

Denial of Similitude: The Exegetical Concern with Gender in “And the Male Is Not Like the Female” (Q 3:36)

Hosn Abboud

1 “Binary Dialectics” versus “Binary Opposition”

The examination of the phrase “And the male is not like the female,”¹ from Maryam’s infancy story in the Quran, starts with understanding the binary concept male/female, moving to the relationship between them within Quranic linguistics and grammar in general, and then analyzing them within the narrative context of Maryam’s infancy story in particular.

The phrase “And the male is not like the female” is a denial of similitude based on a relationship of “binary dialectics”;² that is, if A is not B, it does not mean A is better than B. Moreover, the Quranic discourse sometimes addresses both genders—for example, in the story of creation—as a couple, *zawj*. The *Lisān al-‘Arab* emphasizes the fact that the duality included in the concept of *zawj* refers both to the parity and the differences between the sexes.³ Further, “the notion of male and female” constitutes the oneness of the human race, and is at the center of the notion of *tawhīd* “as a theological principle” in the Quran.⁴ Thus, although A is not B, A is in a dialectical relationship with B. This relationship, however, *may* be interpreted as a relationship of “binary opposition,” rendering the definition of female in the negative sense as “not male” and feminine attributes as not male attributes, and vice versa. This

1 Q 3:36. Except for the two sentences “and God knew best what she had given birth to—and the male is not like the female,” I use Tarif Khalidi’s translation of *The Qur’an*. Abdel Haleem translates them as “God knew best what she had given birth to: the male is not like the female”; cf. Abdel Haleem, *Qur’an* 37. Arberry translates it as “And God knew very well what she had given birth to; the male is not as the female”; cf. Arberry, *Koran* 49. Abdullah Yusuf Ali renders it as “And God knew best what she brought forth—And nowise is the male like the female”; cf. Ali, *Holy Qur’an* 132.

2 See Q 3:195, 4:124, 16:97, 40:40, 49:13, 53:45, 75:39, 92:3.

3 See Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān* iv, 212.

4 For the notion of duality and opposition, see Lawson, *Duality* 23–49.

means that the “binary dialectics” between the two genders becomes “binary opposition.” What is “binary opposition?”

“Binary opposition” implies that meaning can only be evaluated through a complex measure of the antithesis of the very thing one is trying to evaluate. In other words, literary theorists may determine a more comprehensive textual meaning by engaging in a complex measure of the antithesis of the very thing under analysis. Thus, a meaning determined with reference only to itself cannot be considered totally evaluated.⁵ The idea that an opposing relationship should be established is based on the notion that words and images are nothing more than symbols of thoughts. Roland Barthes (d. 1980), the French literary theorist, considers the implications of the sociological lens; he says that when any group belonging to one culture interprets meaning, it puts a series of binaries into practice. In turn, our own responses and interpretations are colored by this play of binaries.⁶

Scriptures depend on binary relationships between concepts. The Quran, for instance, offers a list of binary relationships that are unequal:

Say: Is the blind man the equal of one who sees? Or is darkness the equal of light?⁷

Unequal are the denizens of the Fire and the denizens of the Garden.⁸

Say are those who know the equal of those who do not know?⁹

Unequal are the blind and those who see; nor Darkness and Light.¹⁰

The inequalities in these binary relationships are between light and darkness, paradise and hell, knowledge and ignorance, and blindness and sight. The context of inequality, as the late ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 1998) argues, is between the benevolent and the malicious, faith and blasphemy, true guidance and delusion; it is not between male and female.¹¹

We can infer from the above that the quotation “And the male is not like the female” does not imply inequality.

5 As Steve Campsall, an educational writer and editor at Englishbiz Publishers, points out. See Campsall, *Binary opposition*. See also Moss, *Binary opposition* 44–45.

6 See Kanaya, *Binary*.

7 Q 13:16.

8 Q 59:20.

9 Q 39:9.

10 Q 35:19.

11 See Abd al-Rahman, *Conception of women’s liberation* 37–43.

2 Reading the Phrase in a Narrative Context

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ

The phrase “And the male is not like the female” appears only once in the Quran, in the context of a “tale” where there are two narrators, God as the first person plural noun, referring to Himself as “We” and “He” (as *ṣāhib al-khiṭāb al-aṣl*), and “the wife of ‘Imrān” (Mary’s mother) as the second person narrator (*ṣāhibat al-ḥikāya*).¹² This occurs in Mary’s infancy story, in the chapter *The house of ‘Imrān*,¹³ as follows:

Remember when the wife of ‘Imrān said: “My Lord, I pledge to You what is in ‘my womb’ (literary belly, *baṭn*). It shall be dedicated to Your service. Accept this from me for it is You—You Who are All-Hearing, All-Knowing.”

When she gave birth to a female, she said: “My Lord, I have given birth and it is a female”—and God knew best what she had given birth to **and the male is not like the female**—“and I have called her Mary and I seek refuge in You for her and her progeny from Satan, ever deserving to be stoned.”

God accepted her offering graciously and caused her to grow up admirably, and entrusted Zachariah with her upbringing. Whenever Zachariah entered in upon her in the sanctuary (*miḥrāb*), he found food by her side. He said: “Maryam, from where do you have this?”

