

On Wombs, Women, and the Hand of God

The Bearing of Life in the Qurʾān

It is he that fashions you in wombs as he pleases.

—Sūra 3:6

The Qurʾān hardly provides a comprehensive, systematic manual of reproductive theories and practices; rather, it projects a series of brief vignettes that disclose disparate and fragmentary conceptions of procreative processes and agents of creation on both a cosmic and individual level. These vignettes adumbrate the diverse nature of God's generative role and his creative endeavors, which the Qurʾān presents as inscrutably analogous to both human reproduction and maternal identities. Just as God's creative agency and impulses transcend human comprehension, so, too, does human reproduction necessarily remain a mystery to ordinary men and women who struggle to comprehend its elusive intricacies and so better control its often volatile outcomes. Finding maternal paradigms such as Mary, whose piety led to the birth of Jesus, is one such strategy, but attaining Mary's status proves elusive if not illusory. For most men and women, the Qurʾān's many displays of profound creative and reproductive uncertainties that disclose God's incomparable and mystifying omnipotence prevail.

As the examples below will show, God is at once transcendent word, artisan, farmer, midwife, philosopher, and intimate sexual partner.¹ In his donning of these varied roles, the divine encompasses

all aspects of human creativity, sexuality, knowledge, and gender, yet transcends them as his identity can never be captured fully in a single image. The polyvalence of God's procreative agency renders both men and women deficient to replicate his ways or assume his generative powers as their own. The exceptionally pious seem exempt to this rule, but only to a limited extent. God and God alone creates in wombs whatever, and however, he pleases.²

Divine procreation has among its analogs the mysteries of human reproduction, as it, too, defies rational comprehension and human efforts to determine its outcomes. The Qur'ān presents an array of crucial episodes where women may or may not give birth to show how they are incapable of replicating God's creative efforts to reproduce life, and that God generates in wombs what he pleases. For example, some women remain barren all their lives, even those married to prophets, while others receive a wealth of progeny. Some mothers deliver perfected babies who suffer no infirmities whatsoever, while others bring forth infants who are blind, deaf, or dumb. As one mother's child flourishes well into old age, another's will die while suckling, for no apparent reason. Such profound uncertainty over a mother's ability to dictate reproductive ends likewise serves to underscore God's absolute dominance over all life.

There are a few exceptions to this rule. The extraordinarily pious, such as Mary, who conceived Jesus freely without a human father, do seem capable of determining reproductive ends through their faithful words and actions. However, despite the fact that Mary's exceptional piety gave way to a fertile womb, the Qur'ān still preserves the enigma surrounding Jesus's conception and birth by veiling the actual event behind a panoply of conception narratives that evade any singular interpretation of what actually takes place. Mary's piety may have led to a purified and productive womb, but only God can cause it to conceive the life he desires, in the ways he prefers it to occur.

The majority of ordinary women who struggle to approximate Mary's example, however, can never be assured the same result. Such women may cultivate similar virtues; however, they will not be guaranteed the same reproductive outcomes Mary enjoyed as a result of her perfected actions and purified nature. Therefore, the Qur'ān's array of snapshots projecting the capricious nature of divine creation and human reproduction structure an ambiguous maternal identity that may be pure, pious, and perfected, but also may be deficient, defiant, and flawed in terms of faith and a willingness to sacrifice all to God. The Qur'ān's broad template of diverse and confounding models of creation, reproduction, and maternal identities only grows narrower and more restrictive as subsequent medieval medical scholars and exegetes privi-

lege only those images that support their own patriarchal constructs of God, birth, and motherhood.

The Many Ways God Creates

Near Eastern Foundations of Human Creation: Clay, Mud, and Water

In order to show God's complete mastery and supreme power over all life, the Qur'ān reiterates familiar Near Eastern and Mediterranean stories that stress the generation of life from God's word, or from his hands-on fashioning of inanimate, earthy materials. For example, the Qur'ān emphasizes how God only has to say the word *Be!* and whatever he intends or wills comes into being (*kun fayakūn*).³ The generation of matter from a single word or command resembles Yahweh's formulaic statements in Genesis 1, where he says "Let there be [light]" and there is [light] (*yāhî [ōr] vāyāhî [ōr]*).⁴ The Qur'ānic God's calling things into being from afar emphasizes his absolute and utter transcendence over whatever he creates.

Such depictions of God's remote transcendence are mediated through those verses that emphasize his manual fashioning of life from earthy substances, which resemble what is found in Genesis 2:7: "The Lord God formed man of the dust from the earth (*vayyīšer yāhwā 'ēlōhīm 'eṭ-hā 'ādām 'āfār min-hā 'ādāmā*)."⁵ In contrast to the Hebrew dust (*'āfār*), the Qur'ānic God prefers clay (*ṭīn*) in his molding of humanity: "It is he who created you from clay (*ṭīn*) then decreed a term."⁶ However, the Qur'ān does not limit him to *ṭīn* alone. Other verses mention God's use of potter's clay (*ṣalṣāl*);⁷ mud (*ḥamā'*);⁸ sticky clay (*ṭīn lāzib*);⁹ and dust (*ṭurāb*).¹⁰ Water (*mā'*)¹¹ also serves as a foundational basis for God's formation of life, both human and otherwise, and mirrors, perhaps, ancient Mediterranean or Near Eastern flood narratives, where life emerges after the subsiding of the waters.¹² In all of these examples, God chooses some natural resource he alone shapes into life with his own hand,¹³ without help or intervention. He is not limited to a single substance in his creative efforts, but has access to any he chooses.

