

CONFERENCE OF THE BOOKS

THE SEARCH FOR
BEAUTY IN ISLAM

Khaled M. Abou El Fadl

University Press of America,® Inc.
LANHAM • NEW YORK • OXFORD

CHAPTER 57

Corrupting God's Book



This Conference was founded on the beauty of the Book, and our Civilization was the civilization of books. Our way to God is guided by the Book, and we found our worth only in books. Our God manifested through the Book, and our identity was defined by books. So how can we become the corrupters of the Book and the betrayers of books?

What type of arrogance permits a people to name themselves God's soldiers and then usurp His authority? What type of arrogance empowers a people to inject their insecurities and hatred into the Book of God, and then fancy themselves the divine protectors? Of all the sins of this world, what can be more revolting than usurping God's Word, and then misrepresenting God's meticulous Speech?

God has promised those who alter God's Word unmitigated enmity and inevitable destruction (4:46, 5:13, 5:41, 10:64, 18:27). Those who say about God what they do not know or what they are not authorized to say are held by God in utter contempt (2:80, 7:28, 10:68). Yet, we live in an age and place where the word of God can be altered and corrupted,

and all the fancy Islamic centers and bombastic leaders and preachers could not be bothered to care. We live in an age and place where the so-called protectors of the Holy Sites, Mecca and Medina, have become the corrupters of God's Word.

Their arrogance has convinced them that they are authorized to cleanse Islamic texts of their contents, and become the guardians of the Muslim mind. Even the commentaries on the Qur'an have been cleansed, and Muslims remain largely oblivious to this grave sin. For instance, the commentary known as *Hashiyat al-Sawi* on *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* has been cleansed of passages that describe the Wahhabis as the agents of the devil. Even if one believes that the Maliki jurist Ahmad al-Sawi (d. 1241/1825) has exceeded the proper bounds, this does not give one a license to commit fraud and forgery by misrepresenting al-Sawi's text. Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi's (d. 754/1353) commentary on the Qur'an known as *al-Nahr al-Madd* has been cleansed of passages that refer to Ibn Taymiyya's views regarding God's throne. The cleansing of the printed text is made without any indication or reference alluding to the deletions—as if some barely literate bureaucrat sitting on the cushions supplied by some prince or king is remotely qualified to validate or authenticate the work of such esteemed jurists. But beyond editing the work of jurists, now the corruptions have been extended to the translation of the Qur'an in English and even the *hadith* of the Companions.

For five years or more now, a beautifully printed English translation of the Qur'an has been distributed for free in nearly every Islamic center in the United States. This Trojan-horse translation is found in every Muslim bookstore and in every English-speaking Islamic center. The authors of the translation are professors at the University of Medina, and the book is printed, no expenses spared, in Saudi Arabia. On the very first page of the printed text is a certificate of authentication and approval by the late 'Abd al-'Aziz Bin Bazz, the "Head of the Ministry for Islamic Research, Legal Opinions, Preaching and Guidance" (*Idarat al-Buhuth al-'Ilmiyya wa al-Ifia' wa al-da'wa wa al-Irshad*). Interestingly enough, Bin Bazz did not know a word of English, but he authenticated the text nonetheless. To be fair, however, the translation is a faithful reproduction of Bin Bazz's views with all their idiosyncrasies. On the cover of the book is printed the title:

Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language: A Summarized Version of at-Tabari [sic], al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir With Comments from Sahih al-Bukhari Summarized in One Volume.

The impression created by this translation is that the reader is not only receiving the insights of the authors as to the meaning of the Qur'an, but is also receiving the insights and implicit endorsement of the text by the esteemed classical scholars al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, and Bukhari. In the text, the original Arabic is printed in one column, and on the opposite column is an attempt at a verse-to-verse English rendition of the Arabic text. At the bottom of the page, there are *hadith*-reports purporting to explain and elucidate upon the text. But the liberties taken with the so-called interpretation of the Arabic is nothing short of frightening.

