

# Response to Zainab Bint Yunus' Review of *Women and Gender in the Qur'an*

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I thank AJIS for recently reviewing my monograph *Women and Gender in the Qur'an* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and thank Zainab Bint Yunus of MuslimMatters.org for taking the time to review the work. I must, however, take issue with the reviewer's line of critique.

As an academic exercise, *Women and Gender in the Qur'an* offers a reading of the scripture that investigates intra-textual coherence through philological and structural methods. To miss this point is to miss the theoretical foundation of the project. The book does not purport to analyze hadith corpuses or the tafsīr tradition writ large, and I do not attempt to systematically analyze other early Muslim representations of female figures. In constructing a book-length work, a scholar must discern how to narrow the source material to an appropriate scope. In seeing that no previous scholar had produced an intra-textual reading that examines all Qur'anic verses involving female figures, this is where I contributed. The justifications for my scope and methodological focus are included in the book but are unfortunately not presented clearly in the review.

An attuned audience for the book must clearly understand these

premises and the genre within which I write in order to evaluate the books theoretical and methodological merits. It is not that I am unaware of certain oral traditions or confessional interpretations; I situate many of these popular traditions and interpretive choices outside of the scope of the project at hand for explicit reasons that I discuss in various places in the book. In short, *Women and Gender in the Qur'an* explores Qur'anic intertextuality—not the subsequent history of interpretation and not the vast corpus of oral traditions through which verses can also be understood. Readers seeking analysis of female figures in hadith and in other oral and premodern exegetical traditions can turn elsewhere.

As many AJIS readers will recognize, in addition to the Qur'an itself, materials related to Qur'anic female figures are found in exegesis, hadith collections, biographical literatures, early legal treatises, and Muslim chronicles. These include the writings of Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767–8), as synthesized in the work of Ibn Hishām (d. ca. 218/833–4), as well as in other biographical works such as the *Ṭabaqāt* (Generations) of Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) that includes extensive entries on the Prophet Muḥammad's contemporaries, including women who are alluded to in the Qur'an. Later works, including those by al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1075) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), advance the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or “occasions of revelation” genre. Relevant material is also found in early Muslim chronicles, such as that transmitted by Ma'mar Ibn Rāshid (d. 153/770). Systematically studying mentions of female figures in these works is an important avenue for scholarship, but it is much too large of a corpus to fit within a book that has already an ambitious scope.

Though I offer readings of the Qur'an that focus on intra-textual resonances, this does not mean that I advocate for a Qur'an-only approach, as the reviewer suggests. In fact, in my broader work, I call for an interdisciplinary approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics that is integrative of a variety of methods including rigorous philological, grammatical, rhetorical, and structural analyses that are in conversation with histories of interpretation. I call for interpretation that is attentive to the sociological and affective dimensions of Qur'anic discourse and the emotive impacts of Qur'anic rhetoric. I insist that the moral and pious imperatives that

emerge from scholar's engagements with Qur'anic discourse are needed to illuminate pressing social issues. I call for confessional scholars to engage with academic theories on text, embodiment, and phenomenology. This is far from a Qur'an-only approach.<sup>1</sup>

As an academic in the field of Qur'anic studies, I approach the wider Islamic intellectual tradition with the goal of contributing perspective and nuance. I do not, in fact, merely reproduce exegesis in the style of premodern confessional works. I do not treat premodern exegetes as my interlocuters. Those men were interlocuters for each other, and my interlocuters are contemporary academics in Qur'anic studies, and particularly those who are also doing constructive hermeneutical work. When writing as a contemporary researcher, I do not understand myself as bound to the precise methodologies of any popular medieval exegete nor any specific premodern school of theological thought. Premodern scholars' methodologies have merits, but my book focuses on the entire cast of Qur'anic female personalities and draws out subtle intra-textual connections involving this subset of verses, a task in which premodern exegetes were not especially invested to any great degree. My methodologies have led to new insights that are not found within pre-existing works.

