

Chapter 1: Seeking Clarity

O Mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord, who created you from a single entity and created its mate of the same kind and spread from these two, many men and women; and be careful of your duty to Allah, by whom you demand one another your rights, and to the ties of relationship; surely Allah ever watches over you. (4:1)

Fatma: Allah expresses that He created mankind “**from a single entity**” then created its mate; is “**mate**” in reference to the woman being created from the substance of man? Furthermore, is the Qur’an implying that the creation of the woman came after the making of the man?

Sayyid: There are some Muslim scholars who assert that the man was created first and then the woman was created from the remaining substance of the man. However, by examining the above verse, Allah indicates that the woman and the man were created simultaneously, and that their creation came from the same substance.

This is the meaning of “**a single entity: min-nafsin waahida.**” The creation of the human is a dichotomy in which one body or mass was divided into two parts. Therefore, both genders were created from the exact substance, simultaneously, and thus no element in the creation of the genders is superior to the other.

Fatma: Then, to who is Allah referring when He mentions, “**and created its mate?**”

Sayyid: “**Its mate**” refers to both the wife and husband. Allah affirms that from the same entity He created the spouses. They were not necessarily individually addressed as the wife or the husband. The Qur’an gives compelling evidence that the creation of the man and woman came from one and the same material. Allah divided the genders into two equal parts. There is no precedence, superiority, or inferiority in the creation of the genders. There is equality. The Qur’an states,

“And one of His signs is that He has created for you [men & women], from your own type, spouses so that you may enjoy comfort in their company.” (30:21)

Fatma: I have read in some Islamic references that Eve was created from the rib or remnants of Adam.²

I have always associated this concept with Christian doctrine, not Islam. What is Islam's position regarding this issue?

Sayyid: There are some ambiguous Islamic references that claim Eve was created from the rib or remnants of Adam, but there is no substantial evidence regarding the authenticity of such references.

Fatma: How did equivocal references appear in Islamic resources? How do Islamic scholars determine whether references have enough substantial evidence to be considered reliable?

Sayyid: Elaborating and defining all Islamic resources that scholars rely on would be too extensive. In brief, I will mention two of the most predominant Islamic sources: the Qur'an and the hadiths³ (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad).⁴

All Muslim scholars, regardless of their school of thought, agree upon the authenticity of the Qur'an.⁵ There is no dispute among the schools regarding the immaculateness and flawlessness of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is exactly the

same text today as it was when it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over 1400 years ago. However, the interpretation of the Qur'an becomes problematic when Islamic scholars attempt to explain the Qur'an. One scholar may elucidate or perceive a verse one way while another scholar may view it from a different perspective or interest.

When it comes to examining traditions of the Prophet, Muslim scholars are very careful about ensuring authenticity. Scholars do not accept every tradition as genuine. First, scholars closely study and thoroughly examine the credibility and reliability of the chain of narrators, as well as, what exactly the narrators said.

If scholars discover any author or narrator to be unreliable or not trustworthy then the traditions of that narrator will be disregarded. At the same time, if scholars perceive authors or narrators to be even somewhat questionable, they will refer to their traditions as being "weak." The acceptance of a tradition depends on two things.

First, the tradition must be validated through the household of the Prophet, the twelve infallible Imams,⁶ or through the trustworthy companions of the Prophet. Second, their traditions must not contradict the Qur'an. Once these two criteria are met, then scholars are certain that the tradition is authentic.

In Islamic literature, there is an abundance of unauthentic traditions referred to as "Israelites."⁷ In the history of Islam, there were some people who, upon converting to Islam, were truly incognizant and unacquainted with Islamic ideology, yet still wrote unwarranted traditions. Some of these people started to propagate traditions that were unfounded; for instance, indoctrinating traditions that allege some prophets as sinning, committing adultery, and being drunk. Such outlandish lies are alien to the Islamic creed. Muslim scholars label these narrators and their traditions as "Israelite."

