



Women in the Qur'an: Appreciating Female Faith, Wisdom, and Knowledge

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In Qur'anic stories, more often than not we find depictions of women possessing notable wisdom, resolve, piety, and strength of character. Though the majority of Qur'anic narratives involve men, well over a dozen women figures are also featured in Qur'anic sacred history. This article highlights certain nuances in God's depictions of women figures. Moreover, consideration of Qur'anic women figures invites a fresh perspective on the legacies of our female teachers and religious scholars.

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا

A-fa-lā yatadabbarūna al-qur'āna am 'alā qulūbin aqfāluhā

Do they not contemplate the Qur'an? Or do hearts have their locks upon them?

From cosmic to mundane affairs, the Qur'an is a scripture (*kitāb*) containing a “clarification of all things, and a guidance and a mercy and glad tidings for those who submit” (Qur'an 16:89). The Qur'an is held to be God's speech transmitted to humankind through an angelic and prophetic channel—it is “the most beautiful discourse” (*aḥsan al-ḥadīth*) whereat quivers the skin of those who fear their Lord” (Qur'an 39:23). As Muslims, many of us seek to experience the Qur'an as speech “from the Lord of the worlds” (Qur'an 10:47) in order to gain guidance and other spiritual, emotional, psychological, and intellectual benefits: the Qur'an is replete with sacred possibility.¹

¹ In the initial version of this article, I wrote “pregnant with sacred possibility,” (pregnant in the sense of being full of meaning and significance). In response to editorial feedback, I adjusted the description in order to mitigate the discomfort raised by the concept of “pregnant” being used to describe the Qur'an's meanings. Notably, the Arabic trilateral root *q-r-* can signify becoming pregnant in classical usage, as pointed out by Samuel J. Ross. See *Lisān al-ʿArab* of Ibn Manẓūr, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* of Fairūzābādī, and *Tāj al-ʿArūs* of al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī. In English, Edward William Lane translates *qaraʿat* as “she became pregnant” in his *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 2502 citing the latter two sources. According to some linguists, the connection between the word for Islam's sacred scripture and pregnancy is the idea of gathering (*jamʿ*). The Qur'an gathers together surahs, verses, wisdom, and admonition. A mother gathers together the fetus in her womb. See the discussion of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār Ihyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1420 H), 5:253-254, s.v. Qur'an 2:185.

Much of Muslim writing on women in the Qur'an expounds upon the rules and regulations for women from the Qur'anic worldview. This helps us address questions like: How many wives can my husband have? How should I dress and behave? How long should my baby be nursed? Who is fiscally responsible for my child? However, if we limit the Qur'an to a book that divvies out responsibilities according to gendered social norms—and stop there with regard to thinking about the Qur'an's guidance, we miss opportunities for other kinds of insights about women. Further insights become accessible through contemplation of the subtleties of the Qur'anic *āyāt* and their implications, a modality of engaging the Qur'an commonly known as *tadabbur* (e.g., Qur'an 4:82, 23:68, 38:29, 47:24).

One avenue for deeper engagement with the theme of womanhood, for instance, is to consider personalities in Qur'anic stories. For several years, I have spent much time studying and contemplating the more than three hundred verses that mention a specific female figure or a group of women. “How does God speak *about* women, and how does God speak *to* women?” I asked with sincerity. I found that women figures appear in narratives of conquest, filial devotion, romantic attraction, and more; there is no single standard, no archetypal female figure. Considered as a cohort, Qur'anic women are pious and impious, insightful and ignorant, commanding and timid, old and young, famous and obscure, married and single, ruling and ruled over, fertile and childless, and so forth: there is no archetypal woman. In places, God praises particular women figures, and in other places, God rebukes others for their comportment.

