



## QUR'ANIC ETHICS OF PARTNERSHIP AND GENDER THE CONCEPT OF WILĀYA IN QUR'AN 9:71

Asma Afsaruddin

Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures  
Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

Official chronicles of Islam that document its growth as a world religion and civilization contain accounts of key figures (besides the Prophet Muhammad) who shaped the Islamic tradition in seminal ways. The overwhelming majority of the historical sources which deal with the formative period in particular would have us believe that the history of Islam was primarily molded by Muslim men and it is mainly their deeds and accomplishments that are worthy of documentation. If we move outside of the domain of official histories and chronicles and turn our attention to biographical and prosopographical literature for example, this image can be substantially revised. In *sira* and *tabaqat* works, for example, there is plentiful mention of well-known *Sahabiyyat* (women Companions of the Prophet) who played prominent roles in the history of early Islam. A number of Muslim scholars have gratefully recorded their names and recorded their achievements as major contributions to the formation of Islamic thought and practices. These sources are therefore important for providing a corrective to much of what is still conventionally attributed to Muslim women as a totality in certain circles, particularly in the West - a general lack of agency, invisibility, and marginalization within the key events of Islamic history and its intellectual heritage. This persistent and erroneous image has been challenged and considerably overturned by rigorous scholarship in recent times that has often made use of early biographical works, as well as Qur'an commentaries, hadith literature, *adab* works and other sources to retrieve the life-stories of women who over time progressively became relegated to the sidelines of official history.

The lives of the first generation of Muslims (Ar. *salaf*), men and women, are generally regarded as worthy of emulation by later generations of Muslims. The latter often look back to this century (first/seventh) as an ideal era during which the *Zeitgeist* of Islam was fully realized. With regard to the female Companions, their lives have been and are still centrally constitutive of traditionalist as well as reformist views of what may be described as the proper roles of women in Islamic societies. The accounts of the lives of the Companions in general are still read with great interest by Muslims today; the lives of the *Sahabiyyat* in particular are being scrutinized more eagerly today because they are often indicative of the prominent roles accorded to women in the formative period of Islam.



Besides the wives of the Prophet who were the “First Ladies” of the Medinan community, there were other women Companions who left a trail of impressive accomplishments celebrated by their contemporaries and succeeding generations of the faithful. In this study, I briefly discuss the lives of some representative women from the first generation of Muslims before proceeding to discuss how these examples illustrate the overall gender egalitarianism of the Qur’an and its recognition of equal human agency for men and women in their common moral enterprise to strive for a better world.

Among the most distinctive of the women Companions is Nusayba bt. Ka’b, a celebrated figure from the Banu Najjar of Medina, who was otherwise better known as Umm ‘Umara. The well-known biographer Muhammad ibn Sa’d (d. 45-844/230), wrote a lengthy entry in his prosopographical work *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-kubra* documenting her piety, devotion to the Prophet, and her fearless courage in defending Islam against its adversaries. According to Ibn Sa’d, Umm ‘Umara gave her allegiance to the Prophet on the night of ‘Aqaba, and eventually witnessed several key events of early Islam: she was present at the battles of Uḥud (625/4), al-Hudaybiyya (28-627/6), Khaybar (628/7), Ḥunayn (630/8), and al-Yamāma (34-633/12). At Uḥud, she was present with her husband Ghaziyya b. ‘Amr and her two sons but it was Umm ‘Umara who showed the greatest valor on the battlefield. Ibn Sa’d tells us that the valiant Umm ‘Umara had headed for Uḥud with the intention of quenching the thirst of the combatants but soon found herself engaging in fighting against the enemy. In the course of the battle, she is said to have sustained twelve wounds to her body, inflicted either by a spear or a sword.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn Sa’id includes a detailed account from Umm ‘Umara who confided the following details to a female companion, Umm Sa’id, when the latter asked her what had happened precisely on that day. According to Umm ‘Umara, she had gone out to the battlefield in the early part of the day, carrying her water-skin to feed the thirsty, and worked her way through the battlefield until she reached the Prophet. As the tide of the battle began to turn against the Muslims, she remained by the side of the Prophet and began to fight, defending the Prophet with a sword and a bow and arrow, until she was severely injured. Umm Sa’id then comments on the deep gash that she observed on Umm ‘Umara’s shoulders and asked the latter to identify her assailant. Umm ‘Umara replied that it was Ibn Qumay’a, fighting on the pagan Meccan side and shouting, «Point out Muhammad to me, for I will not have succeeded if he escapes!» Umm ‘Umara was among the group of people who converged on the Prophet to defend him, as a consequence of which she suffered severe wounds. She makes it clear, however, that she was able to get in a few good thrusts herself at Ibn Qumay’a, but, as she comments ruefully, «the enemy of God had on two plates of armor.» The Prophet himself commented on Umm ‘Umara’s valor thus, «Indeed the position of Nusayba bt. Ka’b today is higher than the position of such-and-such people (*fulan wa-fulan*).» She is also said to have lost a hand at al-Yamāma during the battle fought

