PREFACE

A Simpler Believing Women

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This volume is an introduction to my book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān* (University of Texas Press, 2019), and it explains, in simple terms, how I read Islam's scripture and why. In brief, Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is God's word exactly as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia. Although most Muslims will point out, correctly, that the Qur'ān gave women certain inalienable rights 1,400 years ago, the truth is that for much of their history, most Muslims have interpreted the Qur'ān as privileging men. This is because, out of its 6,000 verses, five or so have been interpreted by some scholars as giving husbands certain nonreciprocal rights vis-à-vis their wives.

When I first read the Qur'ān in my teens, I stumbled over these so-called “hierarchy verses” because I found the rest of the text so uplifting. For instance, it teaches that God is beyond sex/gender, that God created men and women from the same Self, that both were made God's representatives on earth as well as one another's mutual custodians, and that God will judge them in light of the same standards. Given such teachings, I could not figure out why God would have given husbands greater rights than their wives in some areas. But at the time I knew nothing about interpreting texts.

Decades later I returned to this question, but by then I knew that Muslims had a long history of sexual discrimination and abuse, which they justified by drawing on one word in each of these five or so “hierarchy verses” (less than 0.01 percent of the text). By then

I also understood that what a text appears to be saying depends largely on who reads it, how, and in what sorts of historical and political contexts; in other words, there is a relationship between method and meaning. Beyond that, I had learned about hermeneutics, patriarchy, and Muslim religious and intellectual history. Rereading the Qur'ān in light of these new insights allowed me to see that, significantly, none of the “hierarchy verses” says that the reason God gave men certain rights is because they are biological males or because they are superior to women. At best, then, the verses addressed the prevailing conditions in seventh-century Arabia. Furthermore, the meanings of these verses change if we interpret some words differently, including the word that many Muslims interpret as “beat” (as in “wife-beating”). Like other languages, Arabic is rich and complex, and quite often a word can mean not only different things but also opposite things. Most of all, I came to understand that when we project theories of male privilege into the Qur'ān based on the assumption that men are made in God's image and God prefers them to women, we are denigrating the Qur'ān's depictions of God. In the Qur'ān's telling, God is one, uncreated, does not beget, is not begotten, and is incomparable since “there is none Like unto [God]” (112:4 [trans. Ali]). Minimally, then, God is not male, man, son, or father. This is why the Qur'ān forbids Muslims from calling God “Father” or even comparing God to anyone, meaning that its own allusions to God as “He” are simply a function of Arabic and not accurate depictions of God's being. Additionally, the Qur'ān urges Muslims to read the whole of the text (rather than piecemeal), to privilege its clear verses over the more metaphorical ones, and to search for “the best” in its meanings. This last injunction clearly suggests that not all the meanings we ascribe to the Qur'ān are necessarily the best, and also that our notions of what is “best” are liable to change over time.

To this end, I framed my own reading of the Qur'ān with its descriptions of God in mind and also applied a comprehensive

definition of patriarchy to it, which readers of the text had not so far done. By *patriarchy* I mean both the tradition of rule by the father/husband and the contemporary claim that biological differences make men and women unequal. When I applied this definition to the Qur'ān, however, I could not find any teachings that support rule by the father/husband or theories of sexual differentiation, which is why I called it an egalitarian and anti-patriarchal text at a time when even some Muslim feminists were convinced that, at best, it is “neutral” toward patriarchy (Wadud 1999). Although this way of speaking about the Qur'ān is no longer uncommon, stereotypes still abound about its alleged patriarchalism.

This book, *Believing Women in Islam: A Brief Introduction*, covers a broad range of issues while excluding discussions of theology, methodology, and hermeneutics. Brevity was a goal. After all, it is meant to introduce readers to issues of patriarchy and sexual equality arising from interpretations of the Qur'ān before they proceed to the wider issues with which I deal more fully in the revised *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'ān* (2019). Although I had contemplated writing a “simpler” version for many years, I never did get around to doing so. Consequently, when David Raeburn Finn, a Canadian philosopher with a burgeoning interest in Islam whom I did not know (and still have not met) offered to condense and simplify the book by adopting more user-friendly language, I took him up on his offer. What you have in your hands is the outcome of his diligent efforts. However, it is not a straightforward adaptation of my work, as we originally intended; rather, it is a product of remixing, by which I mean that while most of the arguments are from the book *Believing Women*, David also offers his own take on some verses and has added a new chapter (8) of his own as well as an afterword.

This volume includes eight chapters. Chapter 1 lays out, in plain English, the dispute between patriarchal and egalitarian readings of the Qur'ān with some examples. In addition, it provides a context

for understanding that the Qur'ān's messages are framed in language that is susceptible to different understandings. Since God is just, all-merciful, and all-knowing, God's word (the Qur'ān) is not meant, and cannot be meant, simply for a localized contemporary humanity of the time of its revelation; it is instead meant for all humanity, for all times. Chapter 2 continues by noting some misogynistic pre-Islamic (or *jahiliyah*) practices regarding women. It points out that the Qur'ān's patriarchal exegesis ascribes male domination and discrimination against women to the Qur'ān, which implies that God either didn't notice or didn't care about the injustices involved in male privilege. To that end, chapter 2 provides examples of verses that explicitly reject inequalities.

Chapters 3 through 5 engage with patriarchal interpretations, revelation, Sharī'ah (divine law), and equality before the law, as well as with the Qur'ān's rejection of the imagery of God as male/father. These chapters simplify the corresponding chapters of *Believing Women*, while also making an additional argument (in chapter 5) about the roles that misleading gendered idioms (called "epicenes" in grammar) play in Abrahamic discourse about the divine.

Chapter 6 examines the Qur'ān's approach to equality and difference, taking as its themes sex and sexuality. It basically addresses the question of whether the Qur'ān supports a biologically based impairment of women's roles. It also offers additional material on verses 2:222–23 that undermine the patriarchal claims that husbands have the exclusive right to initiate sex and choose the sex act, and that their choices aren't subject to their wives' acceptance; that is, they are not mutual.

Chapter 7 focuses on patriarchal interpretations of women's public/marital/family rights and adds an interpretation, by Waqas Muhammad, of the so-called wife-beating verse (4:34), which many Muslims read as allowing a husband to strike a disobedient wife. The chapter subsection on "Adultery, Polygyny, and Disingenuity" disputes patriarchal readings of 2:228, which states that two

women witnesses are required in a legal proceeding. David and I also offer divergent readings on the details of polygyny (marrying more than one wife) as conveyed in verse 4:1–6; however, both our readings contest patriarchal legitimizations of the idea that the Qur'ān permits generalized polygyny. The section on “Divorce and Misreading 2:228 for Male Privilege” provides a liberatory re-reading that demonstrates men’s so-called advantage over women (*dara-jatun*) is not really an advantage.

Chapter 8, written by David, considers recent themes denying a liberating Qur'ān. These include the contentions that the Qur'ān most often addresses men on matters of sexuality, and that it contains unfailingly patriarchal verses. Further, these two facts suggest a sense of revelation-era equality that allowed for women’s spiritual equality but also ordained a male-privileging pecking order. He provides egalitarian readings for each supposedly “unfailingly patriarchal” verse and shows that both Islamic history and the Qur'ān itself are consistent with a liberated Qur'ān: no notions of equality and justice alien to the era of revelation are needed for a liberating reading of the Word. Finally, in his afterword David traces how he, as a philosopher and student of Islam, came to be involved with *Believing Women*, complete with some academic teasing.

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