

AL-ITQĀN

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Volume: 6

Special Issue No. 4

December 2022

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eISSN:26008432

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Published by:
IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298
Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

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A Recollection of a Positive Qur'ānic Character: Maryam Bint 'Imrān

Che Amnah Bahari*

Abstract

This article writes on Maryam bint 'Imrān, of whom the Qur'ān has deliberated several times in a lively manner and even a *sūrah* having her name as its title. A ḥadīth of Prophet SAW also states that Maryam is one of the chosen women of the world during her time. Many *mufasssirūn* based on the verses of the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* of the Prophet SAW have clarified her excellent character. What are the types of characters? How do we ordinary people benefit from this oft-repeated character? How can we emulate it, and how can we make it relevant in today's context? This article will refer to relevant *tafāsīr* of the Qur'ān to seek clarification on Maryam's character, providing action guides for Muslims of today to emulate good morals and good parenting.

Keywords: Character building, Qur'ānic character, Prophetic character

Introduction

Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib says that he heard the Prophet (peace and blessing be upon him) say, "The best of its women (of her time) is Khadījah bint Khuwaylid, and the best of its women (of her time) is Maryam bint 'Imrān."

The ḥadīth cited above speaks highly of two great women of their time – Khadījah bint Khuwaylid (d. 619 CE), the greatest *umm al-mu'minīn* and the loving wife of Prophet Muḥammad SAW¹ and Maryam bint 'Imrān, the mother of Prophet 'Isā.² The Qur'ān in specific, has mentioned Maryam bint 'Imrān more than thirty-four (34) times³ about her excellent character, and there is one *Sūrah* name after her – *Sūrat Maryam*, comprises ninety-eight (98) verses, revealed after *Sūrat al-Kahf*.

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¹ Further reading on Khadījah bint Khuwaylid see Resit Haylamaz, *Khadija: The First Muslim and the wife of the Prophet Muhammad*, (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2008); 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Al-Muslimāt al-Awā'il*, (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Manarah, 2001).

² *Sūrat Maryam*, 19: 22

³ The verses are 1). Before birth – *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 35-36 (twice); 2). After birth – *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3:37 (once); *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 42-47 (5 times); *Sūrat Maryam*, 19: 14-40 (27 times); *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm*, 66:12 (once)

Additional readings revealed that the name Maryam or Miriam or Mary has Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew origins.¹ The name brings the meaning of pious, chaste, or beloved.² For us women and for all time to come, we feel honoured by the Qur'ānic narrations of Maryam Bint 'Imrān, who set great examples of positive feminine characteristics, modest character and woman of substance. With the brief remarks on Maryam, the questions come to mind: what factors contributed to these attributes? How do we ordinary women benefit from this oft-repeated character? How can we emulate and make it relevant in today's contact with endemic COVID-19?³ This writing will begin with the definition of character and its positive description. A brief discussion on factors that contributed to Maryam's outstanding attributes mentioned by the Qur'ān will also be given. From those clarifications and interpretations, action guides for Muslims of today can be utilized to nurture good morals and cultivate good parenting, especially in today's endemic COVID-19.

Character Defined

Many dictionaries and books define character as attributes or features that make up and distinguish an individual or the mental and moral qualities distinctive to a person.⁴ Character in Arabic refers to *akhlāq*,⁵ which reflects the state of one's soul and that state shows in one's actions. Ibn Miskawayh (d. 421 AH/1030 CE) explains in his book, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, that the action portrays good if the soul is in a good

¹ Dan Isaac Slobin, *The Crosslinguistic Study of Language Acquisition*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc. 1985), p.342.

² Maas Anthony, "The Name Mary", *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: Robert Appleton Comp. 1912), vol. 15, p. 252.

³ Endemic means that the disease is still around, but it is at a level that is not causing significant disruption in our daily lives. See Stephen Parodi, "Shifting from pandemic to endemic", *American Medical Association*, March 7, 2022. Retrieved September 11, 2022, <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/how-we-will-know-when-covid-19-has-become-endemic>; Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, "Fasa Peralihan ke Endemik", March 11, 2022. Retrieved September 11, 2022, <https://covid-19.moh.gov.my/reopeningsafely/semasa/2022/03/fasa-peralihan-ke-endemik-11032022>

⁴ *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved September 11, 2022,

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/characteristic>; *Oxford's Learners Dictionary*. Retrieved September 11, 2022,

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/characteristic>.

⁵ *Akhlāq* in Arabic has a close bearing to the Creator and creation. Refer to *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3:49; *Sūrat Al-Sajadah*, 32:7; *Sūrat Al-Zumar*, 39:6

state.¹ In addition, the *akhlāq* of an individual is also liable to change, from good to bad or conversely harmful to good. Also, repeated excellent or bad practices will form one's behaviour over time. Those behaviours can later develop to be a person's trait or character.² More observations on positive character show that the Qur'ān applies the term *khuluqin 'azīm* (an exalted standard of character) attributed to Prophet Muḥammad SAW,³ and the ḥadīth affirms his character is the Qur'ān.⁴

In his exegesis on *khuluqin 'azīm*, Al-Sādī clarifies that the Prophet SAW is surviving severe challenges or *ibtilā'* because he is on the mission to lead people in the right direction; otherwise, a man of weak character could not have done so.⁵ Some examples of *ibtilā'* are also read in the Qur'ānic narratives of many Prophets like Ibrāhīm (*Sūrat Maryam*, 19:42-48), Nūḥ (*Sūrat Nūḥ*, 71:1-13), and Yūsuf (*Sūrat Yūsuf*, 12:3-101). What about the chosen lady, Maryam bint 'Imrān, as cited by the above ḥadīth? The following lines will briefly highlight Maryam's positive character as narrated by the Qur'ān.

