

INTRODUCING THE
QUR'AN



FOR TODAY'S READER

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ences to widows are found in the context of legal texts. The Qur'an does not use a particular term to refer to widows, describing them as "the wives you leave behind." In 2:234, the period of time a widow must wait before she can remarry after her husband's death is given as four months and ten days. This is longer than the three-month period of waiting that is required of a woman after a divorce. The text goes on to say that after the prescribed waiting period widows are free to do as they wish, indicating widowhood was not an impediment toward a woman being fully incorporated into the community. This is supported by the next verse, which is directed toward men who wish to marry widows and urges them to wait until the waiting period has expired before publicly acknowledging the marriage even if they have already spoken to others about it (2:235).

A widow's independence is affirmed in 2:240, which stipulates she is to be taken care of for a year with funds from her husband's estate and permitted to stay in the home they shared. The text does not indicate whether her housing is provided for only that year or if it is a permanent arrangement, but it does state that she is free to reject this provision and go off on her own at any time if she prefers to do so. Another text that refers to a widow's financial status is 4:12, an inheritance law stating she is entitled to one-quarter of her husband's property if he leaves no children and one-eighth if there are children.

Yatim, the Arabic word for an orphan, is found twenty-three times in the Qur'an in both early and late texts. Muhammad himself was orphaned at a young age, and that status is alluded to in 93:6, when he is asked, "Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?" The protection that God extended to Muhammad the orphan is to be duplicated by members of the Muslim community in their relationships with children who have lost their parents. The orphan is the quintessential vulnerable person in the Qur'an, and many texts include orphans among other members of society who must be cared for by those in a position to help them. "They ask you (Muhammad) what they should give. Say, 'Whatever you give should be for parents, relatives, orphans, the poor, and travelers. God is aware of whatever good you do'" (2:215; cf. 2:83, 177; 4:8, 36; 8:41; 76:8-9).

The Qur'an contains explicit warnings against misappropriating the property of orphans and using it for one's own gain (17:34; 6:152), and it expressly forbids dishonoring and oppressing them (89:17; 93:9; 107:2).

Muhammad's parents are not named in the Qur'an. According to Islamic tradition, his father, Abdullah, died soon after the Prophet was born in 570. His mother, Amina, passed away when he was six, and after spending two years with his paternal grandfather, he was raised by his uncle Abu Talib.

whoever does not heed the Qur'an's call to respect orphans will suffer harsh punishment. "Those who unjustly devour the property of orphans are consuming fire into their own bellies, and they will burn in a blazing fire" (4:10).

Marriage

(Q 24:32; 57:27; 2:235, 237; 4:4, 24; 4:19; 4:25; 4:3; 4:129; 4:22-24a; 2:230; 5:5; 2:221; 24:26; 24:3)

The Qur'an holds up marriage as the norm for believers and encourages all people to enter the married state: "Marry off the single ones among you, as well as your male and female slaves who are virtuous. If they are poor, God will enrich them from His favor. God embraces all and knows all" (24:32). The text goes on to say that the unmarried should remain chaste, but this should be only a temporary situation until they are in a position to marry. The Qur'an does not endorse voluntary celibacy as an appropriate way of life, and 57:27 is sometimes interpreted as a rejection of monasticism that contains an implicit critique of celibacy.

The Arabic word for marriage is *nikāh*, and words related to it appear approximately twenty-five times in the Qur'an. It has a semantic association with sexual intercourse, indicating that the Qur'an understands marriage to be the proper context in which human sexuality is expressed. The most common terms for a husband and wife are *zawj* and *zawja*, respectively. They are best translated as "mate" and so convey a sense of equality and partnership. However, other words that refer to the husband, like *sayyid* ("lord," "chief") and *ba'l* ("master," "owner"), underscore the fact that in the Qur'an, marriage is a legal contract whereby the husband owns the wife.

That legal dimension is captured by the term *'uqdat al-nikāh*, the "marriage knot," which expresses the contractual nature of the relationship (2:235, 237). Before the contract can be entered into, it is necessary that each party be of marriageable age, which in antiquity was considered to be puberty. A legal guardian, often a relative, functions as the intermediary between the man and the woman, acting as the woman's representative (2:237). A formal proposal of marriage is required, and it is usually directed to the legal guardian. In speaking about marriage to widows, the Qur'an states that it must be a public union that is out in the open. "There is no blame on your part whether you state that you wish to marry these women or you keep it to yourselves. God knows that you intend to marry

them, but do not make a secret arrangement with them. Speak to them in the prescribed way and do not confirm the marriage until the appointed period has come to its end" (2:235).

The man is obligated to give the woman a bride-gift, or dowry, which then becomes her property that she is free to dispose of as she wishes: "Give women their bride-gift upon marriage, and if they are pleased to give some of it to you freely, you may accept it without feeling guilty" (4:4, 24). The Qur'an makes it very clear that the man is forbidden from trying to recover the gift he has given to the woman (4:19). The amount of the dowry is not stated in the Qur'an, but one text suggests that it is tied to the woman's status within society: "If one of you does not have the means to marry a believing chaste woman, he may marry a believing slave. God best knows your faith. You are part of one another, so marry them with the consent of their people and give them their proper bride-gifts. They are chaste women, not fornicators or lovers" (4:25a).

The Qur'an's endorsement of polygamy—more properly, polygyny—is well known and often commented upon by non-Muslims. The issue is addressed in 4:3: "If you fear that you will not treat orphans justly, then

Polygyny describes a situation in which a man has more than one wife at the same time. Its opposite, when a woman has more than one husband, is known as polyandry.

marry whichever women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear that you cannot be fair, then marry one or what your right hands possess. That is more likely to keep you from going astray." The reference to

"what your right hands possess" is usually understood to be a reference to slaves, with the verse giving a man permission to marry female servants he owns.

While the passage appears to permit marriage to up to four women at the same time, several things must be kept in mind. The text singles out a particular group of women when it focuses on orphans. Some commentators have argued that orphans remain the topic throughout the entire verse, so when the text gives permission for multiple marriages it is limiting the pool of potential wives to only that group. The reason orphans are identified specifically is because of their vulnerable status within society.

This text comes from the Medinan period, when a number of battles occurred, and it may be responding to a situation in which many Muslim men had lost their lives in battle. Their daughters and young wives were therefore alone and unprotected. The verse might therefore be telling the surviving men that if they cannot treat these women honorably as their guardians without marrying them, then they are allowed to marry them. Despite this more restricted way of understanding the verse, however, it

is not uncommon to see translations widen it to include marriage to other women besides the wives and daughters of those killed in war.

It is also important to note that the second part of the verse contains a qualification on the permission to marry up to four women. If the man does not think he can be equitable and treat all his wives the same, he should marry only one. As many scholars have pointed out, this disclaimer needs to be read in light of what is stated later in the same chapter in 4:129: "You will not be able to treat your wives with equal justice, no matter how much you want to do so. Do not turn away from one of them, leaving her suspended. If you repair the situation and continue to be aware of God, He is forgiving and merciful." Many commentators believe that this categorical denial of the possibility of being impartial in a situation of multiple marriages is a virtual abrogation of the other verse and therefore nullifies the practice of polygyny. At the very least, 4:129 expresses a strong preference for monogamy and discourages marriage to more than one person.

It has already been observed that the Qur'an forbids marriage between certain people. The most detailed discussion of this issue is found in 4:22-24a, a lengthy passage that lists those with whom marriage is prohibited. "Do not marry women your fathers married, except for what has already occurred. It is an indecent thing that is hateful and leads to evil. You are forbidden to marry your mothers, daughters, sisters, paternal aunts, maternal aunts, the daughters of your brothers, daughters of your sisters, women who nursed you, women who were nursed by the same woman as you were, your wives' mothers, stepdaughters under your guardianship—those with whose mothers you have consummated marriage, if you have not consummated marriage with them you will not be blamed—wives of your biological sons, two sisters at the same time, except for what has already occurred—God is truly forgiving and merciful—or women who are already married, except for your slaves. God has decreed this for you."

The phrase, "except for what has already occurred," which is repeated twice, refers to those marriages that were entered into prior to this passage being revealed. There is no need for the spouses in such marriages to divorce. According to this listing, several types of relationships create an impediment to marriage, including being a blood relation, having a foster or milk relationship, affinity by marriage, and attempting to marry two sisters. The male perspective is privileged in this passage, and the Qur'an contains no legislation for women with the same detail and scope.

In addition to those listed here, a number of other categories of women are unmarriageable according to the Qur'an. It is illegal to marry a woman who would become a man's fifth wife. A man is not allowed to

marry a woman he has divorced twice until she marries another man and obtains a divorce from him (2:230). Muslim men may marry women from among the People of the Book (5:5), a category referring primarily to Jews and Christians, but they are not to marry other non-Muslims (2:221). Muslim women, however, are not granted permission to marry men from the People of the Book. According to 24:3, Muslims are not to marry those who have committed adultery. "The adulterer may only marry an adulteress or an idolatress, and only an adulterer or an idolater may marry an adulteress. Such behavior is forbidden to believers." Later in the same chapter, it is stated that evil people should marry each other and good people should marry each other (24:26).

Divorce

(Q 2:224-42; 4:19b; 4:35; 2:231; 2:228a; 2:226; 65:1; 33:49; 2:237; 65:6; 2:241; 65:1; 65:2; 2:229-30; 2:226-27; 24:6-9; 4:130-31; 4:24)

Divorce (*ṭalāq*) is permitted in the Qur'an, and four chapters (2, 33, 65, and 66) refer to it specifically. The most detailed discussion of divorce is found in 2:224-42. The first seven verses of chapter 65, which has the title "Divorce," also treat various legal dimensions of the dissolution of a marriage. Although it is permissible for a couple to end their marriage, the Qur'an sees it as a last resort after all attempts at saving the relationship have failed. There is a well-known *ḥadīth* that has the Prophet Muhammad say that, among the things permitted by God, the most detestable is divorce.

Even if a man no longer has affection for his wife, the Qur'an urges him not to mistreat her because marriage, in and of itself, is beneficial for people: "Live with them in an honorable way. If you loathe them, it could be that you dislike something in which God has put much good" (4:19b). Fairness extends to the act of divorce itself, which can be an expression of kindness under the proper circumstances: "When you divorce women and they have fulfilled the waiting period, then either keep them in a fair way or release them in a fair way. Do not keep them to harm them and be hostile. The one who does this harms himself" (2:231a). Prior to the decision to divorce formally, however, the Qur'an holds out hope that mediation will be able to keep the couple together. Family members are to play an important role in that process: "If you fear that a couple may break up, appoint an arbiter from his family and one from hers. Then, if the couple wants to reconcile, God will bring about agreement between them. God

knows and is aware" (4:35).

Once a husband declares the *ṭalāq*, or his intention to divorce his wife, they have to wait three months, or menstrual cycles, to ensure the woman is not pregnant. This is the "set time" mentioned in 2:231 above. Another reason for this three-month delay in formalizing the divorce, in addition to establishing the paternity of any children, is that it functions as a cooling-off period during which the couple may be able to work out their differences and reconcile, which the Qur'an hopes is the outcome: "Divorced women are to wait for three monthly periods before remarrying, and they are not allowed to hide what God has created in their wombs if they really believe in God and the Last Day. Their husbands would do better to take them back during this time if they wish for a reconciliation" (2:228a; cf. 2:226; 65:1). If the marriage has not been consummated prior to the divorce, there is no waiting period since the possibility of pregnancy does not exist (33:49), and in such a case the woman is entitled to one-half of the agreed-upon bride-gift (2:237).

During the waiting period, the man must provide for the woman and allow her to stay in the house. Here, too, one reason for their close proximity is the hope that they will be able to repair the damage to their relationship and remain married, although the primary motive is the support and protection of the woman and her offspring: "House them [the wives you are divorcing], as your means allow, where you yourselves live. Do not harass them and make their situation difficult. If they are pregnant, maintain them until they give birth. If they are nursing compensate them for it, and encourage one another in a good

way. If there are problems between you, another woman may nurse the child for him" (65:6; cf. 2:241; 65:1). A divorce is considered official when, after the waiting period, it is proclaimed in the presence of two witnesses (65:2).

