

Editorial

Muslim Men Writing for Muslim Women: Ibn al- Jawzi’s *Aḥkām al-Nisā’*

During a discussion in my “CPRL 373 Women in Islam” class, students were baffled by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s (d. 1111) candid discussion of sex in his *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*.¹ I was not surprised, because many assumptions are taken for granted about medieval Muslim scholars due to their religious and sectarian reputations, cultural environments, and eras. However, without highlighting any sexual discourse or showering praises, this editorial only introduces Ibn al-Jawzi and his *Aḥkām al-Nisā’*.

Who Is He?

Famously known as Ibn al- Jawzi (d. 1201), Abu al-Faraj Abd al-Rahman ibn Ali ibn Muhammad is not to be confused with his grandson Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1256) or Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350). A Hanbali from Baghdad, he is believed to have written more than 300 books ranging from the Qur’an and Hadith sciences to history, theology, and biographical sources.

Biographical sources praise Ibn al-Jawzi’s intelligence, piety, kindness, and loyalty to the Hanbali school.² While some of them may be exaggerated, the immensity of his scholarly output and the depth of his intellectual caliber is beyond dispute. Although most of his works substantiate his originality, his lesser-known book, *Nuzhat al-‘Ayun al-Nazā’ir fī ‘Ilm al-Wujūh wa al-Nazā’ir*, is a typical example in that regard.³

Any serious study of the Qur’anic content would benefit from this source, for there are few works like it.⁴ But more importantly, it provides the unique senses and varying uses of particular Qur’anic words. For example, although *rijāl* literally means “men,” this book points out that specific verses use it to mean “men,” “husbands,” “human beings,” and “people.” Such information could help the researcher ascertain the exact meaning, regardless of what the word had come to mean in common usage.

His Opinion about Muslim Women

In the introduction of *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, Ibn al-Jawzi's remarks about the women of his day may be interpreted in negative, degrading, and other ways. But this would be doing him an injustice, as we can see when he begins to raise his concerns about women with the following words:

And I continue to motivate (*uḥarriḍu*) people to seek knowledge. For it is the light with which to be guided. Except that I found the women to be in greater need of admonishing than this group of men, due to the former staying aloof from [seeking] knowledge, and the predominance of desire over them naturally. In fact, children are raised in her chamber (*makhda*). Yet, she is not taught the Qur'an, nor does she know how to ritually cleanse herself after her menses.⁵

From the context of the above and subsequent remarks, Ibn al-Jawzi seemed more concerned with women's religious enlightenment or social empowerment and of children, than degrading them. Indeed, the entire introduction was inspired by what may be considered child labor and its devastating consequences, and occasioned logically by "female ignorance" and its negative impact. This is why he wrote *Aḥkām al-Nisā'*.

The only statement that a contemporary feminist might construe as insensitive is "the predominance of desire over them naturally." But until recently, this specific remark was a universal and uncontested chauvinistic belief. However, what should be deemed empirically true during his time was that Muslim women were largely ignorant of religious knowledge. And, as he stated, "since I found that women are in greater need of knowledge, I began to write this book to address their issues, hoping for [God's] reward (*al-ajr*)."⁶

Considering Ibn al-Jawzi's motives, there is reason to see him as a religious and social activist instead of as an anti-woman bigot. Interestingly, he closes his book with a long chapter containing brief biographical data of almost forty historical women whom he considered worthy of emulation. He claims that "even if the women [of his time] kept aloof from seeking knowledge, no era would lack pious one who would actually seek it."⁷ This also challenges any assumption that he had a low opinion of all women.

Why Did He Write This Book?

Ibn al-Jawzi's introduction is very specific and elaborate. And whether or not the problems he raised are compelling depends largely on the accuracy of his claims. Other than his own words, there is no independent, empirical, socio-religious data available to me to interrogate or impeach his claims. But the

fact that he was actually moved to write the book is compelling enough to take his word for granted.

