoint does not conflict with Qur’anic verses 12:109, 16:43 and 21:7, which state, “We have sent [*irsāl*] no one before you except men”.

While Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī himself advocated for the concept of female prophecy, theologians within the Ash’arī school mostly maintained silence on al-Ash’arī’s position. However, some early theologians, like Ibn Fūrak, as mentioned previously, expressed their agreement. Among later scholars also, while the majority remained silent, some aligned with al-Ash’arī’s viewpoint. For instance, Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 1233), a notable Ash’arī theologian, noted a consensus within the Ash’ariyya tradition regarding the rational possibility (*jawāz aqlan*) of female prophethood ([Al-Āmidī 2003](#), vol. 2, p. 713). Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1355), a prominent Shāfi’ī scholar and jurist, also touched upon this subject. Although his statements are not definite, he appears to have leaned towards the position that Mary was a prophet ([Al-Subkī n.d.](#), vol. 1, p. 70). Ibn Ḥajar al-’Asqalānī (d. 1449), another prominent Shāfi’ī jurist, hadith scholar, and historian, in his interpretation of the “*kamāl*” hadith mentioned earlier, considered Mary and Āsiya to be among the prophets. He contended that this hadith serves as evidence of their status as prophetesses, as the concept of “perfection” would not be fulfilled if they were not prophetesses ([Ibn Ḥajar 1959](#), vol. 6, p. 447).

While there is no consensus within the Ash’arī school, Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī’s perspective came to be regarded as the prevailing view of the School by later theologians, as exemplified by al-Āmidī. Māturīdī theologians, especially, consistently highlighted the issue of female prophecy as a point of contention between the Ash’ariyya and the Māturīdiyya.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Nūr al-Dīn al-Ṣābūnī (d. 1184), a renowned Māturīdī theologian known for his debates with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, presented female prophecy as an official stance of the entire Ash’arī school ([Al-Ṣābūnī 2020](#), p. 160). An Ottoman Māturīdī theologian, Ahmād al-Bayādī (d. 1634), included the issue of gender in prophethood as one of the contentious topics between the Ash’arī and Māturīdī schools, categorizing it under the broader heading of “Disagreements between the Ash’ariyya and Māturīdiyya” ([Al-Bayādī 1949](#)).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Abd al-Rahīm Shaykhzādah, an Ottoman theologian from the 18th century, depicted the entire Ash’arī school as upholding the belief in female prophecy, through phrases such as “Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī and his followers” and “Ash’ariyya scholars,” when outlining areas of disagreement between the Ash’arīs and Māturīdīs ([Shaykhzādah 1899](#), pp. 49–50). Other Ottoman theologians also shared similar views on this matter ([Kalaycı 2017](#)). Possibly influenced by this tradition, modern Turkish scholars of Islamic theology commonly attribute this perspective to the entire Ash’ariyya school.<sup>13</sup> After examining Māturīdī theologians who ascribed the belief in female prophecy to the entire Ash’arī school, Recep Ardoğan suggests that this approach could be seen as an attempt by Turkish Māturīdī theologians to establish Māturīdiyya as a distinct school by overemphasizing points of disagreement with the Ash’ariyya ([Ardoğan 2012](#), pp. 82 and 100). It is also plausible that Māturīdī scholars may have interpreted the silence of the Ash’arī majority on the issue as implicit agreement with the founder’s viewpoint. In any case, the notion that prophethood can be conferred upon women is portrayed as the prevailing belief within the Ash’ariyya school in Māturīdī sources.

## 5. Reevaluation of the Contemporary Studies

In light of the overlooked information presented above, I propose a reevaluation of contemporary Western scholarship concerning Mary's prophethood. In this section, I will assess the contemporary assertions.

To begin with, the assertion that there exists a "consensus within Sunni Theology that Mary's prophethood is a heretical innovation" is unfounded, and should be revised. Such a consensus simply does not exist, as a substantial portion of Sunni Orthodoxy has actually endorsed the notion of Mary's prophethood. Moreover, Mary's prophethood is never classified as a "heretical innovation" in the dissenters' sources. This idea is attributed only to certain scholars in the sources, without being branded as heresy. Especially in the Māturīdī sources, authors merely attribute this viewpoint to Abū al-Hasan al-Ash'arī himself, or to the entire Ash'arī school, without condemning them for wrongdoing, let alone heresy. In instances of historical controversy, such as those in Andalusia, some scholars may have levied accusations of heresy against the opposing side, but this should be understood within the specific discourse of that controversy rather than as indicative of consensus.