There were also some Muslim narrators who became influenced by non-Muslims; they socialized with them, read their books, and agreed with some of their ideas. Hence, these narrators implemented non-Muslim standards and customs as Islamic traditions. Some of the narrated traditions contradicted the Qur'an, in addition to, the traditions of the Prophet, or had no relation or credibility to Islamic philosophy.

Amidst the two major branches of Islam,⁸ there is a relentless controversy regarding some narrators of Islamic tradition and what the narrators said. For example, some of the main contributors to Sunni traditions are not regarded in the same fashion in Sh'ia traditions.

Sh'ia scholars cannot accept all traditions written by such known narrators; for instance, one narrator was reprimanded for exorbitant traditions,⁹ while others wrote extensive traditions in which only a measure can be considered reliable. Occasionally some scholars will use these narrators' traditions to corroborate a point, if proven from other narrated sources, that the narration was authentic.

To summarize, scholars do not regard every written tradition as authentic. If scholars suspect that a narrator wrote unattested traditions then they will thoroughly examine everything the narrator had said before accepting the authenticity of his traditions.

Returning to your question, there are some Islamic traditions that originated from previous scriptures, which claim Eve was created from the rib of Adam or his remnants, but the authentic sources deny this to be true.

Fatma: I have read traditions that claim Eve instigated Adam to act against Allah's command, and that she was the reason why man was ousted from Paradise. Is there any truth to these traditions?

Sayyid: Adam and Eve were both dismissed from Paradise because they both disobeyed Allah's instruction.¹⁰ However, the Qur'an puts forth the notion that Adam was more to blame than Eve.¹¹ Nonetheless, they both repented to Allah and both were forgiven.¹² Additionally, the Christian doctrine of "original sin" has no place in Islam. This is based on the clear statement in the Qur'an that no person carries the burdened sin of another.¹³

***"Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself, no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another."* (6: 164)**

Fatma: What I find astonishing is that, during the Prophet's short period of preaching, he was able to abolish many of the pre-Islamic rituals among pagan Arabs, such as burying daughters alive. He was able to implement rights for women at a time when the concept of women's rights was unheard of within the society.¹⁴

He was able to reform the attitude of a society, that a few years prior was barbaric toward women. What I find perplexing is that soon after the Prophet's death, the rights and the attitude toward Muslim women ironically appeared to relapse. Today, Muslim women are still struggling in securing their rights and

trying to overcome the perception of being treated like second-class citizens amongst their society. Why do you suppose this happened?

Sayyid: The premise you gave is not entirely correct. Certainly, the Prophet abolished all of the uncivilized acts that were being perpetrated against women, such as female infanticide,¹⁵ forced prostitution,¹⁶ and matrimonial mistreatment.¹⁷

At the same time, Islam gave women rights to participate in political affairs,¹⁸ to conduct and maintain their business affairs,¹⁹ and rights to claim inheritance.²⁰ However, it would not be correct to state that the Prophet was able to reform the attitude of that society entirely.

Examine the chapters “**Repentance**” and “**Hypocrites**” in the Qur’an. These chapters depict the duplicity and indisposition of some people in that society.

Analyze how Allah contemptibly addressed some people in that society. Examine how some behaved toward the Prophet and how they caused him a great deal of grief by demonstrating disrespect and disobedience. Some members of that society were insincere, unwitting, and obstinate.

Even after the Prophet’s death, the first successor, Abu Bakr, spent most of his time defending attacks caused by deceitful defectors. It would not be correct to presume that justice, respect, and harmony prevailed.

Islam granted women rights to inherit from their families. However, as an example of a slow-to-change society, shortly after the death of the Prophet, his most beloved daughter Fatima was denied her inheritance. Although she was mainly denied inheritance because of political and economical implications, still the denial was unjustified. In the minds of some people, cultural traditions and customs continued to prevail, especially when they pertained to women.

Women, then and now, are struggling for their rights in Islam. Neither Islam nor the Prophet can be blamed for the societal mistreatment of women. Religion cannot be criticized for denying women their rights. Granted, Muslim women in the 21st century are in a much better position than their predecessors; but still, today, some women are continuously dealing with tribal societies that are ignorant of the true teachings and practices of Islam.

