CHAPTER 1

Constructions of Gender in Pre-modern Quran Commentaries

One day, two people were visiting with one of the prophet's wives, Hind bt. Abī Umayya b. Mughīra (d. ca. 59/679), or Umm Salama, as she is more commonly known, her brother ʿAbdallāh, and a mukhannath. As Muḥammad entered in upon the small gathering, the mukhannath was telling ʿAbdallāh, “If God grants you victory at al-Ṭāʾif tomorrow, I direct you to the daughter of Ghaylān—she approaches with four, and departs with eight!”

“Ah, I see that this one knows what is what!” Muḥammad observed. And, addressing his wives, he said, “Do not allow this one to visit you.”

Al-Māturīdī recounts this anecdote in the form of a tradition on the authority of Umm Salama, as well as a variant version of it on the authority of ʿĀʾisha bt. Abī Bakr, in the course of his exegesis of a quranic phrase—who have no sexual desire (ghayr ūlī l-irba). While this ḥadīth (henceforth, “the Ghaylān’s daughter tradition”) is rather obscure for most contemporary readers, it was evidently in wide circulation by al-Māturīdī’s time. That it had become a recognized part of the exegetical discourse on this quranic expression by the late third/ninth century is clear from the fact that the Quran commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, al-Jaṣṣāṣ and al-Thaʿlabī all recount at least one version of it, although these four exegetes all take significantly different hermeneutical approaches.

1 Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Māturīdī, Taʾwīlāt Ahl al-Sunna vii, 552. We begin here with this version from al-Māturīdī because it is particularly illustrative for the purposes of this discussion. For other versions, see below.

2 This phrase appears in Q 24:31. The entire verse reads: “And tell the believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their head coverings fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper.”

As the Ghaylān’s daughter tradition vividly illustrates, both Quran interpreters of the formative period and their audiences understood gender in ways that differ significantly from the assumptions about it that are commonly found today in North America, Western Europe, and many other parts of the world, including many Muslim-majority communities. It is notable that at no point in his discussion of the two versions of this tradition that he cites does al-Māturīdī see fit to address the question that is likely to be foremost in the mind of the average educated, non-specialist reader today: What is a mukhannath?

Significantly, in this way al-Māturīdī’s commentary is typical of the many legally focused compendia of traditions and ḥadīth collections, as well as exegetical works from the formative and early medieval periods that quote various versions of the Ghaylān's daughter tradition. Some apparently wondered about the meaning of the statement that “she approaches with four, and departs with eight” (which is explained as a reference to the rolls of fat on her belly and back). A legal issue of evident concern is whether the prophet’s command to his wives that they not allow the mukhannath to visit them in future indicates that the entry of mukhannaths into the quarters of secluded women is always prohibited. The question of what the mukhannath’s name was (Hīt) garnered some attention. But the term “mukhannath” itself was evidently not regarded as requiring explanation in these texts.

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5 Ibn Ḥanbal vi, 323; Muslim 964 (K. al-Salām); Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash'ath al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* iv, 30 (K. al-Libās) and 307, (K. al-Adab); Ibn Māja i, 613 (K. al-Nikāḥ). Al-Bukhārī also has a few versions of it; see n. 7.

6 As is fairly typical of ḥadiths in general, several variant versions of this tradition with different isnāds that go back to male as well as female Muslims of the Companion generation were in circulation. For an overview of this phenomenon, see: Speight, *A look at variant readings* 79–89.

7 Al-Bukhārī vii, 514 (K. al-Libās). For another slightly different version of this tradition; see: al-Bukhārī vii, n.8–19 (K. al-Nikāḥ). The Arabs of the time regarded plumpness as a very desirable female attribute.

8 Al-Jaṣṣāṣ iii, 318–19.

9 Al-Ḥumaydī i, 309; al-Bukhārī v, 429 (K. al-Maghāzī). For a biographical notice on Hit in a seventh/thirteenth century biographical compendium, see: ‘Īzz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAli b. Muḥammad al-Jazarī, *Usd al-ghāba fi maʿrifat al-saḥāba* v, 395–6. However, another version of this tradition (on the authority of a male Companion) gives the name of the mukhannath as Matīʿ (*Usd al-ghāba* v, 3–4). A discussion of the manifold historical questions that this tradition raises is beyond the scope of this study.

10 Although the situation was different in legal works. For more on mukhannaths, see below.