



The Qur'an and I: Recovering Perspective

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Ever since I can remember, I have been aware of Him: God, The Being at the core of my existence. He was The Constant I hung to amid the periodic upheaval and instability of a nomadic childhood. Without indoctrination, I had determined that He was always Present, and thereupon I made Him Sole Confidant of my thoughts and Listener to my heartache. I loved, trusted, and believed in Him wholeheartedly. Although I did not realize it at the time, in willingly 'granting' Him this intimacy, I had in fact 'appointed' Him Guardian of my developing identity¹ in a world where I needed to reintroduce myself every few years. To other people I might be a girl, an Arab, a Muslim, a diplomat's daughter, etc. With Him, it was so uncomplicated: I was simply a Believer. That was my awareness.

Awakening

I hate this conversation, I said to myself that summer evening, but I just couldn't tear my thirteen-year-old mind away. The couples seated with my parents around the mosaic fountain in our spacious vine-sheltered courtyard were old friends, the conversation was lively and pleasant. My father and mother were great hosts; Dad kept the conversation flowing, while Mom reloaded the multitude of oval 'mezze' dishes placed around the fountain-edge. What a difference from Germany!

It was late summer in Damascus, and the grapes were ripening overhead, dangling chandeliers of plum-purple. The jasmines climbed the walls in bridal bloom, their delicate scent competing with the luscious 'lady

¹ The cornerstone of identity is fidelity, or the ability to sustain loyalties of choice despite contradicting value systems, receiving confirmation from ideologies and companions (Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*).

of the night.² The adults must have enjoyed the cool, dry air. My memory of that evening, however, does not register contentment.

I remember helping my mother in preparing and serving, and in clearing up after everyone had left. I remember doing the dishes, indignantly leaving the guests' wine-stained glasses, unwashed, on the kitchen counter. People of faith, as I understood, do *not* take intoxicants, and I remember making an effort not to show approval. Mostly, I remember being extremely troubled by that night's conversation.

Up to that evening, I had always believed that girls and boys were equals. Not that being a girl wasn't different; Syrian society, represented by my grandmother and aunts, had always tried to curb my 'boyish' freedoms. I told myself that these lovely old ladies didn't know any different. But when this group of modern intellectuals raised the issue and practically echoed my grandma, I felt distraught.

Having grown up in a diplomatic environment, spending my early childhood in England, and then India and Germany, Syrian social standards had never figured in anything I was exposed to -until that moment. What had figured prominently however, emphasized constantly by my parents (to whom I raise my cap today for this undertaking, among others), was my identity as 'Arab' and Muslim.' Rather than cause isolation, that knowledge made me more accepting of others, in the sense that Muslims not only have faith in God's final Message to mankind, the Arabic Qur'an, but we also believe in the Divine Messages at the core of what is known today as Judaism and Christianity.

Also, being a diplomat's daughter I was, by definition, the bearer of a culture that seeks to interact with the diversity that makes up this world.

² *Cestrum nocturnum*

My younger brother and I had never felt as outsiders during our travels, but rather, had enjoyed and benefited from joining the celebrations of the societies we lived in. To us, no one was inherently superior, and all people on earth were equal. In India we had close Indian friends, and sometimes our entire family dressed up, joining their celebrations in 'salwar kameez' and 'sarees.' In Germany, our parents brought us gifts for Christmas, and we carried lanterns and sang 'O Tannenbaum' with friends and neighbors through snow-covered streets. At the American school I felt honored when I was chosen to represent my class in the spelling bee tournament and took pride with my classmates in being an American Girl Scout. Throughout it all, we always knew who we were, felt comfortable being ourselves, and recognized a world in which people were more alike than different.

"....nowise is the male like the female..."

And then, suddenly, here I was, two years later, comfort and recognition threatened, as I listened to the 'male-versus-female' discussion in our courtyard. I did not realize, at that time, that this conversation was offering me a glimpse into an oft-prevalent 'Muslim psyche' where -no matter how educated or modernized people might be- the male reigns supreme.

At that early time in my life, I was still under the impression that adults knew what they were talking about. I panicked:

Does the Qur'an really say that females are inferior to males?