The Qur'ān is relatively silent as to why God decides to utilize one substance over another, although the text does note that sticky clay (*ṭīn lāzib*) appears to be the stubborn, stinking substance God uses to create those "who see signs but turn them into mockery" (37:14). Many Qur'ānic commentators, however, connect the type of clay God prefers in fashioning a human with her innate, natural disposition. For example, when God created the first human being, Adam, he selected *ṭīn*, the purest form.¹⁴ Humans shaped from *ṭīn* would be born untainted and

righteous, though later may be “muddied” by their actions.¹⁵ Some exegetes suggest that extraordinary human beings, such as prophets, were formed from specific types of purified clay.¹⁶ Others propose that human skin color stems from the type of clay originally chosen by God.¹⁷ Such exegetical speculations, however, cannot counter the fact that the Qur’ān bars absolute certainty over God’s reasons for selecting particular raw materials to form humans. In theory, he can create humans from any substance he deems worthy, as underscored by the listing of the variety of materials he has at his disposal.

God’s supreme, solitary role in the fashioning of life is further underscored through the absence in these examples of any feminized earthly counterpart who must yield her natural substances to God’s hand. God’s dependency on the earth’s role in human creation is implied in Genesis 2:7, as Yahweh Elohim necessarily creates man of the dust from the earth (‘*āfār min-hā’ādamā*).¹⁸ By way of contrast, the Qur’ān eliminates the feminized earth as an intermediary source that God must reckon with to extract his foundational, masculine substances—clay (*tīn*) or water (*mā’*)—to generate life. In fact, all of the earthly substances listed above are masculine nouns, which further modulates traditional constructs of binary sexual pairings in the begetting of life.

Several Muslim exegetes continue to privilege this Qur’ānic notion of creation as a solitary act, to the point where God alone even multiplied Adam’s progeny without the help of Eve. Tha‘labī (d. 1063 CE), for example, relates how God created Adam, and then stroked his (Adam’s) back, from which he withdrew offspring who were then destined for the Garden or Fire, a phenomenon also explored at some length by Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE).¹⁹ This homoerotic image of God stroking Adam’s back to generate human life without a female counterpart is underscored by the Qur’ānic examples noted above that emphasize God’s dominant, creative power as he alone acts upon passive, masculine substances in solitary fashion. In its elimination of any human or nonhuman helpers, female partners, or feminine repositories in the procreative process, the Qur’ān portrays its deity as a more supreme, and powerful version of the biblical Yahweh Elohim.

Pagan Agricultural Models of Human Creation: Earth, Soul, and Sperm

The Qur’ān, however, refuses to limit God’s creative nature to that of transcendent utterer of a word or aloof, omnipotent artisan. In order to refine the divine identity projected in many Near Eastern, biblical traditions, many Qur’ānic verses instead highlight God’s intimate—almost sexual—interactions with a feminized earth. For example, Sūra 71:17–18 mentions that “God caused you to germinate from the earth (*anbatakum*

min al-ard), then he will return you into it and bring you out again." Sūra 53:32 also asserts how God "knows you very well since he produced you from the earth (*anshā'akum min al-ard*)." These passages uniquely refer to God not as an artisan but as a farmer who plants crops, watches them grow and die, and then resurrects them each spring.

Here, the earth serves as a willing, animate recipient of God's "seed"²⁰ rather than a static storehouse of natural resources to be mined and molded by him, as is the case in Genesis 2:7. This intimate partnership between God and earth is mirrored in human life also, as in Sūra 2:223, where women are depicted as "tillage" (*ḥarth*) for men to plough. Such agricultural metaphors that depict the earth in terms of female sexuality appear throughout Greek literature. For example, the Hippocratics liken the female body to a plowed and seeded field.²¹ Further, in Pindar's *Pythian IV*, Lemnian women are described as "foreign furrows."²²

God's intimate relationship with the feminized earth reverberates elsewhere in the Qur'ān. For example, in Sūra 99:5, the earth (*al-ard*) serves as one of the few nonhuman, loving beneficiaries of God's revelation (*bi anna rabbaka awḥā lahā*). The bee, whose gender is ambiguous,²³ is another.²⁴ Later exegetes flesh out this intimate partnership by relaying that when God sent Gabriel to the earth to gather for him some of her clay out of which he would fashion Adam, the earth refused, saying, "I take refuge in God against your taking something away from me and mutilating me,"²⁵ a statement that may reveal an exegetical critique of the artisan model. While ultimately the earth could only protest against and not reject God's request, her dissenting voice forced the angels to extract bits of clay from different points on her "skin" (*adīm*) so as not to disfigure her.²⁶

Such examples of God's partnering with the earth counter his image as the solitary, creative force who self-generates life at will. As a loving consort who pairs with a feminized earth, whose own identity is shaped by her having been chosen by God and her willingness to accept God's procreative plans, the divine in these verses becomes much more immanent, human, and masculine than his more abstract, omnipotent role as artisan. However, as a practitioner of both artisanship and husbandry, and transcendent utterer of word in his production of human beings, God's uniqueness as creator ultimately surpasses any single quality or characteristic ascribed to him by either the Qur'ān or its antecedents.

