

Women in Islam
and the
Middle East

A READER

Edited by Ruth Roded

I.B. Tauris Publishers
LONDON • NEW YORK

THE QURAN: DIFFERING INTERPRETATION OF THE DIVINE WORD

[Maimaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Dorset Press, n.d.) 24 (*al-Nur*): 30-1; 33 (*al-Ahzab*): 53, 55; 4 (*al-Nisa'*): 34-5.]

Much of the Quran is difficult to understand because of obscure references as well as the traditional arrangement of chapters and verses in which unrelated passages are interspersed. As a result, philological analysis and additional information obtained from the Prophet's Companions were utilized to explain and amplify the meaning of the revealed text. In theory, this imprecision should enable alternate readings of the legal and normative material in the Quran. In fact, classical exegetes created a mainstream Islamic interpretation of the Quran which was handed down from generation to generation. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Muslim scholars rejected the acquired wisdom as foreign and customary accretions and returned to the text of the Quran in search of true Islam. In recent years, there have been some modest attempts at feminist exegesis of certain passages of the Quran.

Only one woman is actually named in the Quran, but a large number of verses refer to women. These include exhortations addressed to 'the believing men and the believing women', revelations specific to women or to relations between men and women, and laws pertinent to marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. According to one estimate, some 80 per cent of the legal material in the Quran refers to women.

It is interesting to note that according to Islamic tradition a number of women among the early believers had a role in the transmission of the text of the Quran. Aisha, the Prophet's favourite wife, heard passages of the Quran from the Prophet himself, ordered a full written copy to be prepared and corrected the scribe. Hafsa, daughter of the caliph Umar and widow of the Prophet, gave written pages of the Quran which she received from her father to the

caliph Uthman gathered the pages into a book and declared this text as the official version of the holy book. She also corrected a scribe who was writing a Quran. During the first four centuries of Islam, Uthman's text was only one of various versions of the Quran which were ascribed to Companions of the Prophet, the caliphs Umar and Ali, and widows of the Prophet – Aisha, Umm Salama and Hafsa. One of the Prophet's female Companions, Umm Waraqa, collected and recited the Quran and may have assisted Umar in assembling the text.

The first four excerpts below are the basis of the concept of *hijab* in the sense of the appropriate attire for Muslim women, their seclusion at home and the limitation of their contact with men who are not their kin. This subject has been and continues to be one of the central issues related to the status of women in Islamic Middle Eastern society.

Some specific questions arise from each of these verses. In *The Light (al-Nur)*: 30–1, men and women are told to be modest. Is there a difference in the exhortations to the genders? What are women's adornment which should not be displayed? What sort of veils are referred to; what should they cover? Verses 32–3 and 53 of the chapter *The Clans (al-Ahzab)* refer to the wives of the Prophet. Should these regulations be inferred for all Muslim women? What is the definition of *hijab* in the context of the Quran? To whom is verse 59 addressed? What are the cloaks, also translated 'outer garments' (*jilbab*, s. *jilbab*)? Why should women 'draw them close round'?

The general questions which relate to all of the verses are: According to the text of the Quran, must a believing Muslim woman remain in her home? Must she be separated from men who are not her kin inside the house? What should she wear when she leaves the house? According to the Quran, what is Islamic dress? What should it cover? What may one reveal?

No less crucial are the classical, modernist and feminist interpretations of the opening phrase of verse 34, *The Women*, which the British Muslim Marmaduke Pickthall translated, 'Men are in charge of women' (*al-rijal qawwamuna 'ala al-nisa'*). Classical exegesis explained this phrase as referring to the superiority of men over women in a number of religious, political and intellectual fields, and it was frequently quoted to justify the exclusion of women from positions of authority over men (see selections 9 and 10). The modernist Muslim translator and commentator A. Yusuf Ali renders the phrase: 'Men are the protectors and maintainers of women.' The Muslim feminist Azizah al-Hibri takes the definition of *qawwamun* one step further to the concept of moral guidance and caring.

Another thorny issue is the seeming recommendation in the Quran to

'scourge' disobedient wives. Within the framework of the ethical message of Islam, classical Muslim scholars tried to protect women from undue violence from men but they did not question a man's right to use force to chastise his wife. Yusuf Ali builds on this tradition when he translates the verse: 'As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly);' If these three measures fail, Yusuf Ali adds, then a family council should be convened in accordance with the next verse (4:35) in order to work out the couples problems. Verse 35 of 'The Women' is usually quoted by Muslims to offset husbands' almost unilateral right to divorce their wives in a simple and informal procedure as defined in Islamic law.

From the voluminous bibliography on the *hijab*, a solid foundation may be found in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* and Gertrude H. Stern, *Marriage in Early Islam* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1939). Alternative readings of these verses are given by: Mark N. Swanson, *A Study of Twentieth-Century Commentary on Surat al-Nur* (24):27–33; *The Muslim World* 74 (1984):187–203; Mostafa Hashem Sherif, 'What is Hijab?' *The Muslim World* 77 (1987): 151–63, and Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991) which originally appeared in French as *Le Harem politique* in 1987.

The implications of varying exegesis of a Quranic verse is also demonstrated in M. Hashim Kamali, 'Divorce and Women's Rights: Some Muslim Interpretations of S. 2:228,' *Muslim World* (1984). A careful reading of 4 (Women): 3 may reveal the modernist interpretation which concludes that in fact the Quran forbids polygamy.

A feminist exegesis of the Quran as a totality is Armina Wadud-Muhsin's *Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Peperbit Fajar Bakti SDN. BHD., 1992).

The Quran

Surah XXIV Light

30. Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is Aware of what they do.

31. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their

brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed.

Surah XXXIII The Clans

32. O ye wives of the Prophet! Ye are not like any other women. If ye keep your duty (to Allah) then be not soft of speech, lest he in whose heart a disease aspire (to you), but utter customary speech.

33. And stay in your houses. Bedizen not yourselves with the bedizement of the Time of Ignorance. Be regular in prayer, and pay the poor-due, and obey Allah and His messenger. Allah's wish is but to remove uncleanness far from you ...

53. O ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if ye are invited, enter, and, when your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain [*min wara hijab* RR]. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for you to cause annoyance to the messenger of Allah, nor that ye should ever marry his wives after him. Lo! that in Allah's sight would be an enormity.

59. O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks [*jilbab*, s. *jilbab* RR] close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful.

Surah IV Women

34. Men are in charge [*qawwamuna* RR] of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women): So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High Exalted,

Great.

35. And if ye fear a breach between them twain (the man and wife), appoint an arbiter from his folk and an arbiter from her folk. If they desire amendment Allah will make them one mind. Lo! Allah is ever Knower, Aware.