

The Pleasure of our Text: Re-reading the Qur'an  
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When Lucinda Mosher invited me to this conference she wrote that "all too often, women are asked about the 'difficult texts' in their scriptures; less often are they asked to discuss why they love to study their scriptures." That is why we're here on a panel titled "The Pleasure of our Text" where we will explore "the rewards of being a text-scholar" from a variety of religious perspectives.

So, I'm going to begin by thanking the Interchurch Center for opening up this way of speaking about scripture. I specially appreciate it because I've never been asked before to talk about why Muslims find it pleasurable to read the Qur'an. But, before I get to the rewards of reading the Qur'an, I want to say something about how and why I came to read it.

How and why I came to read the Qur'an

Like many Muslims, I was taught to read the Qur'an in Arabic as a child. But, I wasn't taught Arabic itself, so for years I had no idea what I was reading. Why I was reading it also only became clear to me later when I found out that many Muslims believe that the translated Qur'an isn't the real Qur'an. That is why children are taught to read it in Arabic even though many times they are not taught the language itself.

Of course, there is no substitute for reading the Qur'an in Arabic, but, to me the word of God is equally real in all languages.

Basically, then, my understanding of the Qur'an comes from reading translations of it and all these translations are by men. I make this point both as a way to note the absence of women from this field and also because I'm often attacked for trying to impose new meanings on the Qur'an in my own work. The truth, however, is that my antipatriarchal reading of the Qur'an is based on translations that aren't always women-friendly and the reason I can read it as I do is because I use the theological and hermeneutic principles the Qur'an itself suggests for its readings.

Of course, when I first began reading it, I didn't know these principles and I was even unaware of the fact that every reading of the Qur'an—even in Arabic—is a

function of who reads it, how, and in what contexts. In other words, nothing is transparent about the meanings we read into or out of the Qur'an.

I should also say that I was drawn to the Qur'an for both positive and negative reasons.

On a positive note, my sense of self is closely tied to my understanding of Islam and studying the Qur'an is vital to actualizing my self-hood. At the same time, however, the negative experiences I've had also have a great deal to do with my investment in reading the Qur'an. Some of these experiences happened in Pakistan, where I born and where I lived until my thirties. Although I enjoyed all sorts of advantages as a member of a privileged class, I also faced discrimination when it came to certain legal rights.

As we know, of course, not just Pakistan but virtually all Muslim states have laws that discriminate against women and these laws are considered Islamic. I say "considered" because in some cases they contradict the Qur'an and in other cases they play fast and loose with its injunctions. But, in the end, Muslims accept these laws as legitimate because they read the Qur'an itself as privileging males while discriminating against women.

As proof, they point to some verses that they read as appointing men women's guardians, giving men a degree of superiority over women, allowing them to marry multiple wives, giving them the right to beat disobedient ones, to inherit double a women's share and so on.

I struggled with these verses for many years because they seem to go against the grain of many of the Qur'an's teaching; for instance:

- If, as the Qur'an says, God is just and never does zulm to anyone, then why would God allow men to harm women (which is how I understood the word zulm in the beginning).
- If, as the Qur'an says, God is unlike anything created, why would God have some special affinity with males and hatred for females? In other words, why would God privilege males over women?
- If, as the Qur'an says, God created woman and man from the same Nafs or self, how was the man a degree "above" the woman? Was this single self defective and the defective part came to women?

And, so I went around in circles and couldn't find a way out, but, I didn't give up because doing so would have meant embracing a debased view of God.

When I came to the U.S. over twenty years ago, these are some of the questions I brought with me and it's taken me many years to address them in a way that make sense to me. All the verses that had so—literally—bedeviled me began to seem clear once I was introduced to an entirely new literature, not just on Qur'anic interpretation, but on hermeneutics, the interpretation of interpretation, on the role of early Muslim states and interpretive communities in shaping Islamic epistemology and methodology, and on different readings the Qur'an.