The Qur'anic legislation about divorce may seem one-sided in that it gives too much control to the man and leaves the woman in a relatively vulnerable situation. Some have responded to that seeming imbalance by claiming that the wedding gift the man presents to the woman gives her some leverage the man does not enjoy. Because the dowry becomes her property and she does not have to return it to him, a divorced man suffers a double loss—he no longer has his wife, and he has lost the gift he gave to her when they were married. According to this line of thinking, if

Shi'a Islam permits mut'a, or temporary marriage, by which a man and woman legally agree to marry for a set period of time after which they are divorced. Some have supported the practice with 4:24, a section of which reads "If you wish to enjoy women, you are required to give them their bride-gift."

a woman had the authority to initiate a divorce, she would then have control over her husband's property, including herself.

Nonetheless, there is a verse in the Qur'an that suggests that under certain conditions a woman may be able to release herself from an unhappy marriage by buying her way out of it: "Divorce may occur twice, and after that either keep her in a way that is acceptable or kindly let her go. It is not permissible that you take back something that you have given them [your wives] unless both parties fear that they cannot stay within the limits established by God. If you fear the two of them will not stay within the limits established by God, there is no blame on them if the woman gives something to release herself from the marriage. These are the limits established by God, so do not transgress them. Those who do so act unjustly" (2:229).

The mention at the beginning of this verse that divorce can occur twice is another way of giving the woman a measure of protection. A man cannot continue to divorce and reconcile with his wife as many times as he likes. After the second divorce, he may not remarry her until she marries another man and then divorces him (2:230).

The process outlined above is the usual way divorce is enacted according to the Qur'an, but other, less common methods exist to dissolve a marriage. One passage explains that if a man makes good on an oath not to have sexual relations with his wife, they are divorced after four months: "For those who vow that they will abstain from sexual relations with their wives there is a four-month waiting period. If they return to them, God is forgiving and merciful. But if they are determined to divorce, God hears and knows" (2:226-27). Once again, the text holds out the possibility that the marriage will survive.

Although divorce is not the stated outcome, it is the most logical result in another situation mentioned in the Qur'an in which a man accuses his wife of adultery. Normally, four witnesses must attest to an act of adultery for someone to be found guilty, but in the absence of witnesses, a man may swear four times that his wife was unfaithful to him. A fifth time he calls God's punishment upon himself if he is lying. If the woman goes through the same five steps to claim her innocence, she will not be punished (24:6-9). Since, as noted already, Muslims may not be married to adulterers, divorce is the only option if the woman does not protest her innocence. If she does, it is a probable result nonetheless since the accusation of adultery likely will irreparably harm the marriage.

Like every other aspect of human life discussed in the Qur'an, divorce comes under the authority of God, and details regarding how to initiate and carry out the dissolution of a marriage are spelled out in the text.

The most beneficial outcome for all concerned would be survival of the marriage, but if that is not possible, God continues to be present with the couple: "But if they separate, God will give to both out of His abundance. God embraces all, and is wise" (4:130).

Something missing in the Qur'an, which strikes the modern reader as unusual, is the lack of discussion regarding what constitute legitimate grounds for seeking a divorce. This absence is partly a result of the context in which the text took shape. Because a wife was considered to be a man's property, the issue of the reasons why the marriage contract could be nullified was less important than the man's right to dispense with his property as he saw fit to do. Consequently, his motivations, as well as the woman's perspective, are of little interest.

Inheritance

(Q 8:75; 33:6; 89:19; 4:5; 4:19a; 4:7-8; 2:140; 5:106-8; 2:180-82; 4:33; 4:11-12; 4:176; 15:23; 3:180b; 19:40; 57:10; 19:77-80)

Rules regarding the transfer of property from one individual to another are mentioned in a number of places in the Qur'an. They are most commonly found in sections that treat the laws of inheritance, an aspect of Islam that is notoriously intricate and difficult to understand. Other passages treat the topic in a less complex way and function more as guidelines that should be followed in matters related to property transfer.

It is stated, for example, that blood relations have a greater claim to one's wealth than fellow believers who are not kin, although the latter may be the recipients of gifts (8:75; 33:6). Elsewhere, there is a warning about misusing one's inheritance (89:19), a command not to trust property to fools (4:5), and a prohibition against inheriting wives from deceased relatives (4:19a). Another text states that both men and women are entitled to receive inheritances: "Men will receive a portion of what their parents and close relatives leave, and women will receive a portion of what their parents and close relatives leave. Whether the amount is small or large, it is obligatory. If other relatives, orphans, or poor people are present at the division of the property, give them something and speak to them gently" (4:7-8).

A distinction should be made between texts that speak of bequests, whereby an individual designates that a particular portion of his or her wealth should be given to another person, and those that treat inheritance, in which one's relationship to the deceased determines the amount he or

she receives as a beneficiary. Among the former group are a passage that stipulates that widows are to be provided with a year's worth of financial support and are not to be expelled from the home (2:140) and another that gives instructions on how to ensure that a bequest is properly witnessed to when one is near death (5:106-8).

The necessity to take care of one's family members through bequests is stressed in 2:180-82, which also spells out the community's obligation to honor the wishes of the deceased person: "When death is near to one of you who possesses wealth, it is required that he make a proper bequest to his parents and close relatives. This is an obligation incumbent upon all who are mindful of God. Whoever changes the bequest upon hearing it, the guilt of the change is only upon them. Truly, God hears and knows. But if someone fears that the testator has been unfair or done something wrong, and therefore corrects the situation among the parties, that person is not guilty of anything. Truly, God is forgiving and merciful."

Other passages specify the amount each heir is to receive, based on his or her relationship to the dead person. These verses are the basis for Islamic laws of inheritance, which the Prophet Muhammad referred to in a *ḥadīth* as containing one-half of all useful knowledge. "To each person We have established heirs for everything that parents and close relatives leave behind. Give their share to those to whom you have pledged your hand [in marriage]. Truly, God is a witness over all things" (4:33).

The three verses that lay out the Qur'an's teaching on inheritance are 4:11-12 and 4:176. This is a relatively small number of passages treating the topic, but they have generated much discussion among commentators because there are inconsistencies within them, and they do not always agree with what the verses that discuss bequests have to say. The second problem is often addressed by appealing to the Qur'an's chronology. According to the most widely accepted understanding of the reception of the text, the inheritance verses were received by Muhammad after the ones that mention bequests, so they abrogate the previous ones and provide the text's definitive teaching on property transfer.

The share that children and parents receive is the main topic of 4:11. The verse begins with the statement that a son should receive an amount equal to what two daughters receive. This has sometimes led to the formulation of a general principle that a brother will always receive twice as much as his sister(s), but the rules elsewhere in the inheritance verses reveal this not to be the case because, depending on the number of heirs and who they are, the amount the sister(s) receives could be more than one-half that of the brother. This is just one example of the mathematical anomalies that have made the inheritance laws in the Qur'an such a challenge to understand fully. Verse 12 discusses the share of the inheri-

tance a spouse receives, and the amount varies depending on how many offspring, parents, and siblings the deceased had.

The laws in 4:176 complicate matters further because they do not agree with what is stated in 4:12. According to 4:176, siblings of someone who dies with no children or parents are entitled to anywhere between 50 and 100 percent of the deceased person's estate, but in 4:12 siblings in the same situation would receive only a maximum of one-third of the inheritance, and as little as one-sixth if there is only one brother or sister. Commentators have often addressed this inconsistency by making a distinction between the siblings in 4:12, who share the same mother but have different fathers, and those in 4:176, who are full siblings and are therefore entitled to a larger portion of the inheritance. However one attempts to resolve this issue, it is representative of the problems and challenges related to the Islamic inheritance system that are well documented throughout history in the various sources.

While they are different from the passages that have been discussed so far, it is worth noting that some texts speak of God as the recipient of an inheritance. In fact, "the Heir" (*al-wārith*) is one of the ninety-nine names by which God is known in Islam. According to 15:23, God inherits everything, an idea that is captured well in the references in the Qur'an to God's inheriting the heavens and earth: "God is the heir of the heavens and earth, and is aware of what you do" (3:180b; cf. 19:40; 57:10).

This is a natural extension of the belief central to the Qur'an that all of creation belongs to God and will return to God. This idea is vividly portrayed in a brief passage that describes a man who foolishly thinks he will pass on his possessions to the next generation, not realizing that he is part of the inheritance passed on to God: "Have you seen the one who does not believe Our revelation and says, 'I will certainly be given wealth and children'? Has he entered into the unknown or received a pledge from the merciful One? No! We will write down what he says and extend his punishment. We will inherit from him what he is speaking about, and he will come to Us all alone" (19:77-80).

The Family of the Prophet Muhammad

(Q 33:6a; 33:28-34; 33:33b; 33:37; 33:50-52; 33:53b; 66:1-5)

The Qur'an does not have a great deal to say about Muhammad's family life, and most of the material that treats this topic has to do with his wives. Tradition claims that the Prophet had thirteen wives or concubines, but the extant lists do not agree on their names. All but three of them outlived

him, and among those who died before him was Khadija, his first wife, who passed away a few years before the *hijra* to Medina. She was about fifteen years older than the twenty-five-year-old Muhammad when they

Aisha is often referred to as Muhammad's favorite wife. She was the daughter of Abu Bakr, who succeeded Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community at his death, and many hadith are traced through Aisha.

married, and he was in her employment at the time. She was his earliest supporter and among the first to become a Muslim when he began to experience the revelations that became the Qur'an. Muhammad married no other women while Khadija was alive. Together they had four

daughters and two or three sons, but none of the boys lived past childhood. Among Muhammad's other wives, the most prominent is 'Aisha, who died childless.

None of the Prophet's wives are mentioned by name in the Qur'an, although a number of texts address them directly. Almost all references to them are found in chapter 33, which comes from the Medinan period. Many passages indicate that these women enjoyed special status within early Islam, and they continue to be honored into the present day by the Muslim community with the title "mothers of the believers." That designation is based on what is said about them in 33:6a, which is the first mention of Muhammad's wives in the chapter: "The Prophet has a greater claim on the believers than they have on themselves, and his wives are their mothers."

Verses 28 through 34 of chapter 33 touch on a number of themes regarding how Muhammad's wives should conduct themselves. The section opens with Muhammad being told to give his wives a choice between the fleeting luxuries of the present world or the eternal reward of the life to come (vv. 28-29). As usual, the text provides no context for the passage, but here and elsewhere, the *hadith* and "occasions of revelation" (*asbab al-nuzul*) provide an historical framework that identifies the situation being addressed. In this case, some of Muhammad's wives began to seek more possessions and provisions from him as his reputation and status grew, and the passage is meant to remind them about what should matter most in their lives.

Muhammad's wives are addressed directly in the next five verses, where they are urged to obey God and the Prophet and told that they will experience a double punishment or double reward based on their ability to do so (vv. 30-31). This is followed by a statement that they are different from all other women, and they must act accordingly by speaking appropriately, engaging in the practices of the faith, and paying attention to the rev-

elations received by Muhammad (vv. 32-34). "Maintain prayer, give alms, and obey God and His Messenger. God wishes to keep impurity away from you, People of the House, and to completely cleanse you" (33:33b).

An interesting episode involving members of Muhammad's extended family is mentioned in 33:37: "You (Muhammad) said to the man who was favored by God and by you, 'Keep your wife and be mindful of God.' But you hid within yourself what God later disclosed. You feared the people, but it is better that you should fear God. When Zayd ended his marriage with her, We gave her to you so that there would be no blame if believers marry the wives of their adopted sons after they no longer want them. God's command must be followed."

The Zayd mentioned in this verse was Muhammad's adopted son, who married the Prophet's cousin Zaynab. After they divorced, Muhammad married her despite his concern about how people would react to the marriage. The verse immediately following this one absolves Muhammad of any guilt in the affair and repeats the notion that it all took place because this was God's will. The reference that it is permissible for a man to marry his adopted son's former wife is anticipated in 33:4, where it says that God does not consider adopted sons to be real sons.

Muhammad is addressed in 33:50-52 about several matters regarding his relationships with his wives. He is told which women it is permissible for him to marry (v. 50), and then he is instructed that he is free to arrange conjugal relations with his wives in whatever way he wishes (v. 51). The section concludes with a limit set on the number of wives he may have, and he is advised not to marry anyone else or divorce a wife to replace her with another. This ruling did not apply to female servants, who were his own personal property. "You (Muhammad) are not allowed to take any additional wives, nor may you exchange your current wives for others even if their beauty pleases you. Your slave-girls are an exception to this. God watches over everything" (33:52).