Fatma: Considering what you mentioned about the Prophet not entirely being able to reform the minds and practices of some people surrounding him, then what exactly did the Prophet achieve if the Qur’anic laws were not being adhered to?

Sayyid: Guidance is a divine task based on man’s willingness. The Qur’an states:

“Verily O’ Muhammad you guide not whom you like but Allah guides whom He will and He knows best those who are [willing to be] guided.” (28:56)

The Prophet's achievement was in initiating laws according to the Qur'an for the sake of humanity, and furthermore, in setting an exemplary lifestyle by teaching others how to manage and deal with events or situations throughout their lifetime.

Qur'anic laws were not exclusively meant for a group of people who lived in Medina or Mecca over 1400 years ago. The Prophet knew that his society would not change easily. Those who embraced Islam during the Prophet's time were mainly between the ages of thirty and sixty. Their personalities, characters, perceptions, and views on life were already established.

The Prophet could not reform the mentality of everyone in such a short period. It was a transitional period from the age of ignorance and paganism to the age of faith and justness. Qur'anic laws were to be achieved by future generations. Comparatively, as we are working for bettering our children's lives, likewise was the Prophet. The Prophet was working for the next generation, for those who would adhere and practice to the teachings of Islam.

Fatma: “*And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former times of ignorance.*” (33:33)

“And stay quietly in your houses.”

This Qur'anic verse seems to be in regards to the wives of the Prophet; however, some Muslim scholars also apply this verse to all Muslim women. Is this verse directed at all Muslim women or just the wives of the Prophet?

Sayyid: This particular verse was addressed to the wives of the Prophet, but this does not mean that every time the Qur'an referred to the wives of the Prophet it was exclusively for them and no other women. While studying the Qur'an, one will come across many verses in which Allah addresses the Prophet, but in truth, Allah is not only addressing the Prophet. Allah required the Prophet to acknowledge the revelations and wanted the rest of the Muslim community to listen and administer them.

“Stay quietly in your house” does not mean that women cannot venture outside of their homes. It is informing women about making unnecessary excursions or being in “questionable environments.” Let me give you an example. If on the battlefield there are enough men working and fighting, then there is no need for women to be there. Certainly, women may assist within other areas, but they should not be on the battlefield, on the frontline in combat.

Some scholars have also interpreted this verse as a forewarning toward one of the wives of the Prophet, informing the wife not to cause any adversity — to remain home. Years after the Prophet's death, one of his wives assisted in deflecting a war against the legitimate caliph of the time, Imam Ali in the Battle of Camel, in which thousands of Muslims died.

Fatma: How does Islam regard the nature of women?

Sayyid: Women and men are born with the same humanistic qualities and are partners in humanity, according to Islam. A woman is as genuine of a human being as a man, and must, therefore, enjoy the irrefutable and undeniable rights as Allah's creation.

A woman is in no way born imperfect or less intelligent than that of her counterpart.

"We created man (men and women) in the best of molds." (95:4)

A woman's innate disposition in distinguishing right from wrong is the same as a man; she is not more predisposed to evil or its instigation.

"By the soul as it perfected and inspired it about its wrong and its right." (91:7 & 8)

According to the Qur'an, Allah characterizes a woman as having,

"A great deal of good." (4: 19)

A woman comes into this world with a clean, pure, and unburdened soul.

"Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself; no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another." (6: 164)

A woman's obligation in fulfilling her religious ritual toward Allah is equal to that of a man, and her rewards and condemnations are the same.

"I shall not lose the sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other." (3: 195)

A woman can reach the same closeness to Allah as a man.

"If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female and have faith, they will enter Heaven." (4: 124)

Fatma: What is the view of Islam on the position and accountability of Muslim women in society?

Sayyid: Women were created to be half of society. Women are to assist in ensuring the morality, preserving the safety, and securing the well-being of future generations, and to become mothers. Women are created to become mothers and educators of children, among other significant roles.