The English text has all the appearances of a translation. This appearance is only confirmed by the fact that the regular English text is full of interjections placed within parenthesis, and these parenthetical interjections purport to be elaborations clarifying the meaning of the translated text. A reader who does not know Arabic is left with the unmistakable impression that what is within parenthesis is a natural elaboration upon the intended meaning of the Divine text.

To demonstrate the corruptions of the text, we will consider a few examples. The authors translated *Surat al-Ahzab* (33), verse 59, in the following way:

O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies (i.e. screen themselves completely except the eyes or one eye to see the way). That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed. And Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

In the above translation, the authors assert that God's command is that women should cloak themselves in a large veil, and cover everything except one or two eyes. The authors liberally equate a cloak to a veil and, according to the authors, God explicitly mandates that the cloaks or veils be drawn over a woman's entire body. The authors' assertions are indefensible in light of what the Arabic actually says. A conservative and literal translation of the first quoted verse (33:59) would read:

O' Prophet tell your wives, daughters, and the women of the believers to lower (or possibly, draw upon themselves) their garments. This is better so that they will not be known and molested. And, God is forgiving and merciful.

The operative words in the Arabic text are *yudnina 'alayhinna min jalabibihinna*. This could mean either "lower their garments" or "draw their garments closer to their bodies." *Jalabibihinna* literally means "their garments." A *jilbab*, singular form of *jalabib*, is a garment worn on the body, and not a veil. A *jilbab* is a garment, like a dress or Arab robe, which has stitches and threads. A single piece of cloth like a *chador* or *'abaya*, which some women wrap around their bodies in the modern age, would not normally be called a *jilbab*. *Yudnina*, literally, means to bring closer or to lower something, in this case a garb. Therefore, one can interpret this verse to require the covering of the legs, or a more vigilant covering of the torso or, simply, modesty, but the original text does not support the authors' rendition into English.

Muslim jurists have disagreed on the meaning of this verse. Some argued that it mandates the covering of the legs or bosom. The majority asserted that it requires the covering of the full body except the face, hands, and feet. A minority view held by 'Ubayda al-Salmani and Ibn 'Abbas maintained that the verse exhorts women to cover their faces. Importantly, however, the reports about Ibn 'Abbas's views are not consistent. Some reports claim that he did not believe the face or hands should be covered. A number of the jurists who held the minority view argued that women are asked to cover their faces and hands not because it is a religious obligation but because of the advisability of distinguishing between free and slave women. This point about the distinction between free and slave women raises a very important issue about the way this verse should be understood. Nearly all the commentators agreed that this verse was revealed to protect women from molestation. These commentators state that there was a group of young and corrupt men in Medina who harassed and sometimes molested women at night. Apparently, these men targeted only slaves and not free women. They distinguished a slave from a free woman by the cloth they wore; if the woman wore a *jilbab*, they assumed she was free and left her alone, and if she did not, they

assumed she was a slave and harassed her. The commentators state that in response to this problem, these verses were revealed with the specific purpose of responding to this particular problem. Consequently, many jurists argued that the *'illa* (operative cause) for the *jilbab* is to address this specific type of problem. Therefore, many of those who claim that the *jilbab* should cover the face also hinge the analysis on the operative cause of the law, and argue that this law is relevant only if there is an issue involving the distinction between slave and free women, and a problem involving harassment and molestation. If this particular type of problem does not exist, the exhortations of the verse are not pertinent.

It is quite possible to distill from this analysis a general moral call for modesty and a principle of safe conduct. It is possible to argue that these particular verses are establishing social norms of modesty and self-restraint. Relying partly on this verse, the majority of premodern jurists argued that the *'awra* (private parts that must be covered) of a slave girl is different from the *'awra* of a free woman. They maintained that the *'awra* of a free woman is her whole body except her face and hands, and many jurists added the feet. This means that a free woman should cover everything except the face and hands and, perhaps, the feet. But the jurists asserted that a slave-girl does not have to cover her hair, neck, arms, and some even added the chest. This, of course, raises the question: What is the basis for this distinction? Is the hair, arms, or chest of a slave-girl less capable of inducing seduction than that of a free woman? The response cannot be in the affirmative; the body parts of a slave-girl are no less enticing than their counterparts in a free woman. The response largely depends on social norms. The social norms of the time did not consider it immodest for slave-girls to leave their hair uncovered, while it was considered shameful for a free woman not to have a *jilbab* that would cover her body and perhaps a part of the hair. This raises the larger questions: To what extent is this Qur'anic verse addressing a particular social institution, and to what extent can this verse be generalized beyond its specific social assumptions. One way to generalize the verse is to extract or distill the fundamental moral and normative values that are affirmed by this verse, and, in essence, these values seem to emphasize modesty and safety of conduct. This point is open to debate. For our purposes, however, the