She said: “It is from God. God provides for whomever He wills, without reckoning.”¹⁴

3 Grammatical Inference of the Quranic Usage

There is a grammatical rule in the Quran that requires *al-dhakar* (the male) to be always mentioned before *al-unthā* (the female) whenever they syntactically occur together.¹⁵ This stylistic rule is known from the inductive in-

12 See Todorov, *Catégories* 137.

13 All translations are taken from Khalidi, *Qur’an* 45.

14 Q 3:35–37.

15 Ibn Manzūr defined “the female as different from the male in everything and the plural

spection of the Quranic text,¹⁶ and from perscriptive statements in grammar books.¹⁷

Even in the syntax of “a denial of similitude,” *al-dhakar* precedes *al-unthā* in the structure of the sentence. This suggests that in Quranic grammar the male is the primary concept, and the female is a subdivision of it. To understand this rule, the grammatical inference of this Quranic expression must be made clear.

“And the male is not like the female” is a full grammatical sentence. *Laysa* is an imperfect verb that indicates negation. *Al-dhakar* is *laysa*'s subject (*ism*) in the nominative (*marfū'*) and is originally the subject of a nominal sentence (*mubtada'*). The prefix *kāf* is a preposition (*ḥarf jarr*) and *al-unthā* is governed by it (in the genitive case). *Ka-l-unthā* (*jārr wa-majrūr*) is a prepositional phrase that depends on the omitted predicate of *laysa* (*muta'lliq bi-khabar laysa al-maḥdhūf*). “And the male is a like the female” means they are not alike (i.e., they are different).

According to al-Zamakhshārī, the definite article *al-* in *al-dhakar* and *al-unthā* indicates familiarity (*al-ʿahd*);¹⁸ it refers to something that is already known or that has already been mentioned. It means that “the male and the female” refer not to the two genders in general but specifically to what was stated in “the wife of ʿImrān's” mind. Thus, *al-lām* in *al-dhakar* refers to the male that “the wife of ʿImrān” has consecrated (in her belly) to serve in the temple (*muḥarraran*), and *al-lām* in *al-unthā* refers to the female that she has delivered, not to the female sex in general. The speech is made to clearly distinguish between the female child she has given birth to and the desired male child she originally consecrated. The meaning is that the male whom she thought of and consecrated is not like the female who was born. However, the linguist al-Sakkākī interprets it: “What is missed from the expression, we deduce it from the expression; the missed is that the male is better or preferable to the female.”¹⁹ But how do we prove that this is implied in the phrase when we know that the phrase, uttered by the first narrator (i.e., they are God's words), is inserted and not part of the pleading discourse (*khiṭāb al-rajā'*) given by “the wife of ʿImrān”? And why does Quranic grammar place *al-dhakar* before *al-unthā* in syntax that denies similitude between both genders—that is, denies

is *ināth*.” Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī defines the female *al-unthā* in the entry *anath* as different from the male *al-dhakar*, but in the entry *dhikr*, he defines the male as opposite to the female and he refers to the phrase “and the male is not like the female.” Cf. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān* i, 116; ii, 464; and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt* 93, 329.

16 See Abd al-Bāqī, *Muʿjam al-mufahras*, and ʿUmar, *al-Lughā* 69.

17 See ʿUmar, *Lughā* 59–60.

18 See al-Zamakhshārī, *Kashshāf* i 350.

19 See al-Qazwīnī, *Talkhīṣ* 17 (an abridgment of al-Sakkākī's *Miftāh*).

comparison between them (*al-mushabah* to be equal to *al-mushabbah bi-hi*)? If the female is not like the male, it would be logical to first start with the female, “and the female is not like the male,” or does the rule dictate that the male precedes the female in all cases where both genders are mentioned together?

The linguist Aḥmad Mukhtār ‘Umar explains that many linguists believe the grammatical syntax of a language reflects the pattern of thought of those who speak it. Using this hypothesis, he argues that it is possible to discover some cultural features through language. He adds that since most societies prefer the male to the female, and communicate with the male on the basis that “he” has more value than a female, this inferior view of the female is reflected in linguistic classifications, including gender classification.²⁰ In addition, most languages that distinguish between male and female through an additional grammatical ending take the male as the origin of the respective word, and the female as a subdivision of it. The opposite, however, rarely occurs. ‘Umar then gives examples of literary couples, such as Qays and Laylā, ‘Antar and ‘Abla, and Ṣafā and Marwā, and contends that the converse, such as Laylā and Majnūn, and Shafīqa and Mutwallī, is rarely found.

According to ‘Umar, the Quran consistently follows this linguistic rule, always giving the male precedence over the female in grammatical syntax and in all the verses where they are found together (with one exception).²¹ For example:

Their Lord answered their prayers: “I disregard not the works of any who works among you, be they male or female: The one is like the other.”²²

Whoso does good deeds, whether male or female, and has faith, shall enter Heaven and will not be wronged one fleck.²³

O Mankind, We created you male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may come to know one another.²⁴

²⁰ See ‘Umar, *Lughā* 59–60.

²¹ In the case of adultery, “the woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication” (Q 24:2), the Quran gives the female precedence over the male in the syntax. Here, ‘Umar makes a value judgment and says “the role of woman in the adulterous crime is basic, it is key in this crime, and this is why He commences with her. This is contrary to God’s statement: ‘Let no man guilty of adultery or fornication marry any but a woman of similarly guilty etc ...’ (Q 24:3) since the subject here is marriage, and the man is basic in it, because he is the one who desires and takes the initiative for marriage, and this is why He commences with him.” Cf. ‘Umar, *Lughā* 69.

²² Q 3:195.

²³ Q 4:124.

²⁴ Q 49:13.

