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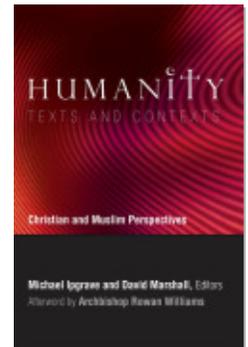
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CHAPTER SEVEN

Humanity and Gender

7.1 Genesis 2:18–25; Ephesians 5:21–33

Tim Winter

Confronted with such complex texts, and with the sensitivity of the subject, I can do no more than offer a few personal reflections and reactions. Any Muslim contemplating a biblical text should recall the injunction not to rush in where angels fear to tread. It is not only that there is a formidable scholarship to assimilate. There is also the question of God's presence. The Bible's usual readers are, for us, *abl al-kitāb*, people of the Book, and this is an honorific; indeed, the Shari'a typically requires us, when disposing of a text in Hebrew characters, to dispose of it respectfully, just as we do the Qur'an. Perhaps that is why the world's richest collection of medieval Jewish manuscripts, the Cairo Geniza, was in Cairo: a Muslim context makes the survival of a Geniza relatively easy. For us there is, charges of textual interpolation notwithstanding, a kind of real presence in the text.

For the Genesis verses, I propose to invoke, not source-criticism, or Christian or even Muslim conventions of reading, but a Jewish voice: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. In his book *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Soloveitchik is concerned with overcoming, to the extent that this can be possible, the alienation of modern man. In the opening primeval Genesis accounts, he finds not one but two Adams, whose interaction within us will determine our happiness.¹⁰⁹

Adam I is the man of glory and mastery. He is crown of creation and, by naming the things of creation, becomes their master under God. Today this is the man of science, technology, and political acumen. Adam II, by contrast, is the "covenantal man." He is lonely: for Soloveitchik this is the key disclosure of these verses. Even before sin, he suffers from an "original solitude." He longs for a personal relationship with a personal God. In this text we are shown that this is granted paradigmatically through Eve. Here Soloveitchik is not far from many modern Christian commentators who understand the sense of "helpmeet" not as "servant" in any sense that would imply her inferiority but as someone who helps him overcome the alienation that lies in being only the man of glory.

Of course, the rabbi will not take this further, as some Christians do, to draw lessons about the internal life of God. A God with an internal relationality is not Judaically possible; indeed, the sociality created through the first human couple, and the richness

of the possible human response to God that ensues, suggests that a fully rich and engaged humanity is entirely feasible without a model of a God who exists in internal relationship. The Psalms, for Soloveitchik, will certainly sufficiently prove that. Who could improve on the prayers and hymns that they contain?

I personally find this helpful; and I think it is not un-Qur'anic. Adam is helped and healed by Eve; not many men will seriously deny this. But perhaps Muslims, unlike Jews, will be able to take this on, to the end of the Bible. If the human being who is the image of God and hence—for a creature—perfect combines what Muslims would call *jalāl* and *jamāl*: rigor and beauty, then perhaps a Muslim who ventures to read the Bible as *kitāb*, as scripture, will be less puzzled by the book of Revelation. The Jesus of gentleness, the covenantal Jesus, if you will, who is—not Adam II, but in the church's language—the Second Adam, shows his fully theomorphic nature in the book of Revelation, where he appears as a just avenger, a messiah of glory rather than of gentleness. Such a reading could restore to the Bible a symmetry that Muslims have not always found in it.¹¹⁰

What of the passage in Ephesians? For Muslims, the holy *kitāb* is primarily *Tawrat* (presumably the Pentateuch), *Zabūr* (presumably the Psalms), and *Injīl*: the Gospels. We will probably be more comfortable if we read Paul as a commentator rather than as a scripture writer. Perhaps he himself would not have argued with this.

In any case, the Ephesians passage seems to be the most sustained statement on gender in the whole Bible. Of course, reading Paul is always an exercise in careful cross-referencing, but the other texts attributed to him do not seem to change the intentions of this passage very much. There is Colossians 3:18 (“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord”). And there is 1 Corinthians 11, which criticizes in very stern language women who pray or prophesy with their heads bare, not only because it is immodest in itself but also because the head-covering is a symbol of her husband's authority over her. For those who accept its attribution, 1 Timothy 2:8–15 takes this further still.

