

Review Essays

Islam's Foundational Equality

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Abstract

In her *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Aysha Hidayatullah argues that certain Qur'anic verses are incorrigibly male-privileging and are themselves privileged. Hence, egalitarian readings of the Qur'an are unsupported and unsupportable. If, as egalitarians propose, such verses are unjust, then either the Qur'an is not God's word or God is unjust. In contrast, I argue that there is no evidence to suggest that any verses are incorrigibly male-privileging and provide or indicate egalitarian rereadings for relevant contenders and that, in any case, no Qur'anic evidence warrants the primacy of such verses. Finally, since controverting egalitarian readings of such verses are available, the logical form of Hidayatullah's argument merely shows that if they are read to exhibit injustice, those readings cannot be God's word. Since the Qur'an is God's word, there is no option but to reread them.

A Reclamation

Insofar as conservative readings of the Qur'an invest men alone with the capacity to understand and therefore interpret God's Word, they are patriarchal. A women-led rebellion, one that insists on reclaiming God's Word from those who deny full equality to believing women, against conservative Muslim beliefs has begun. This undertaking relies upon the Qur'an itself to deny that only men have the above-mentioned capacity. Two leading proponents in this regard are the egalitarian scholars Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud.¹

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Egalitarian readers believe that the Qur'an's message frees believers from the misogynistic customs and practices of the pre-Islamic era. Ranged against them are the combined forces of conservative patriarchal Muslim scholars, the governments of Muslim-dominated countries in league with such scholars, and, regrettably, a multitude – perhaps even a majority – of believers who are bound by the weight of history to the spiritual lead of such scholars reinforced by local jurisprudence and the compulsion of custom. The Qur'an, as read by patriarchal conservatives, supports such practices as denying women an education; involvement in legal institutions, politics, or governance; the right to drive or travel without male approval or a male family member or relative; and, at the familial and intimate level, male ascendancy in the home and the bedroom.

Barlas' and Wadud's scholarly works invite a spiritual Islamic upheaval, for they mount scholarly assaults upon traditional gender-favoring readings. The issues with which they wrestle are complex, as are their resultant arguments – sometimes unremittingly so.² Each scholar has faced problems with a very few Qur'anic verses that have historically been read to support a gender-favoring patriarchy. In what follows, I examine the claims of Aysha A. Hidayatullah, a believing woman who claims to be a feminist but nevertheless supports patriarchal doctrines.³ Although her assertions are cast in academic terms, the outcome of her assertions and my examination of them are as far from merely academic as they could possibly be.

In outline, Hidayatullah accepts that a preponderance of verses promote gender equality. With apparent reluctance, however, she concludes that certain verses are intractably male-privileging: Even if they do not support a recognizably modern world equality of men and women, they nonetheless support a kind of equality that acknowledges male hierarchy. She ends by offering a dramatic dilemma: Either God is not just, or the Qur'an is not God's word. We will show that she fails to provide evidence for her key contention, that select verses are incorrigibly male privileging, which causes her dramatic dilemma to fail. We will ignore the first stage of her rebuke of egalitarians (pp.1-110), which reviews the history and methods of "feminist exegetes" except to note one quibble: Her use of the term *feminism*.⁴

Even if Western feminists do share egalitarian views about misogynistic practices in Muslim countries, it does not follow that Qur'anic egalitarians are Western feminists. Egalitarians find false testimony, weak analysis, and flawed reasoning within patriarchal interpretations. They act not in the interests of "women's rights," but in the interest of liberating the Qur'anic voice from the iron patriarchal hand that has been on its throat, stifling it for centuries.

Muslim women's experiences reading scripture do not fit into a trajectory of Western feminism. Egalitarians do not sort out the Qur'an for women or men, but for believers. They raise the question of whether it may be read for equality and offer firm grounds for such a reading in order to reveal the meanings of those Qur'anic passages that have been obscured or misunderstood throughout the post-revelatory centuries of what arguably amounts to the resurgence of pre-revelation (*jāhili*) customs and practices.