(1) Ibn Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Atā’ (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1997), 8:303-4.



against the false prophet Musaylima from the Banū Ḥanīfa after Mecca fell to the Muslims in 9/630.<sup>2</sup>

Umm ‘Umara is also counted among the early prominent muhaddithat for she heard a number of hadiths from the Prophet and transmitted from him. Her stature remained high among the early Muslims after the Prophet’s death; and it is said that Abu Bakr would frequently inquire about her after he became caliph.<sup>3</sup>

It should be pointed out that there is another female Ansari Companion with the name of Umm ‘Umara, who is distinguished from the first by the name Umm ‘Umara al-Ansariyya. Ibn Sa’d does not refer to her in his biographical entries but another well-known scholar from the Mamluk period Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449/852) does in his biographical work *al-Iṣāba fī tamayīz al-ṣaḥāba*. According to Ibn Ḥajar, Umm ‘Umāra al-Anṣāriyyah is the female Companion who remarked to the Prophet regarding the Qur’anic revelations up to that point, «I see that everything pertains to men; I do not see the mention of women.»<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently the following critical verse (Qur’an 33:35) was revealed:

*Those who have surrendered to God among males and females; those who believe among males and females; those who are sincere among males and females; those who are truthful among males and females; those who are patient among males and females; those who fear God among males and females; those who give in charity among males and females; those who fast among males and females; those who remember God often among males and females – God has prepared for them forgiveness and great reward.*<sup>5</sup>

This is a highly significant verse for the Qur’an had settled the question once and for all: women and men had equal moral agency in their quest of the good and righteous life in this world for which they reap identical rewards in the afterlife. Gender thus had no role to play in the other-worldly salvific efficacy offered by the Qur’an through its prescription for the well-ordered moral existence on earth. Muslim feminists frequently point to this verse (and others like it) to underscore the gender egalitarianism inherent in the Qur’an.

In addition to Umm ‘Umara, Ibn Sa’d provides a detailed entry on another prominent Muslim

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(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid., 8:304.

(4) Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba fī tamayīz al-ṣaḥāba* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), 8:262.

(5) According to Ibn Sa’d, it was rather Umm Salamah, the Prophet’s wife, who had remarked that women had not been specifically mentioned so far in the revelation. This account is recorded by Ibn Sa’d as the occasion of revelation for this verse.



woman from the first century: Umm Kulthum bt. ‘Uqba, a Qurayshi woman, whose preeminence in early Islam is signaled in the following way. She is said to have accepted Islam in Mecca and given her allegiance (*bay‘a*) to the Prophet before the emigration from Mecca to Medina. She is described as having been the first woman to emigrate to Medina immediately after the Prophet. As Ibn Sa‘d puts it, Umm Kulthum’s particular claim to distinction lies in the fact that “we know of no female Qurayshi other than Umm Kulthum bt. ‘Uqba who left her parents as a Muslim woman, emigrating to God and His Messenger.”<sup>6</sup>

The dramatic circumstances in which Umm Kulthum made her escape throws into relief her unusual courage: these circumstances are said to have occasioned the revelation of a specific Qur’anic verse. As related by Ibn Sa‘d, Umm Kulthum left Mecca by herself and arrived in Medina at the time of the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya (28-627/6), accompanied at this time by a man, who is not named, from the tribe of Khuzā‘ah. Her two brothers, al-Walid and ‘Umara, opposed to her emigration, set out in hot pursuit of her and reached Medina the morning after Umm Kulthūm arrival. They implored the Prophet to return her to them, according to the terms of the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya. As is well known, the terms of the treaty stipulated that any Meccan wishing to join the Muslims in Medina would have to be returned to Mecca, whereas anyone from Medina who went over to the Meccans would not have to be returned to the Muslims.<sup>7</sup> On hearing her brothers’ request, Umm Kulthūm is quoted as responding, “O Messenger of God, I am a woman, and a woman’s situation as you know is [similar to] that of the weak. If you were to return me to the unbelievers, they might torture me on account of my religion and I would not be able to endure it.» The Qur’anic revelation is then said to have come down allowing for a special dispensation for the women refugees from Mecca, who would be allowed to remain in Medina after their sincerity of purpose and firm conversion to Islam had been ascertained. This particular Qur’anic verse (Qur’an 60:10), says: “O those who believe, whenever believing women come to you as refugees, examine them, God knows best of their faith, so if you recognize them to be believing women, do not send them back to the unbelievers; such women are not lawful for them nor are such men lawful for them.”