The better-known Pauline passage, Galatians 3:28, says: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In Muslim jargon this might be taken as abrogating the other verses, but it probably does no such thing. Paul is not suggesting that the man–wife relation is not hierarchical; he is saying that their union in Christ, without abolishing that hierarchy, utterly transcends it. Living in Christ is a true anticipation of the life of the blessed in heaven, where such interhuman power relationships cannot be expected to have meaning. But just as the moral law is not suspended for those who are in communion with the church, so too the natural hierarchy of the genders is affirmed.

Ephesians, in any case, represents the Pauline view that Christians, who believe that the Holy Spirit was operative in the exegesis of the early church, have traditionally taken as decisive. It is no more difficult to substantiate this hierarchical reading in Christian literature than in the writings of Islam on the same issue.

Here, for instance, is St. John Chrysostom, summarizing this passage: “Paul has already laid the foundations of marital love, and has assigned to husband and wife each his proper place: to the husband one of leader and provider, and to the wife one of

submission. Therefore as the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands, as to God.”¹¹¹ No less normative is his idea that a Christian family resembles a monastery: like everything else in it, the power of the abbot exists only for the salvation of souls. There are many cases where a monk saves his soul by being in obedience to a bad, incompetent, or foolish abbot, on condition that the obedience was not in sinful things.

For the modern American Orthodox writer Alexei Young,

Christ has taught us that happiness comes only through self-sacrifice (the husband) and obedience (the wife). . . . We are only pilgrims, preparing for the next world; therefore, how can we fail to rule wisely, lovingly, and givingly, if we are husbands? And, if we are wives, how can we fail to be meek and humbly obedient supports to our husbands? In both of these consists true happiness, for in both is to be found the essence of man and woman, the undoing of the sin of Adam and Eve, and the path—through this world—to the Kingdom of Heaven.¹¹²

In Western Christianity, the churches fought valiantly to uphold this particular teaching long after other battles had been lost. In his encyclical *Casti connubii* of 1930, Pope Pius XI warned about the “false teachers” who, in the name of “human dignity,” would try to persuade wives to abandon the obedience owed to their husbands. “This is not emancipation but a crime,” he insists.¹¹³

This has now, of course, substantially changed. Last year only a few traditionalists protested when Raniero Cantalamessa, the Pope’s preacher, expressed his understanding of Ephesians 5:21–32. “The snag” he says, is that Paul “also recommends to women that they be submissive to their husbands, and this—in a society strongly and justly conscious of the equality of the sexes—seems unacceptable.” The explanation: “St. Paul is conditioned in part by the mentality of his age.”¹¹⁴

Even the Pope’s preacher is now deconstructing the text. And this, for Muslims yearning for dialogue, indicates an obstacle. When St. John of Damascus argued with Umayyad clerks, or when Gregory Palamas debated with Sufis, issues were focused on the heart of religion: the teaching about God. Today, because many Christians and even more Muslims appear impatient with theology in their desire to change the world, we focus on civic issues. Yet where once there would have been substantial agreement rooted in the assumption that solemn and clear papal teaching was irrevocable, now there is serious discord and a new polemic. On occasion, Muslim–Christian encounters resemble not a meeting of minds fully representative of their conservative majorities or their historic norms but a version of the clash between the Enlightenment and traditional religion. Issues such as capital punishment, freedom of religion, homosexuality, and gender are often discussed by Christians who have consciously or unconsciously internalized an Enlightenment definition of human flowering that emerged, initially, as a reaction against classical Christianity itself and was passionately condemned by the highest church authorities of the day, authorities convinced that they were receiving the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Muslims, by contrast, tend to favor more conservative positions: even though we have no doctrine of papal inerrancy, we are mostly unimpressed by the moral

consequences of modernity and of the spiritual and social atomism which it promotes. Hence the periodic sense in our gatherings that we are speaking from different universes, that modernity has made our conversation harder, not easier. The real dialogue partner is the Enlightenment.

There is no short-term answer here. It is probable, but not certain, that Islam will probably cope with the Enlightenment challenge more expeditiously than did Christianity. There are aspects to the Enlightenment to which classical Islam is not necessarily allergic.¹¹⁵ But I hope, also, that Islamic ethics will remain prophetically critical of an individualism that is at the Enlightenment's heart, and that is socially corrosive. For the present, in our emergency situation, I predict two things. Firstly, that Muslims will tend to be more respectful of traditional Christian social teachings than are many modern Christians. Our dialogue may take itself to include a call to respect the past. And second, that instead of, as Vincent Cornell puts it (see his essay in chapter 2 of this volume), "pushing the envelope of exegesis" to make the scriptures say what we like, we will try to acknowledge the moral and spiritual power of traditional social orders while acknowledging that, as moral and spiritual midgets, we latecomers in religious history simply cannot carry the tougher demands of tradition. If we are honest, we will concede that a serious feminist exegesis of the Bible and the Qur'an will always find much to criticize. But today we must make do with what we and our parishes can support: a fugitive exegesis, feeble when compared to the glory of traditional social wisdom but the most that our age can bear.