It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, if God and His Prophet decide some matter, to have liberty of choice in action.²⁵

The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another.²⁶

Al-Ṣafā and al-Marwā are among the rites of God.²⁷

According to ‘Umar, the Quran does not change this pattern without good reason.

It is important to note that this syntax, “and the male is not like the female,” is interpreted *on the basis of a similar syntax*,²⁸ which denies similitude between “the wives of the Prophet and all other women: ‘O wives of the Prophet you are not like other women’”²⁹ and denies similitude between God and any other creature or thing—“Nothing resembles Him”³⁰ (i.e., working from the equation that the rule is always to start with the paradigm, which here is the wives of the Prophet and God the Almighty).

4 Major Classical Exegetes on the Interpretation of Q 3:36–37

The interpretation of a group of major classical exegetes, whose significant commentaries on the Quran mark the end or high point of a theological development, is consulted in this section. The classical exegetes include the *ḥadīth* compiler Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the Shi‘ite scholar al-Ṭūsī (d. 459 or 460/1066–1067), the famous Mu‘tazilite grammarian al-Zamakhshārī (d. 538/1144), and the Ash‘arite theologian al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). The chain of transmitters (*ahl al-sanad*) of the *ḥadīth* reports, as referred to by each exegete, is mentioned, but the authority of these transmitters of *ḥadīth* is not discussed. The discussion of the texts (*al-mutūn*) themselves is of interest to us in this research.

25 Q 33:33.

26 Q 9:71.

27 Q 2:158.

28 See the gender bias analysis of al-Iskandārī, one of the commentators on al-Zamakhshārī’s *Kashshāf*, in *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf* i, 350, n. 1.

29 “O wives of the Prophet, You are not like other women if you are pious. So do not speak enticingly lest he who has sickness in his heart lust after you, but be chaste in your speech.” Cf. Q 33:32.

30 “(He is) Creator of the heavens and earth! It is He Who assigned to you, from your own number, spouses and from cattle, pairs, wherewith to multiply you. Nothing resembles Him. He is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.” Cf. Q 42:11.

Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Yazīd al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is known as the major universal historian and Quran commentator of the first three or four centuries of Islam (b. 224/838–839 in Āmul, d. 310/923 in Baghdad). In his excellent work on exegesis (*tafsīr*), *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur‘ān* (*The comprehensive clarification of the interpretation of verses of the Qur‘ān*),³¹ al-Ṭabarī pays special attention to grammatical analysis, lexical etymologies, and meaning variations, and refers to many early traditions and their dogmatic statements.³² The advantage of his *Commentary* is that it forms the most extensive of the extant early works of Islamic scholarship and it preserves the greatest number of citations from lost sources.³³

فلما وضعتها قالت ربّ إني وضعتها أنثى والله أعلم بما وضعت وليس الذكر كالأنثى وإني سميتها
مريم.

When she gave birth to a female, she said: “My Lord, I have given birth and it is a female—and God knew best what she had given birth to (*bi-mā waḍa‘at*)- and the male is not like the female—and I have named her Mary.”

Al-Ṭabarī starts by identifying the “hidden” or elided subject (*al-fā‘il al-mustatir*) of the verb *waḍa‘athā*, then gives the meaning of the verb *waḍa‘at* before discussing the two different readings of the consonant in the verb *waḍa‘at* in order to determine the identity of the speaker (whether God or “the wife of ‘Imrān”).

- Abū Ja‘far said on *fa-lammā waḍa‘athā*, it was when Hanna delivered the female nazirite (*fa-lammā waḍa‘at Hanna al-nadhīra*), and this is why He put it in the feminine (*annatha*). If the *hā* refers to the *mā* in his saying *innī nadhartu laka mā fī baṭnī* the wording would have been *fa-lammā waḍa‘athā qālat rabbi innī waḍa‘tuhā unthā*.
- The meaning of *waḍa‘at* is *waladtuhā* (I am delivered of a female). It is said *waḍa‘at al-mar‘a taḍa‘ waḍ’an*.
- She said: “O my Lord! I am delivered of a female!” meaning she delivered the Nazirite (*al-nadhīra*), the consecrated one to serve the Lord, a female—and God knew best what she had given birth to.”

31 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* vi, 333–336.

32 See Gilliot, *Exégèse*.

33 See Chaumont, al-Ṭabarī x, 13.

On the different readings of the verb *waḍaʿat*, Abū Jaʿfar sides with the majority of the (Quran) reciters (ʿ*āmmat al-qurrāʾ*):

- Most of the [Quran] reciters recite *waḍaʿat*, with a *sukūn* (gram. without a vowel), as a report (*khābar*) from God Almighty about Himself: that He is the Knower of what she had delivered, not of her saying “O my Lord! I am delivered of a female.”
- Some of the recent reciters read it as a report by Maryam’s mother *wa-llāhu aʿlamu bimā waḍaʿtu* (using a *ḍamma* as the respective vowel).³⁴

Then al-Ṭabarī gives his own interpretation (*fa-taʿwīl al-kalām idhan*) before he shares the opinions of a list of six transmitters of Tradition to substantiate the authoritative sources of his reports.³⁵

34 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* vi, 333–336.

35 “When Ṭabarī introduced sources by such formula as *ḥaddathanā, akhbaranā* or *kataba*, this means that he had the license (*ijāza*) for the book from which the passage in question was quoted, whilst when he relied on older books for which he had no firm transmission tradition on which he could rely, he used words like *Qāla, dhakara, rawā, ḥuddithu*.” Cf. Chaumont, al-Ṭabarī x, 13.