Maryam bint 'Imrān – the Qur'ānic Insight

In many writings on good character, Maryam bint 'Imrān's name is frequently cited for references. The Qur'ān, for that matter, in specific, elaborates on Maryam as *qānitah* (devout - *Sūrat al-Taḥrim*, 66:12), *ṣiddiqah* (testify to the truth - *Sūrat al-Taḥrim*, 66:12), *sājidah* (prostrate in prayer - *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3:43), *rāki'ah* (bow in prayer - *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3:43), *ṭahirah* (purified - *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3:42) and *muṣṭafiah* (chosen one - *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, 3:43). Likewise, a glance through the verses in *Sūrat Maryam* disclose that they delineate five essential lessons in character building, namely:

1. the inner strength of a woman (19:16-20)
2. continuously under Allah's providential care (19:21-26)

¹Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, tr. Constantine K. Zurayk, *The Refinement of Character*, (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1968), p. 29.

²Che Amnah, Waleed Fikri Faris, Mardiana Mohammad, "Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī's Concept of *Ibtālā'*: Its application to Stress Management", *Al-Itqān*, Vol. No. 5, Issue No. 1, February 2021, pp. 5-18.

³*Sūrat al-Qalam*, 68:4.

⁴Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Adab al-Mufrad*, tr. Adil Salahi, *A Perfect Code of Manners and Morality*, (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2017), Book 14, ḥadīth 308.

⁵Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sā' dī, *Tafsīr al-Sā' dī*, tr, Nasiruruddin al-Khatib, (Riyad: International Islamic Publishing House, 2018), Vol 10, p.177.

3. satisfied with what she has (19:27-29)
4. Allah's gift (19:30-34)
5. Righteousness is the legacy (19:31-32)

With all names such as *qānitah* or *muṣṭafiah* that point toward Maryam's inner strength and piousness, the question comes to mind: what factors contributed to these attributes? The sharp minds of readers find the Qur'ānic narratives as some of the supporting factors to Maryam's positive character discussed as follows.

Factor 1 – Mother's Continuous Supplication

The Qur'ānic verses indicate that Maryam's mother has continuously supplicated to Allah, the Almighty, to grant her offspring and vowed her child for the service of the Ummah.

"My Lord! (Innī) Surely, I vow to You what is in my womb, to be devoted (to Your Service); accept therefore from me, (innī) surely You are the Hearing, the Knowing." (Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, 3:35)

The critical point here is that we must not fail to turn to our Creator, Who is *al-Samī' al-Ālīm* (the All-Hearing the All-Knowing), for our wishes and request Him for our need. And how many times do we request Allah to accept our deed throughout the day? Hence, we see Maryam's mother's character of *ṣabr* (patience) continue to supplicate for the safety of her baby and the future generation from the ensnarl of Satan. We also observe her farsighted vision and mental preparation to receive her child ready with a name – Maryam.

But when she had given birth to the child, she said: "O my Sustainer! Behold, I have given birth to a female" – the while Allah had been fully aware of what she would give birth to, and [fully aware] that no male child [she might have hoped for] could ever have been like this female – "and I have named her Maryam. And, verily, I seek Your protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed." (Sūrat Āl 'Imrān, 3:36)

How sensible she was; what farsightedness she has! Indeed, as shown below, she understood the substance of virtuous children and a mother's crucial role in determining a baby's religious disposition.

Factor 2 - Pure Intention of Maryam's Mother

The Qur'ān continues the narratives of Maryam, stating that due to the pure purpose of her mother, Allah accepted her *nadhār* (pledge of her child). Maryam was raised in a beautiful way by Allah *anbatahā nabātan ḥasanan* - and was given to the custodian of the Prophet Zakariyyā. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774AH /1373 CE) elaborates on the term *anbatahā nabātan ḥasanan* - as a good and healthy environment that contributes to the positive character of Maryam, where her behaviour, attitude and mannerism are delightful and well-liked among people.¹

In another instance, the Qur'ān confirms that lots were drawn by people who wanted to take care of Maryam – but Prophet Zakariyyā was preordained to be her guardian.² This occasion is an excellent sign for Maryam for people vying to take her into their care; a great blessing from the Almighty Allah the minute she came into the world. Today we hear miserable reports of how “parents” have mercilessly “killed” their offspring out of their ignorance and self-centeredness.³ Contrast that to how Maryam was joyously accepted and a pregnant mother's pure intentions and prayers for her unborn child's life to be in this world and the next.

¹ Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-‘Azīm*, (Riyād: Dār Ibn Jawzī, 2000), Vol. 3, p. 61, cited as Ibn Kathīr.

² *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:44

³ **Kuching, Malaysia.** “Kuching man gets 80 years jail for repeated rape of teen daughter”, *BERNAMA*. Retrieved September 12 2022.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2018/02/337814/kuching-man-gets-80years-jail-repeated-rape-teen-daughter>

Bukit Mertajam, Malaysia. “Infant daughter murder case – lorry driver charged”, *The Star*. Retrieved September 13 2022.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/02/22/infant-daughter-murder-case-lorry-driver-charged/>

Australia. “Father who raped his daughter from age 10 and put her on contraceptive pill at 13 ‘felt entitled’ to abuse her... as court rejects his bid for shorter sentence”, *Mail Online*. Retrieved September 13 2022.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4351524/Dad-raped-daughter-contraceptive-pill.html>

India. “Rape of 13-year-old: Parents blame forced abortion pills for cancer”, *OneIndia*. Retrieved September 13 2022.

<https://www.oneindia.com/india/rape-13-year-old-parents-blame-forced-abortion-pills-cancer-2385151.html>

Egypt. “Father Forces Abortion On Raped Daughter After He Impregnates Her”, *Life Dynamics*. Retrieved September 13 2022.