It bears further emphasis that as a research project, my work is not uncritically bound to any specific inherited authority structure within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Thus, when I observe that Qur'anic prose does not mention any "women" in Paradise, I mean that quite plainly and precisely. I am not making an ontological claim about the existence of women or somatically female beings in Paradise. When I observe that Qur'anic prose does not explicitly detail any sex act occurring in Paradise, this is an observation that could be refuted with a verse that details a sex act occurring in any one of the Qur'anic depictions of Paradise—except that there are none, which is my point.

Though I recognize—and even explicitly hope—that confessionally oriented readers may find value in the book, I present myself as a researcher, not a preacher. From this perspective, the question of sex in paradise is less interesting to me from an ontological perspective and more interesting from a heuristic one: Why does the Qur'an *not*

mention “women” in paradise? Why does the Qur’an *not* depict sexual intercourse in its sensual depictions of paradise? Even though I am a Muslim-identifying academic, when I make a straightforward observation about what the Qur’an does or does not explicitly depict, this should not be read as a theological position. If I take a theological position in my work, I will discuss it as such. I have not, in my published work to date, articulated a claim about the existence of sex in paradise. For the record, I hope it exists.

*Women and Gender in the Qur’an* undoubtedly occupies a space of liminality. As such, it will likely neither be fully embraced by those with secularized expectations nor fully embraced by those who are lodged within a particular strand of an inherited tradition. I describe myself as a “tentative *mufassira*” to reclaim a space for contemporary scholars—and female-identifying academics in particular—to engage constructively with the intellectual tradition.<sup>2</sup> Nowhere does *Women and Gender in the Qur’an* claim to be a work examining the full extent of Islamic creedal thought (*‘aqīda*) on female figures. That is simply not the aim of this book.<sup>3</sup>

Intertextual methodologies were my starting point for probing Qur’anic female figures; I saw untapped potential to emphasize dimensions of Qur’anic coherence through highlighting its discourses involving sex and gender. I am pleased by the myriad ways in which scholars across the globe are engaging with and building upon insights found in the book, and I welcome further critiques. The field of Qur’anic studies today is especially vibrant and rightfully inclusive of varied methodologies; this is particularly true of the sub-field of women and gender studies.<sup>4</sup> I fully recognize that when studied in tandem with other early Islamic sources, including hadith, early biographical literature, and Muslim chronicles, the Qur’an offers windows into late antiquity and the social forces driving the movement of Islamic ideas across the Arabian Peninsula and, ultimately, to other shores. In fact, I end the book calling for more studies that systematically engage adjacent corpuses, including hadith and tafsīr.

I thank AJIS once again for reviewing the work and Zainab Bint Younus for engaging with it. The review puts forth many astute

observations about the book. Yet, in weighing in on questions concerning the book's methodology, the review falls short in communicating essential parameters of the research.<sup>5</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 See discussions of *tafsīr tawhīdī* in Celene Ibrahim, “Of Poets and Jesters: Methodologies and Reception Politics in Qur’anic Studies,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 39, no. 2 (2023): 79–81.
- 2 Celene Ibrahim, “The Tentative *Mufassira*,” *Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no. 2 (2021): 213–19.
- 3 For my work on *‘aqīda*, see Celene Ibrahim, *Islam and Monotheism* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), a concise academic primer on the divine nature and attributes.
- 4 Readers can appreciate the breadth of promising new methodological work in the latest issue of “Gender-Attuned Research in Qur’anic Studies: A Roundtable on Influential Methodologies and Promising New Directions,” *Feminist Studies in Religion* 39, no. 2 (2023): 57–102.
- 5 A dozen other academic publications have reviewed the book. Among them, Nimet Şaker, a Qur’anic studies scholar with a specialization in women and gender on the faculty of *Humboldt-Universität*, offers a detailed and especially accurate review that discusses my research methodology and conclusions at length in *Die Welt Des Islams* 63, no. 3(2023): 367–71. For critical discussions on the merits of each chapter’s methodology, see contributions by Qur’anic studies specialists Aayah Musa (chapter 1), Martin Nguyen (chapter 2), Hadia Mubarak (chapter 3), and Rahel Fischbach (chapter 4) in *Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no. 2 (2021): 191–212.