most significant point is that this verse raises some rather complex issues that merit reflection and study. But by forcing a single and quite specific narrow minority view upon the verse is, without a doubt, a corruption of God's word. The authors quite intentionally limit the text to a singular meaning that is designed to cater to whatever prejudices they have toward women.

In a similar example and on the same subject of veiling and women, the authors translate *Surat al-Nur* (24), verse 31, as follows:

...And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc.) and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent (like palms of hands or one eye or both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer dress like veil, gloves, head-cover, apron, etc.) and to draw their veils all over *juyubihinna* (i.e., their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms etc.) and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers...

But a literal and more honest translation of the above quoted text would read:

And say to the believing women to lower their gaze, and guard their private parts, and that they should not display their adornments except what would ordinarily appear. And, that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and that they should not display their beauty except to their husbands...

The Qur'anic Arabic instructs that women should take their *khimars* and cover their *jayb* (pl. *juyub*). The Arabic is *wal yadribna bi khumurihinna 'ala juyubihinna*, which means that women should take their *khimars* and strike with it or place it upon their bosoms. According to the authoritative lexicon of *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur (d. 711/1311), a *khimar* is a piece of cloth that is worn on the head. A man's turban may be called a *khimar* as well, and a man wearing a turban may be called a *mukhtamir*. A *jayb* is the bosom of a human being. It could also be where the neck and chest meet or the beginning of the cleavage area on a woman's chest. Furthermore, a shirt, garment, or pocket may be called *jayb* as well. The jurists add that the *khimar* was a cloth worn by women in pre-Islamic times on the neck and that it was normally thrown toward the back leaving the

head and chest exposed. The verse apparently instructs that the piece of cloth normally worn on the head (the *khimar*) or neck be made to cover the bosom or to descend down to the point of touching the cloth. Commentators on the Qur'an repeatedly emphasize that women in Mecca and Medina were in the habit of exposing all or most their chests, even if their hair was covered. Consequently, it is quite possible that the point of the revelation was to call upon women to cover their chests. But whatever the case may be, nothing in the verse indicates that the *khimar* is to cover the face or hands. If the verse intended that the face be covered, it would have stated *wal yadribna bi khumurihinna 'ala wujuhihinna* (instruct them to place the *khimar* on their faces). But the verse does not allude or refer to the face in any way. In fact, what partially covers the face is usually referred to as *niqab*, and what covers the head is normally referred to as *khimar*. But the Qur'anic verse does not use the word *niqab* anywhere. Although the verse does not explicitly require the covering of the hair, it is possible to argue that the verse assumes it. But to extract more than that from this verse requires an incredulous degree of creative reconstructionism at best, or arrogant and malicious misogyny at worst.

One should also note that the verse states that women should not display their adornments except what would normally appear. The Arabic is *illa ma dhahara minha*, which is an ambiguous phrase. The closest rendering in English of this phrase is: "that which appears," or "that which would normally appear." This phrasing leaves open the question of whether customs or social standards may influence notions of propriety and modesty. The vast majority of Muslim jurists asserted that the phrase "what would normally appear" refers to two distinct elements, the first is *'urf* or *'ada* (custom and established practice) and the second is *haraj* (hardship). Meaning, this phrase refers to what are admittedly adornments, and perhaps objects of enticement, but they are adornments that do not have to be covered because they "normally appear" either as a matter of custom or because they need to appear to avoid and alleviate potential hardship. Therefore, jurists such as Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi (d. 754/1353) and al-Razi (d. 606/1210) explain that the operative legal inquiry is: What normally appears as a matter of practice, what needs to appear so that the law will not impose undue hardship, and how can