Though no woman figure in the Qur'an is explicitly named as a prophet or messenger, the Qur'an depicts women's characters, wit, and spiritual excellence. In numerous instances the needs and desires of women or girls are heard by God in Qur'anic stories. Women converse with God's angelic messengers, women pray to God frequently, and one woman, in particular, is the conduit for bringing God's “Word” into the world. In one verse, Maryam (upon her peace) poignantly articulates the pains of her labor: “Would that I had died before this and were a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!” (Qur'an 19:23) This verse poignantly expresses

My appreciation goes to all those individuals who have offered feedback on different aspects of this article, including Mobeem Vaid, Nameera Akhtar, Zara Khan, Tahir Wyatt, Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, and others.

the discomfort and pain women often experience during childbirth, but it also captures her embodied struggle to bear a “Word” (*kalimah*) from God (Qur'an 3:45).² In probing stories of the trials and triumphs of female figures in this way, we can note many correspondences between female and male figures.

Several female figures, in fact, are highlighted for qualities such as their discernment, the sincerity of their worship, their conviction and courage, or their degree of closeness to God. They are singled out for special mention and serve as exemplars (positive and negative). Their stories help us inculcate virtues. Meditating on the birth experience of Maryam عليها السلام, for instance, could potentially bring about an increase in empathy toward women facing this exceptionally wondrous but also physically and emotionally demanding task of birthing. The embodied experience of childbirth is necessarily and uniquely a female experience, but even male Qur'anic reciters articulate the distressed cries of a woman in labor through the reenactment of Maryam's speech.

Such potentially affective dimensions of Qur'anic stories are key. Qur'anic scholar Karen Bauer compares Maryam's birth pangs and the anguish that the mother of Moses experiences when having to cast her child away to save him from Pharaoh's forces. Bauer observes how both narratives contain affective potential for the Qur'anic audience:

God is there to relieve emotional and physical suffering, bringing these exemplary women into a state of hope, relief, and, ultimately, knowledge of God's justice and mercy. They both prove their subservience to God and willingness to put aside all worldly emotional attachments to do His bidding. The listener is brought along on the emotional journey, and is able to empathise with the comfort they receive.³

² See Kecia Ali, “Destabilizing Gender, Reproducing Maternity: Mary in the Qur'ān,” *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 2 (2017), 90. See also Aisha Geissinger, “Mary in the Qur'an: Rereading Subversive Births,” in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an*, ed. Roberta Stermann Sabbath (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 379–92; and Daniel A. Madigan, “Mary and Muhammad: Bearers of the Word,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 80 (2003): 417–27.

³ Karen Bauer, “Emotion in the Qur'an: An Overview,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017): 1–30.

In these stories, the extreme trials that pious women experience are assuaged by God's intervention. Pious women still must endure hardships, but their suffering is met with God's awareness and succor.⁴

Qur'anic stories like these illustrate God's attributes and constitute a form of assurance to the Qur'anic audience that they too can be privy to this care. Ultimately, the act of regularly revisiting these female figures in the context of a devotional, ritual practice may transform a conscientious individual. Qur'anic verses engender effects on readers, reciters, and listeners: for instance, the empathy generated when contemplating a narrative about the emotional struggle of a mother being forcibly separated from her child. Such a narrative in the Qur'an could prompt us to act, for instance, when governments displace children from their families. On another level, God's revelation to the mother of Moses عليهما السلام assures her to have faith and trust that the promise of God will come to pass (Qur'an 28:7). This is a general lesson about the efficacy of patient perseverance.

Women personalities, on the whole, are exceptionally pious and morally upright. For instance, multiple Qur'anic verses contain female supplications to God. Until the story of the wife of the Egyptian viceroy is mentioned, more than a fourth of the way into a recitation of the Qur'an from the beginning, every instance in which a female figure speaks is a supplication or pertains in some way to God's benevolence.

Many female figures speak pious words and make supplications to God with the exact same words as do prophetic figures. For example, the wife of Pharaoh عليها السلام prays in the exact same idiom as does her foster son Moses عليه السلام upon his flight from Egypt. They both pray, "My Lord! Deliver me from the wrongdoing people!" (see Qur'an 28:21 and 66:11). Maryam and the Queen of Sheba also speak in a way that is similar to—or even the same as—the speech of male figures who are designated as prophets.