After this revelation, women were therefore not sent back to Mecca but rather were queried regarding their intentions in emigrating. Ibn Sa‘d reports that the Prophet is said to have addressed some of these remarkable women emigrants thus: «Nothing but love for God, His Messenger, and Islam has brought you out (sc. out of your homes), and you have not come out [seeking] a husband or wealth.»<sup>8</sup> Umm Kulthūm’s situation thus provides the *sabab al-nuzul* or “the occasion of revelation” for this particular verse. Biographical accounts that point to this

(7) For these terms, see Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (“The Prophet’s Life”) 2:784.

(8) Ibn Sa‘d, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, 8:183. For more information about early women Companions, see Asma Afsaruddin “Early Women Exemplars and the Construction of Gendered Space: (Re-) Defining Feminine Moral Excellence,” in *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, ed. Marilyn Booth (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-48.

occasion of revelation in turn highlight Umm Kulthūm's exemplary piety and courage.

### Reading the Lives of the Women Companions: Text and Context

Such biographical vignettes of the women Companions provide fascinating glimpses into the Muslim past where an alternatively- conceptualized society, in which the gifts and contributions of men and women were deemed equally valuable, was possible. Early biographical works, like that of Ibn Sa'd, attest that the details of the lives of first generation Muslim women when available, provide instructive examples of women's lives lived to their fullest in service to their community and religion, empowered by basic Qur'anic principles of egalitarianism and piety.

It is in this context of Qur'anic empowerment of women that makes the acts of Umm 'Umāra, Umm Ayman and other Saḥābiyyāt understandable, not as acts exceptional to their gender, but rather as human and humane deeds expected of upright moral individuals, regardless of their gender. In their own time and context, the public lives of these women believers were not deemed to be out of the ordinary but part and parcel of the common mandate for men and women to make meaningful contributions to society. The memory of these early inspirational women however begins to dim in subsequent centuries. As historians have shown, critical changes that crept into Muslim societies from the outside considerably reshaped their orientations and substantially attenuated the gender egalitarianism of the early period. Owing particularly to the influence of Greek and Persian conceptions of rigidly hierarchical societies which valued male citizens more than females, Qur'anic egalitarianism began to be diluted by these ideas starting in the Abbasid period and gaining steam in the later periods.<sup>9</sup>

These striking societal and cultural transformations leave their broad imprint on the way certain Qur'anic verses that deal with human agency and male-female relations particularly within the family were read and interpreted by male scholars through the centuries. Their interpretations provide a valuable window into the progressive "patriarchalization" of Muslim society and the elaborate arguments constructed to support this world-view - all couched in a legitimizing religious idiom.

For example, if we look at the verses in the Qur'an that refer to the creation of Adam and his wife before their earthly existence, we are struck by how the Qur'an either a. blames Adam exclusively for the Fall or b. blames Adam and his wife equally for giving in to the blandishments of Satan. Western readers from a Judeo-Christian background will be struck by the fact that Adam's wife (named Ḥawwā' or Eve in the exegetical literature) is never singled out for exclusive blame in the Qur'an, in contrast to the principal biblical creation account contained

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(9) See in general, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2002).



in the Book of Genesis. On the balance, Adam is the one who is morally culpable for failing to heed God's injunctions and succumbing to wrong-doing. He is however forgiven by God and both he and his wife are given equal opportunity to redeem themselves by establishing a righteous and God-fearing community on earth. The Qur'an most categorically does not assign any kind of ontological moral failing to the woman companion of Adam and thus by extension to womankind in general.

his point has been underscored by Muslim feminists in particular as they argue from within the Islamic tradition for gender egalitarianism. Recuperation of the original Qur'anic verses concerning Adam and Eve is highly important for a very different story emerges from the prolific exegetical literature (*tafsīr*) concerning them.