The intimate relationship between God and the earth is reflected further in the many Qur'ānic passages that feature the integral role of sexual pairing in the procreative act. Such ruminations are similar to what is presented in Genesis 1:27, where "God created humankind

(*'et-hā'ādām*)," then "male (*zākār*) and female (*naqēbā*) he created them." Likewise, in Sūra 4:1, "your Lord created you (pl.) from a single soul (*min nafsin wāhidatin*)²⁷ and from it [her] he created its mate (*wakhalaqa minhā zawjahā*)."²⁸ What distinguishes the Qur'ānic example from its biblical counterpart is that the word for soul, *nafs*, is feminine and the mate (*zawj*) formed from this generic feminine soul is masculine. In contrast, the biblical version presents *'et-hā'ādām* as a generic or even masculine form that is then split into male and female parts. While binary sexual pairing is a persistent theme throughout the Qur'ān, the fact that it reverses the biblical order of who's initially derived from whom either underscores the significance of the feminine role in the begetting of life or, perhaps, renders both masculine and feminine forces impotent when compared to God's ultimate power.

The Qur'ān provides many other examples that stress the importance of sexual pairing in earthly reproduction, but do not privilege one sex over the other.²⁹ In Sūra 92:3, "the male and the female (*al-dhakara wa al-unthā*)" together serve as signs of God's creative power. The reasons God has produced both "the male and female (*al-dhakara wa 'l-unthā*)" are revealed further in Sūra 49:13: "to make nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another." What has taken place between God and the earth in primordial times is reflected in the subsequent sexual acts that are mimed throughout human generations. Aside from humans, most animate forms of life also come from pairs. Sūra 42:11 asserts how God "has made pairs (*azwājan*) for you among yourselves, and of the cattle pairs (*azwājan*), multiplying you thereby."³⁰ Clearly, both sexes play an equally vital role in the engendering of any life form.

While the Qur'ānic God himself does not engage in carnal relations, except, perhaps, in the case of his interactions with Mary and the earth,³¹ his creative power underlies the mechanics of sexual fusion so that human reproduction must also be considered a divine feat. In this light, God becomes inextricable from the natural, human laws that govern his generative acts; in fact, he causes them to be. As such, God is simultaneously an analog for and an agent of creation. His creative forces, which engendered the first human being, continue to penetrate every act of human copulation. Masculine and feminine properties contribute to the procreative process, but neither takes precedence, as God dominates all. When it comes to human reproduction, God is "closer to you than your jugular vein."³²

According to the Qur'ān, sexual pairing serves as more than just a sign of God's power and greatness; it is a fact of nature. The Qur'ān offers many explicit, scientific details, based on Greek medical wisdom, as to how humans are produced through sexual pairing, in particular through sperm: "He has created humankind (*al-insān*) from a sperm

drop (*nutfa*).³³ The Qur'ān mentions further how the human being (*al-insān*) was “created from flowing water (*khuliqa min mā'in dāfiqin*) proceeding out from what lies between the loins (*ṣulb*) and the chest-bone (*tarā'ib*).³⁴

The masculine word “water” (*mā'*) in this case most likely refers to semen, given the Qur'ān's direct reference to the fact that the *mā'* comes from various parts of the human body.³⁵ The idea that sperm comes from all parts of the body is Hippocratic;³⁶ later Muslim physicians, however, also professed this view.³⁷ Given that the word *insān* refers to humankind more generally, it is worth noting the Qur'ān assumes, like the Hippocratics and Galen, that both males and females produce sperm from different parts of their bodies that then combines in the womb to form life.³⁸ Other verses underscore this two-seed reproductive theory, including those that refer specifically to mixed or mingled sperm (*nutfatin amshājin*).³⁹ The fact that God creates humans from the sperm he spawns within them—both male and female—and determines the outcome of each individual mixture suggests that he alone dictates the laws of nature governing reproduction.

Therefore, the Qur'ānic sperm is not produced from the loins of God, which would limit his identity to that of a paternal figure and privilege the male role in procreation, but rather serves as a foundational, generic substance (like clay) that God crafts to utilize in the process of human reproduction. Here, God dons the role not of parent but of neutral inseminator as he creates human beings in pairs, male and female, from a sperm drop (*nutfa*) lodged in place.⁴⁰ Just as the single soul (*nafs*) is a feminine noun from which its masculine mate (*zawj*) is generated, so too is one name for the primary, physical substance so key to all of human reproduction—the *nutfa*—feminine. Here, unlike clay and “water” (*mā'*), God acts upon feminine materials to generate life on both a cosmic and human level. Human beings may serve as the source or vehicle for such sperm, but God alone causes it “to be”⁴¹ and determines what it will become deep within their bodies.

His private workings within the inner confines of the human body—either male or female—to generate “water” (*mā'*) or sperm (*nutfa*) suggests a profound, erotic intimacy with both nature and human life that again casts into relief his image as transcendent pronouncer of “Be!” and the lone, omnipotent artisan who requires no assistance or partnership in the production of life. Such conflated assertions about his identity that fuse together artisan, agriculturalist, and transcendent models of generation resist any human impulse to pinpoint precisely the nature of God or the extent of his powers. Such uncertainties about God's role as creator or precisely how he generates life in theory prevent men or women from modeling themselves off of him in their reproductive

capacities, or from structuring their societies to reflect a particular cosmic order based on familial relations.