⁴ For another discussion of women in the Qur'an with a focus on women's spiritual struggle in the way of God, see Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Shi'i Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

For instance, the Queen of Sheba ends her speech by addressing God, seeking forgiveness, and professing her submission (Qur'an 27:44)—in the same words as does the prophet Moses in the subsequent *sūrah* (Qur'an 28:16). Likewise, when Maryam عليها السلام is confronted by a “well-proportioned” man in her private chambers, she immediately exclaims: “I seek refuge from you in the Compassionate, if you are reverent!” (Qur'an 19:18). Similarly, when the prophet Joseph عليه السلام is hemmed in by the wife of the viceroy, he appeals: “God be my refuge!” (Qur'an 12:23). The Qur'an calls Maryam a “woman of truth” (Qur'an 5:75) and Joseph a “man of truth” (Qur'an 12:46).

Maryam's speech and the prophet Zachariah's speech are thematically juxtaposed in several places in the Qur'an. For instance, Maryam, who is otherwise depicted as conversing with angels and crying out with birth pangs, is silent in relation to defending her honor against charges of licentiousness; her vow of silence is a thematic echo of the silence of her guardian Zachariah عليهما السلام. Both figures are expressive before God but must resort to gesturing before their people.

Aside from the issue of public preaching, I have not noticed any distinctive features of female speech in the Qur'an that distinguish it from male speech. In general, women in the Qur'an often speak with authority, insight, and wit; on much rarer occasions, female speech has nefarious aims. The wife of the viceroy and the Queen of Sheba—both aristocratic women who are depicted in their respective journeys from falsehood toward truth—are the two most loquacious Qur'anic female figures.

On the whole, speech by women does not seem to be more nor less poignant or emotionally composed than that of men. Several female figures articulate their thoughts clearly and effectively in difficult situations; Moses's sister, Moses's foster mother, and the Queen of Sheba all speak nobly in trying circumstances. On occasion, women figures fumble for words when they are caught off guard. The wife of Abraham عليهما السلام expresses her astonishment at the prospect of bearing a child in her old age with the dramatic expression “Oh, woe unto me!” (*yā waylatā*) (Qur'an 11:72). In response to receiving a divine message informing her of the pregnancy, she cries out while striking her face (Qur'an 51:29). Similarly, another

woman figure is caught off-guard: when confronted by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ for divulging a secret, one of his wives رضي الله عنها rejoins, “Who informed you of this?” (Qur'an 66:3).

In narrating this incident, Sūrat al-Taḥrīm (Qur'an 66) begins with emphatic addresses to the Prophet ﷺ and two of his wives. God gives a substantial threat of retaliation should the wives of the Prophet conspire against him (Qur'an 66:4–5). The two wives of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ are implicitly positioned as having the agency to choose which of two extremes (righteous or unrighteous) they will follow. Despite its strong warning to the two wives, there is an aspect of gender balance in the husband and wife figures that are mentioned by God in Sūrat al-Taḥrīm. The *sūrah* begins with a husband (the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) in need of God's intervention but then also references a righteous woman (the wife of Pharaoh) who seeks God's succor against her husband (Qur'an 66:11). It even concludes by extolling a righteous woman with no husband at all.

Sūrat al-Taḥrīm unambiguously depicts the wives of Noah and Lot as negative examples for believers: “They [the spouses of Noah and Lot] were under two of Our righteous servants (*taḥta 'abdayni min 'ibādinā ṣāliḥayn*); then they [the wives] betrayed them [Noah and Lot], and they [Noah and Lot] availed them [their wives] naught against God.” (Qur'an 66:10). The wives of Noah and Lot receive a divine decree in the Qur'an, but, in contrast to the women addressed by God or angels, the divine decree to the treacherous wives of Noah and Lot is in the passive voice without a known speaker: “And it was said to both, ‘Enter the fire with those who enter’” (Qur'an 66:10).