these two elements be accommodated within the bounds of modesty? Modesty does not mean removing all forms of adornments or enticements. One, that is not possible without excluding women entirely from society, and two, the Qur'an acknowledges that certain adornments (*zinaḥ*) are permitted to appear. Modesty, at a minimum, does mean lowering one's garment and covering the bosom area. Most Muslim jurists concluded, from this discussion, that the face and hands are adornments that do not have to be covered because it would create hardship to ask that they be covered, and because established social practices do not necessitate that they be covered. Some jurists evaluating these same types of considerations allowed the appearance of the ears, the forearms, the neck, the feet, or anything one-half of an arm's length below the knee. Other jurists argued that since the *'awra* of a woman in prayer or *ihram* is the face, hands, and feet, in all circumstances, only these body parts may appear. A significant number of jurists thought that the comparison to *'ibadat* is not relevant to the issue of determining which adornments may appear. The rules of modesty in *'ibadat* involve a very different set of issues than those involved in determining established social practice and hardship. Some jurists such as Sa'id Ibn Jubayr (d. 95/714) disfavored exposing the hair although they did not consider the hair to be part of a woman's *'awra*. The majority of jurists argued that the hair is part of the *'awra* of a free woman but not a slave-girl.

As mentioned above, the distinction between the rules of modesty for slave-girls and free women is rather significant. Perhaps because slave-girls lived active social and economic lives, the vast majority of jurists concluded that slaves did not need to cover their hair, arms or anything below the knees. Some went as far as saying the chest of a slave-girl did not need to be covered, but this seems to be in direct contradiction with the Qur'anic verse discussed above. Much of the distinction in the case of slave-girls seems to rely on the appraisal of the twin elements of established social practice and hardship. Relying on their evaluation of these two elements, the jurists concluded that the adornments of slave-girls that could appear were very different than those of free women. Interestingly, a rather small minority of jurists argued that the rules for poor women who need to lead economically active lives were the same as those for slave-girls.

Today, the distinction between free women and slave-girls, to say the least, is spurious, and the whole issue needs to be re-analyzed. Established social practices and hardship connote moral imperatives, but the factual identification of either of these elements is an empirical, not just a textual, matter. In other words, if the law incorporates two distinct normative values, the first of which is the established social practice and the second of which is the removal of hardship, these two normative values need to be balanced against the requirement of modesty. But determining what is, in fact, an established social practice or a source of hardship is an empirical factual question that is subject to re-evaluation and re-examination as the circumstances dictate in different times and places. The input and testimony of women as to what constitutes hardship in today's environment is crucial. Put differently, men cannot simply assume to know what should "normally appear" of a woman's adornment. This is a matter where those most concerned (i.e., women) must have a clear and decisive voice. There is no question that various textual sources establish the outer parameters of this negotiative process—for instance, the chest or anything above the knee may not appear. However, within the outer parameters there is room for negotiation, re-evaluation, and analysis. Most importantly, the Qur'an does not demand or expect that all sources of *fitna* (enticement) be eradicated in society. The Qur'an balances the various interests and rights, and unlike our dismissive friends, the Qur'an does not expect women to bear the full burden of modesty. The weakness of men cannot be the source of hardship and suffering for women, and any approach that does not acknowledge this fact, in my view, is not true to the spirit or letter of the Qur'an.

The authors of the translation, however, seem to be working under a very different set of assumptions. They seem to be under the misimpression that the Qur'an aims to eradicate all sources of enticement in society, and that women should bear the brunt of the burden in this process. Hence, women should be covered from head to toe except perhaps for one roaming eye, and men may happily prance around undisturbed by delectable female parts. Worst of all, this fundamentally male-indulgent view is presented as God's unquestionable truth. The only truth here is that the authors simply forced the idiosyncrasies of their own culture

upon God's text. Consequently, none of the richness and equanimity of the text is reflected in their translation. Rather, the text is made to represent and embody their authoritarian and despotic constructions.