In our era, some women have lost pride in being or becoming mothers. The honor, dignity, and admiration for motherhood has fallen. Some regard the title of "mother" or "homemaker" as demeaning. There is no shame or degradation in being a homemaker or mother. There is nothing amiss in loving and nurturing the family.

On the contrary, motherhood is the most important foundation on which children depend. Mothers are the educators of children; they are their teachers. Children look up to their mothers; they admire them, learn from them, inherit their character, their moral beauty, and their compassion. Motherhood is something beautiful, precious, and important. It is a long and difficult journey to become a devoted mother.

Nevertheless, the importance of fatherhood should not be lessened. A father's role is extremely significant to the family's well being and his absence would create difficulties. Yet, the absence of a mother could be a disaster for a family. Mothers are the threads that keep the family united.

Mothers are the builders of society. They are the ones who foster great leaders, scientists, doctors, husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers. A mother can change a whole society by raising one child. This child could reform a whole nation; in essence, mothers write history.

Fatma: Does Islam encourage women to be independent and self-sufficient? Can they be free to choose what they want to become in life?

Sayyid: Women need to be independent and self-sufficient before marriage, during marriage, and even in the event of a divorce or death. Women should be prepared, at any given moment, to depend upon themselves. No one is

certain of what the future holds. Being independent and self-sufficient can have many beneficial consequences. It creates feelings of confidence, security, and courage. However, Islam also wants a woman to be mindful that some of her decisions should be made in consultation with someone in her life, like her parents.

Fatma: Does Islam favor segregation of the genders?

Sayyid: Segregation of the genders is entirely dependent on the occasion, circumstance, or establishment. For example, Islam would recommend segregation for social gatherings for the sake of pleasure and amusement, since they may lead to maleficent outcomes.

However, Islam would not object to appropriate mixed gatherings in which intellectual, informative, or spiritual lectures were discussed. The main point is that, if immoral outcomes are not feared then mixed social gatherings are acceptable.

Fatma: Regarding the precepts concerning women in Islam, there is a copious body of literature that instructs women on what is not recommended for them. For example, it is not recommended for women to attend mosques, recite the Qur'an in the presence of men, lecture in the presence of men, or pursue fields that are dominated mainly by men. One tends to find an array of varying restrictions. What is the consensus, amongst the scholars, regarding these issues?

Sayyid: There is no consensus amongst the scholars regarding these issues by reason of controversy.

Primarily, when scholars mention the boundaries of women, they are considering that particular society in which women live. For instance, there are some societies where women are not highly visible publicly; therefore, men are socially unaccustomed to women.

In societies where women predominantly stay at home, rarely venture out, even as far as the market, it would not be surprising for scholars to advise women not to patronize the mosques too often. Scholars that make such guidelines do so in an attempt to safeguard women.

In a similar fashion, in societies where women are engaged in and actively participate publicly (such as in the work force or educational institutions) then such an advisement would neither be applicable nor appropriate.

Fatma: I would like to read to you a quote from a Muslim woman who wrote an article in the “London Times” on women in Islam.

Our religion doesn't give women any human dignity; women are considered slaves, I write against the religion because if women want to live like human beings they will have to live outside the religion of Islamic law.²¹

What do you suppose this is indicative of?

Sayyid: This quotation is full of bigotry and emotionalism. The author is neither objective nor accurate in her description. Unmarred Islamic laws are contrary to the author's opinionated conclusions. Islam not only elevated the humanistic stature of women, but also secured women's positions by empowering them with social rights.

Unfortunately, there are some countries that claim to be Muslim, but they are not adherents of the genuine Islamic faith. This person may have been raised in such a country that claims to be a representative of Islam, but its Islamic practices and values have been abandoned. Perhaps, in her country, Islam is a slogan rather than an exercised religion.

