CHAPTER 2
From Unwitting Source to Quran Commentator: Gender and Early Transhistorical Exegetical Communities

“Prophet, say to your wives, ‘If your desire is for the present life and its finery, then come, I will make provision for you and release you with kindness, but if you desire God, his Messenger, and the Final Abode, then remember that God has prepared great rewards for those of you who do good’ (Q 33:28–9).” Commentators on the Quran have sought to explicate the circumstances leading up to this famous ultimatum directed at Muḥammad’s wives as well as these women’s response to it.¹ What would appear to be the earliest Quran commentary that has come down to us, the Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān,² recounts their reaction in this way:

When the Prophet gave them [i.e. his wives] the choice [to remain with him or not], ʿĀʾisha bt. Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq responded, ‘Rather, we choose God and the Final Abode. We are not concerned with this world. This present life is the abode of impermanence (fanāʾ), but the Final Abode is everlasting, and more beloved to us than the impermanent.’ Each one of his wives agreed with this response of ʿĀʾisha’s. Then, once the women had chosen God and his Messenger, God, the Mighty, the Glorious, sent down [this verse], You [Prophet] are not permitted to take any further wives, nor to exchange the wives you have for others . . . (Q 33:52).³

In this brief story, ʿĀʾisha’s response to the revelation of “the Verse of the Choice” (as it is traditionally known) adroitly brings together key words from it with a paraphrase of two well-known quranic verses: “Everyone on earth

¹ For a historical overview of exegesis of these verses, see: Stowasser, Women in the Quran 95–7.
² The age of this work is debated, and it has clearly been redacted by later transmitters; see: Versteegh, Grammar and exegesis 206–42; Andrew Rippin, Studying early tafsīr texts 319–20. Moreover, the Tafsīr Muqātil that has come down to us is only one recension (the Baghdad recension) of the several that were in circulation in al-Thaʿlabī’s time; see: Gilliot, Beginnings 17; Goldfeld, Qur’anic commentary 39–40. For more on Muqātil and his exegesis; see: van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft 516–32; Sinai, Fortschreibung und Auslegung. For a late medieval biographical entry for Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), see: al-Dāwūdi, Ṭabaqāt 520–1.
³ Muqātil iii, 44.
perishes (fān); all that remains (yabqā) is the Face of your Lord” (Q 55:26–7).

Not only does she apparently know Muḥammad’s revelations well, but in a most exemplary fashion she makes a major life decision in accordance with them.

Significantly, these words attributed to ʿĀʾisha receive divine approval in this anecdote. All the other wives of Muḥammad agree with her, and once they express this agreement, the rightness of their choice is divinely validated by the revelation of a Quranic verse that further augments their elite status. Not only are they to remain wives of the prophet, but they—unlike other married women in their community—need no longer fear that they will be divorced or have to accept additional co-wives. This idealized, hagiographic retelling of the incident contrasts with other versions of the tale that do not single out ʿĀʾisha as a praiseworthy figure.4

But although this anecdote idealizes ʿĀʾisha, it does not impute any exegetical role to her whatsoever. Rather, she (along with the other wives of the Prophet) is presented in it as an object of the (male) exegetical gaze. While the Ṭafsīr Muqātil portrays her as eloquently expressing her knowledge and understanding of Muḥammad’s revelations, her relation to these revelations is depicted as both reactive and ultimately passive.

In this story, ʿĀʾisha only speaks at the time that this incident took place. There is no suggestion that she subsequently told anyone else about it, much less that she had ever expressed an opinion about the meaning or scope of the Verse of the Choice for the community as a whole. Nor does she appear to have any inkling that her words will be quoted in connection with these verses in future. In sum, this is a story with an admonitory purpose that is also apparently intended to satisfy the curiosity of any who might wonder how Muḥammad’s wives reacted to the new revelation, and in it, ʿĀʾisha is made to unwittingly play an edifying role for the audience/reader of the Ṭafsīr Muqātil. While the Verse of the Choice itself depicts the wives of the prophet as intimately involved in “the Quran-as-process,”5 with their words and actions receiving a revelatory response, the Ṭafsīr Muqātil does not present any of these women explaining the verses for the benefit of later audiences/readers.

But by about a century and a half later, a significant shift is evident in Sunni exegetical discourses associated with the Verse of the Choice: ʿĀʾisha no longer appears as an entirely unwitting participant. In the Quran commentary of al-Ṭabarī, of the several ḥadīths quoted that retell the incident, no fewer than three are related on the authority of ʿĀʾisha herself. In the following ḥadīth, she ostensibly recounts her reaction to the new revelation in her own words:

4   See n. 16, below.
5   This apt expression was coined by Barbara Stowasser; see her Women in the Qurʾān 85.