

## No Truth Without Beauty: God, the Qur'an, and Women's Rights by Leena El-Ali and Khaled Abou El Fadl Quotes

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is God's revealed book, and that this revelation is relevant and valid for every place, time, and age. But if this is so then the revealed book must continue to address the ever-changing and evolving needs of men and women. In a sense, God's voice must continue to speak to the Khawlas of every age and place. These Khawlas must feel that as Muslim women, their agency is affirmed and validated by the Islamic tradition, and that this agency is not persistently overwhelmed and defeated by the entrenched forces of patriarchy that dominated throughout Islamic history. Leena El-Ali insightfully notes that the Qur'an instituted an affirmative action methodology that revolved around the promotion, protection, and inclusion of women. But as Leena El-Ali recognizes, the male-dominated interpretive tradition of Islam has often frustrated and defeated the Qur'an's affirmative action and made the divine will largely unresponsive and unsympathetic to women's agency and autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

The Qur'an does not contain an amalgamation of disjointed and disembodied rules that happen to regulate women. All Qur'anic legal injunctions represent trajectories in the course of an entire moral and ethical project, and this project, as Leena El-Ali argues, is best represented in the well-known Prophetic teaching that God is beautiful and loves beauty, and that God wants human beings to promote beauty in everything they say and do. It is this moral vision of Leena El-Ali's interpretive project that I find especially compelling.<sup>2</sup>

The Qur'an in its totality—not this or that verse—is what has captured the hearts of billions over the past 14 centuries, in whatever language they had to read it. Because whatever the shortcomings of any translation or whatever may be lacking in context of any kind has always been more than made up for by the beauty and resonance of the whole. Here it seems appropriate to mention the surprise that many Muslims and others often express when they learn that only about 5% of the Qur'an relates to regulations or legal rulings. The Qur'an is not a book of theology either: nearly two-thirds of it is devoted to recounting the lives of the Hebrew prophets, and of Jesus and Mary, as expressions of the spiritual ideal. The remaining third sets out specific rules of conduct for the followers of the then-new religion, covering two major themes: good conduct in one's personal, social and familial life, and specific commentary on a past or present event. Thus

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<sup>1</sup> 8  
<sup>2</sup> 10

looking at the picture in its entirety must once again form the foundation of our understanding of the Qur'an, before we delve into a specific verse or other. That is how we ensure that we see the wood and not just the trees.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the reports attributed to the Prophet, the Sunni hadith collections often also include reports attributed to Muhammad's Companions and later figures, while the Shia ones always include reports attributed to the imams. Additionally, the scholars' own commentaries are often included in the mix. All these reports are commonly—and confusingly—referred to as hadith!<sup>4</sup>

And even the scholar Muslim, who resisted including any commentaries in his compilation, had declared (in self-defence) that he had left out authentic hadiths when he believed that not everyone would agree to their authenticity!<sup>5</sup>

We have already seen that scholars of all backgrounds agree that the Qur'an has remained unchanged from when it was first written down. Conversely, all scholars also agree that there was massive hadith forgery, including the scholars and jurists of those first few centuries of Islam who produced the great hadith collections. In fact, those early jurists readily admitted “that they had themselves uncovered thousands and thousands of forged hadiths.” Why would the early generations of Muslims, presumably more faithful than later generations due to their proximity to the Prophet and his immediate legacy, have wilfully forged hadiths, when the Prophet's every word (and deed) was deemed second only to God's? A primary motive for forging hadiths has been found to be religious zeal. And even with the revered “authentic” hadith compilations we have been discussing, the compilers' motives were not only to record historical data but to also institutionalise the Prophet's exemplary behaviour as a model for the community. In other words, it would seem that the approach of “the end justifies the means” was adopted even by the great compilers not only to establish desired laws, but also to prop up the Prophet as a role model—as though his true example needed any embellishment! It should be clarified though that there was unanimous agreement among the scholars not to use forgeries to derive laws as such—only for embellishing accounts relating to the Prophet.<sup>6</sup>

Another logical conclusion would be to assume that the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, simply neglects to discuss women, much less address them in any way, leaving a vacuum that could easily

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<sup>3</sup> 14-15

<sup>4</sup> 59

<sup>5</sup> 60

<sup>6</sup> 64-65

be filled by whatever trends in a given society. Yet the Qur'an mentions, discusses, and addresses women as a group often, with one of the longest chapters in fact entitled "Women".<sup>7</sup>

Many Muslims do not actually read the Qur'an, and local or imported trends fill the vacuum. Scripture always requires a significant effort on the part of a reader due to the density of its content and complex structure, making it anything but an easy read whatever the religion in question. And while the tradition of reading the Qur'an from beginning till end every Ramadan is widespread among Muslims, I know from personal and others' experience how one can read it yet miss out on key messages when the focus is on finishing the book within a month. Additionally, it is a most unfortunate fact that much of the Muslim world is illiterate, a sad irony for the followers of a religion so directly based on a book. While literacy rates vary widely from one Muslim-majority country to another and many across the Middle East and Asia are in fact highly literate by global measures, some of the more populous or strategic countries (for varying reasons) nevertheless have very high rates of illiteracy including Afghanistan (61.8%), Mali (61.9%), Pakistan (41.3%), Bangladesh (38.5%), Yemen (29.9%), Morocco (27.6%), Egypt (24.8%), Sudan (24.1%), Iraq (20.3%), Algeria (19.8%), and Tunisia (18.2%).<sup>8</sup>

Arguably the most contentious verse in the Qur'an relating to women is verse 4:34, which some incorrectly claim instructed husbands to hit their wives if they disobey them. Before delving into this one, let us ask ourselves one question: Does this make sense in light of all the verses we have looked at so far that relate to women? Does it make sense that God would sabotage His own efforts at establishing equal social dignity and responsibility for women and men alike by suddenly telling husbands they can hit their wives? Throughout this book, I have tried to emphasise how important it is to not single out a verse in isolation, to not look at a single tree, lest the message or forest as a whole be missed. At the risk of repeating myself, this means two things: A verse must be considered not just in its entirety but alongside the verses preceding and following it before we decide what it means, otherwise we might inadvertently go down the wrong track or simply miss the point. Certainly, some verses and phrases are standalones, but many are not. A verse on a specific topic must also be considered alongside all other verses in the Qur'an that deal with that same topic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 88

<sup>8</sup> 104-105

<sup>9</sup> 368-369

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