Qur'an commentaries from after the third/ninth century reveal that the Qur'anic exoneration of Adam's wife proved unpalatable to a number of later Muslim male exegetes and they deliberately imported the Biblical creation story into their interpretations to reassign the blame to her. Earlier commentators, including al-Ṭabarī, stayed close to the Qur'anic text and noted that Adam bore the brunt of the blame for having caused the "Fall." Later exegetes - roughly after the fourth/tenth century - however began to show a marked preference for the biblical version which mandates the wife's subjugation to her husband as a result of her sin, an interpretation that was more in line with the growing patriarchal nature of society. They further embellished their accounts with the story of woman's creation from the rib of Adam taken from Genesis.<sup>10</sup> This rendering of the creation story is markedly in contrast to what the Qur'an actually states concerning Adam and his wife. The relevant verse is:

*O humankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul (nafs wahida) and from it created its mate and from them the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women.*  
(Qur'an 4:1)

Simultaneous creation from the *nafs wāḥida* therefore negates the possibility of man being granted an ontologically superior status by virtue of having been created first, from whose body is then derived the woman's. The Qur'an thus clearly undermines the notion of a hierarchical relationship between man and woman and grants them instead complete ontological equality. In spite of this fundamental Qur'anic orientation, the rib story entered the hadith literature and became a favorite of later male exegetes as a way of justifying the woman's socially and legally inferior status to that of the man.

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(10) Barbara Stowasser, "The Chapter of Eve," in *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 25-38.

## Woman's Moral Agency in the Qur'an: The Concept of Wilāya

Culturally-derived attitudes which progressively undermined women's equal status in society in the formative period of Islam are belied by several passages in the Qur'an that affirm the opposite. Among the most important of these verses is Qur'an (9:71) which establishes equal and complementary moral agency for both men and women. The verse states:

*(Male) believers (al-mu'minun) and (female) believers (al-mu'minat) are the natural partners (awliya') of one another; they command the good and forbid wrong and they perform prayer, give the obligatory alms, and obey God and His messenger. They are those upon whom God has mercy; indeed God is Almighty, Wise.*

The obvious intent of the verse is to establish complete parity between men and women as partners in the common venture to promote the good, righteous society on earth and in the fulfillment of their individual and communal obligations towards God. As obvious as this meaning may seem to us, male interpreters from the pre-modern and modern periods have understood this verse in ways that more often than not were consonant with their own particularist views of proper male-female relations and, particularly for the later period, subversive of its egalitarian thrust. A sampling of the perspectives of a number of influential exegetes is now provided below to offer a glimpse into the conceptualization of such gendered identities in variegated historical circumstances in the pre-modern period.

### Pre-Modern Exegeses of Qur'an 9:71

From the first half of the eighth century during the Umayyad period, the exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767/150) asserts the full and equal partnership of female and male believers in matters of religion (*fī al-dīn*) and highlights their mutually reinforcing obedience to God in this verse.<sup>11</sup>

The celebrated late ninth century exegete Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923/310) from the 'Abbasid period similarly emphasizes that righteous men and women "who believe in God, His messenger and the verses of His book" (*al-muṣaddiqūn bi-Allāh wa rasūlihi wa āyāt kitābih*) are each other's allies and supporters (*ba'duhum anṣār ba'd wa a'wānuhum*). Their fundamental duty to promote what is right and prevent what is wrong consists in inviting people to monotheism and abandon the worship of idols, and to carry out their fundamental religious obligations, such as offering prayers and paying alms.<sup>12</sup>

The eleventh century exegete al-Wahidī (d. 1076/468) similarly underscores the complementarity

(11) Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. 'Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tārikh Al-'Arabī), 2:181.

(12) Al-Tabari, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997), 6:415.



of men and women's roles to be indicated in this verse. He quotes from the famous Companion Ibn 'Abbas who stated that believing women and men were allies of one another "in regard to mercy and affection" (*fī al-rahma wa al-mahabba*). Al-Wahidī understands this statement to mean that they were like "one hand in supporting [one another]" and, like al-Ṭabarī, stresses that they were particularly called to invite people to worship the one God and to themselves observe the fundamental tenets of Islam.<sup>13</sup> Very similar views are expressed by the well-known Andalusian exegete Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273/671), who, on the basis of this verse, characterizes the relationship between men and women as one of "hearts united in mutual affection, love, and empathy."<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, the earlier commentator, the famous Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210/606), who is otherwise generally quite prolix in his commentary on individual verses, does not comment on the special bond of mutual support and affection existing between women and men as indicated in Qur'an 9:71 and therefore does not dwell on what the larger implications of this *wilāya* would or should be.<sup>15</sup> The influential Mamluk exegete Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373/774) in the fourteenth century does comment on the special bond existing among believers and invokes the hadith in which the Prophet describes the faithful as constituting "a [single] edifice in which each strengthens the other" in this context.<sup>16</sup> Worthy of note is that Ibn Kathir uses only the masculine noun for believers (*al-mu'minīn*) in his commentary, in stark contrast to our earlier commentators who repeated the masculine and the feminine plural nouns occurring in Qur'an 9:71 that refer explicitly to believers of both sexes in their exegeses.

