

# The Story of Eve

## Examining the Crooked Rib Tale

by Zabira Ayubi

Are women derivative human beings from the primary male creation? Did Allah create us as crooked and as inflexible in nature as the rib bone? The story of creation in the Qur'an informs Muslims' theological understanding of the nature of human beings and their metaphysical beliefs. How gender is constructed in classical, popular *tafsir*, Qur'anic exegesis, often creates a contradiction: although human beings were created from a single *nafs*, soul, the key verse on creation *Surah an-Nisaa, Ayah 1* has not always been read in an egalitarian fashion. This causes not only deep social ramifications and provides justifications for gender inequality in Muslim communities, but also complicates the nature of creation in Muslim theology.

About 20 years ago Dr. Riffat Hassan wrote one of the first scholarly Muslim women's approaches to the Qur'an regarding creation in modern times. She explored the creation story of the first couple for gender egalitarian, meaning in the Qur'an paying particular attention to the grammatic constructions of verses on creation. Despite this, she argues that Muslim understandings of the

creation of women from a crooked rib are persistent because of *hadiths* that state Adam's wife, or Hawwa as she is named in the *Qisas al-anbiya* genre, or stories of the prophets, was created from Adam's crooked rib. It is a story that is extra-Qur'anic but bears remarkable resemblance to Genesis II. *Qisas* literature was largely developed from *Israiliyyat*, a body of folklore, literature, and scripture of Jewish and Christian origin, which was in circulation in Arabia from before the beginnings of Islam.

Although many scholars consider this *hadith* as *sahih*, authentic, because it appears in *Bukhari* and *Muslim*, its similarity to *Qisas* literature and *Israiliyyat* must be explored. While *Israiliyyat* remains an important source of knowledge for Muslims' relationship to the Abrahamic traditions before them and as points of comparison with other scriptures in interfaith dialogue, its use in *tafsir* must include critical examination. That said, we build on Dr. Hassan's discussion by asking why haven't the crooked rib *hadith* and *Israiliyyat* creation and human beginnings stories been scrutinized as sources with regard to their affect on Muslim understandings of creation.

“Oh, humankind! Reverence your Guardian Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain has spread abroad a multitude of men and women...”  
*Surah an-Nisaa, Ayah 1*

### Resemblance To The Biblical Verses On Creation

For context and comparison, let us examine the story of creation in the Torah or Old Testament. Genesis 1:26-27 says: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’” Although the Hebrew word for humankind in the phrase *humankind in His image* is ‘adam,’ the term suggests a male, gender inclusive plural. This account does not mention the creation of individuals named Adam or Eve and does not suggest a particular sequence or method of creation.

However in Genesis 2:21-23 we see the creation of specific individuals, Adam and Eve, as well as the order and method of creation that implies the traditional interpretation of woman as created for and from Adam, therefore secondary and subordinate: “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the

man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man this one was taken.’”

In this passage, woman is clearly created from the rib of the man. Although reformist or feminist interpretations of creation in Genesis II exist, this passage has had far reaching consequences in Qur’anic interpretation of creation via the adoption of *Israiliyyat* into *tafsir* and hadith which bear remarkable resemblance to Genesis II. *Qisas* literature was largely developed from *Israiliyyat*, which has had in Muslim memory a long history from playing as a competing source to the Qur’an, to its effects on hadith and *Qisas al-anbiya*, its use in *tafsir* of the Qur’an, and finally its rejection as a reliable or meaningful source for Muslims to apply to their religious tradition. However, for better or worse, it has been widely used for illuminating the meanings of Qur’anic verses on creation.

Despite the gender neutral language of the creation verses, such as 4:1, reading the crooked rib into *tafsir* of this verse and others relating to the story of Adam and his mate necessitate a theology in which God is not just in creation of human beings, even though justice is an important characteristic in Sunni conceptions of God’s attributes, especially highlighted in Shi’i theology the doctrine of *adl* or justice as an emanation of God’s justice.

### The Single Soul

Let us consider Riffat Hassan’s criticisms of a traditional theological view of creation in which she establishes “men’s alleged superiority to women (1) that God’s primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created

from man’s rib, hence is derivative and secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as the ‘Fall,’ or man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence all ‘daughters of Eve’ are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt; and (3) that woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance” (Hassan, 70).

Dr. Hassan’s examination of the verses challenges these assumptions. In 4:1 we see creation from a *nafs* *wahidatin*, or single soul or being: “Oh humankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women...” Here we see an emphasis placed on the sameness in the nature of creation and its mate without a sequence or specific order of creation.

Dr. Hassan says there is no indication in this verse that man was created before woman. She says “Since Arabic has no capital letters, it is often not possible to tell whether a term is used as a proper name or as a common noun without looking at the context in which it occurs... The Qur’an states neither that Adam was the first human being nor that he was a man” (Hassan, 72). In other words, Hassan interprets this verse on creation as generic creation of *adam*, a term that is inter-changeable with *insan* or *bashar* (terms that both mean human) and that there is no indication in the Qur’anic verses on creation of the sex of the first human being because *adam* is a gender-inclusive plural.