There is a shift of addressee to the community of believers in the next verse, which begins by telling them that they should respect Muhammad's privacy by not entering his living space unless they are invited and not overstaying their welcome when they visit him. The text then turns to his wives and how Muslims should interact with them. "When you ask them (Muhammad's wives) for something, ask from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and theirs. You should not trouble God's Messenger,

Some, particularly within the Shi'a community, believe the term "People of the House" refers to members of Muhammad's immediate family, namely his daughter Fatima, son-in-law and cousin Ali, and their sons Hasan and Husayn.

and you should not ever marry his wives after him. That would be a great offense before God" (33:53b).

The Arabic word translated "curtain" is *hijāb*, a word that is found seven times in the Qur'an and usually describes a partition or barrier that separates some people from others. It later came to have the meaning of a veil that is worn by a woman to cover some portion of her head and/or face. This verse is frequently cited to support the practice of veiling, but the context makes clear that it is describing some partition between Muhammad's wives and other Muslims rather than how the women are dressed. This is an issue that will be addressed more fully in the following chapter. The prohibition against marrying Muhammad's wives reflects the respect the community is to have for the Prophet and his family, and is also understandable in light of their status as "mothers of the believers."

Reading between the lines of this verse offers a glimpse into what Muhammad's home life might have been like at times. As a focal point of the early community, his residence was a place that was frequently visited by Muslims who wished to spend time with the Prophet and consult him on a variety of matters. This undoubtedly placed certain demands and strains on all members of the household, and this text helped to establish guidelines on issues like when it was appropriate to visit and how Muslims should conduct themselves in the presence of the Prophet and his wives. Having these rules communicated in the form of divine revelation served to legitimate them and to guarantee they would be observed.

The only other passage in the Qur'an that treats Muhammad's family in any detail is 66:1-5. The first two verses refer to something allowed by God that Muhammad prohibited in order to please his wives. It is a mysterious text that describes a vow or oath made by the Prophet, but its content is unknown. It has been suggested in traditions and commentaries that it might be an allusion to an abstention from something, maybe a particular type of food or sexual relations with one or more of his wives. Verses 3-5 relate an episode in which Muhammad tells one of his wives something in confidence that she does not keep to herself. God informs the Prophet of this violation of trust, and Muhammad confronts his wife about it. The two guilty wives are then encouraged to repent, and all his wives are warned of the possibility of divorce if they engage in similar behavior.

In places, the Qur'an broadens the concept of kinship because it teaches that faith unites people into a family of believers, which gives them a sense of identity and common purpose. Nonetheless, it has much to say about the family as normally conceived, and this chapter has considered some

texts that speak of various dimensions of the relationships existing among members of the same household and more distant relatives. Many of these passages are legal in nature, and they are meant to normalize and regulate behavior in the domestic realm in such areas as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Nonlegal texts often speak of the affection and commitment that are at the core of a healthy family, but some passages acknowledge that families are sometimes, to use a modern term, dysfunctional.

The Qur'an does not use family-based language to speak about God, which is different from what is found in the Bible. Like the Qur'an, the Judeo-Christian scriptures sometimes refer to fellow believers as brothers and sisters, but the Bible also speaks often of God as a father, and less commonly as a mother. The main reason for this difference is tied to Islam's understanding of the deity, who is completely transcendent and beyond human understanding or experience. Several texts state that it is impossible for God to have offspring, and language that would present God as a parent in relationship to humanity is not present in the Qur'an.

key TERMS

Quraysh; Hijaz; patrilineal; *hanif*; polygyny; *talāq*; Khadija; Aisha; People of the House; *hijāb*

QUESTIONS for discussion

1. What is your reaction to the way the Qur'an favors faith ties over biological relationships?
2. Does the Qur'an's male-centered perspective make it a problematic source for discussing family matters?
3. Does the Qur'an's theocentric emphasis transform family relations in a positive or a negative way?
4. How do you respond to the presence of biblical figures in the Qur'an?

further READING

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- Azizah Y. al-Hibri, "The Nature of the Islamic Marriage: Sacramental, Covenantal, or Contractual?" in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 182–215.
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Gender and Sexuality

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Terminology; Feminist Readings of the Qur'an; The Egalitarian Core; Problematic Passages; The Veil; Menstruation; Sexual Activity

In recent times, some of the most hotly debated issues related to Islam have centered on the question of gender. How are relationships between men and women understood and articulated? On what should that understanding be based? What are the resulting practical implications for everyday life and social interaction? These and similar questions have been discussed frequently both within and outside of the Muslim community.

Some non-Muslims consider Islam to be a misogynistic or backward religion due to their perception that it mistreats women and relegates them to an inferior status in relation to men. Others are less negative in their assessment, and they argue that it is unfair to generalize in this way because gender relations is a very complex issue that varies from place to place and comprises a range of factors beyond religion that need to be kept in mind.

Similar debates take place among Muslims. Some prefer to maintain and perpetuate a view of gender that took shape centuries ago in a world very different from our own that tended to privilege males, while others call for the replacement of that system with one that stresses the gender

equality they claim is at the heart of Islam. Among the most vocal proponents in favor of such a change are those associated with the feminist movement within Islam that has developed over the past few decades.

The Qur'an is at the very center of these discussions and debates, and this chapter presents an overview of what the text teaches about gender and sexuality. Passages that have been particularly influential in shaping opinions and behavior regarding how men and women should relate to one another are cited and analyzed. Other texts that have played a role in determining attitudes toward things like menstruation and how women should dress are also considered. Additional topics treated include sex outside of marriage and homosexuality. With the recent emergence of feminist scholarship, new voices have entered the conversation, and they have proposed interesting and insightful readings of some of these texts, thereby introducing fresh ways of interpreting them. The aims and methods of these feminist readings of the Qur'an are explained and examined.

Terminology

(Q 33:25; 3:195a; 4:124; 16:97; 40:40; 11:81a; 3:35, 40; 11:71; 12:21; 27:57; 28:9; 11:69-83; 15:61-77; 52:21; 8:24; 24:11; 70:38; 74:52; 78:40; 80:37)

Arabic has words for "gender" and "sex" that are relatively new and not found in the Qur'an. Nonetheless, the text acknowledges the differences

The feminine-singular noun ending in Arabic is the letter tā' marbūta, which is written ۚ when attached to the letter before it and ۝ when unattached. Not all feminine nouns have this ending, so the gender of a word is not always immediately apparent.

between men and women in a number of ways. One is by virtue of the way the Arabic language works. All nouns and many verbs are grammatically either masculine or feminine, and so there is a dimension of gender often present within a word itself. Similar to what is found in other languages, like Italian and Spanish,

Arabic has two distinct plural endings for nouns, one masculine and the other feminine. As with those other languages, the Arabic masculine plural can be used to speak of a group of males or a mixed group of both males and females.

The former usage that refers exclusively to males is most clearly seen in texts that contain both a masculine plural and a feminine plural in succession as a way of speaking of the males and females in a given category. An example of this is seen in 33:35, which contains a string of

ten such pairs: "For Muslim men and women, believing men and women, devout men and women, truthful men and women, perseverant men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, modest men and women, and men and women who remember God often, God has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward." To anticipate a discussion that will be taken up later in this chapter, the presence of passages like this that make no distinction between men and women is one reason why some argue that the Qur'an's view of gender is essentially egalitarian.

The differences between men and women are also acknowledged in the Qur'an through its use of separate terms for male and female. The word for a male is *dhakar*, which is found eighteen times in the Qur'an, while the term designating a female (*unthā*) appears thirty times. In all but two of the eighteen passages that contain the word *dhakar*, the word *unthā* also appears, as in 3:195a, another passage that reflects gender equality: "Their Lord answers them, 'I do not allow to go to waste the deeds of any one of you, whether male or female—the two of you are like each other'" (cf. 4:124; 16:97; 40:40).

A common word for "woman" in the Qur'an is *imra'a*, which can carry the sense of "spouse, wife" when it is found in a context that calls attention to the relationship that exists between the woman and a man. An example of this is seen in 11:81a, which describes the fate of Lot's wife: "They said, 'Lot, we are your Lord's messengers. They will not reach you.

Leave with your household during the night, and let none of you turn back except for your wife [*imra'ataka*]. She will suffer the fate that befalls the others.'" (cf. 3:35, 40; 11:71; 12:21; 27:57; 28:9).

The masculine form of *imra'a* is used on a few occasions to refer to a man, but in some cases the term is better translated "person" since these passages speak of both men and women. "We join together the believers and their offspring who share their faith, and we do not diminish any of their deeds. Each person [*muṣī*] is bound to what he or she does" (52:21; cf. 8:24; 24:11; 70:38; 74:52; 78:40; 80:37). A much more common designation for

The regular plural endings for masculine nouns in Arabic are -ūna and -īna, depending on the case of the noun. The regular feminine plural ending is -āt. In addition, there are a large number of irregular plural forms in Arabic, called "broken plurals," that consist of changes made to the consonants and vowels.

In the Qur'an, Lot is a prophet who was sent to the people of Sodom. His story is recounted in several places, including 11:69-83 and 15:61-77.

a man is the word *rajul*, which appears more than fifty times in the Qur'an. Like *imra'a*, it is usually found in its plural form (*rijāl*).

The plural form most often used to describe women is *nisā'*, which appears twice in the related form *niswa*. The title of chapter four of the Qur'an is *al-nisā'* ("The Women"), which is so named because the word appears twenty times in the chapter, more than one-third of its total occurrences.

A number of terms in the Qur'an are grammatically masculine but refer to both men and women, sometimes in the collective and sometimes as an individual. The most common of these words are *nās* ("humanity"), *āhl* ("people"), *bashar* ("person"), and *insān* ("human being"). Of this group, *nās* is by far the most frequently used, with nearly 250 occurrences of it throughout the Qur'an.

Feminist Readings of the Qur'an

Prior to the 1990s, commentary upon and analysis of the Qur'an was, with rare exceptions, an exclusively male activity. During the first few centuries of Islam and into the medieval period, all of the classical works of exegesis that helped give shape to Islamic theology and law, many of which continue to be influential into the present day, were written by men. Likewise, virtually all of the key thinkers and scholars of the early modern era and on into the latter part of the twentieth century were male.

Sources outside the Qur'an suggest that things were different in the earliest years of Islam, when women were consulted on matters related to the content of the text. According to tradition, some of the women who were closest to the Prophet Muhammad, including his wives, 'Aisha and Hafsa and his companion Umm Waraqa, played significant roles in the compilation and transmission of the written text.

A feminist movement began to emerge within Islam during the nineteenth century, but most of its organizers and supporters lacked formal training in theology and related fields and were consequently unable to engage in serious scholarship. This began to change in the twentieth century, when the education of women became a significant component of the reform efforts of many Muslim-majority countries, and by the end of the century women were making important contributions to the study of the Qur'an and in other scholarly areas from which they previously had been excluded.

During the 1990s, a feminist hermeneutics of the Qur'an began to be articulated that offered innovative alternative readings of passages and

called into question long-held assumptions about the text that had contributed to the oppression and marginalization of women. This method of analysis is built on three interrelated principles. The first is that interpretation of the Qur'an has tended to rely on what commentators have had to say about the text rather than on the text itself. The authors of the commentaries that constitute the body of writings known as the *tafsīr* have become the supreme authorities, and their opinions, rather than the words of the Qur'an, have formed the basis for Muslim belief and practice. The main problem with such reliance on the views and opinions of these scholars is that their interpretations of the Qur'an reflect the biases and limitations of the contexts in which they were living and writing. Their patriarchal environments, which privileged males, were often reflected in and validated by their reading of the Qur'an. The feminist critique posits that such a situation only perpetuates and canonizes antiquated interpretations that are not relevant for later contexts.

The second principle of feminist hermeneutics is that, at its core, the text of the Qur'an is inherently egalitarian in its view of relations between men and women. All people are equal in God's eyes and all have the same basic rights regardless of gender or any other differences that might exist among them. Unfortunately, women and others have sometimes been denied those rights because of the above-mentioned overreliance on interpreters at the expense of the Qur'an itself or because of unjust political systems that claim to be based on Islam. But such situations are due to the mistakes and manipulations of human beings, and they should not be used to malign or call into question the Qur'an, whose message of equality is clear and consistent.