There are some countries that claim to practice Islam, yet deprive women of education, isolate them from social activism, and do not allow them to voice their political opinion. They strip women of their rights, honor, dignity, and continue to maintain that they are representatives of Islam. Unfortunately, we have this today, but this is not Islam; it is social culture.

Additionally, there are some Muslim countries that attempt to depict modernism by electing women as their prime minister. Although they may have women representing their countries in the highest office, in general, they continue to disrespect women within their society. Upon examination of these societies, one may find mistreatment or abuse of women.

Some even arrange marriages for their daughters without their consent. Some husbands regard their wives as bondswomen. Such practices (and others) are customs of society, not customs or values of

Islam.

Fatma: Attitudes and practices that are conducted in the name of Islam are actually contrary to the basic messages found in the Qur'an. If one examines some Arab societies in which both Christians and Muslims live together, one tends to find that the Muslim woman living amongst her own people is not respected in the same manner as compared to the Christian woman amongst her fellow citizens.

Generally, the Christian woman is shown more appreciation and respect within her community. Why do you suppose that in some Muslim societies Muslim women are looked upon as secondary amongst her people?

Sayyid: The respect of Christian women you describe is not a result of religion, but tradition. Likewise, the comparative lack of respect that Muslim women receive in their society also did not originate from religion, but from tradition.

There are many Qur'an verses that assert the notion that men and women are to live concordantly with one another. There are considerable amount of verses in the Qur'an that state men and women are equal. The Prophet even described men and women as being halves of one another.

Traditionally, in some Eastern societies, women have been viewed as secondary, but Islam opposes such viewpoints or mistreatments. Some people, however, might read certain passages of the Qur'an and wrongly draw inaccurate conclusions based on the laws of inheritance and testimony that women are placed in a lesser class than that of men.

To understand the laws, one must analyze their derivations, the deeper reasoning, and logic behind them. The laws mostly are based on economic and social foundations and nothing else. They are not based on the wrong assumption that women are secondary or inferior. Islamic laws were made to ensure not only the rights of the individual, but also the rights of society as a whole.

One must also keep in mind that not only Arab or Muslim societies mistreated women. Christian, Jew, Persian, Indian, etc., and non-religious societies have also misused women, and in some places, continue to do so. Even today, in the West, women are mistreated and disrespected in many areas.

Fatma: You mentioned earlier that we are still dealing with tribal societies, and that people continue to be ignorant of the teachings and practices of Islam. Often the foundation of a Muslim family is centered on giving preference, opportunities, and more affection toward their sons than their daughters. Why is this?

Sayyid: Formerly, many people tended toward mainstream society, which perceived men as being superior to women. This perception of superiority was also reflected within the genders of the family. Partiality toward sons was the case in families that were uninformed about the true practices of Islam. This would not be the case in a well-informed Muslim family that based its teachings on the Qur'an and

traditions of the Prophet.

Nonetheless, we cannot blame Islam for the way parents mistreat their daughters. Islamic literature encourages more affection to be given toward the daughter than the son. Allah instructs parents to offer more attention to their daughters by way of example.

For instance, when parents leave on a trip, the last one they should say good-bye to is their daughter, and upon their return home, she should be the first one to be greeted. This is what the Prophet did to his own daughter, Fatima. Whenever she walked into the room the Prophet used to stand up, kiss her, and offer her his seat.

He would invite her to eat meals with him. Whenever the Prophet returned home from a trip, he would stop at his daughter's home before going to see his wives.

There are numerous verses in the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet that detail the manner in which a daughter is to be treated. I will cite a few of the Prophet's traditions regarding the treatment of daughters.

The best of your children are your daughters.²²

The sign of a lucky woman is that her first child is a girl.²³

First, he should give to his daughters then to his sons. Whoever keeps his daughter happy will get a reward equal to the one who has freed a slave from the progeny of Prophet Ishmael. ²⁴

Whoever brings up faithful daughters, educates them, disciplines them, and marries them will be rewarded Paradise.²⁵

Fatma: When the subject of female circumcision is addressed, the word "Islam" is often associated to it. Is there any association between Islam and female circumcision?