She says that “The term ‘adam’ is a masculine noun, but linguistic gender is not sex” (Hassan, 72). However, since most Muslims assume that the first human being was a male named Adam, his spouse (*zauj*) would be female, therefore associated with the biblical character of Hawwa, even though the term *zauj* is also a masculine noun. Hassan believes that the terms *adam* and *zauj* are ambiguous in meaning and order because the purpose of the Qur’anic

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Riffat Hassan.

verses which use these terms is “not to narrate certain events in the life of a man and a woman (i.e., the Adam and Eve of popular imagination), but to refer to some life experiences of all human beings, men and women together” (Hassan, 73). Unlike in the understanding of the biblical passages of Genesis 2:21-23, in the Qur’an, when “reference is made to Allah’s creation of human beings as sexually differentiated ‘mates’ no priority or superiority is accorded to either man or woman” (Hassan, 73).

She points out that translators such as Muhammad Ali, AJ Arberry, Maududi, and others “translate the feminine attached pronoun *ha* in the phrase *minha* and *zaujaha* as ‘his’ instead of ‘her’ mate, changing the meaning of the verse with the assumption that the first creation was male and the second was female (Hassan 74). Dr. Hassan says the use of the male

pronoun *-hu* in other verses such as 75: 39, *faj'ala minhu az-zanjaini* shows that "Allah's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman" (Hassan, 74). She further reads egalitarianism into the Qur'anic creation through a similar discussion on pronouns in verse 30:21. *Kbalaqakum min anfusakum* does not mean wives are made for/from you (the pronoun *humna* would mean wives), which shows that the verse does not mean that wives are made for/from men; rather it means that mates are made for human beings without respect to a primary or secondary gender.

Additionally, in the verse which describes creation in 4:1 in more detail, in Surah al-Mu'minun, we read "We created the humankind being from an essence of clay. Then We placed him as (a drop of) semen in a place of rest, firmly fixed. Then We made that semen drop into a clotting substance, then out of that clotting substance We made a fetal lump, then We made out of that fetal lump, bones and then clothed the bones with flesh, then We developed out of it another (creature)...." Even in this verse the sequence of creation of male and female is not clear because the actual term for drop of semen used in the verse is a feminine noun in Arabic and the Arabic term for another is *akbra*, a masculine singular adjective.

### **Israiliyyat and the Crooked Rib in Tafsir and Qisas Al-anbiya**

Most contemporary scholars hold that *Israiliyyat* in hadiths are inauthentic. However for the source of *Qisas Al-anbiya*, stories about the Prophets, which are seemingly incomplete or briefly mentioned in the Qur'an, the *Israiliyyat* provide supplemental details from the Torah and Old and New Testaments or from folklore. Exegetes often exercise caution as a general principle regarding the use of *Israiliyyat*: if it

conforms with Islam or does not contradict what we know in Islam, it is acceptable to quote it because the Prophet himself stated "...tell others the stories of Bani Israel (which have been taught to you), for it is not sinful to do so..." (*Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 4, Book 56, Number 667).

Given the account of creation of human beings, of both sexes from a single soul, what is the relevance of the *Israiliyyat* story of Hawwa's creation from Adam's crooked rib? If we apply the same exegetical logic regarding the treatment of unverifiable *Israiliyyat* through Qur'anic sources, then this story should not appear in tafsir at all given that it is contradictory to the creation account in 4:1, 23:14, and other verses.

Thalabi's *Lives of the Prophets* chronicles Adam as a specific human being and the quality of his creation as the first human. Hawwa appears in Thalabi's account, not during creation, but when Adam realizes his loneliness, as follows: "So God cast sleep upon him, and he slept. God took one of his ribs from his left side...and formed Eve from it...Then He clothed her in the Garments of the Garden, adorned her with all kinds of decorations, and placed her at his head" (Thalibi, 48). Here we see an example of direct correlation between Genesis II and *Qisas al-anbiya*.

Thalibi's story continues: "The Angels said to Adam, testing his knowledge: 'What is this, Adam?' He answered: 'A woman.' They asked: 'And what is her name?' He replied: 'Eve (*Hanwa*).' They said: '... Why was Eve given that name?' He said: 'Because she was formed from something alive (*hanyy*).' They asked: 'Why did God create her?' Adam answered: 'So that she would find rest with me and I with her,' for that is as God said: 'It is He who created you out of one living soul, and made of

him his spouse that he might find rest in her' (7:189)" (Thalibi, 48).

Because the characters of Adam and his mate appear in the Qur'an, in a story that is at face value similar to the one in Genesis II, the scholars who wrote *Qisas al-anbiya* found no contradiction in using *Israiliyyat* to form a commentary on the Qur'anic verse 7:189. He uses the extra-Qur'anic story to read into the verse the idea that Adam, as the first creation was man, that his mate was made from his living soul, and not from the same substance, causing her creation

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to be not only secondary in sequence, but also derivative from man, not of the same divine substance from which Adam is made. The fact that she is created from Adam's crooked rib not only implies her secondary status, but also tells us something about the nature of woman as stubborn, difficult, or "crooked."