Equality, Justice, and Gender

Hidayatullah adopts the posture of a Qur'anic "feminist"⁵ because, as a believer, she accepts the infallibility of God's Word. On the other hand, she proclaims her dissatisfaction with those who contend that the Word invariably supports the anti-patriarchal, anti-misogynistic, and egalitarian vision of liberatory readers. She assaults egalitarians with direct challenges (*Feminist Edges*, pp. 131-38 passim): It is "dishonest" to say that the Word is egalitarian because "it continually addresses men, not women" about sex and marriage. Moreover, men are addressed as "agents" and women merely as "passive objects" upon which men exercise their agency. Second, different Qur'anic verses (*āyāt*) tell men they are the family's mainstay and leader, that it is all right for them to have sex with their wives when and how they want, that they can beat their wives, and that they are advantaged in ways that women are not.

Consider this: If the Qur'an predominantly addressed men on matters of marriage and sexuality, would this reflect a favoring of men, an acknowledgment of their greater importance? The revelations ordained remedies for injustices inflicted upon those victimized in pre-Islamic societies. The changes left many people confused, searching for understanding. Before revelation, the stronger (men) were allowed to prey on the weaker and questions of justice were settled by custom. Patriarchs put female babies to death and owned wives as personal chattel. They could rape, abuse, beat, or even beat to death or summarily dispossess themselves of their marital partners as if they were no more than used household stuff. With the advent of revelation, however, these plaintive men, upset by new rules, their customs disrupted, and overmatched by an Almighty voice, understandably posed the majority of questions. A merciful Allah responded by addressing them, limiting and constraining their former misogynistic practices.

Moreover, it is absurd to suggest that God's voice was not heard by those women within earshot. Women, freed from injustice and realizing



God's mercy and now able to recognize and relieve their suffering, had less reason to probe the limits of this newly revealed justice. It is understandable, if rather less charitable, to note that women had less reason to complain: They "heard" what was proclaimed. Being freed from injustice is, perhaps, its own revelation.

There is no evidence here of men's privilege. There is merely evidence, understandable by all of human experience, that men suffered greater *angst* about the changes brought to their prior ascendancy and sought clarification about the limits of their roles. There is evidence, in short, that men's pre-revelatory conduct fell short of God's justice and required the Word's redress.

Gender-Privileging Verses?

We now turn to the second and major thrust of Hidayatullah's *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*: her evidence for anti-egalitarian verses. To begin, she invokes Kecia Ali's⁶ observations in *Sexual Ethics and Islam* that Q. 2:187 and Q. 2:222-23 provide for "male agency and female passivity" in initiating sex. Further, Q. 2:223 "objectifies women ... as matter to be acted upon" (Ali, p.130). Hidayatullah concludes that these *āyāt* "prescribe behavior" based on an assumption of male control. Qur'anic commentaries on intimacy "contain no appeal for female freedom to act" (Ali, p. 131); "... men, not women, are in control of sexual relations since they ... are the only active participants in determining the parameters of sexual conduct with them" (Hidayatullah, p. 135).

Let's consider the verses referred to, specifically Q. 2.187 and Q. 2.222-23, respectively.

Permitted to you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives....
(translation Yusuf Ali)⁷

They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say: They are a hurt and a pollution: So keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean. Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand; and fear Allah. And know that ye are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give (these) good tidings to those who believe. (translation Yusuf Ali).



Hidayatullah's and Yusuf Ali's readings represent those of conservative patriarchal readers. However, a careful reading of Q. 2:222-23 shows that no such behavior is prescribed. Rather, the *āyāt* define when men might approach their wives for intimacy. They address men because men, no longer entitled to take women at will and uncertain of what has been ordained, asked when post-menses sex was permitted (Q. 2:222-23) and whether sex was permitted during Ramadan (Q. 2:187).

Much has been made of a single word in Q. 2:223: Hidayatullah reads a key phrase (Ar. *fa' tū harthakum annā shi' tum*) as "directing men to approach what they cultivate as they will" (cf. p. 161). Similarly, Ali takes the verse to entail that women are "matter to be acted on" and not "agents in their own right" (op.cit. pp.129-30). Apparently both of them understand the metaphorical term *harth* to mean "tilth," which indeed is something that is cultivated and may be seeded. Presumably each commentator then construes this figurative term to mean "wife." Tilth is widely accepted in the English translations as conveying the sense of the Arabic *harth*.