The otherworldly speech directed toward these two wives stands in contrast to the many other women who receive guidance and encouragement. The passive dismissal of these two figures also underscores their detestable nature for “betraying” God's “righteous servants.” These two female figures do not just evoke wretchedness on an individual level; rather, their characters parallel the

widespread iniquities of their respective people. No other people are so frequently condemned in the Qur'an as the peoples of the prophets Noah and Lot.⁵

The wife of the Egyptian viceroy is the only temptress figure in the Qur'an. She serves as a clear example of sexual misconduct against the backdrop of other women figures who are chaste. Nonetheless, one verse containing her speech can be seen as affirming of her quick wit. The climactic moment is narrated as follows:

And they [Joseph and the Egyptian viceroy's wife] raced to the door, while she tore his shirt from behind. And they encountered her husband (*sayyidahā*) at the door. She said, "What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward your wife (*ahlika*), save that he be imprisoned, or [face] a painful punishment?" (Qur'an 12:25)

In this example, the viceroy's wife refers to herself using the euphemism *ahl*, a term that can mean the wife of a given figure but that can also signify the family or household more broadly. In this way, her question, "What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward your wife?" carries the significance, "What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward your family?" With these words, the speech of the viceroy's wife calls attention to the ways in which a man's social capital in a paternalistic social order is linked to his ability to protect and ensure the sexual integrity and dignity of the women in his charge. Thus, she not only deceitfully blames the affair on Joseph عليه السلام, but she does so by employing an idiom that would best achieve her nefarious purpose. She is not the only female in the Qur'an to use her quick wit, but she is the only female to use it with explicitly nefarious aims. Her speech could prompt the Qur'anic reader, reciter, or listener to reflect upon the truthfulness of their own speech.

Many stories in the Qur'an involve female figures and offer moments of introspection for believers. Focusing on the stories of women in the Qur'an can provide spiritual nourishment and can help connect Muslims to our sacred history. This is particularly true when we sometimes have difficulty finding other women in positions of religious authority from whom we can directly study.

⁵ As pointed out in John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 107.

In my early studies of Islam, I was captivated by the many social reforms that the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ instituted to the benefit of women and girls. I had high expectations for how these principles would influence the character and spirit of the religion as it developed throughout the centuries. I was intrigued by the abundance of women teachers, by their essential role in transmitting religious knowledge, and by the many stories of prominent women who financially supported and spiritually grounded the early Muslim community.

Reading about the likes of Khadījah bt. Khuwaylid, Umm al-Faḍl (Lubāba bt. al-Ḥārith), 'Ā'ishah bint Abī Bakr, Umm Salamah (Hind bt. Abī Umayyah), and the biographies of other early women figures kindled in me the desire to somehow also find a way to contribute in a small way to sustaining and supporting a vibrant community of spiritual learning and growth. As a lover of books, I wanted to read the writings of prominent women throughout Islamic history. I hoped to find a woman at whose feet I could study the inner essences of the religion.

Where were such works? Where was such a teacher? The shelf was meager, and the possibilities for such an apprenticeship somewhat constrained. In recent years, women scholars have begun to play a slightly less marginal role in the production of works of Islamic knowledge, and instantaneous connections now make Islamic learning possible over distances. Still, I regularly meet young women who are struggling to find themselves reflected in the Islamic intellectual tradition and struggling to find points at which to access the living tradition of Islamic scholarship.

To be sure, since the earliest Muslim community, Muslims have benefited from women scholars who helped found, sustain, and transmit a scholarly tradition. Women scholars articulating and transmitting religious knowledge is not a feature of western-styled modernity that Muslims adopted in a moment of enlightenment and as a response to modern women's rights discourses. At the same time, Muslim women scholars tended to specialize in disciplines of Islamic knowledge focused on transmission (such as hadith studies) and not on disciplines that invite authorial

creation.⁶ Hence, contemporary women scholars aside, it is hard to fill a shelf with works of women religious scholars.