One gentleman had recited the Qur'anic verses that spoke of the feelings and prayers of Prophet Jesus' grandmother as she gave birth to Mary, ending with: *'..and nowise is the male like the female.'*

**“When the wife of 'Imran said:
My Lord-Sustainer! I have dedicated unto You
that which is in my belly, freely.
Accept it from me. Indeed You (Alone) are
the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing!
And when she delivered her she said:
My Lord-Sustainer!
I have delivered a female
-while God knows best what she delivered-
and nowise is the male like the female-
and I have named her Mary, and I place her in Your refuge,
together with her offspring,
(safeguarded) from the Deviant outcast.”ⁱ**

Qur'an 3:36.

"See? He had added emphatically. *"God Himself says: Nowise is the male like the female!!"*

As this Qur'anic statement echoed endlessly in my mind, I was bombarded by all the intimations I had been experiencing to the same effect ever since my arrival in Damascus two years ago. So far, it had been easy to dismiss the narrow-mindedness of the conservative characters I knew, but I could not as easily dismiss the views of the non-conforming, modern, intellectual men and women I had been listening to tonight!

There was nobody to turn to.

From my limited understanding of classical Arabic at the time, the group seemed agreed that this verse indicated male superiority. One gentleman had even begun discussing the sensual delights that await men in paradise, then perhaps remembering my presence, had just laughed and said that God Himself must be a male.

What! God was male? This was no laughing matter.

Later that night I stayed up after everyone was fast asleep, thinking hard.
I wept. I prayed.

Dear God.... being me was not my choice. YOU created me! If my being born a female was Your decision, how could I be considered anything less?

And then it came to me.

If I had learnt anything in my life so far, I had learnt one thing:
Discrimination is something ignorant, self-centered people do.

It is a human flaw.

There was no way, absolutely no way, that The Divine Creator would discriminate against anything or anyone.

What about the Qur'anic verses I had heard?

Well... I wonder if people truly understand what the Qur'an says.

I wonder.

Many decades later, with a good knowledge of Arabic, after much studying and much research, I no longer wonder:

Muslims in general are not aware of the Qur'an's attributes, and many do not understand the Qur'an all that well.

I was still unaware of that fact when I began studying Islamic subjects such as Qur'an Exegesis (Tafseer), Life of the Prophet (Seerah), Narrations and Sayings (Hadeeth), Jurisprudence (Fiqh), and Doctrine (Aqeedah) under qualified teachers. It was not until I was putting these subjects to use in my English explanation of Qur'anic words and exegeses that I realized:

Many commonly held concepts simply 'do not compute!'

One would expect any exegesis to display its author's researched knowledge and to contain some reflection of the time in which it was written. However, more often than not, we find exegetes of the Qur'an conscientiously repeating their predecessor's explanations with meticulous attribution, often without informing us which explanation they were leaning towards. Few would take on the responsibility of offering a new interpretation because:

Misrepresenting God's words is a major concern, and rightfully so.

The result of this scrupulousness was that many works of Arab/Muslim exegetes of the past millennium were carried forward ad verbatim through the ages, and selected exegeses were translated into different languages. Whenever the populace favored one account over the other, that specific narrative would be circulated, becoming entrenched in people's minds, their teachings, and their literature. Little would it matter after that whether or not an interpretation contradicted other clear verses of the Qur'an or caused people's concept of God to be discredited.

Thus it was, that while reading through one of the best-known tomes of Qur'an exegesis, the 10-volume exegesis of Ibn Katheer,³ I came across such an unfortunate example of repetitiousness that my heart cringed as never before.

In Qur'an 68:42, referring to Judgement Day, the verse speaks of 'the momentous day when a *saaq* is exposed and they (people who had denied God in life) would be asked to prostrate but would not be able to do so.'

يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَن سَاقٍ وَيُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى السُّجُودِ فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ﴿الْقلم: 68:42﴾

³ Renowned 14th Century historian, exegete, and scholar, deceased in 774 A.H./ 1373 C.E.

Today I can say that 'saaq' from the root-verb 'sawaqa'⁴ indicates something being 'driven/steered' (hence the word 'souq' referring to a location to which merchandise is driven from all over) and that the word also refers to what living creatures steer themselves with, such as legs (humans and animals) and stalks (for plants).⁵ At that time, however, I did not know much. I only knew enough to find it difficult to believe that anyone could even posit such an understanding, highlighting it from among all other explanations. The explanation was -may God forgive me for repeating this- that God would 'bare His leg' at which people would prostrate!ⁱⁱ

I wondered how anyone could think, let alone say, something like that! Was there corroborating evidence from the Qur'an itself or from the Arabic language?