While God may create the sperm that generates all human life, the Qur'ān undercuts male procreative primacy by asserting boldly that he is in no way to be understood as a husband or father.⁴² Many Qur'ānic verses note how both pagan Qurayshī and Christian audiences accused God of fathering daughters or sons during the time of Muḥammad. For example, several of the Qur'ān's polemical statements against the Quraysh serve to counter the pagan praise for Muḥammad's (extra-Qur'ānic) Satan-inspired revelation that the goddesses al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manawāt, whom the Quraysh venerated as God's daughters, "are the *gharānīq* (exalted females) whose intercession is approved."⁴³ Clearly, the Qur'ān avows, this statement could not have come from God, for "would God choose daughters for himself and sons for you alone?"⁴⁴ Such counter criticisms allow the Qur'ān to distance further its deity from any paternal characteristics derived from his generative role in the creation of life. God is not bound by binary sexual mores.

Christians are also subject to such polemical attacks for reasons having to do with their understandings of Jesus as God's son. The Qur'ān posts dire warnings against "those who say [God] has taken a son,"⁴⁵ and repudiates the Christian idea that God could serve as father, since "God begets not, nor was he begotten."⁴⁶ Certainly, God could have a child if he chose to do so,⁴⁷ but ultimately "it is not fitting for the compassionate (*al-rahīmān*) to have a son."⁴⁸ Despite his close associations with sperm, earth, nature, and the human body, and his role as lone artisan in the creation of human life, the Qur'ān makes clear God should not be tied to any overtly paternal qualities or attributes. As such, he transcends human categories that ascribe to him a concrete gendered or familial role in the procreative act, in particular, fatherhood and what has come to be its privileged, social role in the generation of life.

While many Qur'ānic passages flatly deny God's role as a father, some do explore his intimate relationship with wombs, which further repudiates his paternal role by casting him into a maternal light (despite the fact that the word for womb [*rahīm*] is masculine). The arena in which God creates is often the womb,⁴⁹ whose secrets are hidden to men and women in "shadows of darkness (*ṭhalmāt*)."⁵⁰ The word for womb (*rahīm*) is derived from the same root as mercy (*rahīma*), which forms two of God's ninety-nine names: the merciful (*al-rahīmān*) and the compassionate (*al-rahīm*).⁵¹ God, therefore, is inseparable from a woman's reproductive parts, from which he generates life. In addition to womb, the root *r-ḥ-m* also implies blood ties, kinship, pity, and tenderness.⁵² The Qur'ān suggests God's mercy and tenderness are ever-present in the womb, which, like human beings, cannot escape God's complete knowl-

edge of all its inner workings.⁵³ In theory, this mercy and knowledge will be cast further upon all those whom God creates in their mothers' bellies, "one creation after another."⁵⁴ God's close connection with the masculine womb, embedded deep within the female body, is also well attested in many *ḥadīth*, which, for example, note how God appoints an angel to guard over every womb.⁵⁵

In addition to highlighting God's maternal associations with the womb, the Qur'ān also underscores his role as midwife when mothers give birth. Not only does God have complete knowledge of what takes place in the womb, but he himself delivers his followers "out from the bellies (*buṭūn*) of your mothers knowing nothing and gave you hearing, sight and hearts, that by chance you may give thanks."⁵⁶ Through such dealings with the womb and what it produces, God's identity becomes intimately entwined with both the mother in whose womb he creates life, and the life form he fashions and carries forth into the world.

Interestingly, this passage notes that the ability to see and hear is something God grants humans subsequent to their birth. In other words, humans are neotenous, or perhaps even nonhuman, as they exit the womb, and therefore require God's continued hands-on molding, nurturing, and rearing to bring them to their current physical and moral state, where they may worship him fully and freely. While God certainly displays all the characteristics of a good mother in these examples, he is never explicitly referred to as one. Whatever maternal characteristics God may display, they are entwined with his identity as transcendent word, solitary artisan, and masculine consort with a feminized earth. By amalgamating disparate identities, and suggesting that God embodies them all, the Qur'ān affirms no clear attribute can possibly capture God's true procreative identity or the precise nature of his generative powers.

*Greek Medical Theories and the Qur'ānic God:
Seed, Blood, Flesh and Bones*

Still other Qur'ānic verses combine the different artisan and agriculturalist models together into a single trope that serves to frame an epigenetic depiction of fetal development that reflects, to varying degrees, Greek medical theories. In its articulation of Hippocratic, Galenic, and, to a lesser degree, Aristotelian models of fetal development, the Qur'ān demonstrates God's mastery of the reproductive techniques described by them, but emphasizes that his creative efforts are not bound by them. While mechanistic processes drawn from Greek philosophy and medical wisdom may play an important role in the production of offspring as they generate heat, friction, or *pneuma* from seminal fluid, the laws

of nature become subordinate to the one God who alone possesses the power to engender humans from nonliving matter.

The Qur'ān's epigenetic portrayal of fetal development, which follows the creation of life from clay, to sperm, to blood clot, to lump of flesh, to bones, appears in Sūra 23:12–14: "We have created man from a scion, from clay (*walāqad khalaqnā al-insāna min sulālatin min ṭīnin*); then we placed him as a sperm drop (*thumma ja'alnāhu nuṭfatan*) in a secure place; then we created out of the sperm drop a clot of blood (*thumma khalaqnā al-nuṭfata 'alaqatan*); then we created from the clot a lump of flesh (*fakhalaqnā al-'alaqata muḍghatan*); then made the lump of flesh into bones (*fakhalaqnā al-muḍghata 'izāman*); then covered the bones with flesh; then fashioned him into another creation (*khalqan*)."⁵⁷

In this example, God pinches off a small, clay, homuncular mass that he then places "as a sperm" in the womb. The fashioned mass then progresses along the precise path outlined by Greek medical scholars: from seed, to mixed seed, to coagulated blood, to flesh, to bones.⁵⁸ According to Hippocrates, for example, it is at this point, when the bones and limbs have been articulated, that the "fetus" comes into being.⁵⁹ Likewise, the Qur'ān acknowledges the presence of yet another "creation" after the bones are covered with flesh.