Genesis 2:18–25

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Ephesians 5:21–33

²¹Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²²Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of

which he is the Savior. ²⁴Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³²This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. ³³Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

7.2 *al-Aḥzāb* 33:35; *al-Rūm* 30:21; *al-Nisā'* 4:34; *al-Baqara* 2:228

Jane Dammen McAuliffe

Few verses in the Qur'an have received more contemporary attention than those that address questions of gender difference. Literary representations of gender, whether in secular or religious texts, have become a prominent object of scholarly attention in the last several decades. Questions of gender justice occupy a central place in both domestic and international politics and they are key issues on the agendas of inter faith organizations and their activities. It is also fair to say that few issues are more controversial than those that address gender identity, gender equity, and the intimate relations between men and women.¹¹⁶

These four Qur'anic verses are a mixture of general, ethos-setting statements and particular, prescriptive pronouncements. The more comprehensive verses are presented here first.

al-Aḥzāb 33:35

This verse appears at the mid-point of *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* ("The Confederates"), a sūra that is dated to the Medinan period and that addresses multiple matters including relations of the Prophet Muḥammad with his family. Mentions of the "occasion of revelation" (*sabab al-nuzūl*) for this verse provide a poignant entrée to its discussion.¹¹⁷ Each narrative offers an episode in which one or more of Muḥammad's wives asks a question such as "Does the Qur'an ever mention us women?" or "Why does it speak only of the male believers (*mu'minīn*) and never of the female (*mu'mināt*)?" It is said this verse and *al-Imrān* 3:195 were revealed in response to those questions. The latter passage is also gender explicit when it says, "I do not allow the work of any worker among you, male or female (*min dhakarīn aw unthā*), to be lost." A more positive recasting of this sentiment is *al-Tawba* 9:71: "And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends of one another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poor-due, and they obey God and His messenger. As for these, God will have mercy on them. God is mighty, wise."

al-Rūm 30:21

The context for this verse in *Sūrat al-Rūm* is a large group of "sign" passages. Within a longer doxology (verses 17–28), verses 20–25 all begin with the phrase "and of His signs" as they speak to the wonders and the bounties of God's creation. Other than basic glossing, this passage did not attract extended exegetical treatment. Given the creation focus of the larger context, some commentators asked whether "spouses" should signify

only Adam and Eve or all human spouses. The first interpretation draws the connection between this verse and *al-A'raf* 7:189: "It is He who created you from a single person (*min nafsin wāḥidatin*), and He has created from him his wife, so that he might incline toward her."

al-Nisā' 4:34

This verse occurs in the *sūra* titled "The Women" because of the amount of material in this *sūra* that relates to the rights of women and to matters of family life, such as laws of inheritance and limits of marital consanguinity. The occasion of revelation offered for this passage concerns the situation of a woman who appealed to the Prophet after her husband had struck her. Several phrases are of particular interest to the commentators.

- "Men are the managers of the affairs of women" (*al-rijāl qawwāmūna 'alā l-nisā'*).¹¹⁸ According to Ibn 'Abbās, *qawwāmūn* means those who have the rightful power over the discipline of women.¹¹⁹
- "For that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another" (*bi-mā faḍḍala Allāhu ba'dahum 'alā ba'di*). Commentators point to the ways in which men surpass women, e.g. by requiring more blood money (*'aql*), by receiving a larger portion of inheritance and booty, by eligibility for the offices of caliph and amir, by being able to initiate divorce, and so on.
- Women are referred to as righteous (*al-ṣāliḥāt*) and obedient (*al-qāniṭāt*). For the commentators, the former refers either to those who act well toward their husbands (*muḥsināt*) or to those who do good works. For the latter, the explanations offered are that they care for their husbands' goods when their husbands are absent or that they safeguard themselves for their husbands alone.¹²⁰
- The female conduct that is termed "rebellious" (*nushūz*) is glossed exegetically as "the wife's being hateful to her husband."¹²¹
- The most contested section of this verse is the three-part escalation that follows the accusation of "rebellious." "Admonishing" (*fa-izūhunna*) is normally glossed as verbal exhortation. "Banish them to their couches" (*wa-hjurūhunna fi-l-maḍājī'i*) captures more comment but most of it revolves around whether this means husbands not speaking to their wives or refusing to have sex with them. For the final phrase—and phase—of marital discipline, Ibn al-Jawzī advises: "God has permitted you to beat her with a beating that is not intense (*darban ghayr mubarrih*)."¹²² He also insists that this is, indeed, a mandated sequence, that is, that corporal punishment is a final, not a first, step.¹²³