<https://lifedynamics.com/father-forces-abortion-raped-daughter-impregnates/>

Factor 3 – Rizq (Sustenance) from Allah

An additional distinct blessing for Maryam was that foods or eatables were provided for in her *miḥrāb*, which made Prophet Zakariyyā ask her in amazement:

“From where does this come for you?” Maryam’s response reflects her religiosity: “It is from Allah, and indeed, Allah provides for whom He wants, bi ghayr ḥisāb without measure”. (Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān, 3:37)

The words *bighayri ḥisāb* that Maryam expressed to respond to Prophet Zakariyyā indicate to us the level of her trust in Allah as the Only Provider, and she saw Him at work in all things. This thought is about trusting Allah and seeing His work and sign in all creation. This part of having trust in Allah has to be emphasized and understood by people today,¹ particularly with the severe test of the pandemic and endemic COVID-19. Planning is essential in life, but we must not fail to recall that Allah is the One who provides. If any calamities decreed upon us occur, at that moment, we must register in our mind that it is Allah the Provider. He provides opportunities or new openings for us, the source of sustenance from places or realms we never imagined. In other words, in planning, all we may look for is our jobs and incomes, but it is Allah Who can provide “without measure”, while our jobs or incomes are always within quantifiable limits. The Qur’ān continues to inform us of the greatest blessing that Maryam received due to her submission and the earnest *du‘ā’* of her mother. Not only has that Maryam received a never-ending *rizq* from Allah but also a sense of wisdom and understanding of things from a very young age. The critical point here is that we should not underestimate the power of *du‘ā’*, much less a mother’s *du‘ā’*. When *du‘ā’* changes life, what makes us think ours will be in vain? Therefore, we must make a sincere life like that of Maryam’s mother, which later on has an enormous impact on Maryam’s life, as shown in the following analysis.

Factor 4 – Glad Tiding from Allah

As duly understood, Maryam is a chosen one but not without Allah’s *ibtilā’* (tribulations). *Ibtilā’* in the Qur’ān refers to two conditions. First, it provides a prospect for a faithful person to be stronger than before (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:124), and the other is to differentiate between the feat and the loser in pursuing good deeds (*Sūrat al-Mulk*, 67:2). In Maryam’s case, though Allah

¹ Che Amnah, “*Tawakkul: Exemplary Deeds of the Mother and the Sister of Prophet Mūsā*”, *Al- Itqān*, Vol. No. 3, Issue No. 2, December 2019, pp. 5-22

chose her, she was not without challenge so much that she became stronger to face the forthcoming events. Accordingly, the angels informed her of the glad tidings of her son - ‘Īsā ibn Maryam who would be noble in the world and highly esteemed before Allah in the Hereafter.

One can imagine how Maryam feels about the prospect of conceiving a fatherless child. Being devout in worship to Allah, she guards herself against men, asking: *“How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?”* (*Sūrat Maryam*, 19:20). Indeed, these glad tidings would entail tremendous pain and sacrifice on Maryam’s part. In response to the queries made by Maryam, Allah says:

“It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us. And it is a matter [already] decreed.” So she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a remote place.” (*Sūrat Maryam*, 19:21-22)

On the phases of Maryam’s state of conceiving her son, the Qur’ān does not highlight but elaborates on the moment Maryam is about to deliver her baby.

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.” (*Sūrat Maryam*, 19:23-24)

The experience of childbirth alone, as stated in the above verses, can be a traumatic experience for all. According to M.A. Nastara, having an abnormal pregnancy and common knowledge increases labour pain, while self-esteem, pleasure, and relaxation can decrease it in a normal pregnancy, making the delivery favourable.¹ Hence, as Nastara affirms, it is logical for Maryam, physically alone and suffering from excruciating labour pain, to wish for death, obscure and forgotten. However, Maryam regains her composure, continues worshipping Allah earnestly, and is then bestowed physical and spiritual comfort. The physical comfort here is that Maryam does not suffer from thirst (rivulet or *sarīy* - *Sūrat Maryam*, 19:24) and hunger (ripe dates or *ruṭaban janīyyan* - *Sūrat Maryam*, 19:25). While the spiritual one is the presence of her child - ‘Īsā as her *qarri ‘ayn* (the comfort of the eye - *Sūrat Maryam*, 19:26) paves the way for Maryam to be

¹ M.A. Nastara “Women’s experience of pain during childbirth”, *Iran Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Research*, 2010 Spring, 15(2): 77–82.

psychologically ready to face the accusation of her people who think the worst of her. She is inspired not to converse with anyone, and her son will do all the talking. (*Sūrat Maryam*, 19:27-34).

A demonstrative lesson for readers from the above Qur'ānic narration on Maryam is that the suffering, adversity, and sacrifice, especially the one related to conceiving and delivering a baby, indicates the pleasure of our Creator with all of us. Indeed, when Allah is pleased with a person, He puts him through various tribulations or *ibtilā'*, pushing him to the wall of patience and strong will that he never knew he could attain!