One might ponder whether the general silence among Ash'arī scholars concerning Mary's prophethood implies a consensus on rejecting the concept. However, this assumption proves unfounded for two primary reasons. First, within Sunni Islam, consensus (*ijmā'*) holds significant weight, requiring explicit and unanimous affirmation from all parties involved. In this case, not only is such unanimity lacking, due to the general silence among Ash'arī scholars, but divergent viewpoints also persist, notably including those of such prominent figures of Ash'arī school as Abū al-Hasan al-Ash'arī, Ibn Fūrak, al-Āmidī, al-Subkī, and Ibn Ḥajar. Second, when a prominent authority takes a stance, the silence of their adherents is often inferred to be tacit agreement. Therefore, the reticence observed among Ash'arī scholars on this matter might be interpreted as tacit support for the viewpoint espoused by the founder of the School, rather than an affirmation of the alleged consensus opposing the concept of female prophethood. For instance, al-Ghazzālī's subtle endorsement of the notion of Mary's prophethood mentioned earlier might be seen as influenced by al-Ash'arī's view.

Another assertion pertains to the so-called divide between "Western" and "Eastern" Islamic scholarship. However, this claim lacks a solid foundation, for two key reasons. First, it is based on unsubstantiated generalizations made without thorough investigation. As I demonstrate in this study, there were just as many Eastern scholars advocating for female prophethood as there were Western ones, and there are likely more, yet to be uncovered. Second, the so-called Western Muslim scholars expressed their opinions because there was a controversy, which was not the case in the East, where scholars generally did not find it necessary to express their opinions. Nevertheless, some Eastern scholars did so, but this was primarily in response to the controversy that had arisen in the West, as they cited Ibn Ḥazm in their discussions.

One might wonder why this controversy emerged in the West but not in the East. Maribel Fierro, who argues that there was no distinction between the Eastern and Western approaches to the status of women, offers insightful perspectives on this matter. She suggests that discussions surrounding the leadership of the Muslim community were prevalent in Andalusia at the time of this controversy, indicating potential political motivations. She also elucidates how this argument was intertwined with wider theological debates concerning the essence of miracles and their association with prophets and saints, suggesting underlying theological motivations. Moreover, given Andalusia's status as a region where Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted, interfaith dynamics could have played a role. Additionally, some contemporary scholars note that the prominent role of Ibn Ḥazm in this discourse, representing the Zāhirī school, hints at ideological motives. Ibn Ḥazm's conclusion was primarily guided by his adherence to Zāhirī hermeneutics, which emphasized literal interpretations of Qur'anic terminology, such as *nubuwah* and *wahy*. These factors collectively suggest that Andalusia provided an environment conducive to the emergence of such debates. In contrast, the Eastern context had different dynamics and

lacked a similar controversy. However, I argue that al-Ash’arī’s endorsement in the absence of controversy holds greater significance than Ibn Ḥazm’s endorsement in the midst of one. Furthermore, the fact that both al-Ash’arī and Ibn Fūrak predate Ibn Ḥazm and the Andalusian controversy adds further weight to their perspectives.

Regarding this claim of an Eastern–Western distinction, an overlooked detail should also be considered. Whereas Ibn Ḥazm is undeniably an Andalusian thinker, the extent of Western influence on al-Qurṭubī invites investigation. Although he was born and raised in Andalusia, al-Qurṭubī migrated to Egypt in 1236 at a young age, shortly after the fall of Cordoba, and spent most of his life here (Altıkulaç 2002, vol. 26, p. 455). His *tafsir* was a late work that he wrote in Egypt, and it relied heavily on the Eastern scholars as sources (Coşkun 2019, vol. 7, pp. 100–1). Therefore, it would be questionable to categorize al-Qurṭubī solely as a Western scholar. Similarly, Abū Ḥayyān, incorrectly identified by Zakyi Ibrahim as a Western commentator advocating for Mary’s prophethood, relocated to Egypt at a very early stage in his life, and remained in the East until his death (Kafes 1994, vol. 10, pp. 152–53). He wrote his *tafsir* during the later stages of his life in Egypt (Karagöz 1991, vol. 4, p. 516). In sum, it would be inaccurate to perceive the argument for Mary’s prophethood as an exclusively Western phenomenon.