I searched. There was none.

However, 'baring a leg' was a well-known Arabic expression depicting exertion during difficult times,⁶ and was the explanation offered by many exegetes, and even lightly alluded to by Ibn Katheer himself.

⁴ سوق: أصل واحد، وهو حَدُّ الشَّيْءِ. يقال ساقه يسوقه سَوْقاً .
والسَّوْقَةُ: ما استيق من الدواب...والسُّوقُ مشتقَّةٌ من هذا، لما يُساق إليها من كلِّ شيء، والجمع أسواق .
والساق للإنسان وغيره، والجمع سواق، إنما سميت بذلك لأنَّ الماشي يُساق عليها .
وسوق الحرب: حومة القتال، وهي مشتقَّةٌ من الباب الأول.

⁵ A quick search thought the Qur'an shows us the 16 verses in which variations of this root-verb appear, nine of which are related to something or someone being 'driven/steered,' twice related to 'souqs/bazaars,' twice clearly related to legs (Q.27:44; 38:33), once to plant stalks, and twice as an expression showing struggle and exertion (Q.75:29; 68:42), including the above mentioned example.

⁶ The expression we're discussing (in Q.68:42) depicts people reacting to a matter of grave consequence. Another expression referring to death speaks of 'a leg folding over the other' (Q.75:29).

Al Tabari (838-923 C.E.):

"A group of Companions and interpreters said: It seems to be about a matter of grave severity. Ibn Abbas used to say: "A grievous matter is revealed. Do you not hear the Arabs say: 'The war got us up on a leg'?"

This seems somewhat similar to our saying that 'someone got up on their feet,' or 'rolled up their sleeves,' indicating their toiling through strenuous circumstances.

الطبري:
"القول في تأويل قوله تعالى: (يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَنْ سَاقٍ وَيُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى السُّجُودِ فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ (68:42) قال جماعة من الصحابة والتابعين من أهل التأويل: يبدو عن أمر شديد. كان ابن عباس يقول: يكشف عن أمر عظيم، ألا تسمع العرب تقول: "وقامت الحرب بنا على ساق؟" وعن قتادة، في قوله: (يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَنْ سَاقٍ) قال: عن أمر فظيع جليل". انتهى

That explanation, I concluded, was the correct one.

Until that moment, my endeavors in understanding the Qur'an were all about having to choose the best available interpretation. I had not yet discovered the tools which would enable me to step safely off the trodden path.

A Path Rarely Traveled

And then it happened! I stumbled upon a discovery which led me off the trodden path of mere reading exegeses, and plunged me deep into the illuminating depths of Qur'anic research where I started seeing its words and concepts through the lens of its 'Arabi' tongue:

It happened as I was reading the Qur'an where the verse warned Prophet Muhammad, peace upon him, not to pray in the new mosque built by the hypocrites, but to remain in the first mosque where his companions were.

**"Do not stand therein, ever!
Truly a house of worship founded, from its very first day,
on Awareness is more worthy of your standing therein;
in it are 'rijaal' who love to be purified,
and God loves those who purify themselves."**

Qur'an 9:108

I read and reread it. *"....in it are 'rijaal' who love to be purified..."*

Everyone knows 'rijaal' means men, but:

'How is it possible,' I asked myself, 'that the verse says in the mosque are men when everyone knows that the Prophet's mosque was half-full of women?'

Anyone who knows anything about the Prophet's life ﷺ would know that women comprised a large part of the Prophet's congregation.⁷

And then I thought of another verse:

**"Among the Believers are 'rijaal'
who were true to their Covenant with God:
of them are those who fulfilled their pledge
till the very end, while others await:
and they never changed course. "**

Qur'an 23:23

I had always aspired to be among this group, but with the explanation of these verses screaming masculinity, I knew in my heart that something was not right.

Could we be misinterpreting the word 'rijaal'?

I looked up the root-verb 'rajala' in several lexicons⁸ and found my answer in its definition:

"The root verb 'ra-ja-la' denotes a person dismounted, ie, on foot; a female is "rajulah" and 'rajlaa,' while a male is "rajul." All three words have the word "rijaal" as plural."

We were misinterpreting the word 'rijaal'!

What a recovery!

'Rijaaal' had always meant 'women' just as much as it meant 'men.'
'Active women; women on their feet, independent of their mount..' and
1,000 years ago, everyone knew this!

