CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN IN THE QUR’ĀN

And if you fear that you will not deal fairly by the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if you fear that you cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hands possess. Thus it is more likely that you will not do injustice (4:3).

Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great (4:34).

Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three (monthly) courses. And it is not lawful for them that they should conceal that which Allah has created in their wombs if they are believers in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them. Allah is Mighty, Wise (2:228).

These three verses—the first addressed to men planning to marry, the second a statement about relations between husband and wife, and the third about divorce and possible reconciliation—are among those most often cited as emblematic of what the Qur’ān has to say about women in Islamic society. The first is used to show that Islam permits polygamy and the second and third to show the superiority of men over women. These are oversimplifications. In this chapter I shall examine these and other verses concerned with women to provide background for the issues that came to the fore in legal discussions. One of the main difficulties with introducing material from the Qur’ān is that so much of it is open to different interpretations that it is hard to “start” anywhere: it is usually easy to see what it says (although even here there are exceptions), but frequently harder to say what it means. Qur’ān
commentaries are available to interpret every word of the Qurʾān, but they too present problems of understanding.¹

To make my start, therefore, I will discuss a number of verses about women and family life. If the verses can be understood on their own—however superficially—I will merely draw attention to them. If they cannot be understood without some explanation, I will provide a context for them drawn from the Kitāb asbāb al-nuzūl (Book of occasions of revelation) compiled by Wāḥidī (d. 468/1075).² Collections of occasions of revelation are based on the assumption that particular verses of the Qurʾān were revealed to the Prophet to guide him in response to a particular set of circumstances or events that were part of his life. Each “occasion” is the subject of at least one hadīth that tells a story, sometimes about the Prophet’s own life, sometimes about the life of a Companion. When the occasion is about the Prophet’s own life, he receives guidance from a revelation that explains to him what he must (or must not) do. When the occasion is about the life of a Companion, that person usually comes to him with a particular problem and asks how to handle it. The Prophet then answers, on the basis of a verse (or verses) of the Qurʾān revealed to guide him in the matter at hand. Sometimes several traditions tell the same story about the occasion, but with different transmitters and different details. Other times entirely different stories are told to explain the same verse.³ Wāḥidī’s work is one of the earliest collections of this kind of material.⁴ One purpose for such collections is that an occasion of revelation is “part of the documentation used by legal scholars to understand how a Qurʾānic law is to be applied.”⁵ In the verses devoted to women, their lawful behavior

¹ See EQ, s.v. “Exegesis of the Qurʾān.”
² For occasions of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), see EQ, s.v. “Occasions of revelation.” For Wāḥidī, see EI, s.v. “Wāḥidī, Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Ali b. Ṭahmād.”
³ See EQ, s.v. “Hadīth and the Qurʾān.”
⁴ Some of the translations of the Qurʾān into English include commentary that explains the occasion or purpose of various verses. Pickthall introduces each Sūra with a summary of its contents, which often includes occasions of revelation. Ahmed Ali’s translation includes explanatory material in footnotes, as does the Arabic-English Qurʾān put out by the King Fahd Holy Qurʾān Printing Complex in Medina (1410/1989–90).
⁵ See EQ, s.v. “Occasions of revelation.” In this article Andrew Rippin says of the genre: “Historically, it is not certain how the compilations of the asbāb al-nuzūl occurred. The reports may have originated within the context of the life story of Muḥammad ... they may have been found among the stock of material used by the popular preachers in early Islam ... they may have been part of the documentation used by legal scholars to understand how a Qurʾānic law was to be applied ... or they may have been a form of exegesis in and by themselves.”