The third principle recognizes that the Qur'an contains texts that are not in agreement with its egalitarian core. It states that a distinction must be made between two different types of material in the Qur'an—those passages and messages that are universally relevant for all times and places, and those that are more limited in their scope and application. The first group contains the eternal essence of the Qur'an that transcends time and space, while the second is context-specific and meant to be directed to a particular moment and location. In the view of feminist scholars, it is crucial to keep this distinction in mind because without it one might mistakenly assume that texts that were originally directed to the circumstances of seventh-century C.E. Arabia are also addressed to us in the twenty-first century. They claim that this is precisely what has happened throughout history since the *tafsīr* literature has tended to focus more on the patriarchal, context-specific passages of the Qur'an and has downplayed the egalitarian ones that are universal in nature.

With these principles in mind, feminist interpreters attempt to point out the flaws in traditional exegesis of the Qur'an while proposing new

The three principles of feminist interpretation of the Qur'an: (1) prior interpretation has relied on commentators rather than the text itself; (2) at its core the Qur'an is egalitarian in its view of gender relations; (3) some texts are not in agreement with that egalitarian core.

ways of thinking about passages that have often been used to subjugate women or to justify patriarchal attitudes and behavior. The field is ever-expanding, but among the most prolific and influential of these scholars are Asma Barlas (Pakistan, b. 1950), Riffat Hassan (Pakistan, b. 1943), Fatima Mernissi (Morocco, b. 1940), and Amina Wadud-Muhsin (United States, b. 1952). The results of their scholarship are reflected in some of the analysis presented in this chapter.

The Egalitarian Core

(Q 9:71-72; 4:124; 16:97; 24:12; 33:35-36; 40:40; 48:4-5, 25; 57:18; 71:28; 85:10; 9:67-68; 33:73; 48:6; 2:34-36a; 7:20-22; 20:120-23; 7:22; 20:121; 4:1; 6:98; 7:189; 35:11a; 36:36; 53:45; 75:39; 78:8; 92:3; 51:47-49; 30:21; 7:189; 49:13; 7:26; 20:132; 47:17; 49:3; 58:9; 74:56)

The equality of men and women is stressed throughout the Qur'an in many texts that are addressed to or mention both males and females. The obligations and duties required of men and women are identical, and they will all be rewarded in the same way if they remain faithful and carry out those responsibilities. The use of gender terms in these verses is a subtle way of reinforcing the idea that all people are full and equal members of the Islamic *umma*. "Believers, both male and female, are protectors of one another. They command what is right, and they forbid what is wrong. They maintain prayer, give alms, and obey God and His Messenger. God will grant mercy to such as these. Truly, God is powerful and wise. God has promised the believers—both male and female—gardens under which rivers flow where they will remain forever, and lovely dwellings in the eternal gardens. But the greatest thing of all will be God's approval—that is the supreme victory!" (9:71-72; cf. 4:124; 16:97; 24:12; 33:35-36; 40:40; 48:4-5, 25; 57:18; 71:28; 85:10).

Elsewhere, unbelievers and sinners are spoken of in a similar way, by identifying the men and women among their ranks and the punishments that await them: "The hypocrites, both male and female, are like each other. They command what is wrong, and they forbid what is right.

They are tight-fisted. They have forgotten God, so He has forgotten them. Truly, the hypocrites are transgressors. God has promised the hypocrites, both male and female, and the disbelievers that they will reside in the fire of hell forever. It is what they deserve. God rejects them, and an enduring punishment is theirs" (9:67-68; cf. 33:73; 48:6).

The fact that both believers and unbelievers are spoken of in this way indicates that the Qur'an understands gender equality to be an inherent part of humanity that is not contingent upon having faith or being a good person. This idea is expressed in a number of texts that speak of creation and the origin of humanity in which men and women are viewed to be on equal footing. The story of the first couple, for example, does not privilege Adam over Eve in any way: "When We told the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated except Iblis, who refused and was proud. He was one of the unbelievers. We said, 'Oh Adam, live with



FIGURE 17 All the angels except Iblis (upper right) bow down to Adam.

your mate in this garden, and you may both eat freely from it as you wish. But do not approach this tree, or you will both become transgressors.' But Satan caused them to slip up, and removed them from the state they were in" (2:34-36a; cf. 7:20-22; 20:120-23).

Eve remains unnamed in this passage, as she does throughout the entire Qur'an. In fact, the only woman referred to by name in the Qur'an is Mary the mother of Jesus. Something else not explicitly mentioned in the text is Eve's creation. There is no equivalent in the Qur'an to the biblical tradition that Eve was created from some part of Adam's body, usually understood to be a rib. That mode of creation in the book of Genesis has sometimes been cited as support for the belief that Eve was inferior to Adam and therefore, by extension, men are superior to women. There are many reasons why such an interpretation is incorrect, but the lack of this tradition about Eve's creation in the Qur'an shuts off the possibility of such an understanding of human origins. The Islamic text does not describe the creation of either Adam or Eve, so it is not possible to compare their origins in a way that places one above the other.

Another difference between the qur'anic and the biblical accounts of the garden story is in the way the eating of the fruit is described. In Genesis, Eve eats from the tree first after being deceived by the serpent, and then brings some fruit to Adam, who eats it. This has caused many readers to place the blame on Eve as the one primarily responsible since she was the first to disobey the order not to eat. Consequently, she is

The Qur'an does not refer to original sin or the fall of humanity.

often seen as the cause of humanity's "fall." This interpretation is not possible with the Qur'an's version of the events since Adam and Eve act in tandem throughout the story. They both are deceived, and although it is not stated in this text, elsewhere in the Qur'an it says that they both ate of the fruit, with no indication that one ate before the other or caused the other to eat (7:22; 20:121). In the Qur'an, the first man and first woman are created as equals, and they disobey God's command as equals. There is nothing in the text that suggests one is superior to the other.

This view of gender equality is reinforced in other passages that speak of human origins without recounting the story of the first couple. For example, the Qur'an's egalitarian view is clearly articulated in the first verse of chapter four ("The Women"): "Oh people, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and created from it its mate. From them spread out many men and women. So be mindful of God, by whom you request things of one another, and [be mindful of] your kinship relations. God watches over you" (4:1; cf. 6:98; 7:189).

According to this verse, all people have a common point of origin in the same *nafs*, an Arabic word that is often found in the Qur'an. It appears almost 150 times, and it is sometimes difficult to know how it should best be translated in a given verse. Among its possible meanings are "self," "mind," "heart," "person," and "soul." Many translators favor the last alternative for 4:1, and that is how it is rendered here. Although the precise sense of the word is somewhat ambiguous, the meaning of the text is not in doubt—men and women come from the same source and ultimately trace their creation back to God.

The reference to a mate in 4:1 is an important aspect of the Qur'an's view of the male-female relationship. The Arabic word used here is *zawj*, which can refer to two things that are connected in some way or to one of the two components of such a pairing. When used in reference to human beings, it therefore describes a couple or one member of that couple. The idea that people are created in couples is mentioned in several places in the Qur'an. "God created you from dust, then from a drop of fluid, and then made you pairs" (35:11a; cf. 36:36; 53:45; 75:39; 78:8; 92:3). Such passages highlight the relational dimension of human life, and they never privilege one member of the couple over the other. All of creation, including humanity, is paired in mutual relationships, a situation that is meant to remind people of their unity and equality under God. "We built the heavens with power, spreading them wide, and We laid out the earth—how great is the One who spread them out! We created everything in pairs so that you might reflect" (51:47-49).

The Qur'an sometimes explains why humans have been paired in relationships: "Among His signs is that He created spouses for you from among yourselves so that you might find comfort in them. He put love and compassion between you. There truly are signs in this for a people who reflect" (30:21; 7:189). The Arabic verb translated here as "find comfort" is *sakana*. When it is followed by the preposition *illā*, as it is in this verse, it can mean "to rely upon," "to be reassured by," "to trust in," and "to feel at home in." This passage offers one of the Qur'an's most tender and moving descriptions of the bond that exists between spouses. Each should be for the other a source of comfort, security, and support. It is to be an equal partnership in which love and compassion are ever present. This is an image of domestic harmony that can be attained only if each partner treats the other with dignity and respect.

Asma Barlas has suggested that the meaning of *sakana* in this verse should extend into the area of sexuality. She believes that the text is describing a situation in which both partners are sexually satisfied since this is an essential dimension of a happy and mutually fulfilling relation-

ship. She points out that, if her reading is correct, the Qur'an articulates a message of equality between spouses related to sexuality that will not become a part of other religious traditions until centuries later.

A final aspect of 30:21 to consider is the double reference to "signs" at the beginning and end of the verse. Like so many other facets of life mentioned in the Qur'an, human coupling is first and foremost a sign of God's power and authority over creation. This transforms a relationship between spouses into something much more than the shared life of two individuals who have chosen to come together. It becomes an opportunity for them to learn something about God if they, as the text urges, take the time to reflect on their shared experiences.

The texts examined here and others like them constitute what feminist scholars believe to be the egalitarian view of gender relations that is at the heart of the message of the Qur'an. This is the universal teaching of the text that is relevant for all times and places and must form the basis for an authentically Islamic understanding of how men and women should relate to one another. The text does not discriminate or show prejudice based on one's gender, but considers equality among all people to be something instilled in creation by God.

The only distinction the Qur'an makes among people is based on belief, not biology. It is one's faith, or lack of faith, that ultimately determines one's fate. This idea is present in 49:13, one of the Qur'an's most eloquent statements on the need to celebrate diversity and respect differences: "Oh humanity, We created you male and female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you might know one another. The most honorable of you before God are the ones who are most pious. Truly, God knows and is aware."

Here, too, the common origin of all people is recognized, and there is no attempt to make distinctions among them based on gender. The determining factor is rather one's ability to be "mindful" of God. The Arabic term for the quality being called for here is *taqwā*, a theological concept that is central to the Qur'an and Islam. It comes from a verb that carries the meaning of being mindful or conscious of something, and when used in reference to God, it describes an attitude of piety that is constantly aware of one's complete dependence upon and submission to the deity. Such a person, whether male or female, is the one who will be, in the words of 49:13, most honored. "Children of Adam, We have given you garments to cover your nakedness as an adornment. But the garment of piety (*taqwā*)—that is the best. This is one of God's signs, so that people may reflect" (7:26; cf. 20:132; 47:17; 49:3; 58:9; 74:56).

Problematic Passages

Certain other verses have sometimes been cited, especially by non-Muslims, as evidence that the Qur'an is a misogynistic text and teaches that women are inferior to men. Feminist interpreters have criticized this analysis with the claim that it is too simplistic because it does not take into account the cultural context of the passages in question or the meanings of certain key terms found within them. They argue that a thorough study of these texts indicates that some of them are relevant only for their original seventh-century-c.e. audience and are not meant to be universally applied. In other cases, a careful consideration of their vocabulary reveals that they actually reflect and support the egalitarian ethos that is central to the Qur'an. In the following sections, some of these passages are examined and discussed.

Legal Witnesses

(Q 2:282a; 6:117; 10:108; 20:52; 39:41; 27:20-44)

The number of witnesses the Qur'an stipulates as necessary for a legal proceeding is sometimes considered to be indicative of a negative view of women. The relevant text is found in 2:282a: "Oh believers, if you contract a debt for a stated term in your dealings with one another, put it in writing. Have a scribe write it down between you fairly. A scribe cannot refuse to write as God has taught him. Let the debtor dictate—he should fear God, his Lord, and not reduce [the amount] a bit. If the debtor is mentally deficient, feeble, or cannot dictate, then let his guardian dictate justly. Have two of your men act as witnesses. If two men are not available, then use one man and two women out of those you deem acceptable as witnesses. If one of the two women makes an error, the other can remind her. The witnesses should not refuse when they are called."

This passage has led some to conclude that the Qur'an's view of the relative worth of men and women can be summed up in the formula "one man equals two women." It has even been suggested on occasion that the verse reflects the view that women are not as intelligent as men. This reading may be influenced by the reference to the feeble-minded debtor who needs to rely on the help of a guardian just prior to the mention of witnesses. According to this reading of the text, two women are required because one by herself would not be the intellectual match of her single male counterpart.

In response to this reading, it should be noted that the text does not state that both women are to function as legal witnesses. Only one of them is a witness, and the other plays a role in the proceeding only in the event

that the first woman needs assistance in recalling the details of the case. The Arabic verb that is used to describe the state of the woman who needs assistance is *dalla*, which can mean “to lose one’s way,” “to stray,” and “to err” (cf. 6:117; 10:108; 20:52; 39:41). It is translated here as “to forget,” but the semantic connection to these other meanings should be apparent. If she becomes confused and lost, her companion is to remind her and help her to get back on track in her testimony.