Where the Qur'ānic version differs from the Hippocratic descriptions of fetal development, however, is in its insertion of God's active hand throughout the entire process. This form of divine control is seen most clearly in the Qur'ān's adaptation of Hippocratic models to secure God's primacy as he places clay as "sperm" in the womb just prior to the various stages of fetal development. This added prequel to the Hippocratic process ensures that human reproduction is not an activity separate from divine procreation. God's initial, creative act of generating the first man from clay is still evident in the very conception of each and every human being via sexual intercourse. Thus, human reproduction becomes the analog to all of divine creation in its ever-shifting mysteries and polyvalence.

Including clay in the Hippocratic stages of human reproduction has significant theological consequences. First, it connects biblical antecedents of dust formation with contemporary Greek medical wisdom, and demonstrates how the Qur'ān supersedes them both. Second, it affirms that the divine creation of the first man and subsequent acts of human reproduction are, in essence, indistinguishable. Because human sexuality and reproduction mirror God's initial creative acts, the Qur'ān breaks from the biblical narrative in Genesis by no longer casting human reproduction as a distinct form of divine punishment upon those who disobeyed God.⁶⁰ God is no longer absent from earthly, human reproduction, which men and women suffer as a consequence of disobedience

or sin, but remains an intimate partner within it as he navigates the entire course of sperm generation, conception, fetal development, birth, and life itself from both inside and outside the womb. And third, God's formation of a clay homunculus as "sperm" ensures that his creation of each human being is flawless and unadulterated, since nothing is left to chance or nature. The Qur'ānic God has no need to "blot out from the earth the human beings [he] has created"⁶¹ for their initial creation is one of divine intent and perfection.

The Qur'ān continues to appropriate and revise Greek medical wisdom through its discussions of another essential ingredient required in the process of human creation: the animating breath. As noted above, Hippocrates divides the embryo into four stages: sperm, coagulated blood, flesh, and bones (and other bodily members). In his model, breath (*pneuma*) enters into the developmental process during one of the earliest stages, after seed from both mother and father mixes in the womb, and is gathered into a single mass that condenses as a result of heat.⁶² According to Hippocrates, since the lifeless mass is housed in a warm environment, it "acquires breath."⁶³ This warm breath, however, must escape, so it hollows out a passage for its release. Once the passage of escape has been formed, it "inspires" from the mother a second quantity of breath, which is cool air. Hot air, in other words, necessarily draws cool air into itself to "feed upon" as it expels warm air in return.⁶⁴

Hippocrates identifies two sources of air for the seed: this internal breath generated by heat, but also the cool, outside air inhaled by the mother.⁶⁵ The continuous breathing in and out of the seed allows it to inflate and to develop a membrane around its surface, similar to the way a crust is formed on the surface of bread when it is baked.⁶⁶ In other words, Hippocrates likens the female body to a hot "oven" where bread, the staple of life produced through women's labor, is cooked. Because a woman ceases to menstruate when she becomes pregnant, the excess blood descends and surrounds the membrane. The seed contained within the membrane then draws this blood into itself via the essential breath.⁶⁷

The process of tearing the membrane in order to "breathe in" blood from the mother further results in coagulation around the areas of rupture, which causes the mass to grow.⁶⁸ Thus the breath (*pneuma*) generates the evolution of what is eventually to become a living being from the first stage of development (seed), to the second (coagulated clot), and then to the third (flesh), when the coagulated clot connects with the umbilicus, and flesh begins to form.⁶⁹ At this point in the process, the breath (*pneuma*) serves as the principle organizer of matter, a force that drives nonliving material into living beings. For the Hippocrat-ics, breath is the power that first generates life inside the womb, and

then determines, guides, and drives its progression toward a completed human form.⁷⁰

While the four Qur'ānic stages of fetal development resemble the Hippocratic model, they differ radically from it in that they do not evolve one from another, but rather stand as separate and distinct divine acts as noted by the repetition of the verb *khalaqnā* (we created).⁷¹ Rather than breath driving the transformation of the mixed seed into progressive permutations of fetal development, it is God who creates each stage separately. Here, God leaves nothing to natural, mechanistic processes; each movement is not caused by another but rather is rooted in his creative efforts.

There is never a moment in the Qur'ānic scheme—as there is in the Hippocratic model—where any of the various fetal forms would be caught betwixt and between a sperm drop or clot of blood; a clot of blood or lump of flesh. An entity that is neither a sperm drop nor a clot of blood, nor one that is in the nebulous process of transforming from one state to another, could potentially fall outside God's jurisdiction. Likewise, God is not bound by the Hippocratic mechanics of fetal development, as he may disrupt the progression at any point with a new creative act. By deemphasizing the "natural" mechanisms that drive the embryo from one stage to another, the Qur'ān offers a "corrective" to past pagan philosophers who wrongfully left God out of the equation.