According to him, people became oblivious of God and the hereafter due to scant knowledge and a lack of understanding.⁸ He noticed that many average people taught their children about their own businesses and crafts, but not about the obligation of worshiping God, the essentials of relationships, or how to deal with their own desires. These children would then focus on seeking this world and learn nothing of the other world. Thus, they might be influenced by storytellers who would regale them with cheap and misleading stories. They would come out insisting on doing what is tantamount to committing sins, while considering that to be out of God's generosity.⁹

Ibn al-Jawzi further claimed that storytellers might expose them to stories of extreme ascetics, because the former know nothing about the attached obligations and benefits of living in the world. Instead of earning a living and supporting a family, they might consider abandoning the world and their families by retreating to a prayer nook, where they would benefit no one. If this were to happen, he thought, it would have been better if the children had stayed ignorant, for such seclusion would isolate them by equipping them with crippling ignorance and not one iota of proper knowledge. In conclusion, he insisted: "I knew then that the source of this epidemic (*āfāt*) is ignorance."¹⁰

He then spoke of the ignorance of the women of his day, adding that they are not taught even the basic rules of the ritual prayers or counseled before marriage, especially, regarding the husbands' rights. He charges that they might have witnessed their mothers postpone ritual purifications associated with menstruation until they were ready to do their laundry. They would therefore enter the public baths without proper covering (*mi'zar*), claiming that they were there with daughters and fellow sisters....

If per chance they attended the storytellers' sessions, that would be worse (*arda'*) for them and even more harmful than displaying themselves and infatuating (or being infatuated by) men. It may also be harmful in that the storytellers only offered "poison" (problems) rather than "cure" (solutions). They only recited the words of love and erotic poetry, which would remain deceptively intact when they fell into lonely and empty hearts. These storytellers neither introduced obligations nor proscribed prohibitions. So Ibn al-Jawzi concluded that "as I found that the women are in greater need of knowledge, I began to write this book that would address their issues, hoping for [God's] reward. And I know of nobody who wrote similar book before me."¹¹

In short, *Aḥkām al-Nisā'* seeks to educate women – who would, in turn, educate children – about what he believes to be important issues that they should know. Thus it contains two broad categories of chapters: what he be-

lieved women must know for their religion and social life (category one: C1) and what they should know about issues specific to themselves (category two: C2). In other words it contains material, which may or may not be classified as “women’s issues,” that every Muslim must know. Only about 59 percent of the 110 chapters deal directly and specifically with issues related to women (C2).¹²

This indicates that, more than anything else, Ibn al-Jawzi was truly concerned about providing women with concise but comprehensive religious knowledge that would make them self-sufficient. Not only did he include the general subject matters listed in the books of traditional jurists (while highlighting and expanding those about women), but he also relied extensively and almost exclusively on hadiths for his overwhelmingly brief discussions. Below are specific examples of each category.

Legal Age (C2): To be considered legally mature, a boy must meet one of three conditions: have a wet dream, reach the age of fifteen, or have pubic hair. For a girl to be considered legally mature, she must also meet one of these same three conditions, begin menstruating, or become pregnant. As the issue of legal age applies to both girls and boys, Ibn al-Jawzi deliberately concluded by highlighting the point that, after meeting any of these experiences, a woman must be aware that she is henceforth responsible and that any negligence on her part of her religious obligations can be punished.¹³

Knowledge of God (C1): This has nothing to do with gender or sex, and Ibn al-Jawzi made no effort to claim so. But since he thinks that each Muslim must learn of God’s existence, he discusses this through observation and, interestingly, without recourse to the Qur’an or Hadith. He argues that knowing God is the foremost obligation for a mature Muslim; uses the existence of the universe, as well as Earth and the human body, to establish a creator God; and concludes with God’s uniqueness as regards His wisdom and omnipotence.¹⁴

Seeking Knowledge (C2): Although learning is not specific to women, Ibn al-Jawzi directed his brief discussion to them on the grounds that seeking knowledge is just as obligatory upon women as it is upon men. He insists that a woman with no father, brother, husband, or male relative to help her learn the obligations has a valid excuse for not learning, even if she fails to ask. However, it is better if she could learn on her own or from scholars (men) without being in isolation with them. In this case, she should learn enough to fulfill the minimum requirements of her socio-religious duties and must ask questions about that which she is ignorant and without being shy.¹⁵

Others Chapters (C2): Ibn al-Jawzi devoted many chapters to such women-related topics as female circumcision, ritual purification, menstruation, congregational prayers, the prohibition of public baths and perfume, warning

against slandering women, what a woman should do after committing adultery, and warning them against attending storytellers' sessions and befriending men. He concluded the book with a long chapter on historical women whom he considered worthy of emulation and categorized them into "ancient" (e.g., Sarah, wife of Abraham; Asiya, wife of Pharaoh; and Mary, mother of Jesus), "Companions" (e.g., Khadijah, Fatimah, A'ishah, and other female Companions), and "the following generations" (e.g., various great women of Madinah, Kufah, and Basrah).