The text stipulates that two women attend the proceeding to ensure that the outcome is fair and just, but it is not making a disparaging comment on their capacity to reason and think for themselves. It is simply acknowledging a sociological fact of the time—that the world of business and commerce was a primarily male-centered one with which women had little experience and familiarity. Because this was the situation in seventh-century Arabia, it was necessary to have a system in place that would guarantee a fair outcome in the event that two people from the group that had the most knowledge of such transactions—males—could not be present.

The two women are able to consult one another and collaborate to make sure the case is properly decided. But, in the view of feminist scholars, such an arrangement is necessary only under those conditions. If, in other circumstances, women are skilled and experienced in business matters the arrangement outlined in 2:282 is unnecessary and does not apply.

The Queen of Sheba is known as *Bilqis* in Islamic sources. In the Qur'an, she becomes a believer after a visit to King Solomon's court. Her story is told in 27:20-44.

This is therefore a context-specific passage that should not be universally applied and is not making a blanket statement about the relative value of men and women. The fact that the Qur'an holds up a woman like the Queen of Sheba as a preemi-

nent model of political leadership, a field dominated by men, illustrates the same point.

Gender Ranking

(Q 4:95; 9:20; 57:10; 2:253; 58:11; 20:75; 46:19; 6:132; 2:228; 2:226-39)

A recurring theme in the Qur'an is the idea that God ranks some people above others. The Arabic term that is used in these passages is *daraja*, which conveys the meanings “level,” “degree,” and “step.” According to these texts, God raises the status of certain individuals, thereby privileging them and setting them apart. One passage states that anyone God chooses will be raised in rank, but more commonly groups are singled out because of some quality they possess. Among the groups that are ranked

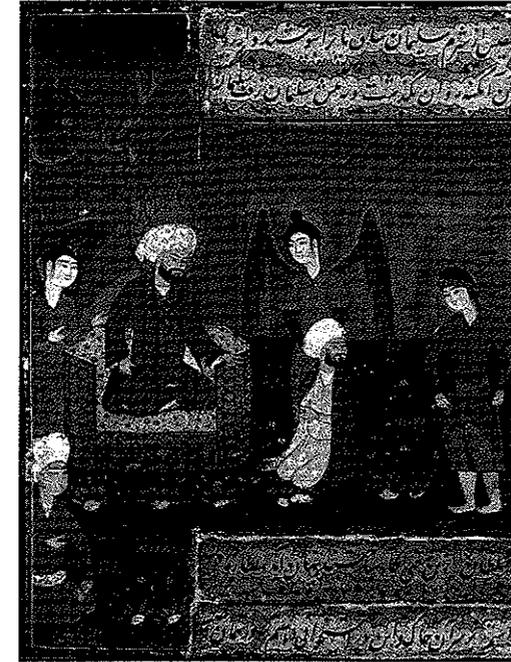


FIGURE 18 *The Queen of Sheba (far right) approaches Solomon's throne.*

ahead of others are those who put forth effort on behalf of the faith (4:95; 9:20; 57:10), messengers to whom God's word is revealed (2:253), believers (58:11), and those who perform good deeds (20:75). It is said elsewhere that this will be an experience that all people will have because each person will be ranked based on his or her actions: “All will be ranked [*darajāt*] based on their deeds, and He will repay them for what they have done. They will not be treated unjustly” (46:19; cf. 6:132).

One passage is different from the others because it appears to make a distinction among people based on their gender. This idea is mentioned at the end of 2:228, a lengthy verse that must be quoted in full because the topic of its earlier part must be kept in mind to properly interpret it: “Divorced women are to wait for three monthly periods before remarrying, and they are not allowed to hide what God has created in their wombs if they really believe in God and the Last Day. Their husbands would do better to take them back during this time if they desire reconciliation. Women have [rights] similar to those [of men] over them, according to what is acceptable, and men have a degree [*daraja*] over them. God is strong and wise.” As the words in brackets indicate, the precise meaning of the latter portion of this verse is somewhat difficult to understand. The

context suggests the passage is a reminder that, like men, women enjoy certain rights that are well-known and beyond dispute. In other words, there is equality between men and women when it comes to the rights they have.

But the use of the word *daraja* in reference to men seems to indicate that they are somehow privileged above women, not unlike the way the groups mentioned earlier are ranked above other people. This part of the verse does not specify why this is the case since it does not identify what it is that sets men apart from women. This has sometimes led interpreters to argue that the verse is simply describing the state of things as they are. They understand it to be a blanket statement that expresses God's preference for men over women and therefore an endorsement of male superiority.

To read the verse in this way is to misinterpret it because its wider context has been ignored. According to Amina Wadud-Muhsin and other feminist scholars, the first part of the verse identifies the area in which men have an advantage over women. It and the two verses prior to it describe the process a man must follow when he wishes to dissolve a marriage by pronouncing the decree of divorce. The mention later in the verse of the degree that men have over women is in reference to this practice since women are not permitted to obtain a divorce by pronouncing the decree. For Wadud-Muhsin and others, 2:228 is not issuing a general statement about male superiority over women. It is limiting the man's *daraja* solely to the area of divorce, but even then it is quick to point out that women, like men, enjoy certain rights that are well-known to all and must be granted.

The wider literary context of 2:228 supports this understanding of the verse. It comes at the beginning of a lengthy section (2:226-39) whose primary topic is divorce. It contains many instructions to men about the need to treat women honorably and fairly, and it reminds them repeatedly about the rights women have in the divorce process. The point seems to be that even though men have been granted an advantage in this one area, they are to act responsibly and not abuse it.

Throughout the section are warnings about the need to adhere to the teachings of the Qur'an and not transgress the rules. "Those are God's limits—do not transgress them. Those who transgress God's limits are evildoers" (2:229b; cf. 2:230b, 231b, 232b, 233b, 234b, 235b, 237b). Given the explicit focus on divorce throughout the section, it is clear that the reference to the *daraja* of men in 2:228 is confined to that one area and should not be seen as a broader comment about men and women in general.

Physical Abuse

(Q 4:34; 4:135; 5:8; 2:47, 122; 7:140; 45:16; 2:253; 6:86; 17:55; 27:15; 4:95; 17:70; 4:32-33; 4:7; 33:31, 35; 66:5; 2:238; 3:17; 33:35; 2:116; 30:26; 16:120; 3:43; 66:12; 4:128)

If any text qualifies as "ground zero" in discussions regarding the Qur'an's view of gender, that designation would have to go to 4:34. It is a very important verse that has generated much controversy, not least of all because it appears to give husbands permission to physically abuse their wives. As with other texts discussed in this section, though, a thorough analysis of the verse and its key terms demonstrates that the message of male superiority it is held to espouse is not as certain as it might first appear to be. Nonetheless, this text presents a challenge for those who assert that the Qur'an's essential view of gender is an egalitarian one.

"Husbands are providers [*qawwāmūna*] for their wives, since God has favored [*faḍḍala*] some with more than others and they spend out of their wealth. Good women are devout [*qānitāt*], guarding during the absence [of their husbands] what God would have them guard. If you fear antagonism [*nushūz*] from them, admonish them, then leave them alone in bed, then hit [*idribū*] them. If they obey you, do not mistreat them in any way. God is most high and great." To facilitate analysis of this key verse, it will be divided into two sections. The first part comprises the first two sentences, which explain certain obligations for each party in the relationship between spouses. The second part offers instructions on how to respond to a particular set of circumstances that threaten the stability of the relationship. Key words in each section are at the center of the interpretive debate over the verse's meaning.

The text begins by stating that husbands are supposed to provide for their wives. The Arabic word used to describe this is *qawwāmūna*, which is found in two other verses of the Qur'an. In 4:135, it is used to speak of those who uphold or defend justice, and in 5:8 it describes those who are committed in their faith in God. Looking at these three occurrences, it appears that 4:34 is instructing men to be steadfast as they take care of and protect their wives. They are to provide for them as intently as they seek justice or believe in God. Some interpreters give the word a sense that privileges men over women by suggesting that husbands are to exercise authority over their wives by dominating and controlling them. This is partly due to the use of the preposition *'alā* after *qawwāmūna*, which can carry the meaning "over" or "against." But there is nothing in the meaning of the word *qawwāmūna* that requires it have this connotation. The word is used here to remind men of their responsibility to provide for and protect the women in their care.

The first part of the verse speaks of God having a preference when it says that God has preferred, or favored (*faḍḍala*), some over others. This idea is expressed a number of times in the Qur'an, and it is similar to the notion of God raising the rank (*darajā*) of some people that was mentioned earlier in this chapter. Other passages that use the verb *faḍḍala* speak of divine preference for the Israelites (2:47, 122; 7:140; 45:16), prophets and/or messengers (2:253; 6:86; 17:55; 27:15), those who strive for the faith (4:95), and humans in general (17:70).

It is important to note, however, that 4:34 is not claiming a universal divine preference for all males, as is sometimes claimed, which would place men in a position of superiority vis-à-vis women. The Arabic of the passage is ambiguous because it can mean, "God has preferred some [males] over others [females]," but it is also grammatically acceptable to read it as, "God has preferred some [males] over others [males]". There are good reasons for opting for the second possibility over the first, and if it is adopted, the verse is making a comment about some males in relation to others rather than discussing males in relation to females.

The first part of this verse states that husbands are *qawwāmūna* over their wives only when they are among the group of men who are singled out by God to play this role. But how is God's preference for them manifested, and does it somehow privilege men over women? The two previous verses help to answer these questions. The beginning of 4:32 anticipates a theme in 4:34 by using the verb *faḍḍala* to indicate that some have received more than others, and the implication is that men and women do not receive the same amount of compensation: "Do not covet that by which God has favored [*faḍḍala*] some of you more than others. To men the portion they have acquired, and to women the portion they have acquired. Ask God for some of His bounty—He has knowledge of everything."

The reason for the disparity between men and women is suggested in 4:33, which mentions the topic of inheritances: "To each person We have designated heirs for what parents and close relatives leave behind. Give their portion also to those to whom you have pledged your hands [in marriage]. God is a witness over everything." As noted in the chapter on family matters, according to the Qur'an, male heirs are entitled to more money than female heirs (4:7). Inheritance is the only area in which a divine preference for men over women is stated in the Qur'an, and this plays a critical role in how 4:34 should be interpreted.

The first sentence of 4:34 is referring in part to inheritances when it explains what makes some men *qawwāmūna* over women. "Husbands are providers [*qawwāmūna*] for their wives, since God has favored [*faḍḍala*] some with more than others and they spend out of their wealth." Not all

men receive inheritances, but those who do must use some of that money to support the women who are dependent upon them. This is the reason why men receive more inheritance than women, who are permitted to keep their inheritance for themselves. Men who do not support their wives from their means are not *qawwāmūna* over them, so the text is not saying that men, as a group, are superior to women. Neither is the verse implying that women are incapable of providing for themselves. It is simply stating that women are normally not expected or required to be the breadwinners and provide for the family.

Some scholars, like Amina Wadud-Muhsin, have argued that this verse also acknowledges the woman's role in childbearing and perpetuating the human race. It places additional responsibilities on the man to provide for her so that she is not further burdened by being required to find the means to support herself, thereby giving each spouse certain obligations and duties.

Another key term in the first part of 4:34 is *qānitāt*, an adjective that describes women and is translated here as "devout." It is sometimes rendered as "obedient," and some have suggested that this word stresses the deference wives are to show to their husbands, but there is no support for this interpretation. In a few other texts, the word is used to describe women (33:31, 35; 66:5), and elsewhere the context suggests that it is used in reference to men (2:238; 3:17; 33:35). In a couple of passages, it is stated that everything on earth and in heaven, presumably including the non-human elements of creation, is *qānit* (2:116; 30:26).

In every one of these texts, the obedience being described is directed toward God, not to another person. It is therefore an expression of one's humility and submission to God rather than an indication of one person's deference to another. This is clearly seen in the passages that mention the only two individuals who are said to be *qānit* in the Qur'an. One is Abraham, the quintessential monotheist and model for all believers: "Abraham was truly an example, devout [*qānit*] to God and upright in faith. He was not an idolater" (16:120).