When the Qur'ān does take up notions of breath, they tend to reflect more the Aristotelian, as opposed to the Hippocratic, understanding of *pneuma* in terms of the necessary, biological role it plays in the animation of life. The Qur'ān, however, critiques and transforms Aristotelian conceptions of breath according to its own theological principles. Such principles devalue the primacy of the male in the reproductive act, which marks both males and females as equally (in)significant in the generation of life, and elevates God's power over all of creation.

Aristotelian notions of breath are elaborated through the Qur'ān's discussion of two specific cases where God generated life outside the normal course of human reproduction: the creation of Adam from clay, and the conception of Jesus, son of Mary, without a father. In each instance, the Qur'ān draws upon Aristotelian theories of *pneuma* to describe how life comes to be, but amends them according to the theological belief that God alone, as opposed to man or nature, has the power to produce life.

Like Hippocrates, Aristotle also views *pneuma* as heat. However, for Aristotle, this heat is not generated by the friction caused when two seeds mix together, but rather is imparted by the male semen, which is a compound of *pneuma* (hot air) and water.⁷² This heat, however, is no ordinary heat; Aristotle likens *pneuma* to the divine element of the

stars.⁷³ Aristotle believes only males contribute semen or seed, and thus *pneuma*, or *ether*, to the generation of life.⁷⁴

Unlike the Hippocratic model so favored by the Qur'ān where both parents generate seed, females supply only the "prime matter" (menstrual blood) upon which the semen, or vital heat, acts.⁷⁵ The male, therefore, becomes the sole active partner in the process of reproduction, the transmitter of the *pneuma* that generates the movement,⁷⁶ or produces the "effect" inside the passive female body.⁷⁷ Rather than two matters colliding and mixing together to produce heat, as in the Hippocratic model, the male semen alone contains the *dynamis* that causes the inactive material in the female to take on a particular shape or character,⁷⁸ and imparts to it the same movement with which it is itself bequeathed.⁷⁹

Once inside the womb, the water portion of the semen dissolves and evaporates, and the vital heat (*pneuma*) is left to form, differentiate, and organize the new individual. Aristotle links the activity of the animation and formation of an individual being to the idea of the soul (*psuchē*),⁸⁰ which he defines as "the essence (or reality) of a particular body."⁸¹ Here, the soul (*psuchē*) serves as principle of life because it is the source of its movement, its final cause (for the sake of which the body exists), and the "essence" of all living bodies.⁸² Although Aristotle, like Hippocrates, confers breath or *pneuma* as the animating or organizing principle for life, he deviates from his predecessor by maintaining that the breath also transmits the soul, the essence that makes something a distinct living being. He also parts company with Hippocrates by locating the source for both breath and soul within the male, who alone produces semen from heated blood.

In the Qur'ānic example of Adam's creation, God tells the angels he is going to produce a man (*bashr*) from clay (*ṭīn*), and "when I have fashioned him and breathed into him from my spirit (*wanaḥaytu fīhi min rūḥī*), fall down before him."⁸³ In many respects, the "breath" imparted by the deity that carries the spirit (*rūḥ*) functions analogously to the male semen that transmits the soul in Aristotle's paradigm. Like the Aristotelian male, God in this passage serves as the active force in the reproductive process, the lone transmitter of the *pneuma* that animates life from passive, inanimate material. However, the Qur'ān continuously casts into relief his male-like dominance over female matter with projections of his maternal concern for human development and his transcendent word that causes life to be without active intervention. This panoply of images assures no singular divine identity is privileged.

Qur'ānic descriptions of Mary's conception of Jesus also mirror Aristotelian paradigms of the role of the animating breath in human reproduction. Here, the divine breath allowed Mary to conceive Jesus

without a human partner, just as it allowed for the generation of Adam without a father (or mother, for that matter).⁸⁴ The Qur'ān notes in Sūra 21:91 that because Mary guarded her private, sexual parts (*ahṣanat farjahā*), "We breathed into her from our spirit (*fanafakhnā fihā min rūhinā*) and made her and her son a sign to the world."

Sūra 66:12 gives a slightly different version of the story that emphasizes the more overtly sexual nature of the breath's role in reproduction. Here, the breath did not enter *her* but *it*, meaning her vagina (*fanafakhnā fihī min rūhinā*). The emphasis on Mary's vagina in Sūra 66:12 elicits more explicitly the Aristotelian model of male semen carrying the essential breath of life that activates the inanimate matter in Mary's womb. Here, Jesus's conception may follow the natural course of reproduction outlined by the Greeks (minus the human father), but the Qur'ān ensures the precise details of the event still remain inaccessible to humans through its multiple and often contradictory depictions of what actually took place.

How medieval exegetes seek to explain who blew what where reveals a desire to resolve the Qur'ān's ambiguity over what took place between God and Mary. Such interpretive efforts likewise strive to diffuse suggestions of an erotic encounter that may have occurred outside the realm of male knowledge and control. To strip Mary of her dangerous, procreative potency and her intimacy with God, some medieval scholars work to revise the literal reading of Sūra 66:12, which proposes the spirit was blown into *it*, meaning her vagina (*farj*). While these scholars assume *farj* to mean vagina,⁸⁵ they advise it was actually the angel Gabriel, and not God, who breathed the strong current of air either directly or indirectly into Mary's *farj*. Although the Qur'ān does not mention Gabriel as the one who exhaled the conceiving breath into Mary's private parts—in fact, the Qur'ān utilizes the ubiquitous "we" as the subject imparting the air—the majority of scholars make him the agent of the breath.⁸⁶ Gabriel did not take liberties with Mary on his own initiative, however, as a husband might decide to act upon his wife;⁸⁷ rather, God dispatched him to her.⁸⁸

In their efforts to sever the intimate liaison between Mary and God so clearly implied by Sūra 66:12, medieval exegetes draw upon the familiar patterns of conception and reproduction offered by Aristotle, where a male figure (Gabriel) necessarily imparts the life-giving force (semen) into the woman's womb.⁸⁹ Such interpretations that favor the masculine role in human generation make God's inscrutable creative efforts subject to human reproductive practices, which limits his ability to create whatever, and however, he pleases. They also restrict Mary's own erotic agency in her partnership with God to conceive life.