But to begin with, it is simply inaccurate to read *fa' tū harthakum* as instructing a man to "seed his tilth." Both Ali and Hidayatullah seem to take the imperative tense (*fa' tū*) as commanding men to initiate sex with their wives. There are two grammatical confusions here. The first one is that context determines whether the imperative mood commands or permits. A child asks his father when he may go out, and the father replies: "Go out when you finish your chores," thereby granting permission, as opposed to commanding. Men ask when they can resume having sex with their menstruating wives, and are informed that they must wait until this process has finished and their wives have purified themselves with water. Only then may they approach, come to, or seek out their tilth (more about tilth as we proceed).

The second grammatical confusion is evident from Ali's handling of the conjunction "as" (Ar. *annā*), for it may mean either "when" or "how." However, barring a detailed explanation, it cannot mean both, for again the meaning is wholly determined by context. So, the house painter asks: "Should I use a brush or a roller?" and the answer: "As you wish" means "paint how you wish," that he is free to use either one. What is the context in Q. 2:222-23? A man must refrain from sexual relations with his wife "during" her menses "until she is clean," then "after she purifies herself" approach In any language, "during," "until," "then," and "after" are temporal in character and therefore do not even remotely mention "how" one is to approach his wife. The conventional patriarchal reading provided by Ali ("approach them in any manner, time ...") is thus clearly unsupported by any element of the context.



The religious conventions of Islam, like those of Judaism, address questions of when marital intimacy is permitted. This alone undermines the contention that Q. 2:223 ordains or implies male control of marital intimacy. Hidayatullah may believe that male control has traction because women are referred to by the figurative term *ḥarth*, translated as “field” or “tilth.”

Admittedly, tilth is soil prepared for seeding. But the husband clearly plays no active role in its preparation, for it is the wife who, through self-conscious and ordained ritual bathing, prepares herself for his approach. Since the imperative (Ar. *fa' lū*) is permissive, not commanding, and since the limits indicated by the verses are explicitly temporal, no part of Q. 2:223 indicates that his approach entails his right to sexual intimacy without regard to her consent.

The sole sense in which the husband might play a role, albeit an indirect one, in preparing his tilth is explicitly dependent on his wife's sexual agency. If a husband has cared for his wife, has shown gentle kindness and generosity (as Hidayatullah agrees the preponderance of the Qur'an's verses enjoin), his love and respect are directed toward encouraging her self-aware activities of tilling, specifically her ritual bathing. But notice that if this is how the husband's contribution to cultivating his tilth is conceived, it is utterly mutual and equitably reciprocated by her indication (i.e., ritual bathing) that she welcomes intimacy. Equally, if this is the husband's contribution, it reduces male privilege from initiating sexual contact to that of nurturing affection as a foundation for marital intimacy – a privilege that is fully and equally a woman's.

Not incidentally, this explanation also makes far greater sense of understanding *ḥarth* as referring not to the enriched soil found in gardens and available for seeding, but the “garden” of intimacy itself, in which mutual cultivation and reciprocity are found and nourished. Such an interpretation is warranted, inasmuch as Ali's concern over Q. 2:223's tilth (*ḥarth*) is a concern over an manifestly metaphorical reference. As a metaphor, tilth cannot work seamlessly between Q. 2:223 and Q. 42:20. Consider the two following translations of the latter verse:

Whoever desires the harvest [*ḥarth*] of the Hereafter, We increase for him in his harvest [*ḥarth*], And whoever desires the harvest [*ḥarth*] of this world ...
(42:20, Sahih International)

To any that desires the tilth [*ḥarth*] of the Hereafter, We give increase in his tilth [*ḥarth*], and to any that desires the tilth [*ḥarth*] of this world ...
(42:20, Yusuf Ali)





Here *ḥarth* figuratively references the rewards of paradise, which, in Islamic texts, has many descriptions – none of which refer to cropped, no-longer-living, and soon-to-decay fruits and vegetables. In contrast, Yusuf Ali’s suggested translation of tilth offers what is effectively a farmer’s fallow field ready to be worked as a believer’s reward. Paradise is not a field of enriched soil, but a serene place of living gardens (*jannat*). Neither “a field of ready-to-work soil” nor “a collection of cropped vegetation subject to consumption and decay” responds to the metaphor. That metaphor, the *ḥarth* of Q. 42:20, reflects a verdant, living paradise for those whose devotion and reverence have nourished Allah’s reward.