Historians can attest to a clear legacy of Muslim women scholars, a facet of Islamic culture and society that can be celebrated, but their (our) legacy has been marginal compared to the sheer number of works authored by men. Institutions supporting Islamic learning were directly impeded by social and political struggles in the wake of European colonialism, and undoubtedly women's teaching and transmission suffered accordingly. Still, the dynamics curtailing women's participation in the scholarly enterprise cannot be attributed to colonialism alone. Even before the arrival of European-styled modernity, women were rarely authors of scholarly works even if they were learned and occasionally even prominent teachers. For instance, how many works of Qur'anic exegesis can you name? How many of those were authored by women? A similar phenomenon can be observed in other disciplines of Islamic knowledge production.

As a young student of Islamic knowledge, this situation regarding a lack of access to women's scholarly output led me to probe further: Could the relative marginalization of women scholars be rightfully attributed to social factors, such as gendered norms for accessing Islamic learning and gender-based expectations for women's comportment and livelihood, or could the dearth of women's voices among the ranks of influential authors and exegetes be convincingly attributed to intrinsic factors related to women's divinely determined capacity for religious knowledge and insight? Do God's depictions of female figures in the Qur'an generally diminish their spiritual or intellectual aptitude? It was a question I had to ask and answer with sincerity.

After engaging with the Qur'anic depictions of women in depth over several years, and also probing women's contributions to Islamic intellectual history, I see the many sociocultural factors that have constrained women's scholarship. In contrast, when I examined the Qur'an in detail over these same years in order to discern how God, the Most Knowing, describes women's intellectual and spiritual

⁶ For a detailed account, see Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

potentials, I continued to find the Qur'an quite affirming—not demeaning or discrediting.

I found not only a validation of women's intellect and spiritual aptitude, but so too did I find women teachers. In the course of this exploration, it was as if the women personalities in the Qur'an became, in some direct way, the female teachers that I longed to find in my own quest for Islamic learning. Some women I “met” for the first time; somehow their stories had not reached me in all of the lectures I had attended. Others showed me a side of themselves that I had not seen in previous cursory glances. Even the few irrevocably corrupt women figures in the Qur'an had cautionary lessons to impart.

Engaging with the speech of Allah about these women opened up a possibility for me to ask more existential questions about womanhood, female worth, and women's dignity. For instance, “Does the Qur'an affirm female faith, wisdom, and knowledge in ways that have not yet been fully appreciated?” The answers to this central question, I think, have implications for contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an and also for conceptions of gender in Muslim communal contexts. Most importantly perhaps, the women's stories in the Qur'an can impact the way we, as women, view ourselves and our own intellectual and spiritual capacities.

Through these unexpected teachers, the Qur'anic figures, I have come to see and appreciate nuances about the depictions of women in the Qur'an. I have come to see that the Qur'an often engages with affairs of direct importance for women in a female-centric manner, even when certain figures (like the wife of the viceroy, for instance) have pronounced character flaws. In their breaches, whether slight or grave, and in their magnanimity, women figures serve as reminders for how to navigate human struggles and develop moral character. Qur'anic depictions of female figures in moments of struggle have deepened my appreciation for the ways in which the speech of God, the Most Wise and Subtle, can comfort the hearts of seekers of knowledge and piety. Reading and re-reading the stories of women figures strengthens my own desire to draw nearer to the One who is Most Merciful, Mighty, Wise, and Generous.

Renewed attention to women in Qur'anic stories can help us, as Muslim communities, better appreciate women in Islamic sacred history. But valuing these women figures can, in turn, provide an impetus for better recognizing the integral contributions that women regularly make as teachers, mentors, and religious scholars in our contemporary communities too. *In shā' Allāh.*