The other is Mary the mother of Jesus, who is told by the angels who announce the birth of her son that she is to express her obedience to God by bowing down: "Mary, be devout [*uqnutī*] to your Lord, prostrate yourself, and bow down with those who bow down" (3:43; cf. 66:12). This usage, which understands *qānit* to be a form of obedient reverence toward God, is reflected in the other passages mentioned above that contain the word. It is therefore a term that describes the piety a woman should possess, and it does not support the idea that God wants wives to obey their husbands in all matters.

The second half of 4:34 is the more controversial part of the verse, and two words in particular have been at the heart of the debate over what the passage means. "If you fear antagonism [*nushūz*] from them, admonish them, then leave them alone in bed, then hit [*idribū*] them. If they obey you, do not mistreat them in any way. God is most high and great." After the description of the ideal relationship that should exist between spouses, this section offers guidance on what to do if the stability of the marriage is threatened. In fact, though, this hypothetical scenario is outlined in a one-sided way since it is directed to the man and discusses only a case that presents the woman as the blameworthy party.

The term that describes the woman's offense is *nushūz*, which can be translated as "haughtiness," "disloyalty," "antagonism," and the like. It is sometimes understood to be a uniquely feminine trait and therefore a description of a cause of marital disharmony that is found only on the disobedient wife's part. But to take this position is to ignore the fact that the word is found later in the same chapter to speak about a husband who disrupts the relationship between spouses. "If a wife fears antagonism [*nushūz*] or rejection from her husband, neither of them will be blamed if they can reconcile, for harmony is best. Pettiness is present in the human soul, but if you work toward good and are mindful of God He is truly aware of what you do" (4:128). The husband, too, can be guilty of engaging in *nushūz*, and so it is a mistake to consider it to be a quality that is found only among women.

While each member of the couple is capable of violating the relationship by committing the same offense, the Qur'an offers different counsel on how to deal with the matter, depending on whether the offending party is the man or the woman. The reference to *nushūz* on the man's part in 4:128 leads to a discussion of a "peaceful settlement" between the couple that, in light of the literary context of the surrounding verses, is best understood to be a reference to divorce and the dissolution of the marriage. If such is the outcome, the text assures the couple that neither of them will be at fault. But this does not appear to reflect the facts of the case, since it is the husband's *nushūz* that set in motion the end of the marriage.

The way the Qur'an addresses *nushūz* on the part of the woman is quite different. It calls for increasingly harsh measures against her, and it does not speak of the option of a peaceful settlement through divorce or other means. The different approaches to handling the situation are likely due to the originating context of the Qur'an, and they reflect a time and place in which issues of gender and social status were perceived in a way different from our own.

The Qur'an lists three responses for the husband whose wife has engaged in *nushūz*, with each successive one to be implemented only if the previous one does not work. The first is verbal in nature, as the man is instructed to admonish or warn the woman about the damage she is causing to their relationship. If this fails, the man is to refrain from sexual relations with her (literally, "forsake them in bed"). In both these scenarios, the hoped-for outcome is reconciliation between the man and woman or an amicable separation, and in this sense the verse is similar to 4:128, which urges the couple to seek a peaceful settlement.

The third response has been the subject of much controversy because it employs the verb *daraba*, whose primary meaning is "to hit, strike." There have been two main ways of addressing the Qur'an's apparent approval of domestic violence in this verse. The first is to accept it at face value, but to interpret it in a way that softens its initial harshness. This is done primarily by arguing that the text is calling for a very light slap or tap rather than the use of extreme physical force. Some have even suggested that the hit should be symbolic rather than an actual strike. Those who opt for this interpretation often point out that the verse uses the first form of the Arabic verb (*daraba*) rather than the second form (*darraba*), which intensifies the meaning and describes a harsh physical beating or repeated blows. In this reading, the passage is actually trying to reduce domestic violence by limiting it and presenting it as only a last resort after all other measures have been exhausted. In other words, it is restricting spousal abuse rather than giving permission for it.

The other way of understanding the verb is to say that it has an entirely different meaning that has nothing to do with physical violence. Arabic is a very rich language whose words often have multiple meanings that are not semantically close to one another, and that is the case with *daraba*. Among its possible other meanings are "to set an example" and "to go on a journey," and it is sometimes suggested that one of these alternatives is really what the text is calling for. With the first, the man is being advised to somehow use the situation as an example for the couple to learn from, and with the second the passage is calling for some physical distance between them to allow for a cooling-off period in the relationship.

There are good reasons why modern readers of the Qur'an should not consult 4:34 for guidance on marital relations. In the first place, because

In the Arabic verb system, there are ten forms. The first is the three-letter root with no changes made to it. The other nine all entail modifications of that root, including the doubling of letters, lengthening of vowels, and insertion of additional consonants.

this verse is ambiguous and its meaning is unclear, particularly regarding the word *ḍaraba*, it should not be used as a norm for how spouses should relate to one another. The passage can mean more than one thing, and that vagueness cautions against choosing one meaning as the correct one to the exclusion of others.

Another issue that lessens the relevance of 4:34 for today's readers is the difference in context between our own day and that of the text's original audience. Modern notions of what marriage is and how spouses should relate to one another differ significantly from seventh-century Arabia, where women were subjugated to men and physical abuse was permitted. Marriages of subjugation are becoming a thing of the past, and so this text does not speak to our circumstances. If we take *ḍaraba* to have its basic meaning of "to hit," we must understand the verse as an attempt to limit and control violent behavior in a context in which a man's physical abuse of a woman was tolerated. Because such behavior is unacceptable today, the text should not serve as a guide for us.

Put another way, 4:34 is one of those context-specific texts mentioned earlier that should not be universally applied to later times and places. Unfortunately, as many feminist scholars have pointed out, that is not the way the text is usually understood. The exegetical writings found in the *tafsīr* tradition have formulated and passed down interpretations of the verse that reinforce stereotypes about male superiority and perpetuate the oppression of women in many places. Because the views of the exegetes have become canonized over time and form the basis of many Islamic laws and attitudes, views that highlight the egalitarian nature of the Qur'an's message on gender or that point out the ambiguities in the text have often been downplayed or ignored.

The Veil

(Q 7:46; 17:45; 19:17; 38:32; 41:5; 42:51; 33:53; 33:59; 24:31; 21:91; 33:35; 33:5; 66:12)

How Muslim women should dress is one of the most frequently discussed topics related to Islam in the modern world. Stories that treat various aspects of the issue are regularly covered by the media in North America, Europe, and other parts of the world where Muslims are in the minority. These debates have also taken place in Muslim-majority countries, where some of the religious and cultural dimensions of women's dress have been discussed and dissected. Much of the controversy has surrounded the wearing of a veil, often referred to by its Arabic term *ḥijāb*. Non-Muslims

often assume that the practice of donning a veil is something that can be traced to the Qur'an, but that is not the case. In fact, the Qur'an has surprisingly little to say about the subject of women's dress.

The word *ḥijāb* is found seven times in the Qur'an, and in none of those cases does it refer to an article of clothing that is meant to cover some part of a woman's (or a man's) body. It comes from an Arabic root whose primary meanings are "to screen," "to seclude," and "to cover." All of the references to *ḥijāb* in the Qur'an describe a barrier or partition that is meant to form a separation between those on one side and those on the other. An example is seen in 7:46, which speaks of a barrier that separates those in heaven from those in hell. "Between the two groups is a barrier [*ḥijāb*], with men on the heights recognizing them by their marks. They call out to those in the garden, 'Peace be with you!' They do not enter, but they long to" (cf. 17:45; 19:17; 38:32; 41:5; 42:51).

Another text in which it is used is 33:53, discussed in the previous chapter in reference to Muhammad's family, where the word *ḥijāb* is sometimes wrongly associated with women's dress: "Oh believers, do not enter the Prophet's dwellings for a meal unless you are given permission to do so, and do not linger there until it is ready. When you are invited, enter. After you have eaten, depart. Do not stay to engage in idle chatter, for that bothers the Prophet. He is embarrassed to ask you to leave, but God is not embarrassed by the truth. When you ask them [Muhammad's wives] for something, ask from behind a curtain [*ḥijāb*]. That is purer for your hearts and theirs. You should not trouble God's Messenger, and you should not ever marry his wives after him. That would be a great offense before God." This verse is one of the rare times the Qur'an discusses some aspect of the Prophet Muhammad's personal life in some detail. The mention of a *ḥijāb* is in reference to a partition or screen behind which Muslims were to stand when they spoke to Muhammad's wives, and is not speaking about something the women were wearing on their bodies.

The two primary texts in the Qur'an that discuss women's clothing are 33:59 and 24:31. The first is directed to Muhammad and puts forth a general guideline for how female members of the Islamic *umma* should dress. "Oh Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to have their outer garments [*jilbāb*] hang low over them. That way, they will be recognized and not be harassed. God is forgiving and merciful." The word used for the garment referred to is *jilbāb*, and this is the only place it is mentioned in the Qur'an. It is generally understood to be a loose-fitting article of clothing that covers the upper part of the body, including the neck and bosom, as a type of cloak.

The verse does not describe the garment in any detail, so it is difficult to know precisely how it was worn, but it is not referred to as a *hijāb* and therefore did not function as a type of veil. The verse explains the reason why women are to wear the *jilbāb*, and this is an important point to keep in mind—it is not meant to cover them up or render them invisible, but to make them visible to others, especially non-Muslim men. It is a marker that calls attention to their status as Muslim women and protects them from unwanted advances.

Some feminist scholars, like Asma Barlas, have argued that because the verse is directed to Muhammad, it is relevant only for his time period and is not meant to be universally applied to later contexts. Because his environment was a patriarchal one in which sexual abuse and sex for pay were common among non-Muslims, Muslim women needed to identify themselves to ensure they would not be mistaken for slaves or prostitutes. In other situations in which this is not a concern, according to Barlas and others, wearing the *jilbāb* is not necessary.

As is the case with other passages already discussed, the history of interpretation of this verse found in the *tafsīr* material introduced new ways of reading it that are not supported by the text of the Qur'an. In this case, commentators came to see it as a statement about the importance of covering up women rather than the need to identify them. This led to calls for their veiling and more extreme forms of rendering them invisible, like covering their faces and hands, that persist in some quarters today but have no basis in the Qur'an.

The other verse that discusses how women should dress is 24:31: "And tell believing women to lower their gazes, guard their private parts, and not show their adornments except what is [normally] visible. They should draw their head-scarves over their bosoms and not show their adornments except to their husbands, their fathers. . . . They should not stomp their feet so as to reveal their adornments they have hidden. Oh believers, turn to God so you may prosper." The missing section identified by the ellipsis contains a lengthy list of other people to whom women may "reveal their adornments."

Three times in this verse the word "adornments" (Arabic, *zīna*) is used, but the precise sense of the term is unclear. Its most common meanings are "charm" and "decoration," but the context here suggests that this fits only the third occurrence, where it is probably a reference to jewelry that is otherwise unseen but might be heard if a woman stomps her foot. The other two times *zīna* appears are most likely speaking about the parts of the body that only some people are allowed to see. Those areas of the body are not identified, but the text states that it is normal and acceptable

to reveal certain "adornments," so it is clearly not calling for a woman to cover up completely. The only part of the body that is specified in the verse is the *furūj*, a euphemism for the sexual organs that is translated here as "private parts" (cf. 21:91; 33:35; 33:5; 66:12).

The article of clothing mentioned in this verse is the *khimār*, a type of head-scarf or shawl that the text says should also cover the skin that is exposed above the neckline of the woman's garment. It does not function as a veil and is clearly not meant to cover the entire face because, if so, the command for women to avert their eyes and lower their gazes would not make any sense. The fact that a *khimār* can also refer to a man's turban also argues against its functioning as a type of veil.

An interesting aspect of 24:31 is that its first part is found almost verbatim in the verse before it, which is directed toward men. "Tell believing men to lower their gazes, and guard their private parts—that is better for them. God is aware of all they do." This is significant because it shows that the Qur'an expects every person to act and dress modestly, regardless of gender. Such modesty requires that a person's body be covered in a way that is socially acceptable, but it does not stipulate that a woman must cover her face or hands. Those practices stem from commentaries on the Qur'an rather than from the Qur'an itself. Very often, these commentaries put forward a view of the female body as something dirty and polluting that must therefore be covered up and rendered invisible. But this idea is at odds with the text, which values the body to a high degree and says that it must be treated with dignity and respect.

Only two verses in the Qur'an discuss how women should dress.