Although the masculine plural noun may be understood as a broad collective noun that implicitly includes women as well, the reiteration of the feminine plural noun in imitation of the relevant Qur'anic verse would have erased any ambiguity regarding the inclusion of women believers as full participants in the shaping of the Muslim community.

## b. The Modern Exegesis of Rashīd Riḍā

In the nineteenth century, the prominent Egyptian scholar and reformer Muḥammad 'Abduh and his loyal disciple Rashīd Riḍā collaborated together on a Qur'an commentary project, titled *Tafsīr al-Manār*, which remains influential until today. Since Riḍā continued with this project after 'Abduh's death in 1902, it is his voice that we hear from Qur'anic chapter 5 onwards and therefore we are referring to him alone in our continued discussion of Qur'an 9:71.

It is in the *Tafsīr al-Manār* that we finally obtain a more detailed explication of the nature of

(13) Al-Wahidī, *al-Waṣīf fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994), 2:509.

(14) Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2001), 8:186.

(15) Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999), 6:101-103.

(16) Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1990), 2:353.



*wilāya* understood to be indicated in the verse and how that applies to men and women, both equally and differentially. As far as their fundamental relationship is concerned, Rida asserts, the *wilāya* that exists, according to this verse, between believing women and men has to do in general with mutual support, solidarity and affection (*ta'umm wilāyat al-nuṣra wa wilāyat al-ukhuwwa wa al-mawadda*). He also invokes hadiths as proof-texts, one in which Muhammad describes the community of Muslims as “one body” (*al-jasad al-wāḥid*) and another (previously quoted by Ibn Kathīr) in which the umma constitutes a “single edifice in which each strengthens the other.” The alliance of support (*wilāyat al-nuṣra*) is specifically constituted so that all may collaborate in defending the truth, justice, the religious community, and the nation.<sup>17</sup>

Where gender does make a difference is in the realm of military defense of the polity. Here, says Rida, women offer their help and efforts in everything short of actual combat. He points to the example of the women Companions during the lifetime of the Prophet who provided water for thirsty combatants, prepared food, and tended to the wounded on the battlefield.<sup>18</sup> Aside from this difference, Rida appears to consider men and women to be equally engaged in their efforts to promote what is right and prevent what is wrong.

### Analysis and Critique of Exegeses of Qur'an 9:71

The fairly brief comments on the whole recorded by pre-modern male exegetes on what otherwise strikes us today as a revolutionary verse are perhaps telling. They underscore for us that the medieval male imaginary was not capable of extrapolating from this verse a larger scriptural mandate for men and women to work together companionably and on an equal footing in all spheres of life. They restrict the *wilāya* indicated in this particular verse to the religious sphere alone and do not derive a broader empowerment of men and women equally in reforming both themselves and the larger society around them.

Riḍā in the twentieth century has a more capacious understanding of *wilāya* in connection with both men and women. He however places one restriction on the *wilāya* of women – that its purview does not extend to fighting on the battlefield which remains a male preserve. By default, all other activities that constitute the promotion of truth, justice, and righteousness appear to be open equally to women and men by virtue of the Qur'anic mandate to serve as “allies of one another.”

Fundamental flaw in traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics has been the inability of many exegetes to distinguish between the general or universal commandments of the Qur'an and the particular, contextualized applications of them. In the discipline of tafsir, this division is well-recognized

(17) Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999), 10:471.