The English word *garden* provides a reading that is consistent with both contexts. While tilth suggests a worked soil suitable for seeding, it also suggests a land with decaying organic material and intimates its fallow state. In English, a prepared soil that nourishes those who tend it and is, in turn, nourished by them, is referred to both poetically and literally as a garden. A garden is both the area prepared and tended by tilling, as well as the living, growing, and demanding flora therein. *Garden* names that which produces living bounty, the good deeds you send forth (cf. Q. 2:223). Figuratively, it couples the fecundity of intimacy referenced in Q. 2:223 and the living bounty of paradise referenced in Q. 42:20. Tilth, on the other hand, captures neither of these meanings. Such an understanding of the *ḥarth* metaphors in these two verses belies Hidayatullah’s view and undermines Yusuf Ali’s translation. Hidayatullah claims that “mutuality and love ... are disconnected” from the Qur’an’s “guidelines for sexual conduct” (*Feminist Edges*, p. 135), even though Q. 2:222-23 provides no basis for such a view.

Using Yusuf Ali’s translation of the menses verses as a basis, the indicated changes suggest the following reading:

They ask you about women’s menses. Say: it is an annoyance [*adhān*]. So leave women alone at such times and do not seek intimacy until they bathe. After they have bathed, then seek intimacy as Allah has enjoined. Truly Allah loves those who turn to Allah, and loves those who care about cleanliness. (2:222)

Your wives are a garden [*ḥarth*] for you, so visit your garden as [*annā*] you wish ... (2:223)

Hidayatullah quotes Kecia Ali approvingly to suggest that wherever egalitarian *tafsīr* “systematically avoids inconvenient verses” (*Feminist Edges*, p. 135) and “selectively” presents egalitarian verses in isolation from their



broader scriptural context, it is “fundamentally dishonest and ultimately futile” (*Sexual Ethics*, pp. 131-32). But this is so much bravado. Certainly the Qur’an obliges one to reread those exceptionally rare verses that are selectively and perversely understood to support extravagantly retrograde pre-revelatory misogynistic attitudes and practices. It obliges believers to see that such verses are vastly outweighed by the Qur’an’s forceful extolling of marital peace, tranquility, and the succor of sexual harmony as well as to read the Qur’an as a whole as opposed to piecemeal (Q. 5:14 and Q. 15:89-93). It obliges believers directly by enjoining them “to find the best meaning” (Q. 39:18).

Admittedly, if there were no alternative readings conceivable for these rare verses relished by traditionalist readings and if one were to consistently avoid considering them, then one might be faulted. But to suggest that no alternative readings are *conceivable* is unwise. Thus the charge of “fundamental dishonesty” may be read as an instance of hyperbolic pugnacity, a rhetorical provocation. As for egalitarian readings being “ultimately futile,” readers are invited to review those commented on here so that they themselves may weigh which readings better reflect the Word.

Accordingly, Hidayatullah’s comment that “men are the only active participants in determining the parameter of sexual conduct” with their wives (p. 135) is a misunderstanding. These *āyāt* address men’s queries about when they may seek intimacy in accordance with the changed circumstances of the new faith’s required observances. This understanding explains the grammatical context that the Qur’anic verses directly imply.

Q. When may we approach our wives and seek intimacy with them?

A. Go to them (approach them) when

The Qur’an permits men to seek intimacy after their wives purify themselves (Q. 2:222-23) and after breaking the daily fast during Ramadan (Q. 2:187). No Qur’anic direction expresses and no verse ordains that only the husband can determine the couple’s sexual conduct. The Qur’an’s wisdom recognizes that in the complexity and depth of sexual intimacy, including the seeking of such intimacy, active participation may sometimes take the path of ritual acquiescence – a path that is open to either partner. Its wisdom in counseling mutuality, respect, and kindness thus envisages each partner’s active participation, even if that consists simply of a welcome accommodation.