⁷ I remember a story I read at the time (but now couldn't find reference to) of a man who lived far off and came to pray at the mosque every other day. When questioned by the Prophet as to his frequent absence he said, "*I have only one robe which my wife and I take turns to wear to the mosque...*" So important was it for his wife to attend that they shared their one robe.

⁸ 'Mu'jam al Maqayees fil Lughah' by Ibn Fares, 329-395 AH/940-1004 AD; also 'Mukhtarul Sihaah'.

Although I felt blessed that I had uncovered one tool which would bring me closer to understanding God's words and recognizing their original intent, I also felt sad.

I knew that very few Muslims, myself included, would think of using lexicons to find out what Qur'anic words mean. We are accustomed to relying on the information handed down to us, much of it posited as footnotes beneath the texts we study.

Just imagine: Even in our Arabic-speaking schools, we graduate to university without *ever* opening dictionaries or lexicons to find out the meanings of the unfamiliar words and phrases we come across in old Arabic literature, poems, and in Qur'anic verses. Why? Because the meanings of these words and phrases happen to be conveniently supplied for us at the bottom of each page:

A board of educators instructs us in understanding what we read.

Over time, we Arabs have lost much of the language of our forefathers, becoming totally unaware of the proper usage of some words and oblivious to the connotations of others. To us today, 'rijaal' only means 'men' as opposed to 'nisaa' which only means 'women' (I suspect that women in some Muslim countries are discouraged from going to the mosques because of this lost connotation).

How could anyone expect the word to have another meaning without the use of lexicons? And then it struck me.

The Qur'an *had already given us the meaning*, but no one was paying attention.

This is when I realized the importance of another tool where one part of the Qur'an explains another: Cross-referencing.

Although exegesis demands such cross-referencing,⁹ prior to 1917 there was no Qur'anic index, so most exegetes compiled the works of their predecessors and cross-referenced whenever they could. When the index of Muhammad Fu'ad Abd al-Baqi's (1882-1968) *-Index of the Words of the noble Qur'an-*¹⁰ appeared in 1917 it became an essential part of many an Arabic library. Holding the position of 'most important book' in my library after I discovered it in the late 1980's, it was not replaced until the internet came about with its handy Qur'anic search-engines.

Cross-referencing is an essential tool:

The Qur'an had already given us the meaning of 'rijaal' in other verses.

In a verse speaking of prayer the Qur'an says:

"But if you (plural) are in fear, then (pray) 'rijaal'/on foot or 'rukbaan'/ on your mounts...¹¹"

'Rukbaan' means persons transported on a mount, from the singular 'raakib' (m) and 'raakibah' (f). Here the Qur'an is clearly speaking of people on foot as opposed to people on their mounts, but many a preconditioned mind had not registered the distinction.

It seems that at some point in the distant past, by the time Islam had spread its farthest, the word 'rijaal' had lost half its value and so had womanhood. No longer enjoying the freedoms of the Arab Bedouin lifestyle and no longer fully independent, a female had ceased to be a 'rajulah.' After the term 'rijaal' became commonly restricted to men, it

⁹ The saying - القرآن يفسر بعضه بعضا - The Qur'an explains itself (one part explains another) is common among exegetes and those studying the Qur'an.

¹⁰ Al Mu'jam al-mufahras li al-faz al-Qur'an al-karim

¹¹ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ فَرِجَالًا أَوْ رُكْبَانًا فَإِذَا أَمِنْتُمْ فَأَدْكُرُوا اللَّهَ كَمَا عَلَّمَكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ (البقرة: 239)

would only register in people's minds in opposition to 'nissaa' -women- even when it appeared on its own¹² in a verse denoting dynamic *people*.

The Qur'an's mention of 'rijaal' in opposition to 'rukbaan' had always been there for everyone to see, but few had made the connection.

Having made the connection, the 'recovery' of this single word turned out to be the key with which an infinite treasure trove was opened. I have been blessed to recover many important words and concepts since then, each offering a magnificent new perspective: One little part of a beautiful, coherent whole.

I am not exaggerating when I assure linguistic researchers of the Qur'an that its astounding Worldview has the potential to bring us all together in Peace and Prosperity.

That is my hope and my promise.

Little did I know that soon after I began this new stage in research, I would meet a linguist whose response to my most-pressing question would take me back to that evening when I was thirteen, upset by the adults' understanding of the statement (ليس الذكر كالأنثى) '- and nowise is the male like the female..'