Action Guides from Maryam's Qur'ānic Narratives

With these four points on Maryam elaborated above, what are the action guides for Muslims today to emulate, good morals and good parenting during endemic COVID-19? It is well known that COVID-19 has rapidly affected our day-to-day life and businesses and disrupted world trade and movements. The various industries and sectors are adversely disturbed by the cause of this disease, including the pharmaceuticals industry, the solar power sector, tourism, Information, and electronics industry.¹ In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO)² and the slogan "Just Stay At Home"³ and "*Kita jaga diri Kita*",⁴ though very succinct to contain the spread of COVID-19, have tremendously hit the economic sector. Small businesses which grow well on daily incomes have poorly been shaken, especially

¹ See Abid Haleem et al., "Effects of COVID 19 pandemic in daily life", *Current Medicine Research and Practice* April 2020, pp.1-3; Richard Setterstern et al., "Understanding the effects of Covid-19 through a life course lens", *Advances in Life Course Research*, Volume 45, September 2020, pp. 1-11; Andrew Mohanraj, "Life after Covid-19: What will our new normal be like?", *The Star*, April 11, 2020. Retrieved September 13 2022.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/2020/04/12/life-after-covid>; Farah Hidayu et al., "Covid-19 Pandemic During 2020 Malaysia Movement Control Order (MC)) – The Case Of Residential College Students' Mental Health", *International Journal of Social & Scientific Research*, Vol. 06, Issue (I) June 2020, pp. 1-18.

²On MCO see "SOP Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP)", Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia. Retrieved September 11, 2022, <https://covid-19.moh.gov.my/faqsop/sop-perintah-kawalan-pergerakan-pkp22>

³ See P Kanyakumari, "PM Muhyiddin to Malaysians amid movement control order", March 18, 2020, *Channel News Asia*, Retrieved September 11 2022.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-muhyiddin-covid-19-movement-control-stay-home-772961>

⁴ The slogan appeals to all to fight against COVID 19. See the website: <https://kitajagakita.com/>

owners of roadside stalls. MCO has locked out their meagre income. Equally disturbed, public health has also been the biggest calamity.¹

Hence, with life conditions' changing swiftly, our reaction reveals who we are, what we think and what kind of culture we are developing. Dreadful times expose our actual values, priorities, strength, and integrity as individuals and as a society. To build up self-resilience, like being a person of Maryam's traits, Muslims have no choice but to emulate her practices, finding peace, perspectives, and a clear mindset to rejuvenate themselves from the uncertainties of COVID-19.

In the context of nurturing good morals and cultivating good parenting, **Factor 1 – the mother's continuous supplication**, the prominent reminder is to trust Allah and be consistent in one's prayer to Allah. Here it typically teaches the parents, in the context of COVID-19, to make *duā'* for their children to stay safe from the virus.² Just like Maryam's mother, today's parents may plan and prepare to nurture good character among their children by referring to various verses of the Qur'ān. The prominent one is clarified in verse one hundred and seventy-seven (177), *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, where it lucidly specifies the action guides for parents to achieve *birr* or righteousness.

“*Birr* (righteousness) is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west. But *birr* is [in] (1) one who (i) believes in Allah, (ii) the Last Day, (iii) the angels, (iv) the Book, and (v) the Prophets...” (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:177)

The prime prerequisite in achieving the state of *birr* is to submit wholeheartedly to Almighty Allah. Its essence requires the implementation

¹ Tang Kuok Ho, “Movement control as an effective measure against Covid-19 spread in Malaysia: an overview”, *Journal of Public Health*, Springer, June 2020, pp. 1-4; Ahmad Ibrahim, “Covid-19 has both positive and negative impacts”, May 2, 2020, *New Straits Time*. Retrieved September 11, 2022.

<https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2020/05/589148/covid-19-has-both-positive-and-negative-impacts>

² The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has overturned family life around the world. School closures, working from home, physical distancing, sanitizing, frequent hand wash- it is a lot to find the way for anyone, but especially for parents. The UNICEF team has come up with the Parenting for Lifelong Health initiative to bring parents and caregivers a set of practical tips to help manage this new normal era. See “Coronavirus (COVID-19) parenting tips: Expert tips to help you deal with COVID-19 parenting challenges”, August 17, 2020. Retrieved September 11, 2022.

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/coronavirus-covid-19-guide-parents>

of performing prayers.¹ This state is further enhanced by having a solid faith in five aspects encapsulated in *arkān al-īmān* (pillars of faith), as mentioned in the cited verse above. The pillar of faith is inferred as *ḥabl min Allāh* (the relationship with Allah as the Creator). At times, it is also known as a vertical relationship. The stronger the faith, the stronger it is the vertical relationship. Parents during this endemic COVID-19 can explain this aspect of faith to their children by informing and practising *wuḍū'* before *ṣalāh*. They can nurture their young children by stating that *wuḍū'* is one form of cleansing, done before each *ṣalāh* five times a day. A person washes his hands, forearms, mouth, nose, ears, face, hair, ankles, and feet, three times each.² Besides, parents can instil in their children that cleanliness is an integral part of faith.³ These ideas thus relate to cleanliness, which is also necessary to suppress the damage caused by the COVID-19 virus.

As for emulating “**Factor 2 - Pure intention of Maryam’s mother**”, parents can continue to show the practical aspect of *birr* known as *ḥabl min al-nās* (the relationship with a fellow human being). It is lopsided if this relationship is not preserved. Hence, verse one hundred and seventy-seven (177) reaffirms:

“...and (2) gives wealth, despite the love for it, to (i) relatives, (ii) orphans, (iii) the needy, (iv) the traveller, (v) those who ask [for help], and (vi) for freeing slaves....”

As stated earlier, the strength of the vertical relationship is depicted in one’s pure intention to give some portion of his or her hard-earned or precious wealth to ease the need of six categories of people, as stipulated in the cited verse. The more one gives, the better it is. One’s affinity to *ḥabl min al-nās* is further tested with the ability to perform regular prayers and offer *zakāh* to purify the soul. The verse continues to explain the significance of *ṣabr* or patience in various difficulties as an additional criterion to achieve *birr*.

Just like the pure intention of Maryam’s mother to send Maryam for ‘*ubudīyyah* to Allah at the Holy Temple, known today as Bayt al-Maqdis,

¹ Ibn Kathīr, Vol. 1, p. 277

² Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (Al-Manṣūrah, Riyāḍ: Dār al-Ghadd, 1997), Vol. 1, *Kitāb al-wuḍū’*, Ḥadīth 142, cited as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

³ Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim bin Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Salām, 2006), Vol.2, *Kitāb al-Ṭahārah*, Ḥadīth 1, cited as *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.