Of course, patriarchal apologists also celebrate other purportedly “male-privileging” verses, like the notorious “wife beating” of Q. 4:34. Here, Hi-

dayatullah begins unfortunately: Because God's omniscience includes envisaging any and all interpretations of the infamous verb *daraba*, God intended "to beat" as a possible interpretation (*Feminist Edges*, p. 138). But first, any interpretation may be poorly researched, dubious, and even preposterous. It strains credulity to assert that "God envisaged preposterous interpretations" amounts to "God intended preposterous interpretations." Comparably, we would not countenance the inference that "God envisaged evil" means "God intended evil." Allah's omniscience does not imply Allah's connivance. Second and in any case, following Waqas Muhammad's⁸ painstaking research, *daraba* simply did not mean "to beat" in the era of revelation (Muhammad, *Wife Beating in Islam?* p. 71) even if it has this as a common meaning in modern Arabic.

Hidayatullah next confronts the "feminist" (i.e., egalitarian) tenet that the Qur'an acknowledges sexual difference without assigning any corresponding gendered roles (p. 154). She summarily misreads Q. 4:34, the very verse she adduces to support Qur'anic gendered roles, to assert that it "charges men with being the breadwinner (*qiwāmah*) for women" (p. 155).

That she misreads the verse is clear, given that it is a response to yet another of the men's revelation-era uncertainties: "Are we still breadwinners for our families in the (new) religion of Allah?" This question is answered: "Men are breadwinners who spend of their wealth [inherited or from employment] on their families." Therefore, this verse defines a role, limits what a breadwinner is, and provides a job description.⁹ W. Muhammad refines our understanding of this term by noting that it also is used for those believers whose just witness supports God. (Muhammad, *Wife Beating in Islam?* p. 26) Thus, Q. 4:34 does not charge men with being exclusive breadwinners for their families, let alone saddle them with this unique role. Rather, they are breadwinners only insofar as they support their families. Indeed, to read it as appointing men the sole breadwinners makes a mockery of known Islamic history, for certainly it could not have escaped either the notice of Allah or that of the Prophet, peace be upon him, that Khadijah was the breadwinner throughout their marriage, as well as her many pregnancies and tribulations. After her death, far from being diminished by her role within the family, the Messenger, peace be upon him, treasured her memory for the remainder of his life.

Hidayatullah argues that men are nonetheless assigned a gender role by default: Since they cannot bear children, they are to support the mother/wife (and child) (p. 156). Thus, she says, the Qur'an in point of fact invests "biology with content and meaning" (*ibid.*). Here she confuses anatomical difference

(a lack of the relevant “equipment”) for gender difference in order to support male privilege. No support for anti-egalitarian readings of the Qur’an is provided by observing that men, despite their inability to bear children, are to play a role in supporting mothers/wives and their children.

The Meaning of Equality

“Equal” is defined with brilliant economy in a masterful encyclopaedic English dictionary thus: “Equal: (noun) one not inferior or superior to another.”¹⁰

Hidayatullah attempts to drive a wedge between genders by noting that whereas the Qur’an invites mutuality, reverence for, and kindness to women, none of this need be inconsistent with enjoining hierarchy, that is (one can only assume), an anatomically based pecking order (pp. 160-61). This amounts to the conjecture that equality (spiritual?) may be consistent with a (corporeal) class system. However, since no convincing Qur’anic evidence showing relevant difference supports her ostensibly useful distinction, this asserted distinction is empty. What she suggests as evidence is simply not evidence.