(18) Ibid.



in regard to the meaning of verses - *‘āmm* (general) vs. *khāṣṣ* (particular) – but not necessarily applied in a consistent manner. This has led to what a number of scholars today consider to be misreadings of the Qur’an, especially when it concerns gender (among other issues). An example of such a verse that has been subjected to such a misreading is Qur’an 2:282 which reads, “Set up two witnesses from your own men, and if there are not two men, then choose a man and two women as witnesses, so that if one makes a mistake, then the other can remind her.” Despite the fact that the context in which this verse is embedded is in reference to a very specific kind of financial enterprise - a loan transaction – the verse has been invoked by some as a proof-text to argue in general for a woman’s legal testimony to be worth half that of a man. This is assumed to be because of her tendency to be forgetful and thus not as mentally competent as a man.

This position is quite popular among conservative factions today, but, as Muhammad Fadel has shown, this view cannot be attributed uniformly to the medieval fuqaha’. Instead, he shows that many medieval jurists had much more complex and sophisticated views on the validity of women’s testimony and two of the most prominent pre-modern jurists, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and Ibn Taymiyya, both of whom incidentally are highly regarded in the same conservative circles today, came very close to articulating the equal valid testimony of women compared to men.<sup>19</sup> These two jurists clearly understood that the general cannot be derived from the particular. Because of the restrictive context of Qur’an 2:282, a woman’s incompetence in financial transactions in the pre-modern world where such competence would have been rare has no bearing in other matters where she may have competency equal or superior to a man’s – in hadith transmission and childbearing matters, for example. In fact, in the field of hadith transmission with its almost impossibly high standards of moral probity and retentive memory, the individual testimony of women narrators about the reliability of hadiths they related from the Prophet was frequently and freely accepted.

Both the Qur’anic context and the historical practices – the living sunna – of the early community provide irrefutable proof that Qur’an 2:282 was never meant to constitute a generalizable rule about the value of a woman’s legal testimony. When this verse is read along with Qur’an 33:35 and Qur’an 9:71, for example, it is clear that the universal proclamation of women’s ontological equality to men and affirmation of their independent moral agency in the latter two verses trumps the particularist understanding of feminine limitation as a result of historical contingency. As Asma Barlas ably phrases it,

Conservatives (and classical *Tafsīr*, on which they draw) thus focus on textual/logical time

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(19) Mohammad Fadel, “Two Women, One Man: Knowledge, Power and Gender in Medieval Sunni Legal Thought,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997): 185-204.



(sequence of words and meanings) within the Qur'an, rather than on reading the Qur'an as a totality revealed over time. In so far as this method deemphasizes the contexts of the Qur'an's revelation, and thus of its teachings, it also fails to distinguish the general from the specific within the Qur'an.<sup>20</sup>

The more rigorous hermeneutics of the Qur'an adopted by feminist and other scholars today point to more interpretive possibilities than were imaginable in the past. In this exegetical process, they are resorting to compelling new readings of scripture that they take great pains to show do not violate the fundamental spirit and intent of the Qur'an – but that in fact represent a greater fidelity to its core message of equality and justice. Among other verses, Qur'an 9:71 with its clear and unambiguous endorsement of the equal partnership of men and women for the common good is a valuable proof-text in this hermeneutic enterprise. The verse after all places no gendered restriction on implementing the basic moral imperative of promoting what is good and preventing what is wrong.

The accounts of the lives of the male and female Companions men reveal to us that this moral imperative was followed equally by men and women and that it affirmed the presence of women in public life and their service to society on an equal footing with men.

Reading and re-reading foundational religious texts and other literary artifacts from the medieval period, especially in its nooks and crannies through which women (and other marginalized people) typically tend to fall, can yield rich dividends, as this study has sought to demonstrate. Whether as religious scholars, poets, jurists, military heroes, and learned citizens of their communities, Muslim women helped shape Islam's storied past, a fact often acknowledged by their contemporaries and given due recognition in the writings of their male students, colleagues, and consorts. It is later scholars who have consigned these remarkable women to relative oblivion and elided their contributions to the shaping of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

As Fazlur Rahman, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Khaled Abou el Fadl, Tariq Ramadan, Azizah al-Hibri, and myself have emphasized, it is by returning to the Qur'an and paying close attention to its text and context that we can retrieve the enduring normative principles of Islam that must shape the Muslim's world-view. These principles are subject to multiple interpretations depending on the socio-historical circumstances of the reader. Today we have inherited a world that makes us aware of the potential of Qur'an 9:71 to assert the equal moral and human

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(20) Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 52.



agency of men and women. More than ever before, closer attention to the concept of *wilāya* as adumbrated in this verse allows us to conceptualize a society today that adheres to the Qur'an's core message of equality and justice, principles that extends to all human beings, **regardless of gender.**

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