Maryam is well received there despite not being a *muḥarrarā*.¹ Patience is the crucial element practised by Maryam's mother that paved the way for Maryam to have a virtuous *ṣuḥbah* of Prophet Zakariyyā. Al-Ghazzālī (d. 504AH /1111CE) says that *ṣuḥbah* is a form of *tarbiyyah* that fosters constructive relationships, high self-respect or esteem and positivity, and meaning and purpose in life.² This practice of *ṣuḥbah* is an aspect of realizing *birr* that today's parents could emulate to nurture the virtues stipulated in the subsequent verse 177 of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*.

“... and (3) who establishes prayer and (4) gives zakāh; (5) those who fulfil their promise when they promise; and (6) those who are patient in (i) poverty and (ii) hardship and (iii) during battle. Those are *al-ṣadaqū* (the ones who have been true), and it is those who are *al-muttaqūn* (the pious).”

Striving to uphold the strength of *ḥabl min Allāh* and *ḥabl min al-nās*, as outlined in the cited verse, is strenuous but not impossible if one strives hard to reach the target. During the endemic COVID-19, one of the crucial factors to staying safe and peaceful is to practice a high level of patience in terms of persisting in doing the right things, even when it is hard. Patience is also resistance in the face of temptation, for example, stockpiling essential supplies and forgetting the needs of others in a rush to take care of oneself and family members during the COVID-19 endemic. Patience or *ṣabr*, once achieved, the person deserves to be praised, as mentioned in the above verse, not only as *al-ṣadaqū* (the truthful ones); but also as *al-muttaqūn* (pious).

Additionally, parents may be motivated by al-Ghazzālī's point that during COVID-19, parents are their children's *ṣuḥbah* and the practical ways of *ṣuḥbah* are that one has to be patient to teach their children the art of seeking advice from close ones, search for counsel from close friends, look up for positive criticisms from others, join a society and socialize with

¹ Under the Mosaic Law, only a *muḥarrarā* (a male free from all worldly concerns and exceptionally committed to serving God – *Sūrat Āl-Imrān*, 3:35) is accepted to provide a devoted service to the Holy Temple. However, Maryam is marked out for a unique destiny, as a miracle child of her old age parents, to be the mother of the miracle child-ʿĪsā; she is well accepted to devote herself at the temple – Bayt al-Maqdis. Indeed **Maryam is the trendsetter for a lady to enter and worship at Bayt al-Maqdis** and it applies until today. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran, Text, Translation and Commentary*, (Maryland: Amana Corp, 1983), p. 132.

² See *ṣuḥbah* in Al-Ghazzālī, Abū Ḥamīd, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥbah wa-al-muʿāsharah maʿa aṣnāf al-khalq lil-Imām al-Ghazzālī*, (Baghdād: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿĀnī, 1984).

them.¹ In fact, through reflection and socialization, one can learn to emulate and adopt good behaviour practised by others.² Through the COVID-19 pandemic or even endemic, family members are still shuttered together and have to learn more about each other, sharing things and space. Reflection on Prophet Yāqūb's advice on his sons is crucial. The reason is that before the pandemic, we often live outside of our houses, and when we catch up, our response may not be sensible. Now living in a "crammed space", squabbling among siblings is inevitable, and these test parents' state of mind that has to deal with other financial and work-related issues that are readily escalating. Therefore, parents must continuously reflect and ponder on man's nature of toil,³ but Allah assures that with every difficulty, there is relief.⁴ With this realization and emulating the pure intention of Maryam's mother, parents can control themselves and are not easily swayed by their children's temperament.

The "Factor 3 -*Rizq* (Sustenance) from Allah" can be comprehended when parents remind their children that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the whole world financially. However, it is more crucial than ever that parents continue affirming their children that Allah, also known as *Al-Razzāq*, is man's Provider. Humankind will always receive the sustenance that *Al-Razzāq* has planned for no matter what occurs, COVID-19 or none. Like Maryam's firm belief in *Al-Razzāq*, Who gifts her fruits out of season, parents must learn to strengthen their belief in Him. Although the current financial condition is dire or getting anything parents would like for their children is out of the question, one never knows which door *Al-Razzāq* will open. All parents need to do is try their best and believe that *Al-Razzāq* will care for the rest. He, the Provider, can provide for humankind in ways man never imagined.

Likewise, the narratives on Prophet 'Īsā and Maryam reinforce the *Al-Razzāq*'s sign of greatness and His infinite capabilities (*Sūrat al-Mu'minūn*, 23:50). Here, we observe that the remarkable quality of her character is that Maryam lack of desire to gain the approval of her people as she returned to her town with her infant. With everyone judging and interrogating her, she promised to remain silent and put her trust in *Al-Razzāq* to handle the matter. When asked about the baby, she pointed at

¹ Al-Ghazzālī, Abū Ḥamīd, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 3, (Dimashq: Dār al-Khayr, 1990), pp. 200-203, cited as *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*

² Ibid., p. 200.

³ *Sūrat al-Balad*, 90:4.