Menstruation

(Q 2:222; 4:43; 5:6; 65:4; 2:223)

The Qur'an's most detailed statement on the subject of menstruation is found in 2:222: "They ask you (Muhammad) about menstruation [*maḥīd*]. Say, 'It is a hardship [*adhā*], so keep away from women during it. Do not approach them until they are cleansed. When they are cleansed, approach them as God has commanded. God loves those who turn to Him, and He loves those who cleanse themselves.'" The reference to menstruation putting a woman in an unclean state is probably the main reason why Islamic law holds that contact with menstrual blood makes a person impure. Other passages in the Qur'an list a number of bodily functions—including

urination, defecation, and sexual intercourse—that render one unclean for prayer and require an ablution (4:43; 5:6). Menstruation is not mentioned explicitly in those texts, but the presence in 2:222 of words from the Arabic root *t-h-r*, which describes ritual purity, is likely a reason why it came to be viewed as one of the bodily functions that make one impure.

The English translation of 2:222 can give the impression that men are to completely avoid their wives during their menstrual periods, but

Contact with certain bodily discharges like blood, urine, and semen renders a Muslim ritually impure and therefore not in the proper physical state for prayer. Depending on the circumstances, the impurity is removed by either a full bath or a simple ablution.

that is not what the text is saying. The Arabic expressions used in the verse make it clear that they are only to refrain from having sexual relations with their wives during this time. Other forms of interaction and physical contact are permissible, and so the couple should behave as they normally do in every area of their relationship except for the sexual.

Even if her menstrual blood is seen as impure or polluting, there is nothing in the Qur'an that says the woman herself, or her body, should be viewed in this way.

In the verse, menstruation is referred to as a "hardship." The Arabic word used to describe it is *'adhā*, which describes a disease, ailment, painful condition, or inconvenience. However it is translated, the passage is acknowledging the painful effects that typically accompany menstruation, and it urges a man to put his wife's situation and needs above his own. The word used for menstruation is *maḥīḍ*, and some have suggested that it is a noun of place and that therefore the text is calling for avoidance of the location where menstruation occurs, the woman's genital area. If this reading is adopted, it further supports the idea that the verse is not calling for complete avoidance of the woman but simply refraining from sexual contact. The only other place in the Qur'an where *maḥīḍ* is found is in 65:4, which discusses the period of time a divorced woman must wait before remarrying to determine if she is pregnant.

The reference in 2:222 to having marital relations "as God has commanded" has been taken by some commentators to be a comment about the sexual practices the couple might engage in. They think the verse could be a statement in favor of vaginal intercourse that is opposed to other sexual positions and techniques. In other words, the passage is advising people about not just when to have sexual relations but how to have them. They cannot engage in sexual activity whenever and however they wish, but they are to express themselves sexually as God intends.

This is an important point because it has a bearing on how to understand the verse that follows immediately after it, which has sometimes been interpreted in a way that denigrates and objectifies women: "Your wives are fields for you. Go into your fields as you wish, and send forward [something] for yourselves. Be mindful of God, and remember that you will meet Him. (Muhammad), bring good news to the believers" (2:223). The description here of wives as fields has sometimes led to the accusation that the Qur'an considers women to be the property of men.

But to adopt this view is to read a modern assumption into the text and to impose on it a notion of land ownership that would have been foreign to those living in seventh-century Arabia. Land at that time was not something to be parceled out and owned by individuals; it was something to be cultivated and nurtured for the good of society. This is precisely the point behind the use of the metaphor "fields." It is in their capacity to bring forth new life through childbirth that women are like fields, and this verse encourages men to do their part in perpetuating the human race and helping to bring about the next generation. Working together in their distinct but complementary roles in conceiving and raising children, this is what men and women are to "send forward" for themselves.

The reminder at the end of the passage to be mindful of God recalls the statement in the previous verse that men are to engage in sexual relations as God intends. Reading that as an acknowledgment of divine preference for vaginal intercourse supports the interpretation that 2:223 describes women as fields in order to underscore the connection with human reproduction, and it has nothing to do with women's inferiority or subjugation. So when the text tells men they may "go into your fields as you wish" it is not giving them license to be selfish or forceful in their relationships with their wives. It is meant to remind them of the creative and life-giving dimension of human sexuality.

Sexual Activity

(Q 30:21; 7:189; 2:187a; 2:197a; 4:15; 4:22, 25; 17:32; 33:30; 65:1; 7:80; 27:54; 29:28)

The Qur'an teaches that sexual expression is a natural and essential part of human existence. As already seen, the text sometimes uses the verb *sakana*, which can mean "to feel at home" and "to trust in," to describe the peace and harmony that result from the physical intimacy enjoyed by a couple. "Among His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves that you might live with them in comfort [*litaskunū*]. He placed love

and mercy between you. These are truly signs for a people who reflect" (30:21; cf. 7:189). This is one of several signs of God's involvement as creator of the physical world that are mentioned in this section of the Qur'an (30:20-25), which underscores the text's positive view of sexuality as a gift from God that is meant to be celebrated.

Islamic law stipulates that sexual relations are not permitted in daytime during Ramadan, the month of fasting, but the Qur'an allows it in the evening hours of the month. "During the night of the fast, sexual intercourse with your wives is permitted for you. (2:187a). There is a possible prohibition against sexual activity during the pilgrimage ritual in 2:197a: "The pilgrimage takes place during the well-known months. Let there be no sexual intercourse, aberrant behavior, or arguing for anyone doing the pilgrimage. God knows about any good you do." In both verses the Arabic word for "sexual intercourse" is *rafath*, a term that clearly has that meaning in the first text because of the presence of the phrase, "with your wives." In the second passage, the word might have its other meaning of "to engage in obscene or sexually explicit talk," and the verse could be forbidding such behavior during the pilgrimage.

The Qur'an typically does not refer to particular forms of sexual activity, and so it is difficult to know with certainty what it is referring to when it uses the word *rafath* or other terms. It does not, for example, refer specifically to anal intercourse or oral sex. It is commonly assumed that the references to a man and a woman engaging in sexual relations are speaking of vaginal intercourse, but it should be kept in mind that many other forms of sexual expression are not explicitly mentioned or prohibited in the Qur'an.

Improper sexual activity is often termed *fāhisha* or *faḥshā'*, two related words that can describe any indecent or immoral act. The exact nature of the offense is usually left unexpressed, but the general context of some passages suggests that these are sometimes references to adultery or fornication. "If any of your women engage in lewdness [*fāhisha*], call four witnesses from among you. If they testify against them banish the women to their houses until they die, or until God shows them another way" (4:15; cf. 4:22, 25; 17:32; 33:30; 65:1). In a few

The Prophet Muhammad is castigated in 66:1 for refraining from engaging in sexual relations with his wives.

passages, the term is used in reference to homosexuality, a topic discussed below (7:80; 27:54; 29:28).

Extramarital Sexual Relations

(Q 24:23-24; 5:5; 23:5; 24:4, 33; 33:35; 70:29; 66:12; 21:91; 3:35-36; 4:25; 5:5; 17:32; 25:68; 17:32; 3:135; 6:151; 7:28, 33; 42:37; 53:32; 4:15; 24:2; 24:4; 24:6-9; 12:22-29)

The Qur'an teaches that Muslims should observe modesty and refrain from inappropriate sexual activity. Some words that convey this notion of chasteness come from the Arabic root *ḥ-ṣ-n*, which in certain forms means "to guard, preserve," and others come from the root *ḥ-f-z*, which has similar meanings. The idea behind this usage is that good people protect themselves from immorality by guarding their genitals and refraining from all improper sexual activity. "Those who accuse chaste [*al-muḥṣanāt*] and innocent believing women are cursed in this life and the next. A great punishment will be theirs on the day

The Qur'an refers to Mary's birth in 3:35-36, a chapter whose title ("The Family of 'Imrān") mentions her father's name.

when their tongues, hands, and feet testify against them about what they have done" (24:23-24; cf. 5:5; 23:5; 24:4, 33; 33:35; 70:29). The individual who personifies this quality most clearly in the Qur'an is Mary, who guarded her virginity and gave birth to Jesus without having had sexual relations with a man. "Mary, daughter of 'Imran, guarded [*aḥṣanat*] her private parts, so We breathed Our spirit into her. She accepted the truth of the words of her Lord and His books—she was one of the devout ones" (66:12; cf. 21:91).

The Qur'an forbids taking a lover and having sex outside of marriage (4:25; 5:5; 17:32; 25:68), and extramarital sexual activity is often described by words that come from the Arabic root *z-n-y*, as in 17:32: "And do not go near adultery [*zinā*]. It is a vile deed, and a path to evil." Another word that is often identified with extramarital relations is *fāhisha*, discussed above, but since this term refers to various types of indecent and immoral acts, it is sometimes difficult to know precisely what kind of activity is being condemned (3:135; 6:151; 7:28, 33; 42:37; 53:32). As already noted, it appears in 4:15 in a text that is often held to be prescribing the punishment for women who have committed adultery: "If any of your women engage in lewdness [*fāhisha*], call four witnesses from among you. If they testify against them banish the women to their houses until they die, or until God shows them another way." According to this verse, the guilty party is to be consigned to her home until death, unless she is otherwise rehabilitated by divine means.

One reason why it is believed that this passage is speaking about adultery is that there is another verse in the Qur'an that also refers to the need for multiple witnesses to charge a woman with a violation, and there the offense is clearly adultery because the verse uses words from the root *z-n-y*

to describe both the man and the woman: “Flog the adulteress and the adulterer one hundred times. Do not let compassion for them prevent you from carrying out God’s demand, if you believe in God and the Last Day. Make sure a group of believers witnesses their punishment” (24:2). Most commentators claim that this verse abrogates 4:15, and that is why whipping is sometimes a punishment for adultery in those places that strictly follow Islamic law. It should be noted that the Qur’an does not make a distinction based on gender but says that both parties are equally guilty. The practice of stoning adulterers has no basis in the Qur’an, and derives from the *hadith* traditions associated with the Prophet Muhammad.

A punishment of eighty lashes is prescribed in 24:4 for those who accuse a woman of adultery but are unable to garner four witnesses. In point of fact, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assemble four people to testify to the offense because they each would have to witness the act of penetration. This means it is highly unlikely that the scenario imagined in 24:2 could occur and its punishment be enforced.

The Qur’an refers to another set of circumstances whereby a man can accuse his wife of adultery without witnesses, but there the woman has the right to defend herself and has the last word on the matter: “Those who accuse their wives of adultery and have no witness but themselves should swear by God four times that they are telling the truth. A fifth time he should call God’s curse upon himself if he is lying. The punishment will be averted from the woman if she witnesses by God four times that her husband is lying and, the fifth time, calls God’s wrath upon herself if he is telling the truth” (24:6-9).

The most dramatic passage related to adultery is found in 12:22-29, which is the Quran’s account of the biblical story in Genesis 39 that describes the encounter between Joseph and his master’s wife after his brothers sold him into Egypt. Almost all of the one hundred verses in chapter 12 relate the story of Joseph, making it the longest single narrative in the Qur’an. Its version of what happened between Joseph and his master’s wife is similar to the Bible’s, but with some important differences.

Although she is unnamed in the Qur’an, the wife of Joseph’s master is identified as Zulaykha in other Islamic sources.