“Ibn Ḥāmid has related to me (*ḥaddathanī*) the following statement of ... on the basis of [a chain of authorities including Salamah, from (ʿ*an*) Ibn Ishāq, from Muhammad b. Jaʿfar b. al-Zubayr]: ‘When she was delivered, she said: O my Lord! I am delivered of a female!—and God knew best what she had brought forth (*bi-mā waḍaʿat*) and a male is not like a female, that is: when she had given her as a nazirite (*nadhīra*) to Him.’”

“Ibn Ḥāmid has related to us (*ḥaddathanā*) the following statement of ... on the basis of a chain of authorities: Salamah has related to us (*ḥaddathanā*), has related to me (*ḥaddathanī*) Ibn Ishaq ‘because a male is stronger in this than a female’ (*huwa aqwā ʿalā dhālik min al-unthā*).”

“Bushr has related to us (*ḥaddathanā*) ... on the basis of (a chain of authorities including Yazīd, Saʿīd,) from (ʿ*an*) Qatāda: ‘The woman was not able to be given for such workmanship (*kānat al-marʾa la tastaḥī ʿan yuḥaʿ bihā dhālik* ...) meaning to be consecrated for the service of the church (*kanīsa*) to reside in it and take care of it and clean it, so she does not leave it at any time, because she is afflicted with menstruation and harm.’”

“Al-Ḥassan b. Yahyā has related to us (*ḥaddathanā*) ... on the basis of (a chain of authorities including (*akhbaranā*) ‘Abd al-Razzāq, (*akhbaranā*) Maʿmar, from (ʿ*an*) Qatāda: ‘She said: my Lord I am delivered of a female, indeed they used to give the male in dedication for the service of God (*wa-innamā kānū yuḥarrirūna al-ghilmān*)—he said: and the male is not like the female and I have named her Maryam.’”

“Al-Muthannā has related to me (*ḥaddathanī*) ... on the basis of (a chain of authorities including Ishāq, Ibn Abī Jaʿfar) from his father from (ʿ*an*) al-Rabīʿ, he said: ‘The wife of ʿImrān dedicated to Allah what was in her belly with the hope that He will give her a boy because the woman cannot do the meaning taking care of the church (*kanīsa*) and not departing from it and cleaning it for what she is afflicted with of harm *al-adhā*.’”

“Mūsā has related to me ... on the basis of (a chain of authorities including ʿAmrū, Assbāt,) from (ʿ*an*) al-Suddī that the wife of ʿImrān thought that what was in her belly is a boy so she had consecrated him (*wahabathu*) to Allah; so when she delivered suddenly she

Allah knows best of all his creatures what she had delivered (*bi-mā waḍaʿat*)—then the Almighty turned back to her report, and she said—in apology to her Lord regarding what she had consecrated (of her pregnancy) for the service of her Lord—“**and the male is not like the female,**” because the male is stronger and better equipped for the service, and the female is not suitable (*lā taṣluḥi*) in certain situations to enter the holy (*al-quds*) to serve the church (*al-kanīsa*) for reason of menstruation and postpartum period.³⁶

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī (385–460/995–1067) is commonly known as Shaykh al-Ṭāʾifa (high religious leader of the Shiʿi sect). Al-Ṭūsī’s commentary on the Quran, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (*The elucidation of the interpretation of the Quran*), is a comprehensive work comparable in scope to al-Ṭabarī’s work.³⁷ However, al-Ṭūsī arranges his material in a different way. He begins by giving various readings and addresses issues of etymology and word significance. He then moves to a discussion of the meanings of certain words and phrases as they are used in the verse under study. Matters of syntax are analyzed and, finally, the reasons for the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) are given where appropriate.³⁸

Al-Ṭūsī organized his commentary on

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مَرْيَمَ

under the subcategories: “The reading” (*al-qirāʾa*) and “The meaning” (*al-maʿnā*).

was a female so she said—to Allah apologizing:

‘My Lord I am delivered of a female and the male is not like the female,’ saying that they used to give a male in dedication for the service of God (*wa-innamā yuḥarrirūna al-ghilmān*). Allah said: ‘and Allah knows best what she had delivered’, she said: ‘I have named her Maryam.’”

“Al-Qāsim has related to us he said ... on the basis of (a chain of authority) al-Ḥusayn who said Ḥajjāj has related to me ... on the basis of (a chain of authorities from Ibn Jurayj, al-Qāsim b. Abi Bazat, from ʿIkrima and Abi Bakr) from ʿIkrima, ‘My Lord I am delivered of a female, and the male is not like the female’ means in menstruation and no woman should be with the men her mother is saying this.”

36 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* vi, 333–336.

37 Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*.