Of course, life here hasn't been all light and learning! Here I have certain legal rights but not the religious or cultural space to fully express my identity as a Muslim. And this space has only been shrinking for Muslims, both at "home" and abroad since 9/11. Most people still don't know much about Islam and what they do know is often in the form of stereotypes about the hijab, the harem, and holy war. And the onus is on Muslims to defend ourselves from the ignorance and bigotry of those who believe that because they know two verses from the Qur'an they are authorized to claim that "Allah loves terrorists" as someone said to me.

So, pain and pleasure both explain my engagement with the Qur'an, but, in deference to our panel, I will dwell on the pleasure principle today and, in the rest of my talk, speak about the rewards of being a "text-scholar."

## 2. The rewards of being a "text-scholar"

I said earlier that, when I came to the U.S., I brought some questions with me and, over the years, I have found new ways of trying to answer them. This process has involved both learning and un-learning and, if I were to put it simply, and perhaps dramatically, I would say that it has allowed me to break out of the circle of oppression created by conventional readings of the Qur'an.

For one thing, the mystery of why Muslims read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text stopped being a mystery once I discovered the concept of patriarchy. If Muslims have always read the Qur'an in existing patriarchies, is it any wonder that their readings have been infused with assumptions of male privilege?

For another thing, if reading a text, even in its original language, is always an interpretive act, why do we not question conventional readings of the so-called misogynistic verses?

For instance, the so-called "wife-beating" verse begins to unravel once we realize that the word that is translated as "to beat" derives from the root daraba that has several different meanings, including "to separate" and "to ignore." What sorts of hermeneutic and political choices went into rendering daraba as beating?

Similarly, the whole edifice of polygyny begins to collapse once we note the fact that the Qur'an only speaks about it in the context of a discussion of ensuring justice to female orphans. What sorts of elisions went into reading that as the right of all men to marry more than one woman?

Doesn't the verse on polygyny end by saying that it is better to marry only one wife so that the husband won't be partial to another?

And if the Qur'an tells us that God never does any *zulm* to anyone, by which it means transgress against the rights of others, why should we assume that God's speech teaches men to do *zulm* to women by transgressing against their rights?

And, if the Qur'an appoints women and men each other's *awliya*, or guides and charges them both to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, how have we arrived at a bald reading of the verse that says that men are women's guardians?

And, if the references to the degree of privilege that men enjoy over women occurs in a verse dealing with divorce, why should we take that as a universal statement about male ontology?

And, why should we assume that men always inherit twice the share of a woman when the Qur'an clearly says that if parents die and leave one daughter, she gets half of their inheritance and that mothers get twice the share of fathers?

And why have we chosen random lines out of three verses as defining the Qur'an's position on female-male relations when there are passages that clearly attest to the equality of the sexes. Here, I will quote only one:

For Muslim men and women,--  
For believing men and women,  
For devout men and women,  
For men and women who are  
Patient and constant, for men  
And women who humble themselves,  
For men and women who give  
In charity, for men and women  
Who fast (and deny themselves).  
For men and women who  
Guard their chastity, and  
For men and women who  
Engage much in God's praise  
For them has God prepared

## Forgiveness and great reward.<sup>12</sup>

These are the rewards, then, of being a text-scholar: of discovering that God is indeed just; that God has no special affinity with males and hatred for women, that human beings are of the same essence and held to the same standards and endowed with the same capacity for moral personality and choice.

More personally, the Qur'an tells me that God does not belong to me but that I belong to God; that wherever I look, there is God's countenance; that God is the sustainer of both the East and the West; that all matters wherein we differ must go back to God; that there is no compulsion in religion and that submission to God, to be meaningful, must be freely chosen.

That is why I look to the Qur'an to guide my engagement with myself and with others; to sustain me in times of trial and self-doubt; to heal me in the face of hatred and war and ignorance; to still the fear in my heart; to increase me in knowledge; to allow me to keep looking within, but also beyond myself, for the possibilities and promise of life, and always, always, to keep me humble in the service of God.

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<sup>1</sup> 33:35; in Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an* (NY: Tehrike Tersile Qur'an, 1988) p. 1116-17.