This is what the linguist said:

"In Arabic grammar, when we say: Nowise is A like B, we are favoring the latter (B) over the former (A), akin to the statement 'In no way is silver like gold.' This sequence shows that gold, in this case 'the female,' is favored over silver, in this case 'the male. This is straightforward Arabic, and no linguist, or grammarian would understand it the other way around!"

¹² When both words 'nissaa' and rijaal' appear together in a verse, the reference usually is to both 'men' and 'women,' perhaps originally related to those standing at the front lines protecting those behind them, as can be understood from what follows:

Although the root-verb of 'nissaa' is 'nasaya/نسي' which is about leaving something/forgetting, when the verb that forms the noun ends with a 'hamza' on the alif (نساء), then the noun is about something/someone following/ postponed, as in 'a sale with postponed payment or delayed reimbursement' وَهُوَ بَيْعُكَ الشَّيْءَ نَسَاءً، وَهُوَ التَّأخِيرُ; the word 'postponed' here is 'nissaa' (an adverb indicating the state of payment).

Interestingly, although 'nissaa' in most sentences would be correctly understood as the plural 'women,' the singular 'woman' in Arabic is 'mar-ah' (والنِّسَاءُ والنِّسَاءُ جمعُ المرأةِ من غير لفظها); different roots and phonetics.

"What?" I exclaimed. *"Please say that again!*

To which he added:

"This is no surprise, seeing that the female newborn referred to is Lady Mary, the future mother of Jesus, peace upon him."

But I was surprised indeed! How could that be?

Have Arabs and Muslims, for the past millennium, been so well-conditioned that we could not even entertain the concept of a female being equal to, or (as in this instance) being favored over a male, even though we knew that in this verse the infant referred to was to be the Mother of Jesus, peace upon them both? Why have we -for the past thousand years- been quoting this verse to indicate male superiority? Why?

It was a bitter realization, looking back.

But what we need to do is to look forward.

Let us look forward to what the recovery of original meanings of Arabic words and Qur'anic statements leads to: A magnificent perspective; one little part of a beautiful, coherent whole.

Not only that, but we also restore the Message and its Recipients to our Creator's 'default,' triggering the Interactive Mode that had been deactivated: Iqra.. (but that is another story).

It is late summer in Damascus now, and the grapes still ripen on the vines, as jasmines climb the walls in perpetual bridal bloom. I am visiting with my elderly parents, enjoying their sweet company, as we all fast Ramadan together. I think of that evening, so many decades ago, when I was thirteen, and my memory registers contentment:

It was my night of Destiny.

بفضل الله

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﴿ إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ عِمْرَانَ رَبِّ إِنِّي نَدَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّي ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴾ ﴿٣٥﴾ فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّي أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذُرِّيَّتَهَا مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ ﴿آل عمران: 36﴾

ابن كثير:

"لما ذكر تعالى أن للمتقين عند ربهم جنات النعيم، بين متى ذلك كائن وواقع، فقال تعالى { يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَنْ سَاقٍ وَيُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى السُّجُودِ فَلَا يَسْتَبِطُونَ } يعني يوم القيامة، وما يكون فيه من الأهوال والزلازل والبلاء، والامتحان والأمور العظام. وقد قال البخاري ههنا حدثنا آدم، حدثنا الليث عن خالد بن يزيد عن سعيد بن أبي هلال عن زيد بن أسلم، عن عطاء بن يسار عن أبي سعيد الخدري قال سمعت النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يقول " يكشف ربنا عن ساقه، فيسجد له كل مؤمن ومؤمنة، ويبقى من كان يسجد في الدنيا رياءً وسمعة، فيذهب ليسجد، فيعود ظهره طبقاً واحداً " وهذا الحديث مخرج في الصحيحين وفي غيرهما من طرق، وله ألفاظ، وهو حديث طويل مشهور..."

Ibn Kathir did offer other explanations, but this one remains, and is being reprinted again and again. Thankfully, many exegetes excluded this interpretation and resorted to Qur'anic context and the linguistic 'Arabi interpretation. The Qur'an is 'Arabi, in a 'Arabi tongue ('Arabi meaning self-expressively eloquent) and must be regarded as such.

There is no better explanation of the Qur'an than the Qur'an explaining itself and the definitions in the oldest lexicons explaining each word's original meaning.