Despite their insistence on a male figure imparting the animating breath, a number of medieval exegetes were still uncomfortable with the

fact that Gabriel, let alone God, would have had access to Mary's vagina. They intimate the spirit was more likely blown into *her* (as suggested by Sūra 21:91), but suggest that could mean anyplace on Mary's person. Therefore, they project Gabriel did not exhale his breath into Mary's vagina, but rather into a hole or opening in her outer garment, and she conceived.⁹⁰ Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE), for example, proposes God commanded Gabriel to breathe the breath into a slit (*jīb*) in Mary's garment, and then the breath descended into her vagina and she conceived Jesus,⁹¹ just as a woman becomes pregnant after sexual intercourse with her husband.⁹² He also reports how some scholars assert Gabriel's breath emanated directly into her chest; others that Gabriel exhaled into her mouth.⁹³ The desire to privilege the male generative role in Jesus's conception, but lessen the erotic intimations of that encounter, seem to fuel these medieval exegetical musings.

In contrast with these interpretive perspectives, the Qur'ān draws from the same biological paradigms to relay the many ways Mary conceived Jesus without a male partner. After all, God creates whatever, and however, in wombs as he chooses. While some Qur'ānic passages are patterned according to Aristotelian views of reproduction, others break that pattern by broadening God's procreative capabilities. For example, in yet another account of Jesus's conception (Sūra 19:17), Mary received not the breath that contained the spirit in her vagina, but directly "our spirit (*rūḥanā*), who appeared to her as a man in every respect (*basharan sawīyyan*)" to tell her the Lord would give her a son. Here, the feminine spirit (*rūḥ*) is cloaked in the guise of a man (in every respect), who, through his very foretelling of what was to be, that is, by his *word*, bequeaths her a child.

In this Qur'ānic verse, the necessary, animating breath of life that must somehow be inserted or generated in Mary's womb—so vital in both Hippocratic and Aristotelian paradigms and in many Qur'ānic verses—is absent. The Qur'ānic God, contrary to those who imply otherwise, can cause life to be in the womb without breath or *pneuma* by simply sending his spirit (*rūḥ*) upon Mary without any necessary contact with her reproductive parts, just as he cast down his spirit (*rūḥ*) on or into the night of destiny.⁹⁴ The fact that the spirit, *rūḥ*, is feminine in this example (even though it appears in the guise of a man) further underscores the point that God's creative efforts critique but also transcend the laws of science and nature that elevate the role of men acting upon women in the generation of life.

God's choosing of Mary to bear his "signs"⁹⁵ in many ways mirrors his intimate partnership with the earth to create life in the artisan and agricultural motifs noted above.⁹⁶ In theory, Mary, like the earth in the eyes of exegetes, could have voiced some resistance to what was about to be done to her. In fact, she did cry out to the spirit (in the guise of

a man) who confronted her, asking, "How can I have a son when no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?"⁹⁷ He replied, "So it will be (*qāla kathāliki*)," and it was.⁹⁸ She, like the earth, could have protested, but instead she accepted what had been decreed.

The fact that Mary acquiesced to God's request and bore and delivered his prophet Jesus successfully, but in great hardship, humiliation, and pain, points to her extraordinary piety, superior physical aptitude, and free acceptance of God's will. Contrary to the Aristotelian depiction of reproduction, where the womb is a passive receptacle for man's generative seed, the Qur'ān portrays those feminized partners (Mary, soul, earth) who received God's breath, spirit, or creative hand through whatever mode he wished to send them, as active, willing, and necessary agents in the generative process. After all, God could have generated life from masculine substances alone, or caused life to "be!" without the help of female agents. His inclusion of them in his procreative efforts, however, became necessarily entwined with the life he drew forth from them.⁹⁹ Their active responses to God's desire to create life becomes an essential feature of his procreative efforts and, as such, a revealing measure of an exemplary maternal piety for all to emulate.

What further separates Qur'ānic depictions of life-giving breath in the reproductive process from their Greek counterparts that emphasize the male role in the begetting of life is the presence of the spirit (*rūḥ*), which deviates radically from the Aristotelian *psuchē*. In the creation of both Adam and Jesus, the breath that enlivened them stemmed from the spirit of God. The spirit not only separates the animate from the inanimate, but, in contrast with the *psuchē*, humans from animals. Humans alone share in the divine nature via the spirit. For example, Sūra 32:7–9 speaks of God creating all humanity (*al-insān*) from clay (*ṭīn*), and then making his (its) progeny (*naslahu*) of a "water despised" (*mā'in mahīnīn*), or sperm. However, unlike the Mary passages where the spirit, via the breath, was blown directly into her *farj*, God "breathes in him/it"¹⁰⁰ of his spirit" (*nafakha fihi min rūḥihi*), and finally bestows upon "you" (m. plural) the faculties of hearing, sight, and understanding. Clearly, life does not begin until the breath animates the inanimate sperm, as suggested by the shift in pronoun from "him/it" to "you." Human sperm alone does not carry the essential life force that allows someone to access and comprehend God's revelation; that vital element, which separates humans from animals, is rooted in, and can only be transmitted by, the divine.