Even given these exegetical restrictions, contemporary Muslim interpreters struggle with this verse. In our era, domestic violence is an important social concern. For my home city of Washington, D.C., alone, police report eleven thousand calls per year about such abuse, and five thousand women request restraining orders against their husbands or partners. A recent survey of contemporary approaches to *al-Nisā'* 4:34 groups various

approaches, some of which hold the Qur'anic text itself harmless while blaming its exegetical amplification, while others are willing to ask whether the text itself is patriarchal, androcentric, and unjust.¹²⁴ Scholars as various as Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas point to the foundational ethos of the Qur'an as one of justice and egalitarianism and cite verses such as those just discussed to support this assertion.¹²⁵ They then tend to stress the "symbolic" nature of the imperative "beat them" (*wadribuhunna*) or characterize it as descriptive of seventh-century practice rather than prescriptive for twenty-first-century life.

al-Baqara 2:228

This verse occurs in a longer section of the second *sūra* (verses 226–43) that deals with divorce and the treatment of divorced women and widows. According to the classical exegetes, the occasion for the revelation of this verse was the practice in pre-Islamic society of women claiming to be pregnant to forestall a divorce or of hiding a pregnancy to forestall a reconciliation. Consequently, exegetical attention focuses on several key phrases in this verse.

- *Al-qurū'* (menstrual periods) is discussed via synonyms and etymological explanations. Associated ḥadīth address the problems presented by abnormal menstrual patterns.
- "It is not lawful for them to hide what God has created in their wombs" (*wa-lā yaḥillu labunna an yaktumna mā khalāqa Allāhu fī arḥāmihinna*) is understood to mean that women are not permitted to conceal either pregnancy or the fact that they are menstruating. It also indicates, however, that women are the authority in such matters. This is, in fact, a key point about this verse.
- "Women have such honorable rights as obligations" (*wa-labunna mithlu alladhī 'alayhinna bi-l-ma'rūfi*). The term translated as "rights" (*ma'rūf*) is understood as both the necessities of life and the ordinary associations and intimacies of marital life. A ḥadīth from the Prophet that is used as part of the commentary on this verse insists that a husband should feed his wife "when he eats, clothe her when he clothes himself" and it cautions that "he should not strike her on the face or curse her."¹²⁶
- But their men have a degree above them (*wa-lil-rijāl 'alayhinna darajatun*).¹²⁷ Classical commentary on this part of the verse stresses male financial responsibility as the basis of this higher "degree." Al-Zajjāj is cited for the view that both husband and wife take pleasure from each other but that a husband's precedence is a function of the money that he spends on his wife.¹²⁸

Some contemporary interpretations of the phrase "women have such honorable rights as obligations" have read this as a statement of gender equity, that is, as an assertion that women have rights and obligations equivalent to those of men, even as they note functional differences or distinct spheres of activity.¹²⁹ The more controversial aspect of this

verse, however, is the notion of “degree above.” The prevailing exegetical tendency in contemporary treatments has been to limit the scope of this precedence to the situation of divorce itself, to note, for example, that men need not wait three months to remarry and that they have the authority to rescind a divorce. What such contemporary interpretations resist is any reading of “degree above” that offers men unilaterally superior rights over women or predominant ontological status.¹³⁰

al-Aḥzāb 33:35

³⁵Men and women who have surrendered, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give in charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God oft—for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty wage.

al-Rūm 30:21

²¹And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy. Surely in that are signs for a people who consider.

al-Nisā’ 4:34

³⁴Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God’s guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great.

al-Baqara 2:228

²²⁸Divorced women shall wait by themselves for three periods; and it is not lawful for them to hide what God has created in their wombs; if they believe in God and the Last Day. In such time their mates have better right to restore them, if they desire to set things right. Women have such honourable rights as obligations, but their men have a degree above them; God is All-mighty, All-wise.