⁴ *Sūrat al-Inshirah*, 94:5-6.

the amazing baby whom *Al-Razzāq* would make speak; ʿĪsā says: “*I am indeed a servant of Allah. He has given me revelation and made me a Prophet....He has made me kind to my mother and not overbearing and miserable.*”¹ This speech purified Maryam, for Allah defended her in the Qurʾān against anybody who denied the truth. How frequently do we feel under pressure from those around us? Do we emulate Maryam’s style of a quietist, submitting to Allah’s order, despite being able to respond? Maryam submits to Allah in complete faith; hence she is unaffected by her people’s remarks and reproaches, pointing us towards high self-esteem acquired and developed during her *miḥrab*-life under the *ṣuḥbah*’s of Prophet Zakariyya. Hence, the practice of *ṣuḥbah* during her early day at the Holy Temple proved effective. Maryam has developed a sign of solid courage to face her people. To emulate and nurture Maryam’s strong character, parents must develop the value of self-esteem² or *murū’ah*. In other words, *murū’ah* reflects the ability to uphold good moral behaviour and character by forsaking various attitudes, speeches and conduct that degrade the noble status of God’s best creation.³ In contrast, low self-esteem is the inability to refrain from doing things forbidden by Islam which devalues one’s dignity as a righteous person.⁴ Therefore, parents in the spirit of *Al-Razzāq* may be guided by the Qurʾānic concept of *tazkiyah al-nafs* or the soul’s purification, proven in Maryam’s courage, to build their children’s self-esteem.

It is worth looking at the idea of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyyah (d. 715AH/ 1350CE) in dealing with self-esteem. He states:

“When a servant knows that Allah alone is in charge of harming and benefitting, giving and withholding, creating and providing, giving life and bringing about death, it produces the acts of worship, ultimately putting one’s trust and reliance

¹ *Sūrat Maryam*, 19: 30-32

² Self-esteem refers to a person’s beliefs about their own worth and value. It also has to do with the feelings people experience that follow from their sense of worthiness or unworthiness. Self-esteem is important because **it heavily influences people’s choices and decisions**. See Adrian Lohan, Fiona King, “Self-esteem: defining, measuring and promoting an elusive concept”, *Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education*, May 1, 2016; Viktor Gecas, “The Self-Concept”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 8 (1982), p. 5.

³ Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Tuwijrī, *Mawsūʿat Fiqh al-Qulūb fī Ḍawʿ al-Qurʾān wa al-Sunnah* (Baridah: Dār Asdad al-Mujtamī, 2012), p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*

in Him in one's heart. Such reliance necessitates trust and outward deeds.”¹

To clarify more, Ibn Qayyim reiterates that our daily repeated utterances or *dhikr* will pave man's mindset to think of doing good deeds and strengthen his or her self-esteem - “The servant's knowledge of Allah's supremacy of hearing, seeing and knowledge to the extent that:

1. not even the smallest of physical particles in heavens and earth is unseen to Him, and
2. that He knows the secret and hidden deception of the eyes as well as
3. what is hidden in the breasts will produce in person a keen guarding over his tongue, physical limbs, and thoughts in the heart to keep them away from everything that is displeasing to Allah.”²

The parents who are knowledgeable about Ibn Qayyim's thoughts can explain to their children this fundamental thought of *Al-Razzāq*, the One Who gifts and institutes knowledge in the heart so that they may learn to survive hopelessness. Although the pandemic COVID 19 has moved towards endemic, parents continue to face the challenge of being both parents and teachers simultaneously. They have to assume the full-time role of educating their children, supporting their learning virtually and back from school and now face-to-face system, about the dimension of right and wrongdoings.³ In this way, children are consistently guided towards a precise dimension of right and wrongdoings, limitations, causes and ways to encounter them. At the same time, parents and teachers may also educate their children on the *ghaybiyāt* (unseen) aspects that can reduce the fear of death related to COVID-19 by explaining the truth of death, soul, body, and eternal happiness.⁴

¹ This is the result of our daily *du'ā*- “Verily my *ṣalāt*, my service, my life and my death are all for Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds”- *Sūrat al-An'ām*, 5:162. See Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Miftāḥ dār al-Sa'ādah wa Manshūr Wilāyat al-'Ilm wa al-ʾIrādah*, [The Key to the Abode of Happiness and the Decree of the Sovereignty of Knowledge and Will], (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-'Ilm al-Fawā'id, 1905), vol. 2, p. 90, cited as *Miftāḥ dār al-Sa'ādah*.

² *Miftāḥ dār al-Sa'ādah*, vol. 2, p. 90.

³ See Tharayana Arumugam, “Ensure no kid is left out in e-learning”, *New Straits Times*, April 12, 2020. Retrieved September 16, 2022.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/583560/ensure-no-kid-left-out-elearning>

⁴ Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, tr. Constantine K. Zurayk, *The Refinement of*

Once this fundamental knowledge is known to children, their self-esteem is raised higher than before. They will realize **Factor 4 – gladdening is from Allah, *Al-Razzāq***. At this point, Ibn Qayyim affirms that once a person understands that *Al-Razzāq* knows what is hidden and apparent, it creates the guiding act on his actions that will “...make him involve those bodily parts in acts that are beloved and pleasing to Allah alone.”¹ This action, in turn, produces virtues of:

1. Inward shyness. It also produces a shyness that makes the person
2. Avoid forbidden and evil acts. [The servant’s] knowledge of Allah’s self-sufficiency, generosity and mercy make the person very
3. Hopeful in Allah.”²

The good virtues, also known as a spiritual awakening, are, thus, reflected in daily life and “...it produces in him similar acts of:

1. External and inward forms of worship in accord with his level of understanding and knowledge. Similarly, his recognition of Allah's grandeur, greatness and magnificence produces in his humility, submission and love.
2. It also produces in him internal emotion and feelings of worship, as well as
3. The external acts that these require. Similar to his knowledge of Allah’s perfection, beauty and divine attributes manifest themselves in a unique love found in the other perfection, beauty and divine attributes manifest themselves in a special kind of love found in different levels of worship.”³

The outcome of this spiritual awakening is that parents can explain that life is not about material achievement alone but a religiously balanced life leading to being fully conscious of Allah. During the COVID-19 pandemic, since December 2019, we observed that worldwide,

Character, (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1968), pp. 172-190.