Finally, from its content, one is convinced that *Aḥkām al-Nisā'* is an indispensable source for a Muslim woman who wants to acquire a basic knowledge of Islam and learn the necessary information about her obligations, roles, responsibilities, and rights.

This Issue

We open this issue with Malik Badri's "Cognitive Systematic Desensitization: An Innovative Therapeutic Technique with Special Reference to Muslim Patients," in which he discusses his innovative alterations, his Islamization of Wolpe's systematic desensitization therapy, and how he applied them in 1965 to treat a Moroccan patient. Badri's main modifications were to (1) ask the patient to speak out loudly when describing what she was imagining; (2) encourage her to "horizontally" imagine and speak about other scenes of comparable anxiety-provoking instances; and (3) ask her to stop talking, instead of raising a finger, whenever she experienced a great deal of anxiety.

Mohammed Hashas follows with his "Is European Islam Experiencing an Ontological Revolution for an Epistemological Awakening?" Emphasizing the questions of ethics and spirituality, he argues that European Islam is experiencing an ontological revolution that revisits epistemological foundations in order to endorse some basic values of modernity. This endeavor is described as "revisionist-reformist," for it is a continuity of a rationalist trend in Islamic thought, and at the same time updates a number of values that for centuries have been narrowed down to revealed/prescribed laws.

Next is Luqman Zakariyah's "Beyond Textuality in Islamic Legal Exegesis: Intertextuality and Hypertextuality for Codifying Legal Maxims of Islamic Criminal Law." He studies how linguistic mechanisms complement juristic methodology in codifying Islamic legal maxims from Qur'anic exegesis. He explores several relevant exegeses, shows how maxims codified through intertextuality and hypertextuality are more far-reaching than those codified through textuality alone, and highlights the application of these legal maxims to some aspects of criminal law.

We close with Mohammad Khalil Elahee’s “Energy Management, Sustainability, and Ethics: An Islamic Perspective.” Elahee discusses what underpins energy management’s ethical dimension, focusing on sustainability, and analyzes the Islamic perspective to elaborate a value-based, universally acceptable, realistically applicable, and objective environmental ethic. He evaluates the outcomes of climate change in our understanding of environmental issues and also investigates whether a difference in vision with regard to faith and the hereafter can hinder a common engagement.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

Endnotes

1. As presented in Kacia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2006), 6-8.
2. For more, see Khayr al-Din al-Zirikli, *Al-A‘lām: Qāmūs Tarājim li Ashhar al-Rijāl wa al-Nisā’ min al-‘Arab wa al-Musta‘ribīn wa al-Mustashriqīn* (Beirut: Dar al-‘Ilm li al-Malayin, 1980), 3:316.
3. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Nuzhat al-A‘yun al-Nawāzīr fī ‘Ilm al-Wujūh wa al-Nazā’ir* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risalah, 1984).
4. Such as al-Raghib al-Isfahani, *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifah, 1961).
5. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Aḥkām al-Nisā’* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-‘Arabi, 2003), 14.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. This entire section is paraphrased from his introduction, not a direct translation.
9. This is eerily reminiscent of contemporary young Muslim men turning to pseudo-scholars on the Internet who brainwash them into committing heinous atrocities while believing that they are helping the cause of Allah.
10. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Aḥkām*, 14.
11. Ibid.
12. Out of 110 chapters, close to 45 (41%) are not specifically related to women. These range from “Knowing God” to “Prayers,” “Ablution,” “Hajj,” “Kindness to Neighbors,” “Preparation for Death,” and so on.
13. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Aḥkām*, 21.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 22.

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