Men’s privilege might acquire some support if Q. 2:222-23 did not guide their understanding simply as to when they may seek intimacy with their recently menstruating wives. Hidayatullah might support a hierarchy if this passage instructed husbands to ignore all of the verses enjoining mutual respect, equal rights to intimacy’s serenity (*sukūn*), and kindness between marital partners. She might reasonably argue for men’s primacy if the believing wives referenced here were incapable of understanding the ritual role of post-menstrual bathing; if the passages commanded them to assent to their husband’s imprecations; or, alternatively, if they were genetically incapable of the myriad responses and gestures available through God’s Grace implying diffidence, assent, warmth, denial, or enthusiasm, to name but a few.

Hidayatullah shares a cost with traditionalist interpreters. She asserts, without evidence, that certain verses, including Q. 2:222-23, reach a “semantic dead end.” Apparently she believes this permits her to categorize a host of egalitarian verses enjoining the elimination of pre-revelatory inequalities in worship, marriage, divorce, and family life as conflicting with *central* underlying Qur’anic themes, notably male privilege. She acknowledges a preponderance of egalitarian verses but cannot conceive of how they might illuminate and nourish the tellingly rare passages in which these alleged semantic dead ends are reached. It is as if, impossibly, Allah were confused instead of some



readers of Allah's Word lacking the understanding or the will to continue rereading it for meaning. A privileging patriarchal authority that denies equal rights to women has no Qur'anic authority, for the Qur'an specifically denies that any such differential authority derives from God's authority. Equally specifically, it never says that men alone are the managers either of women or of their families, does not authorize men to beat their wives, does not prescribe men's initiation of sex with their wives, and does not say that men are a "degree above" women.¹¹

Paradoxically, Hidayatullah asserts that her views do not constitute a surrender to patriarchy and sexism, for she merely wishes to present "the possible existence of both an egalitarian and a gender-hierarchical core" in the Qur'an (p. 172). But the contention that semantic dead ends are reached in those verses that are necessary to her case remains unproven. While the Qur'an might conceivably authorize a gender pecking order, she has not identified any of its authorizing passages – and until she does so, given that controverting egalitarian readings are readily available for each purportedly privileging verse, her claims are without merit.

Hidayatullah contends she has offered an "honest enquiry," one that differs from the "simplistic" one suggesting that Muslim "feminists" (i.e., egalitarians) stand on the enlightened side of justice. The egalitarians' simplistic inquiry reflects "a particular conception of equality and justice," one that forces "anachronistic readings of the Qur'an," one not reconcilable with the Qur'an whose "framework of justice" is not ours (pp. 172-73). Here she means to rebuke egalitarians who dispute a gender-favoring Qur'an. But even if such verses existed – which they do not – she presents no evidence warranting the claim that male-privileging verses take *precedence* in the Qur'an. That is, no Qur'anic verses say "Some *āyāt* are important, some not," and none say "The verses that [purportedly] favor males have precedence."

What is true is that egalitarian readers of the Qur'an read its teachings to prescribe the elimination of inequalities and injustices by way of seeking a world in which Allah's Justice is possible. An all-knowing merciful God could not limit recognition of injustices to a specific era and place, thereby ignoring those of other times and places. The Word of an omniscient God must recognize injustice for each and every person, for each and every moment of history. Furthermore, it is improbable to claim that a Western sense of justice has not been informed by perceptions of historical inequalities eliminated in the interest of Allah's justice. Modern, Western concepts of equality and justice are not irrelevant to egalitarian readings of the Qur'an, even if modern concepts escaped application in seventh-century Arabia. A scripture is for all times and



contains within it the possibilities of inexhaustible readings and meanings, a theme embraced by Muslim theologians ever since the very beginning of Islam.¹²

Of course, not all gender inequalities are unjust. Husbands may eat more than wives, a form of inequality. But under a morally relevant description, their eating does not deny a just distribution because (for purposes of illustration) each person's needs may be satisfied. By contrast, reading Q. 4:34 to define men as the family's exclusive breadwinners and thus precludes female breadwinners, supports an inequality that is neither supported by a careful reading of the verse nor the reality that Khadijah supported their family – a reality that is clearly available for Allah's contemplation and for that of all believers throughout history. It cannot be the intent of conservative readings of the Qur'an to mock Islamic history by ignoring it.