Tabari is one of the first *mufasssirs*, or Qur'anic exegetes who legitimated *Israiliyyat* for the purpose of finding meaning in the Qur'anic stories of the prophets which seemed to have more complete details in the Torah and Gospels. Traditional tafsir scholars such as Fakhruddin Razi, Ibn Kathir, and Tabarsi all have used the crooked rib hadith to illuminate creation verses of the Qur'an and have also used the *Qisas al-anbiya* feature of the story of how Hawwa received her name.

Likewise in the popularly cited classical tafsir of Ibn Kathir, there is no critical discussion over the creation of woman from Adam's rib. In his



tafsir of verse 4:1 he says, "...He also reminds to them of His ability, in that He created them all from a single person, Adam, peace be unto him... And from him He created his wife Hawwa (Eve), who was created from Adam's left rib, from his back while he was sleeping. When Adam woke up and saw Hawwa, he liked her and had affection for her, and she felt the same toward him. An authentic Hadith states... woman was created from a rib. Verily, the most curved portion of the rib is its upper part, so, if you should try to straighten it, you will break it, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked" (Ibn Kathir, 4:1).

In Ibn Kathir's tafsir, there is no linguistic discussion parsing out the meaning of terms appearing in the verse itself. Instead he uses the *Israiliyyat* story involving the sleep of Adam (not mentioned in the crooked rib hadith) to discuss the method of creation, even though the verse here does not mention Adam by name or mention anything about his rib. Before he even quotes the so-called authentic hadith, he pulls his interpretation of creation directly from the Genesis II account, which was found in *Israiliyyat* stories, such as that of Tabari's history of the world.

### The Crooked Rib Hadiths

It is possible that the crooked rib idea in tafsir on creation of human beings comes not from the *Qisas* literature, but directly from the crooked rib hadith, which is considered *sahih* in *Bukhari* and *Muslim*, two major Sunni hadith collections. As such, we need to reexamine the authenticity of the hadith, apart from its origin in the *Qisas* and *Israiliyyat* tradition. There are six similar versions of this hadith that women are created from a crooked rib in the *sahih* Sunni collections, three in *Bukhari*, and three in *Muslim*.

Here are three variations: 1) "Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved

portion of the rib is its upper portion, so if you would try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely" (*Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 4, Book 55, Hadith 548). This hadith attempts to demystify the nature of women and justifies women's crookedness with the origin of their creation. It calls for kindness out of pity, the women cannot help but be crooked so one should be nice. 2) "The woman is like a rib, if you try to straighten her, she will break. So if you want to get benefit from her, do so while she still has some crookedness" (*Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 7, Book 62, Hadith 113). In this version, men should leave women to be stubborn and deal with them the best they can. Finally, *Sahih Muslim's* version is: 3) "Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so if you wish to benefit by her, benefit by her while crookedness remains in her. And if you attempt to straighten her, you will break her, and breaking her is divorcing her" (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 8, Hadith 3467). In this variation, so extreme is women's crookedness that it can only be subdued with divorce.

All versions of this hadith assume not only that women are derivative human beings, but they are crooked, rigid, and inflexible in nature as the bone from which they are made. The narration is on the authority of Abu Hurayra, a companion of the Prophet whose reliability even the earliest hadith scholars such as Abu Hanifa found questionable because he recounted thousands of hadiths, too many of which were uncorroborated by other witnesses. The crooked rib hadiths, as with many other hadiths narrated by Abu Hurayra, only has one chain of transmission,

through Abu Hurayra, making it a *gharib* or strange, poor hadith, the lowest rank of authenticity of Sunni methodology of hadith criticism. Additionally, scholar Fatima Mernissi has pointed to sources that show that female contemporaries of Abu Hurayra, including the Prophet's wife, Aisha, objected to his anti-women attitude, suggesting that he fabricated misogynistic hadiths.

Additionally to be considered authentic, the *matn*, or text of the hadith itself which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, must not contradict anything in the Qur'an, which is already considered to be authentic, complete, and the protected literal word of God. Thus if we examine the *matn* of these hadiths, we see that the hadith which states woman was created from the rib of Adam is incongruent with the

Qur'anic idea of creation of the first human pair from a single soul.

Whether or not one believes that the creation from a single soul is of the specific man Adam and his wife, or whether adam and

adam's mate are the first pair of human beings with both genders created at the same time, clearly the story that Adam went into a deep sleep so that God could create from his crooked rib his wife, Hawwa, named after her origin from a living being, is non-existent in the Qur'an. 🌸

Sources:

"The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition" by Riffat Hassan

Sunan Abu Dawud, Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*

*The Veil and the Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* by Fatima Mernissi

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