38 See McAuliffe, *Qurʾānic Christians* 48.

Al-Ṭūsī related from Ibn ʿĀmir and Abū ʿAmr, on the authority of Āṣim and Yaʿqūb, that there are two statements regarding the issue of “the wife of ʿImrān” that mention the gender of her newborn female. First, he says, it is read as an apology to withdraw from the vow because the newborn is female. Second, proceeding with the male before the female in her questioning about her female gender (*taqdīm al-dhakar fī l-suʿāl lahā bi-annahā unthā*), because the shame (ʿayb) of the female is worse (*aswaʿ*), and this shame affects her faster (*asraʿ*), and her strive is weaker (*adʿaf*), and her mind is lesser (*anqas*), she mentions the female first so that her question on this issue is valid.³⁹

As to his saying (*qawluhu*) “And the male is not like the female,” al-Ṭūsī says it is an apology, because a female is not fit in the same way as a male (*lā taṣluḥ limā yaṣluḥ lahu al-dhakar*) and that they used to only allow males to be consecrated (*taḥrīr*), because a female is not fit like a male to serve the sacred mosque (*li-khidmat al-masjid al-muqaddas*) given that she is afflicted with menstruation and postpartum confinement, and must protect herself from mixing with other people. He quotes from Qatāda, who said that consecrating (*taḥrīr*) is—according to custom—only allowed for boys. Then he relates that *hā* in *waḍaʿtuhā* could be a metonymy of *mā* in His saying *mā fī baṭnī*.

As for the linguistic phrasing, al-Ṭūsī gives the original meaning and all the conjugated forms of the verb *waḍaʿa*, and in regard to the meaning (*al-maʿnā*) of (her) saying “and God knew best what she had given birth to,” he argues that it is said by way of exaggerating an attribute (*li-l-mubālagha fī l-ṣifa*). Next, he discusses the reading of *waḍaʿat* as either *waḍaʿtu*, with the first person singular ending *-tu* if it is to be the speech of “the wife of ʿImrān” by means of her glorification of God and her worship to Him, or as *waḍaʿat*, with the third-person feminine singular ending *-at*, which he sees as the best reading for two reasons: she has already said that she had delivered a female; and second, if otherwise, she would have addressed God in her speech—if it is her speech—by saying “and you knew best” (*wa-anta aʿlamu*).

Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhshārī (467–538/1075–1144), the famous Muʿtazilite grammarian, wrote one of the best-known Quran commentaries, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-taʾwīl* (*The discoverer of the truths of the hidden things of revelation and the choicest statements concerning the aspects of interpretation*).⁴⁰ *Al-Kashshāf* contains ideal examples of Muʿtazilite doctrine and, in this respect, “stands much more intentionally on a specifically dogmatic foundation than does al-

39 Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān* 444.

40 Al-Zamakhshārī, *Kashshāf*.

Ṭabarī's commentary."⁴¹ Al-Zamakhshārī conveys his perceptiveness and brilliant knowledge of language in a number of grammatical, lexical, and philological writings in *al-Kashshāf*.

Al-Zamakhshārī organizes his interpretation of Q 3:36 into a question-and-answer format ("you say" and "I say"):

If you ask me: How is the female (*al-unthā*) in the accusative as a state (*ḥāl*) from the pronoun *waḍa'athā* and is this according to your statement: the female has delivered a female? I answer you: The original is: she has delivered him a female, but he puts it in the feminine because the state (*ḥāl*) is in the feminine ... As if it was said: I am delivered of the pregnancy or the (*nasmah*) a female.

If you ask me: Then why did she say I am delivered of a female and what is the purpose of her statement?

I answer you: She said it with disappointment, and contrary to her assumption, she complained to her Lord because she had hoped and thought she would deliver a boy and this is why she dedicated him for the service of the Lord (*lil-sidāna*). Addressing her monologue of disappointment and sadness, God Almighty said "and God knew best what she had given birth to," in order to glorify her subject and to show her ignorance of what He had bestowed to her. The meaning is: "and God knew best what she had given birth to" and what is connected to her of great matters and to make (her) and her son a sign for humankind while she was ignorant of it.⁴²

In the reading of Ibn 'Abbās, "and God knew best what she had given birth to" (*wa-llāhu a'lamu bi-mā waḍa'at*), God's speech to her means, you do not realize the worth of the delivered child (*al-mawhūb*) and of God's knowledge of his high rank and his importance.⁴³

In another reading of the verb *waḍa'at*, Allah has a secret and wisdom (*sirr wa-ḥikma*), and perhaps this female is better than the male as a source of comfort for herself (*tasliyatan li-nafsihā*). If you ask me what is the meaning of "and the male is not like the female"? I say, it is a clarification (*bayān*) to what she says "And God knows best what she brought forth" of the greatness of the subject and its elevation. It means that the male that she has requested is not like the female that is given to her as a

41 See Götje, *Qur'ān* 35.

42 Al-Zamakhshārī, *Kashshāf* i, 349–350.

43 *Ibid.*, i, 350.

gift (*wahabat lahā*) and the definite article *al-* in both indicates familiarity.⁴⁴

If you ask me why He joined by means of a conjunction (*‘aṭafa ‘alā*) the phrase “and I have named her Maryam” (*wa-innī sammaytuhā Maryam*) I answer you: It is adjoined (*‘atf ‘alā*) to the phrase, “and I am delivered of a female” (*wa-innī wada‘tuha unthā*) and between them are two inserted phrases, like the Quranic phrase *wa-innahu la-qasamun law ta‘lamūna ‘aẓīm*.⁴⁵

Muḥammad b. ‘Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543/1149 or 544/1150–606/1210) was a master of Sunni Ash‘arism. He occupies such an important place in the intellectual history of Islam’s twelfth century that he has been called the renewal of religion (*mujaddid al-dīn*).⁴⁶ The *tafsīr*, known as either *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (*The keys to the unseen*) or *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (*The great commentary*), is al-Rāzī’s great work (magnum opus). In his *al-Tafsīr*, al-Rāzī combines philosophy and theology and often divides his analysis of a particular verse into a series of questions (*masā’il*); each *mas’ala* may then be further subdivided to present an extensive range of possible interpretations.⁴⁷ Al-Rāzī presents two opinions:

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ

The first “is said to be God Almighty” said, narrating on her behalf, “**and the male is not like the female,**” and there are two statements (*qawlān*) in this regard: the first is that her aim is to prefer the male child to the female (*tafḍīl al-walad al-dhakar ‘alā al-unthā*). The reasons for this preference from different points of view (*wujūh*) are: First, the law allows the males to be given (as *nadhīra*) but not the females. Second, it is permissible for the males to carry on the service in the temple but not for females because of menstruation and other symptoms experienced by women. Third, because of his strength and fortitude, he is suitable for service but not the female because she is weak and cannot withstand service. Fourth, the male attracts no shame while in service and when mixing publicly

44 See my conclusions for the meaning of *lām al-‘ahd*.

45 Al-Zamakshārī, *Kashshāf* i, 350.

46 See McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians* 63.

47 Ibid., 69.

with people, but the female does. Fifth, the male is not accused in the same way as the female when he mixes [with other people].

For all these reasons (*wujūh*) al-Rāzī concludes here that the male is preferred to the female in this context. The second opinion is the following: what is meant by this phrase is to favor this particular female over the male. It is as if she is saying that “I wanted a male but this female is a gift from God Almighty. The male who was my wish is not like the female who is a gift from God.” This indicates that this woman had deep knowledge of God’s glory and knew that anything God did for His servants was better than what the servant wished for himself.⁴⁸

5 Cross-Referencing with the Protoevangelium of James

Having examined the interpretations of a group of classical exegetes, it is important to now turn to a reference about the story of the vow by Hannah, Mary’s mother, as it is found in the ancient Christian narrative and apocryphal gospel, the Protoevangelium of James (also known as the Gospel of James, or the Infancy Gospel of James). To point out Maryam’s infancy story from the Protoevangelium is by no means suggesting that this is the only source the Quran may be referring to. However, the description of Hannah’s vow seems to be consistent with that of “the wife of ‘Imrān.”

The Protoevangelium is not considered canonical, although it was read in the early church alongside the New Testament. Its significance is acknowledged, since it is part of a church tradition related to the biographies of highly regarded figures and saints, which satisfy the curiosity of the believers who want to know about the biographies of their sacred figures.

The Protoevangelium’s account was widespread in early Christianity, and also at the time of the Quranic revelation, and later Muslim exegetes refer to it. Exegetes also looked for historical details, especially in regard to names and the naming of the holy figures mentioned (only according to their epithets) in their Quranic stories.⁴⁹ Finally, it sheds light on the type of vow which, according to al-Rāzī, “is in the laws of the Israelites and is absent in our laws.”⁵⁰

48 See al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-kabīr* viii, 28.

49 The Quran tends to hide the names of Jewish and Christian female figures (except for Mary) from the Messianic and Israelite periods and both male and female figures from the Islamic period (with the exception of two names, Muḥammad and Zayd).

50 Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-kabīr* viii, 27.

Al-Rāzi and other authoritative exegetes knew that the narrative was set in an ancient Israelite milieu. They even mention the names of personalities such as “the wife of ‘Imrān” (Hannah) and her genealogy. In fact, some recount the story in its entirety in their historical works,⁵¹ since they most probably knew the story from translated Arabic reference works, given that Muslim exegetes did not read the Christian texts in their original languages, such as Greek, Syriac, and Coptic, and their knowledge of foreign languages was limited mostly to Persian.⁵²

It is essential to point out that the New Testament does not include Mary’s infancy story, as found (in full) in the Protoevangelium and very briefly in the Quran, although the story was widely known. The Quran retells the story of Mary’s infancy from the moment of her mother’s vow to dedicate her to the service of the Lord before she was born, to her growing up in the temple in preparation for her receiving the annunciation from God (via the messenger). Moreover, it places Mary’s family, “the House of ‘Imrān” (*Āl ‘Imrān: The Descendants of Amram*), in the same chosen status as that of “the House of Abraham” (*Āl Ibrāhīm: The Descendants of Abraham*).⁵³

It is important to notice that, in the Protoevangelium’s account, Hannah gave a similar speech to her God before the birth of the child, expressing her will to consecrate her (future) child to the service of the Lord regardless of its gender.

I will give a short account from the scene where the archangel gives Hannah the good news (annunciation) and Hannah makes the vow regarding the child—which is closely related to the scene where “the wife of ‘Imrān”⁵⁴ makes the same vow to God in the Quranic narrative:

The Angel’s annunciation to Anna and Joachim (iv)

1 And behold an angel of the Lord appeared, saying unto her: Anna, Anna, the Lord hath hearkened unto thy prayer, and thou shalt conceive and bear and thy seed shall be spoken of in the whole world. And Anna said: As the Lord my God liveth, **if I bring forth either male or female, I**

51 See al-Ṭabarī, *Tarīkh* i, 585.

52 See Ba’albaki, *Lexicographers* 31.

53 See the verse which introduces Mary’s infancy story in “The House of ‘Imrān,” Q 3:33. See Neuwirth, *House of Abraham* 499.