The idea that God's spirit contains within it the ability to see, hear, and understand his signs—a crucial criterion for defining human existence—is underscored by the fact that it is only human life that may potentially receive his spirit, and not animal life. In the Qur'ān, animal

life absorbs only the animating breath. For example, in Sūra 5:110, Jesus was instructed to fashion the likeness of a bird (*kahaya'ti al-ṭayri*) from clay (*ṭin*), and by God's leave, to breathe into it so that it became a real bird.¹⁰¹ Jesus's breath served to enliven the clay figure of the bird just as God's breath brought to life the clay figure of Adam. However, Jesus's breath in this case did not transmit the spirit. Jesus's inability to transfer the spirit to the bird may be due to the fact that he was merely a man and not God or that nonhuman beings cannot be the recipients of God's spirit. Clearly, if God had wanted him to, Jesus could have infused the bird with his spirit. Therefore, it seems likely that God does not want his spirit to dwell in animals, which possess no innate capacity to see, hear, and read his signs.¹⁰²

Sūra 32:7–9, where God makes progeny from a “water despised” and bestows upon “you” the faculties of sight and sound, along with the many passages on Mary and Adam, critiques the atomistic, Hippocratic view that life is the byproduct of two nonliving matters colliding randomly in a warm environment. Rather, these passages suggest that while male and female sperm may meet and unite in women's wombs, only God, and not friction, or heat, supplies the necessary breath and spirit to generate human life. In the context of the Qur'ān, strict adherence to the Hippocratic model would give human beings, both male and female, or nature the ability to animate human life, a divine power that would challenge God's supreme authority. In addition, the Qur'ān's emphasis on God's spirit allows the text to distinguish the creation of human life from other, inferior forms (animals) that cannot see and hear his signs.

This same passage (Sūra 32:7–9) also underscores the theological idea that only God, and not the human male, serves as the sole source for and transmitter of the *pneuma* and the spirit. As depicted in the Qur'ān, God in many ways embodies the Aristotelian life force, an image so clearly expressed in the Qur'ānic verses depicting God's breath descending into Mary's *farj* to impregnate her. However, he is not bound to imparting it in the same way males must insert the life-giving breath via their sperm into the bodies of women. Also, while human conception and fetal growth may follow Hippocrates's two-seed theory and four-stage path, as suggested by the Qur'ān's many references to sexual pairing, mixed sperm, and embryonic development, only God can generate that path through his word, breath, or spirit, or his molding and fashioning of clay into sperm that he then plants in the womb, after which he “brings you out as infants, then allows you to come of age, then become old men.”¹⁰³

Perhaps, then, one of the reasons why the majority of medieval medical scholars, such as Rabbān al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya, and ʿArīb ibn Saʿd favor the Hippocratic (and Galenic), two-seed model of

human conception over the Aristotelian view that males alone impart the *pneuma* to generate life is to distinguish clearly between human and divine reproduction.¹⁰⁴ If human males were allowed to cast out the animating “breath” (let alone the “spirit”) through their own semen, what, then, was there to distinguish them from God? As Sūra 5:110 suggests, even Jesus, who was, after all, a man, cannot send forth the spirit as he animates the clay bird via his breath. Only God can impart the “dynamis” that has the effect of granting humans their life, which implies animation, but perhaps more importantly, the unique perception to see, hear, and comprehend that which is divine.

Of course, the Qur’ān also asserts that God can simply bypass any paradigm analogous whatsoever to human sexual reproduction through a singular word. After all, Sūra 3:59 points out that “[t]he similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam. He [God] created him [Adam] from dust (*turāb*), then said to him: ‘Be!’ And he was (*kun fayakūn*).”¹⁰⁵ The feminine spirit that appears as a man also gives this same abstract, non-descript phrase (*kun fayakūn*) to Mary as she inquires how could she have a son when no man has touched her. Clearly, God’s creative impulse transcends human comprehension at the same time that it engages it.

In sum, the Qur’ān displays a number of Near Eastern artisan paradigms, pagan agricultural motifs, and contemporary Greek medical theories to demonstrate the varied and contradictory ways God generates life. The Qur’ān’s modifications of these models all point toward a radically transcendent, omnipotent creator. God is at once the sole fashioner of human life from (masculine) substances he alone chooses but also intimate male partner with a number of feminine subjects who are active agents alongside him in the procreative process. Likewise, God appears as both omnipotent molder of humans from clay and maternal midwife to the (male) wombs that serve him. He also takes on the role of astute physician as he demonstrates his mastery over contemporary medical wisdom about how life is conceived and how it develops in the womb, and omnipotent lord as he transcends the laws of nature that govern such mechanistic processes in light of his own will, which may be generated by a single word.

Such colorful and diverse models of how life is re/produced and the roles God assumes in his generative efforts reflect the Qur’ān’s rhetorical desire to evoke dialog, debate, and general human uncertainty about how (what and why) God creates. In this way, the Qur’ānic God is able to embody yet surpass the limited identities, ideologies, and characteristics assigned to him by past authoritative Near Eastern/Mediterranean traditions, human sexuality, or natural law as articulated through Greek medical wisdom. By vocalizing multiple images of God’s creative activities and projecting a variety of models to explain God’s