I also disagree with contemporary researchers who read the rejection of Mary’s prophethood as the “androcentric” viewpoints of Eastern Muslim scholars, especially considering the lack of significant divergence between the Islamic East and West in this matter, as previously discussed. Furthermore, upon examining the views of the scholars who reject Marian prophecy, it becomes evident that they do not offer extensive explanations. Among those who do explain their viewpoints, such as Ibn Kathīr, we typically observe two primary reasons for their objections. First, they point to Qur’anic verses, such as 12:109, that explicitly state that only men were granted messengership. It seems that these rejecting scholars do not differentiate between *nubuwwah* and *risālah*, as Ibn Ḥazm and Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī do. Second, they argue that there is no verse in the Qur’an explicitly stating that a woman was sent as a prophet. In brief, their conclusions are primarily rooted in their interpretation of the Qur’an. Furthermore, I believe the discussion of “purity” in Islamic sources has been overstated in certain contemporary writings, to the point where it is portrayed as the main reason for rejecting Marian prophecy. While some sources may mention purity as one of the reasons why some Qur’anic verses restrict messengership to men in general, I have never encountered any connections between purity and Mary’s prophethood in the sources I have examined. That being said, I do not intend to imply that there are no issues concerning historical and contemporary Muslim perspectives on gender. What I aim to underscore is that the discourse surrounding Mary’s prophethood is distinct from scholars’ approaches to gender.

Finally, I disagree with the comments by contemporary scholars that associate the lack of popularity of Marian prophecy among Muslim scholars with the predominance of Ibn Kathīr’s commentary. First, the widespread reception of Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr* in learning circles does not necessarily lead to widespread disapproval of Mary’s prophethood. It is imperative to scrutinize more specific evidence to ascertain whether Ibn Kathīr’s commentary exerted a significant influence on shaping the prevailing majority perspective on this matter. Second, despite Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī’s considerable influence as the founder of the Sunni Orthodox theology, which even surpasses that of Ibn Kathīr, his endorsement of the concept of female prophethood was not sufficient to establish it as a widely accepted belief among scholars. Notably, Ibn Kathīr himself invoked al-Ash’arī’s authority to bolster his own stance, albeit erroneously portraying him as an opponent of the idea of Marian prophecy. Consequently, I find it unpersuasive to attribute the skepticism toward Marian prophecy solely to the popularity of Ibn Kathīr’s *Tafsīr*.

## 6. Conclusions

The stance of Ibn Ḥazm and al-Qurṭubī on the issue of Mary’s prophethood has been widely recognized in contemporary scholarship. However, what contemporary scholars

seem not to be aware of is that Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī, and some of his prominent followers within the Ash’ariyya school, also endorsed the idea of female prophethood, including that of Mary. In this study, I attempt to demonstrate that contemporary scholars have based their conclusions about Mary’s prophethood on insufficient information, neglecting discussions on the subject that took place in the Islamic East and among Orthodox Sunni scholars. This oversight has led them to present unsubstantiated generalizations regarding the matter.

Upon examining the overlooked details concerning Mary’s prophethood, the following conclusions emerge in this paper: First, there has never been a consensus within Orthodox Sunni Islam on the rejection of Marian prophecy. Contrarily, notable figures within the Ash’arī school supported it, with the majority of Ash’arī scholars showing no objection. Second, the acknowledgment of Marian prophecy has never been deemed heretical by Sunni orthodoxy. Third, the geographical origins of Muslim scholars did not play a significant role in shaping their views on Mary’s prophethood. Regardless of whether they are from the East or the West, opposing scholars have not rejected Mary’s prophethood based on any perceived lack of merit on her part, nor have they linked it to her gender. Instead, the discourse primarily centers on the scholarly interpretations of pertinent Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions. Fourth, the assertion that associates the lack of wide acceptance of Marian prophecy to the popularity of Ibn Kathīr’s commentary requires further substantiation.