54 The Quran does not mention biblical women by their first names (except for Mary, Mother of Jesus); this is why Hannah, the mother of Mary, is not mentioned by name, and instead appears by her epithet, the wife of ‘Imrān. The Quran also links Mary’s genealogy with Amram’s, which includes Moses, Aaron, the brother of Moses, and their sister Miriam (Exodus 15:1–20).

will bring it for a gift unto the Lord my God, and it shall be ministering unto him all the days of its life.⁵⁵

Note that Hannah makes the vow to God about consecrating her baby to the service of the Lord regardless of whether she gives birth to a male or female child. This indicates a clear vow without consideration of the baby's gender, although there is clear preexisting knowledge of the significance of this woman and her child whose "lineage will be known to the whole world." No traces of regret can be found in Hannah's speech about the gender of the child. Also, the first narrator does not interrupt to assert that God needs not be told by his people things that he knows, or to speak on his behalf or on behalf of "the wife of 'Imrān"; "and God knows best what she has given birth to," and "and the male is not like the female."

6 Conclusion

The question raised at the beginning of this paper was whether the exegetical views interpret this controversial phrase in a way that implies, literally, that the male is preferable to the female.⁵⁶ Before we give the answer, a summary of the relevant linguistic, grammatical, and cultural issues raised above is necessary:

The **linguistic feature** of *al-lām* in *al-dhakar* and *al-unthā*, which is defined as *lām al-'ahd*, refers, in *al-dhakar*, to the male that "the wife of 'Imrān" has consecrated (in her belly) to serve in the temple (*muḥarraran*), and in *al-unthā* to the female that she has delivered, meaning the individual child in the mind of "the wife of 'Imrān" (*al-ma'hūd fī dhihn wālidat Maryam*), and not the female sex in general. *Lām al-'ahd* thus removes any hidden meaning of the sort al-Sakkākī suggested (i.e., general preference of male over female) since there is no hidden meaning (*iḍmār*) in the grammar. And when Maryam was "accepted

55 See James, Protoevangelium 40.

56 Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī defines *al-faḍl* as "surplus over economy" and of two kinds: praised and criticized, and it is used more in praise than in criticism; "As to the surplus in terms of the self (*al-dhāt*), like the surplus of one man over another, it is accidental (*araḍan*) not in essence (*jawharan*), i.e., it is possible to attain it by earning, such is stated, 'God has preferred some of you over others in bounty' (Q 16:71) and 'Men are legally responsible for women, in as much as God has preferred some over others in bounty, and because of what they spend from their wealth' (Q 4:34); He means of what man is favored in subjective virtue, and the favor has given him strength, money, prestige and power." Cf. al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt* 639.

right graciously” by the Lord and “was chosen above the women of all nations,” her acceptance becomes one of blessing and not one of compensation.⁵⁷

As to the structure of the sentence *wa-laysa al-dhakar ka-l-unthā* and the grammatical rule that claims the Quran consistently commences with *al-dhakar* (the male) before *al-unthā* (the female) as a gender preference rule (‘Umar), in most cases where the two genders are mentioned together—even in the case of “a denial of similitude phrase” (*jumlat nafī al-tashbīh*), such as “and the male is not like the female,” where the male precedes the female—this does not mean that the criterion of precedence in the grammatical language system is equivalent to the criterion of preference in the social system. Also, this grammatical rule may reflect the social system of the people who speak the language, but it does *not necessarily reflect the moral system of these people*. The moral criterion before God as to the difference between the male and the female, as stated in Q 49:13, is righteousness (*taqwā*).⁵⁸

Moreover, while the syntax of *wa-laysa al-dhakar ka-l-unthā* is comparable to the syntax of *yā nisā’ al-nabī lastunna ka-aḥadin min al-nisā’*,⁵⁹ the meaning that “the Prophet’s wives are not like other women” is not based on the Prophet’s wives’ being preferred over all other Muslim women, but that they are exemplars for other women. In a similar analogy, the expression *laysa kamithlihi shay’*, “Nothing resembles Him,” is structured on God’s absolute transcendence and not on God being preferred to His creatures.

How did al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭūsī, al-Zamakhshārī, and al-Rāzī interpret preference (*tafḍīl*) of the male to the female (or vice versa) in God’s statement (on behalf of himself or on behalf of “the wife of ‘Imrān”) in the context of a particular Jewish ritual of dedicating males to the service of the temple?

All of the aforementioned authoritative exegetes, al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭūsī, al-Zamakhshārī, and al-Rāzī, read the two phrases “and God knows best what she had delivered and the male is not like the female” (according to *qirā’at al-jumhūr*) as God’s words (whether on behalf of Himself or on behalf of “the wife of ‘Imrān”). Only al-Zamakhshārī identifies the two phrases as technically

57 I thank Professor Wajih Qansu at the Lebanese University in Beirut for his explanations of the linguistic and legal meaning of *lām al-‘ahd*.

58 “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).” Quoted from Ali, *Holy Qur’an* (Q 49:13).

59 “O Women of the Prophet! You are not like any of the (other) women: If you do fear (God), be not too complaisant of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak a speech (that is) just.” Q 33:32.

two parenthetical phrases (*jumlatān mu'tariḍatān*) into "the wife of 'Imrān's speech." However, in identifying the two different voices in the tale, the first narrator (*sāhib al-khiṭāb al-aṣl*) and the second narrator (*ṣāhibat al-ḥikāya*), these exegetes do not say that the story is a retelling of a Christian tale.

Al-Ṭabarī interprets "And the male is not like the female" as meaning the male is stronger and better equipped for the service. The female is not suitable (*lā taṣluḥ*) in certain situations to enter the into the holy (*al-quḍs*) environment and serve the church (*al-kanīsa*) for reasons related to feminine attributes, mainly "menstruation and the postpartum period," which were considered unclean states according to Jewish customs.