In the Islamic text, her husband comes home to find them together only to exonerate Joseph when it is pointed out that his shirt is torn from behind, indicating Joseph was trying to flee and the woman is the guilty party. The most notable difference is the important role God plays in the Qur’an while being completely absent from Genesis 39. The moral of the story is clear—Joseph was able to resist temptation only because of his belief and trust in God, and

GALLERY

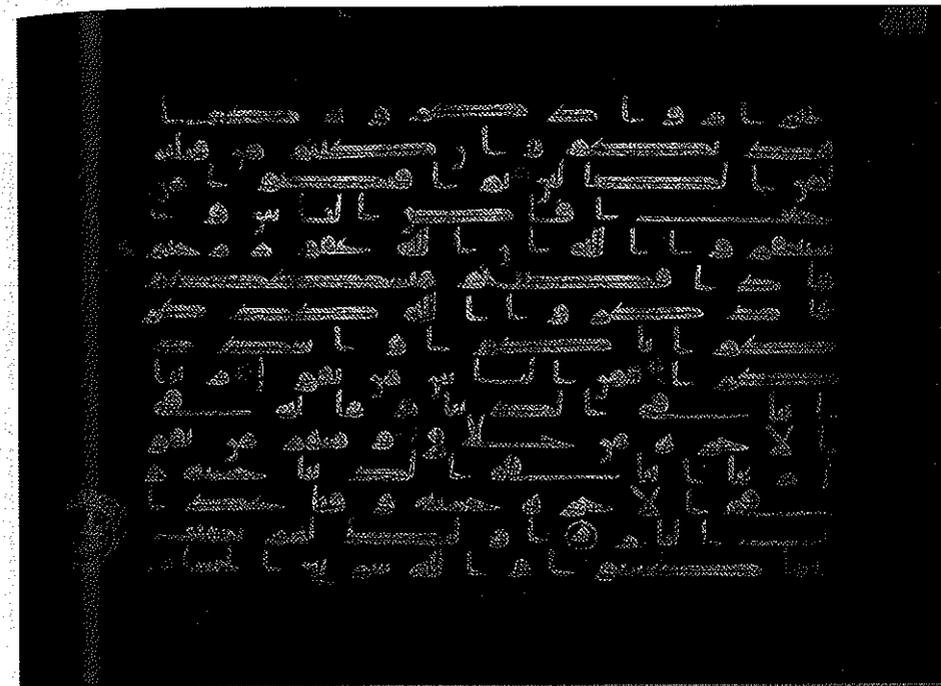


FIGURE A
Ninth-century Qur’an in Kufic script. This version of the Qur’an, from Kairouan, Tunisia, is distinctive for its dramatic contrast of gold on blue parchment. Verses are marked off by small circles within the text, which itself contains no vowel signs, points, or other diacritical marks.

FIGURE E
Reading the Qur'an. This photograph shows an Indonesian Muslim woman reading the Qur'an during Ramadan.

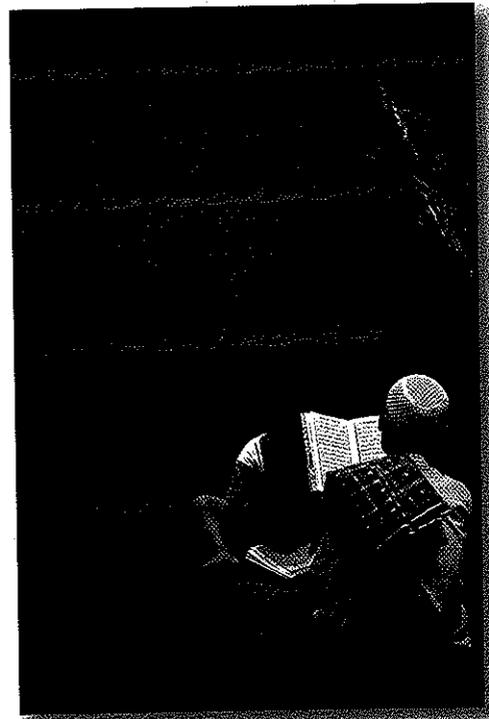
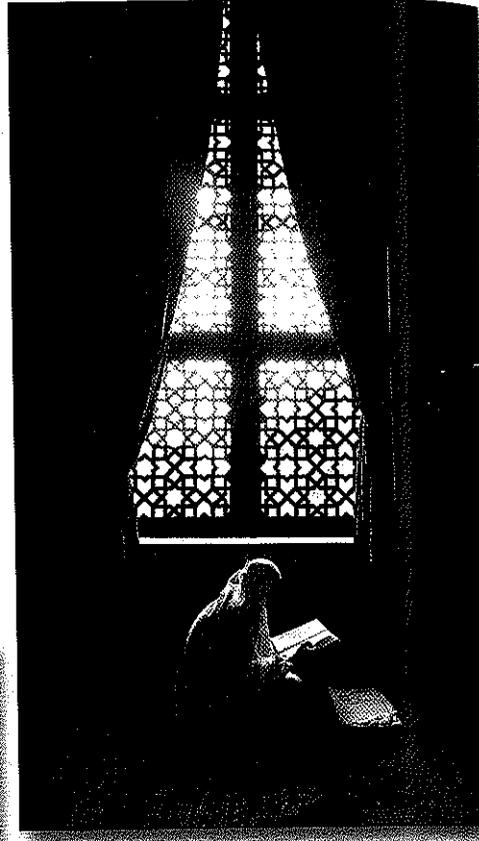


FIGURE F
Father and son reading the Qur'an. All Muslims are expected to read the Qur'an on a regular basis, a practice that typically begins at a young age. This father and son read the Qur'an in an Indonesian mosque during Ramadan.

in this he serves as a model for others to follow. "She made a play for him, and he would have done the same if he had not seen the proof of his Lord. We did this in order to keep him free of evil and lewdness—he was truly one of Our pure servants" (12:24).

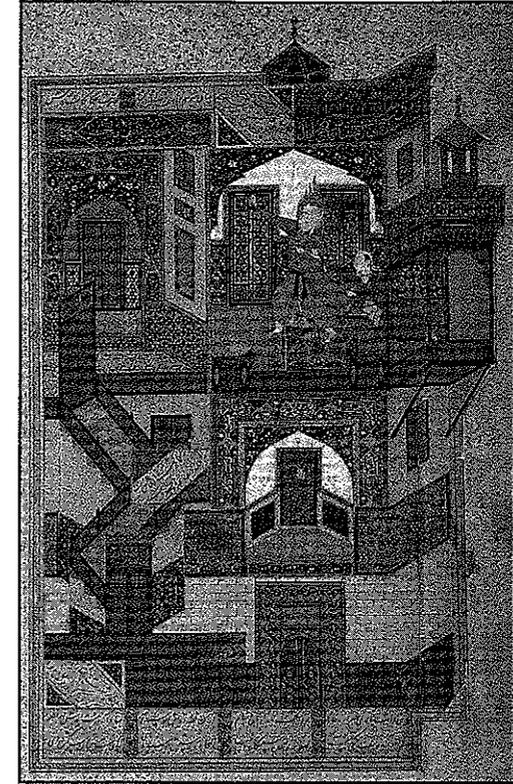


FIGURE 19 Joseph flees from Zulaykha, as depicted in this fifteenth-century manuscript.

Homosexuality

(Q 7:80-84; 11:77-83; 15:61-77; 26:160-75; 27:54-58; 29:28-35; 54:33-40; 4:15-16)

The Qur'an does not have much to say on the subject of homosexuality. Most of the references to it are found in passages discussing the visit of God's messengers to Lot, which have much in common with the biblical account found in Genesis 18 and 19 that describes the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (7:80-84; 11:77-83; 15:61-77; 26:160-75; 27:54-58; 29:28-35; 54:33-40). Upon the messengers' arrival at the unnamed town in the Qur'an, its inhabitants seek to engage in activity described as *fāḥisha* (7:80; 27:54; 29:28), which leads to their destruction.

As noted above, the term *fāhisha* is somewhat vague since it can refer to any immoral or indecent act. But in several of these passages, the nature of the offense is identified as the men's sexual desire or lust for other men. In 26:165-66, Lot chastises the men of his town, "Of all humankind, do you come to the males and reject the spouses God has created for you? You are a people who exceed the bounds!" (cf. 7:81; 27:55; 29:29). In these texts, same-sex activity is criticized and condemned, but it is important to keep in mind that nowhere does the Qur'an consider it to be a greater offense than other forms of sexual transgression. The terminology found in the stories associated with Lot's people is also found in passages that are critical of opposite-sex transgressions like desiring a man or woman one is not married to, fornication, adultery, and having sexual relations while a woman is menstruating. It is therefore incorrect to claim that the Qur'an considers same-sex activity to be a greater sin than those committed within heterosexual relationships.

The punishment of Lot's people is not solely or primarily due to their sexual practices or preferences. As with all the stories in the Qur'an that describe a community's punishment, the main cause is their failure to heed a prophet's message and, ultimately, their refusal to submit to God's will. The Lot stories are about a people's alienation from God, and their same-sex desires are considered to be one manifestation of that estrangement. This idea is well expressed in 54:33-35: "The people of Lot rejected the warnings. We sent a storm of stones against all of them, except the family of Lot. We saved them just before dawn as a favor from Us. Thus We reward those who are thankful."

In recent times, some Bible scholars have argued against the traditional view that the main purpose of the story in Genesis 19 is to condemn homosexuality. They offer an alternative interpretation that focuses more on hospitality than sexuality. In ancient Near Eastern societies, guests were treated with a great deal of respect and honor, and this practice continues in many cultures into the present day. When the townspeople of Sodom and Gomorrah tried to break into Lot's home and kidnap his visitors for their own purposes, they violated one of the basic principles of social interaction—hospitality toward the stranger. According to this reading, their lack of respect, more than anything else, is why the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were punished.

Reading the Qur'an passages about Lot with this interpretation in mind reveals some intriguing connections because his concern with hospitality appears to be present in a couple of places. In 11:78, Lot reacts to the men's attempt to forcibly take his visitors: "His people hurriedly came to him, and previously they had committed evil deeds. He said, 'Oh

my people, these are my daughters—they are purer for you. Be mindful of God, and do not shame me before my guests. Is there not a sensible man among you?'" Lot's offer of his daughters as a substitute in place of his visitors strikes the modern reader as repugnant, but it reflects the cultural norms of a time that was markedly different from our own. In antiquity, children were a man's possession, and he could use them as he liked. As strange as it may sound to us, Lot was actually trying to protect his people by offering them his daughters. This becomes apparent when it is observed that the word translated here as "purer" comes from the Arabic root *ṭ-h-r*, which is commonly used to convey the idea of purity, especially in ritual matters. Lot does not want his people to pollute themselves, and so he offers them his daughters because he knows if the men have relations with them they will not render themselves impure.

But what may be driving his actions most of all could be his awareness of the hospitality norm, as evidenced by his desire not to be shamed and disgraced before his visitors. A similar note is sounded in 15:68-69, where he utters a double plea in an effort to avoid embarrassment: "He [Lot] said, 'These are my guests, do not humiliate me. Be mindful of God, and do not shame me.'" The presence of the hospitality theme in the Qur'an, as in the Bible, adds an important nuance that suggests the story has broader social implications and that the people of Lot are punished for reasons beyond their sexual practices.

Another passage that is sometimes considered to be speaking about homosexuality is 4:15-16, the first verse of which was discussed earlier in connection with adultery: "If any of your women engage in lewdness, call four witnesses from among you. If they testify against them banish the women to their houses until they die, or until God shows them another way. If two men commit a lewd act, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, leave them alone. Truly, God accepts repentance, and is merciful." Although many commentators maintain the passage is concerned with improper heterosexual relations, it has been suggested on occasion that it is actually treating same-sex relationships. If so, it would be the Qur'an's only explicit statement on lesbianism. As already noted, the word describing the offense in these verses is *fāhishah*, which refers to any indecent act. But some of the Arabic words in the second sentence are grammatically masculine dual, which underscores the fact that the verse is speaking about the actions of two men and lends support to the interpretation that it is discussing homosexuality.

The Qur'an does not say anything specific about topics like abortion, birth control, or masturbation.

The Qur'an addresses many topics related to gender and sexuality, and in recent times new ways of thinking about this ancient text's meaning and relevance for today's world have been put forward. Some have warmly embraced these newer approaches, and others have denounced them. The debates and discussions will undoubtedly continue as Muslims wrestle with issues like male-female relations, appropriate dress, homosexuality, and other forms of sexual expression. Just as Jews and Christians disagree on the role the Bible should play in modern society, it would be unrealistic and unfair to assume that all Muslims should be of the same opinion when it comes to the Qur'an. Diverging views and disagreement are essential to any healthy, vibrant community. What remains to be seen is which perspective will exert the most influence by shaping Islamic attitudes and behavior in the future. The answer to that question is unknown, but that perspective will certainly be informed by the Qur'an, however its message is understood and interpreted.

key TERMS

tafsir; *umma*; *nafs*; *zawj*; *sakana*; *taqwā*; *daraja*; *qawwāmūna*; *faddala*; *qānitāt*; *nushūz*; *daraba*; *hijāb*; *jilbāb*; *zīna*; *furūj*; *khimār*; *adha*; *mahīd*; *rafath*; *fāhisha*; *zīna*

QUESTIONS for discussion

1. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of relying on an ancient text like the Qur'an for guidance on matters like gender relations and sexuality?
2. What is your reaction to the aims and method of feminist readings of the Qur'an?
3. Do the problematic passages in the Qur'an that can be interpreted as privileging males negate the egalitarian core that some claim is its essential message?
4. Why do interpretations of texts sometimes become more influential than the texts themselves?

further READING

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