Similarly, reading *daraba* as "to beat" supports an inequality and is inconsistent with the earliest classical Arabic usage recorded for the word (Khalil ibn Ahmad's *Kitāb al-'Ayn*, p. 71, as cited in Muhammad, *Wife Beating in Islam?*). Instead, reading it with Muhammad to mean "to cite to an authority" squares with the prevalent and central usage in classical Arabic (ibid.), the Prophet's own conduct in dealing with a woman "left hanging" (Q. 58:1-4, and Q. 58:1-4, 4:35, which prescribes conditions for involving the authorities in the divorce process. In short, none of the exceptional *āyāt* purporting to support male privilege in function, let alone male superiority in "being" (whatever that might mean), in fact do so.

why the duplication?

Broadly, Hidayatullah, echoing conservatives who see egalitarianism as anti-Islamic, suggests that Qur'anic "feminists" (i.e., egalitarian readers) apply inapplicable modern, Western feminist concepts of equality and justice to their readings. But the notion that "modern" concepts of equality and justice are inapplicable to the period of revelation is unsubstantiated. Moreover, considerable evidence suggests that the implications of these supposedly male-privileging verses were in fact recognized as iniquitous and unjust both in the Qur'an and in revelatory-period justice.

Recognition that beating one's wife constituted an injustice is reflected in Islam's earliest history, for from the beginning this act provided grounds for her to initiate divorce. In respect to breadwinners (*qiwāmah*), no modern theory of equality need be applied to show that women of the era of revelation could be and were recognized, both at that time and now, by all believers as breadwinners for their families. Khadijah was a conspicuous example of a woman who satisfied the definition of a breadwinner offered in Q. 4:34. Further, every seventh-century widow and every independent widow since

who has supported her family is a counterexample to the traditionalist misreading of breadwinner as an exclusively male role. Again, no peculiarly modern notion of inequality is applied to point out that conservatives misread the figurative *harth* to mean tilth, which includes the further confusion of intimating a wife's availability for "seeding" quite without regard to her consent and, indeed, against her will. The Qur'an specifically and pervasively enjoins consideration, as well as kind and gentle conduct, between spouses, prescriptions that from the beginning cast doubt on traditional patriarchal readings of Q. 2:222-23.

To sum up: Islam's history, which saw wife beating as a grounds for divorce, female bread-winners, and women self-consciously active in post-menses bathing, belies the notion that the justice and equality of the seventh-century were peculiar and somehow culturally alienated from a modern sense of justice and equality. The Qur'an's pervasive and insistent enjoining of mutual respect, tenderness, and sexual reciprocity within marriage pointedly argues against a misreading of *harth* as tilth, which suggests that women are passive receptacles for male seeding. Instead, it argues for a recognizably modern sexual equality. Thus, the idea that egalitarian readers represent an inauthentic Islamic fifth column, one that is foisting modern and alien Western concepts of equality and justice upon Islam,¹³ is denied both by Islam's history and by the Qur'an itself.

Hidayatullah represents herself as "Muslim feminist," led by her understanding of God's Word, to doubt either the text's divinity or God's justice (pp. 194-97). Essentially, her position admits defeat in the face of what she takes as passages that intractably favor male privilege. There is a note of schizophrenia in her resignation as she contemplates rejecting Qur'anic divinity on the one hand or God's justice on the other. She ends on a note of wan optimism: "[I]f gender justice [does] not fully cohere with the Qur'an ... we need not despair (p. 197). She suggests that, in retrospect, her questioning may be seen as one door closing, another opening (p. 197). What door might have been opened?

The ability to pose a dilemma argues neither for its validity nor its endurance. Hidayatullah takes it **as read** that proponents of egalitarian *tafsīr* are stuck with unjust male privileging verses. So, she proceeds to posit that if the Qur'an is supposed to be God's Word, either God is unjust or what is supposed to be God's Word is not, in fact, God's Word. But egalitarian readers propose an option that allows one to escape this dilemma: Traditionalists have misread those verses that seem to be unjust male-privileging verses. Thus the dilemma neither exhausts the possibilities nor endures because the assumption upon

which it is based, that the Qur'an forces upon us inviolable but unjust understandings of Allah's commands, is mistaken.