Al-Ṭūsī interprets (on the authority of 'Āsim and Ya'qūb) and associates gender bias with the female; for example, the "shame (*'ayb*) of the female is worse (*aḥḥa'*), and this shame affects her faster (*asra'*), and her drive is weaker (*aḍ'af*), and her mind is more defective (*anqaṣ*)."⁶⁰

Al-Zamakshārī reads the passage to imply the importance of the future child (*mawlūd*) and "God's knowledge of his high rank and his importance." Al-Zamakshārī uses the term "perhaps" and the two terms "secret and wisdom" to produce a shift in perception from the preference of the male to the female: "God perhaps has a secret and wisdom (*sirr wa-ḥikma*) and perhaps this female is better than the male as a source of comfort for herself (*taṣlyatan li-naḥsihā*)." He interprets "And the male is not like the female" as a clarification of her saying "And God knows best what she had given birth to." It means the male that she requested is not like the female that was given to her as a gift (*wahabat lahā*). In other words, we can also interpret the phrase to suggest "the male is not better than the female."

Al-Rāzī gives two conflicting statements (*qawlān*). According to his first statement (*qawl*), God is sharing news on her behalf, favoring the male over the female, and uses the term preference, saying that "the wife of 'Imrān's" aim is to prefer the male child to the female (*tafḍīl al-walad al-dhakar 'alā l-unthā*).⁶¹ He gives five reasons for her preference by arguing from a gender perspective why men and not women are allowed to do service of this kind and why the Israelite law allows the males to be given (as *nadhīra*), but not the females. The reasons he listed are basically physical feminine attributes (menstruation and other symptoms experienced by women) and socially defined reasons (the female attracts shame while mixing publicly with people, and the male is not accused in the same way as the female when he mixes with other people).

60 Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān* 444.

61 See al-Rāghib al-İṣfahānī's definition of *al-faḍl* as in fn. 54.

It is very important to highlight what al-Rāzī clearly contests, this kind of preference in the male “*nadhīra*” “is in the laws of the Israelites and is absent in our [Muslim] laws, and in general, laws allow for such differences.” This leads to a contention with those who take this phrase, not within its original context, and apply the Quranic exegetical rule of interpreting in a general sense and not looking at the specific context (*al-‘ibra bi-‘umūm al-alfāz lā bi-khusūs al-asbāb*).⁶²

According to the second opinion (*qawl*), what is meant by this phrase is to favor this particular female over the male. It is as if she is saying: “I wanted a male, but this female is a gift from God Almighty. The male, who was my wish, is not like the female, who is a gift from God.” It is interesting that here al-Rāzī gives a positive opinion of the religiosity of the mother of Maryam, which “indicates that this woman had deep knowledge of God’s glory and knew that anything God did to His servants was better than what the servant wished for himself.”⁶³

In conclusion, the issue of favoring the male and not the female to serve in the temple as a *nazir* was well understood by all exegetes to be in accordance with Jewish norms (not Islamic norms). Although these exegetes do not accuse the female of polluting the temple—which is what was implied and in accordance with Jewish norms—they do not differentiate between the physical inconvenience of the female serving in the temple and the female’s spiritual convenience and strength to serve in the temple, which is the real requirement for the worship of the Lord according to the Quran, as it is clearly stated in the same narrative, “O Mary, pray constantly to your Lord, and bow down in worship, and kneel alongside those who kneel.”⁶⁴ Thus, these exegetes were aware that “the wife of ‘Imrān” is doubtful of God accepting her newborn female to be given as a *nazir*, but they did not justify this ruling from their own cultural milieu; that is, they did not emphasize how, in general, Muslim women are expected to enter the Ka’ba or mosque.⁶⁵

A study of the gender concerns of major authoritative exegetes in classical Islam, including al-Ṭabarī, al-Ṭūsī, al-Zamakhshārī, and al-Rāzī, allows for an examination of the capacity of classical Islamic learning and the teaching of

62 Opinion of the author of this article.

63 See al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-kabīr* viii, 28.

64 Q 3:43.

65 In ancient Judaism, a woman did not enter their most sacred temple or serve in it, but according to the customs of the Arabs, which continued into Islam, both men and women enter and circumambulate around the Ka’ba and run between Ṣafā and Marwā.

the Quranic ideals, and the exegetes' authority in interpreting issues related to gender equality in Islam.

A critical analysis of the challenges that arise from a lack of analytical gender criteria in Islamic education will definitely make a difference in modern Islamic education. Today, a group of Islamic feminist academics, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary theorists, and theologians from the United States, Europe, the Middle East, the Arab world, and Indonesia are involved in rereading and rethinking the Quran's and *hadiths'* long history of male interpretation. They are enriching Islamic studies and bringing a new dynamic to Islamic learning.

Most of the aforementioned classical exegetes are fully aware that the exclusion of the female *nazīr* from worship in sacred space was the custom and norm of the Israelites and does not reflect Islamic norms and customs. Some of these exegetes did not hesitate, however, to bring their own gender and cultural biases into their interpretations. Others, like al-Zamakhshārī, who made a shift in perception, did not push for gender analysis to confirm the unmistakable presence of ethical and spiritual egalitarianism in Islam. Indeed, the Quran does not state that the female is not equal to the male or that the male is preferable to the female in the theological and ethical system of Islamic learning.

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