Sayyid: There is no association between Islam and female circumcision. Female circumcision may commonly be practiced by some African societies. The fact that those who practice female circumcision may be Muslim, does not justify concluding that it is based on Islamic rituals or practices.

Fatma: In some Muslim countries, and in some cases, when a Muslim woman is suspected or rumored to have committed an illicit act male members of the family would take it upon themselves to execute her. This disturbing act is known as "Death by Honor." Usually the perpetrator is sentenced to a few years in prison and released. Would this form of conviction be a reflection of Islamic law?

Sayyid: Any crime or sin committed in an Islamic society must be dealt with accordingly through the Islamic and civil courts. Vigilantism is forbidden. Islam honors the life and the lives of all people. Taking the life of another person is considered a cardinal sin. The only person that is permitted to execute the law is a qualified Islamic judge, not a family member.

Therefore, “Death by Honor” has no basis in the Islamic tradition. In fact, the Qur’an comments on the penalty for those who accuse or rumor on the subject of adultery or fornication without providing credible witnesses.

And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses to support their allegations—flog them with eighty strips; and reject their evidence ever after; for such men are wicked transgressors. (24:4)

1. Arabic word for God.

2. Sahih Al-Bukhari.

3. Hadiths, Sunnah, or traditions are actions, words, and consents of the Prophet Muhammad in matters pertaining to the meaning and practices of Islam which have been transmitted through a line of narrators.

4. Prophet Muhammad proclaimed the message of Islam.

5. Inquires about Shi’a Islam, Sayyid Moustafa Al-Qazwini.

Schools of Islamic thought are paths Muslims follow to the Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. There are five schools of thought:

Ja’fari: comprise 23% of the Muslims. Established by Imam Ja’far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq in Medina, Hijaz 148 H (Islamic calendar). Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq was the sixth imam of the twelve designated imams of the school of Ahlul Bayt (family members of the Prophet Muhammad).

Hanafi: comprise 31% of the Muslims. Established by Imam al-Numan ibn Thabit, better known as Abu Hanafi in Kufa, Iraq during the Abbasid Empire.

Maliki: comprise 25% of the Muslims. Established by Imam Malik ibn Anas al-Asbahi in Medina, Hijaz during the Abbasid Empire in 148 H.

Shafi: comprise 16% of the Muslims. Emerged in Egypt by Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi during the Fatimid Dynasty.

Hanbali: comprise 4% of the Muslims. Established by Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal in Baghdad, but only gained popularity in the Arabian Peninsula due to the ideas of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism.

6. The twelve Imams are the descendents and successors of the Prophet, according to the Ahlul Bayt school of thought.

7. Israelite is a term referring to a set of Biblical stories and accounts which were introduced into the Islamic tradition.

8. Shi’a: followers of the Prophet through his infallible family (for reference to Ahlul Bayt, see Qur’an 33:33).

Sunni: followers of the Prophet through his companions.

9. Sharh Ibn Aby Al-Hadia, v. 1 p. 360.

10. Qur’an, 2:36 & 7:20–24. Adam & Eve’s disobedience was not considered a sin since Allah’s command was not obligatory. Rather, it was an advisement, according to the Ahlul Bayt school.

11. Qur’an, 20:115–121.

12. Qur’an, 7:23 & 2:36.

13. Qur’an, 17:15.

14. Few examples: inheritance, voting, freedom of expression, marketing, and education.

15. Qur’an, 16:58/59 & 17:31.

16. Qur’an, 24:33.

17. Qur’an, 2:231–232.

18. Qur’an, 60:12.

19. Qur’an, 4:32.

20. Qur’an, 4:7.

21. London Times, 22 June 1994, Taslima Nasreen, a Bangladeshi author.

22. Mustadrak Al-Wasel, v. 2, p. 615.
23. Mustadrak Al-Wasel, p. 614.
24. Makarin Al- Akhaq, authority of Ibn Abbas.
25. Wasail Al-Sh'iah, v. 15, p. 100.

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