In the end, the acknowledgment of Mary as a prophetess would not augment her esteemed status, given the ample recognition she already receives in Islamic sources. Indeed, Mary holds a significant place in Islamic tradition, revered for her piety, devotion, and exemplary character. Nevertheless, this study gives more weight to the case for Mary’s prophethood by bringing the neglected information to the table.

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## Notes

- 1 For information on the debate, see ([Fierro 2002](#), p. 184).
- 2 Q. 3:42: “Behold! the angels said: ‘O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee -chosen thee above the women of all nations.’” (The Qur’anic translations in this study are from Yusuf Ali).
- 3 Q. 5:75: “Christ the son of Mary was no more than a messenger; many were the messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth”.
- 4 In contemporary scholarship, Ibn Kathīr is often portrayed as adopting Hanbalī theology, influenced by his teacher Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). For an evaluation of this assertion and a comprehensive examination of Ibn Kathīr’s stance on Kalām, Ash’ariyya and traditionalism, see ([Mirza 2012](#)).
- 5 Some other writers echo Stowasser’s claim regarding a “consensus” on the denial of Mary’s prophethood. For example, Asma Sayeed states that “there is a consensus in the Sunni and Shi’i traditions that . . . her [Mary’s] gender prevents her from being categorized as a prophet” ([Sayeed 2013](#), vol. 1, p. 634).
- 6 Schleifer asserts that Ibn al-‘Arabī is silent on the matter; however, the latter, whom I cited above, defends female prophethood.
- 7 Abboud’s book contains numerous errors, including factual inaccuracies, spelling mistakes, and transliteration errors. In her discussion of Mary’s prophethood, for example, she erroneously credits Abū al-Hasan al-Ash’arī with the statement: “God never sent a prophet from desert or from among women and the jinn” ([Abboud 2014](#), p. 142). The statement actually comes from al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728).
- 8 It is important to note that M. Zakyi Ibrahim misinterprets Abū Hayyān’s position. To clarify, Abū Hayyān simply conveys here an opinion amidst differing perspectives and refrains from taking a definitive stance. Moreover, his intention is not to suggest

- that Maryam was sent as a messenger (*risālah*); rather, he means that the Angel was sent to her by God ([Abū Ḥayyān 1999](#), vol. 3, p. 147).
- <sup>9</sup> For Ibn Fūrak, see [Watt \(1986](#), vol. 3, pp. 766–67).
- <sup>10</sup> In the *Islam Ansiklopedisi* entry on Ibn Fūrak, Y. Ş. Yavuz inaccurately claims that Ibn Fūrak opposed al-Ash’arī’s doctrine, specifically rejecting the concept of female prophethood. See [Yavuz \(1999](#), vol. 19, pp. 496–97). Cf. also [Yavuz \(1989](#), p. 112). This claim is reiterated by other Turkish researchers, likely influenced by Yavuz’s entry. For instance, M. İskenderoğlu repeats the same assertion in an entry on Ibn Fūrak, in the *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Islamic Philosophy*. See [İskenderoğlu \(2006](#), vol. 1, p. 245).
- <sup>11</sup> The focal points of contention between the Ash’arī and Māturīdī schools have given rise to a distinct “literature of disagreement” that originated in the 14th century and persists to the present day. Numerous works have been authored on this subject, delving into the intricacies of these areas of disagreement. The concept of gender in prophethood consistently emerges as one of the focal points of contention within these writings. For further exploration of this literature, refer to [Kalaycı \(2017](#), pp. 79–151).
- <sup>12</sup> However, al-Bayādī emphasizes that numerous adherents of the Ash’arī school reject the notion of female prophecy (p. 56), attributing this belief solely to Ash’arī himself and some traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*) (p. 329).
- <sup>13</sup> This generalization is evident in various references, such as [İzmirli \(1981](#), p. 72), and it is also present in entries about Ash’ariyya in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*.

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