¹ *Miftāḥ dār al-Sa‘ādah*, vol. 2, p. 90.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

620,304,917 people suffered from COVID-19 and 6,540,465 deaths.¹ In Malaysia, 4,831,822 cases with 36,350 death are reported.² These statistics indicate that man from the past, present, and future desperately needs Divine favour and opportunity to gain His Pleasure. Parents must inform their children that no matter how strong we are, a human force cannot grant us immortality and eternities of happiness. Whether we like it or not, we are moving toward death's grasp. Death, however, is not the end, as we all know. The path from this world to the Divine presence does not end at death. The Great Day of Final Judgment will be when we will be interrogated about our thoughts, intentions, feelings, motives, and acts and held accountable for them. Allah is where we will ultimately return. No human being can escape this fact, regardless of how often he denied it in his lifetime. Thus, the glad tiding is mentioned in the Qur'ān,

“Verily, he truly prospers who purifies himself, glorifies the name of the Guardian Lord, and (lifts his heart) in prayer. But you prefer the life of this world, whereas the life hereafter is better and more enduring. This is in the previous scripture, the scriptures of Ibrāhīm and Mūsā.”
(*Sūrat al-Ālā*, 87:15-20)

The main idea of the verses is to emphasize *tazkiyyah al-nafs*—freeing ourselves from all types of defilement. Our bodies, minds, and hearts are all intricately designed; as a result, they are constantly changing and prone to imbalance. To continually strive to improve our manners in our relationships with ourselves, our parents, our children, others, and most importantly, in our relationship with our Lord, it is necessary to reflect and self-examine. The “testing time” on earth occurs in the conflict between our inner forces—the heart and the ego.

Just like Maryam's life, all of us must live Allah-centered life, remember Him and keep His commands in every aspect of ours. No matter where we are or whom we are dealing with, the thought of God should never be far from our hearts and minds. Indeed, those who succeed on the Day of Judgment will be those whose good deeds weigh more than their evil deeds, earning Allah's pleasure. This spiritual awakening can only happen due to a habit of remembering Him and observing His command.

¹ COVID Live - Coronavirus Statistics – Worldometer. Retrieved September 26 2022. https://www.google.com/search?q=covid+now+world&rlz=1C1CHBF_enMY866MY866&oq=covid+now&aqs=chrome.4.69i57j0i131i433i512j0i512j0i10i512j0i512l3j69i60.8052j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

² Ibid.

Suggestions to self-improve.

With this ongoing spiritual awakening, man, however, requires a continuous reminder that life is full of tests, specified in *Sūrat al-Mulk*, verse two (2) – “*He Who created death and life that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might oft-forgiving.*”¹ And another precise one is stipulated in *Sūrat al-Baqarah* verse one hundred fifty-five (155) – “*We shall certainly test you by afflicting you with fear, hunger, loss of properties and lives and fruits. Give glad tidings, then, to those who remain patient.*” The keyword here is patient, and just like Maryam, one must be healthy and persevere in coping with trials and tribulations such as loss or gain in wealth,² children,³ falsehood and verbal abuse,⁴ and the death of loved ones.⁵

From the brief citations, one can visualize that to uphold daily virtuous life, trials and tribulations such as the endemic COVID-19 in one’s life are expected. Irrespective of what man has to encounter, the pertinent point is to be righteous⁶ and follow the straight path of Allah, and he has nothing to fear. This feat is the promise of Allah: “*Indeed, those who believe and do righteous deeds and establish ṣalāh and give zakāh will have their reward with their Lord, and there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.*”⁷ The verse indicates to us the Mercy of Allah on humankind; He gives us all the opportunity to emulate the practices of Maryam’s mother, who has a pure intention to submit to Allah, showing her gratitude to Allah by supplicating to Him and surrendering her most “desired Maryam” to His will. Ultimately, she leads a blissful life knowing that Allah has taken care of Maryam - *anbatahā nabātan ḥasanan!* For all of us today, with the COVID-19 pandemic or endemic still looming around us, our reaction reveals who we are, what we think and what kind of culture we are developing. Dreadful times expose our actual values, priorities, strength, and integrity as individuals and as a society. To build up self-resilience, like being a person of Maryam’s traits, Muslims have no choice but to emulate her practices, finding peace, perspectives, and a clear mindset to rejuvenate themselves from the uncertainties of COVID-19. In this context, *Sūrat al-*

¹ For a good explanation on challenge, test or tribulation see Abul A’lā Mawdūdī, *Tafhīm al-Qur’ān*, (London: Islamic Foundation, 2006), vol. 3.

² *Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān*, 3:186.

³ *Sūrat al-Taghābun*, 64:15.

⁴ *Sūrat Ṭā Hā*, 20:130.

⁵ *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:214.

⁶ Some of the righteous (*birr*) deeds to apply are outlined in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:177 and the evil deeds to be avoided are specified in *Sūrat al-Isrā’*, 17:23-38.

⁷ *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2:277.

Mulk or The Sovereignty, the sixty-seventh *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, provides quick action guides to emulate. It comprises thirty (30) verses that develop Muslim bearing and peace of mind (*Sūrat al-Mulk*, 67:1-30):

1. Acquiring Allah-centric (67:2) as opposed to self-centric
2. Showing humbleness to Allah (67:20) as opposed to arrogance
3. Developing an abundance mindset (67:21) as opposed to scarcity
4. Having *Ākhirah* emphasis (67:22) as opposed to *Dunyā*
5. Balance responses (67:3) as opposed to extreme reaction
6. Contemplation (67:23) as opposed to disruption
7. Trust and submission to Allah (67:20) as opposed to panic or anxiety
8. Mindfulness to Allah (67:30) as opposed to the full affection to means in life
9. Steering towards a peaceful heart (67:29) instead of an overwhelmed heart.¹

Just like Maryam, who rejuvenates herself from the ordeal of “giving birth alone” by having complete trust in The Only One and The Capable One, we can restore ourselves by contemplating and applying the lessons from *Sūrat al-Mulk*. Among the benefits we can derive from the nine reflections of *Sūrat al-Mulk* are seen in the following elaborations.