Indeed, the foundation of much of the liberatory interpretation lies precisely in the contention that rereading the Qur'an to seek meaning consonant with Allah's justice is both possible and enjoined by scripture. So any assertion that egalitarian readers must find certain verses inviolably male-privileging comes to little more than a begging of an initial question: How are Qur'anic verses to be read? Plumbing for a gender-privileging reading does little to advance the rigid patriarchal position that how certain verses are to be read is closed, that their meaning is certain and forever fixed. What purports to be novel in her position merely repeats, without substantiation or comment, what patriarchal exegetes have insisted on for centuries.¹⁴

The dilemma that she poses fails because it does not exhaust all possible alternatives. But in any case, no believer can contemplate the horns of a dilemma that obliterates the foundations of faith. Since God is just, it is not the Book whose divinity must be questioned, but rather those readings that are apparently inconsistent with God's Justice. To suppose that the Qur'an may not be God's Word is to doubt the foundation of the Islamic faith, the Book of God's revelation. Egalitarian readings of each of the verses that she finds so profoundly unjust that she considers herself forced to propose such a desperate dilemma suggest how she may go about rethinking her view.

In the end, Hidayatullah's lack of clarity as to the form of her argument is surprising. Perhaps she means to present egalitarians with a *reductio ad absurdum*: "We're stuck with verses you egalitarians claim are unjust. If they're unjust, then either the Qur'an isn't God's Word or God is unjust. Since egalitarians can't very well agree to either alternative, Qur'anic 'justice' must mean something different from what they take justice to be." But this *reductio* is a double-edged sword. Hidayatullah may speculate that some verses resist rereading. But if she is to be taken seriously, she cannot insist that they are incapable of rereading. And so her argument comes to this: "If certain verses are read as unjustly male-privileging, then either the Book *as so read* is not God's Word or God as so understood is unjust." Thus read, her argument is a perfect *reductio* of the contention that some verses counsel injustice. Barlas and Wadud have recognized what she has not: If patriarchal readings unjustly privilege men, those readings are not consistent with God's Word and thus believers are obliged to reread such verses. There really is no other option.

Endnotes

1. Asma Barlas, *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).
2. Barlas’ *“Believing Women”* is brilliant and densely argued. A more approachable co-authored work that largely condenses and simplifies her seminal work is forthcoming (spring 2017). Asma Barlas and David Raeburn Finn, *Confronting Qur’anic Patriarchy* (Austin: University of Texas Press). The press will simultaneously release her updated *“Believing Women.”*
3. Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
4. While Hidayatullah’s primary targets are Wadud and Barlas, they also include Azizah Y. al-Hibri, Sa’diyyah Shaikh, Riffat Hassan, and others who dispute a traditional *tafsir* wedded to unassailable male privileging in some Qur’anic *āyāt*.
5. We use the term since it is one she employs, quoting her as it were, without agreeing to its application.
6. Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006). 129.
7. <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=2&verse=187>. This website provides seven English translations for each verse. The translator’s name (e.g. Yusuf Ali) and verse number (e.g. 2.187) identify the relevant passage.
8. Waqas Muhammad, *Wife Beating in Islam? The Qur’an Strikes Back!* (San Bernadino: 2011). ISBN 1461028256 www.Quran434.com.
9. Implied in Waqas Muhammad’s reading of 4:34. Cf. p.28
10. *The Imperial Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Chas. Annandale (London: 1900).
11. The “degree” verse in question, Q. 2:228, sensibly says that if a man has second thoughts while divorcing his wife and wishes to reconcile, the onus is on him (he bears the greater responsibility) to initiate the reconciliation. Cf. Barlas, *“Believing Women,”* 194-95.
12. Barlas, personal correspondence.
13. Which may be read as a subtext of Hidayatullah’s dispute with those readers of the Qur’an who believe that it proposes a genuine equality in which neither sex is superior or inferior.
14. Patriarchal dogma to the effect that God appointed men to rule over women is entrenched in the practices of many jurisdictions of the ummah. Western commentators also commonly cite it while slandering Islam.