1. Once we relate with The One in control, the Capable Owner, not the little creatures of COVID-19, this will give tranquillity and relieve much of our anxiety and trauma in life.
2. Once we remember that COVID-19 does not create death but is created by Allah, we do not desperately fear Corona but take the essential preventative measures and turn to Allah.
3. The material resources are not our sole providers, but the unlimited sustenance comes from Allah. He opens and creates ways which we could not imagine or expect.

¹ More explanation can be seen in Dina Mohamed Basiony, “*Surat al-Mulk: A Spiritual Antidote to the Global Pandemic*”, April 20, 2020. Retrieved September 26, 2022. <https://productivemuslim.com/category/spiritual-productivity>

The above nine points trailed by the three lessons will be wholly exemplified and be advantageous to us in confronting COVID-19 if those thoughts are concurrently reliving in the form of *ṣalāh*, shown in the subsequent action guides.

1. Perform *Ṣalāh* – it recharges beyond the physiological capacity through the constant connection to the Divine *Rabb*, Who builds our internal capacity.
2. *Ṣalāh* affords a good spiritual structure because man is a person of habit¹ and a necessary ingredient for psychological and mental stability. COVID-19 disrupts and breaks down our habits and routine. This loss increases the level of anxiety. Performing five times daily *ṣalāh* establishes structure, discipline, and comfort.
3. *Salāh* edifies our focus and defies distraction. COVID-19 badly distracts our minds. Once we enter into *ṣalāh*, we step out of this world affair but enter into the dimension and presence of the Divine *Rabb* - rehearsing, bowing, prostrating, glorifying, supplicating, and perhaps crying. Then we leave the *ṣalāh* – renewed, rejuvenated, mindfully present and ready to face the world.²

The ability to switch our mind from one state to another that is from a self-centric focus to Allah-centric as Maryam practices to brace herself from her ordeal to face her people is a practical skill to break the cycle of anxiety and futility that COVID-19 is infecting all of us. In other words, *ṣalāh* enables us to shift from a limited “Task Mode Network”³ way of reasoning to a massive “Default Mode Network”,⁴ which opens new vistas of reasoning and reflection that helps us battle COVID-19. And by so doing, it does not mean we forgo the current public health measures like “stay at home” and “*kita jaga diri kita*”, a form of quarantine which the Prophet SAW⁵ has advised us to follow. This quarantine act is indeed a

¹ *Sūrat al-Ma‘ ārij*, 70:19-23.

² Mohammed Faris, “How Salah Will Guide Your New Normal”, June 4, 2020. Retrieved September 26, 2022. <https://productivemuslim.com/salah-your-new-normal/>

³ Hal Blumenfeld, “Neuroanatomical Basis of Consciousness” in *The Neurology of Consciousness* (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2016), pp. 3-29.

⁴ See Ethan M. McCormick, “Contributions of default mode network stability and deactivation to adolescent task engagement”, *Scientific Reports*, (2018), 8, pp.1-14.

⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Vol. 7, Book 71, Ḥadīth 626.

physical form of seceding ourselves in connecting with The Wise, The Capable Healer Himself, *Al-Shāfi*, simplified as:

1. Staying at home allows us to contemplate within ourselves and protect ourselves from other forms of harm. Likewise, parents can explain to their children the importance of physical distancing.
2. Strive to minimize our time reading unnecessary news on social media and instead spend our quality time with our children, reading verses from the Qur'ān or ḥadīth of the Prophet. Have the plan to include our children in memorizing verses of the Qur'ān or the ḥadīth.
3. Parents may assist their children with their online classes and their homework. Similarly, parents may cook their food together with their children. This activity may develop the skill of management in cooking.
4. At the same, while gathering, we can start performing our *ṣalāh* together. We should also use this time to reflect on and acknowledge our weaknesses and shortcomings. This act of humility brings in the powerful aid of The All-Powerful, The Most Merciful Himself.

Conclusion

The Qur'ānic narration of Maryam and her mother's positive character teaches us to love them, emulate their behaviour, and implore Allah to guide and assist us as He did for them. We should always strive to emulate and adopt their admirable qualities and characteristics. It is also due to Allah's generosity that they are lauded by both previous and subsequent generations, demonstrating their exalted position. Moreover, we today may emulate their practices to develop positive character, particularly in parenting during the COVID-19 endemic. Hence, we see the signages that call for "stay at home" or "*al-baqā' fi al-manzil*" or "*xyu ban*" is crucial for it provides us with the opportunity for self-introspection and accountability, just like Maryam, who retires to a remote place to get back to self-strength. In the seclusion, more prospect for us to see our purpose in life, inadequacies, and the way to progress to become a better version of ourselves. Thus, the reflection of Qur'ānic narratives on Maryam and her experiences mentioned above prove to be significant for us to develop and emulate her practices in self-resilient,

the virtuous deed which paves the way for a healthier and closer connection with The Powerful Creator of all, *Al-Qahhār*, including the COVID-19. It is not COVID-19 that creates death, but He Himself - *Al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm*—Who creates life and death. It is a matter of time before we all return to His fold. The question is: are we ready?

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AL-ITQĀN

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Volume: 6

Special Issue No. 4

December 2022

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