The text of the translation does not give any indication that the absurd renderings of the Divine Text are a result of the idiosyncrasies of the Wahhabi authors. In fact, the authors attempt to confirm the impression of the immutability of their renderings by twice quoting a tradition as a footnote to the above quoted verses. The footnote says:

Narrated Safiya bint Shaiba [sic.]: 'Aisha used to say: "When (the verse): 'They should draw their veils over their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms,' was revealed, (the ladies) cut their waist sheets at the edges and covered their faces with the cut pieces." (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Vol. 6, *Hadith* No. 282).

The truly shocking realization for anyone with a command of the Arabic language is the shameless dishonesty and the remarkable liberties taken with translating this *hadith*. The authors' translation of the statement attributed to 'Aisha (d. 58/678), the Prophet's wife, and reported by Bukhari is nothing short of an outright misrepresentation. The original in Bukhari states that when verse 24:31 was revealed, 'Aisha said: "[The women] took their garments and tore pieces of cloth from the edges and *yaakhsamarna biha*." *Yaakhsamarna biha* means that the women took the pieces torn from their garments and wore them as a *khimar*, and, as mentioned above, a *khimar* could be a piece of cloth worn on the head. So, presumably, the women wore the pieces torn from their garments on their heads. Another version of the same report, also in Bukhari, provides that only the women of the migrants from Mecca (*al-muhajirin*) were quick to comply. Other versions of the same tradition, reported elsewhere, state that the women of the Ansar were the ones who promptly complied. In either case, the original Arabic does not in any way indicate that the veils were worn on the face. The most one can understand from 'Aisha's tradition is that women covered their heads. But one cannot help but wonder, if the women cut a big enough piece from the edges of their skirts to cover their heads and faces, did this mean that these women left their legs exposed? In any case, the authenticity of this tradition, with its many versions, has been questioned, and some versions indicate that the

response of the women in Medina was to cover their bosoms.

In yet another example, and there are many examples, of corrupting the text, verse 4:34 was translated in the following fashion:

Men are the maintainers of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient (to Allah and to their husbands), and guard in the husband's absence what Allah orders them to guard (e.g. their chastity, their husband's property, etc). As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly, if it is useful)...

The original in Arabic does not refer to husbands as the recipient of women's obedience. The original talks about women who are pious, humble before God, and observant of God's commands. The corrupted text not only inserts a reference to husbands, but also equates obedience to husbands with obedience to God. Furthermore, the translation leaves the reader with the distinct impression that husbands may punish their wives for what, in the husband's judgment, constitutes "ill-conduct." This leads to a separate discussion all together. Why are husbands, as a category, given full authority to act as judge, jury, and executioner against women for what they alone deem as "ill-conduct"? What if a husband is less pious than the wife? Furthermore, the word used in the original is *nushuz*, which means a serious deviation or gross misconduct and, in either case, the verse does not authorize husbands to beat their wives. The word *azwaj* (husbands) is not mentioned in God's text and, as explained earlier in the *Conference*, the verse is talking about gross sexual misconduct, which is distinct from other types of "ill-conduct," particularly from the purview of Islamic law.

The Noble Qur'an translation/interpretation of the Qur'an is widely distributed in the United States. According to this translation, God commanded that women cover their faces, necks, bosoms, arms, legs, and hands. Furthermore, the reader is informed that God commanded devout obedience to God's self, and then mandated the same type of obedience for husbands. From the gross liberties taken in translating the text, apparently the translators believe that God wishes women to be like

house-broken dogs—loyal, timid, sweet, and obedient. One can only ponder, what type of rotted and foul soul imagines that God wishes to imprison women in a sewer of squalid male egos, and suffer because men cannot control their libidos? What an ugly picture they have created of God's compassion and mercy.

According to the translators, God ordered the veil, and the veil must cover the face, except one or two eyes, and only the palms of the hands may appear. The eyes are not supposed to be covered, apparently as a concession to women, so that they may be able to walk. What if a woman had a seeing-eye dog—would she need to cover her eyes as well? But, of course, dogs are devilish abominations in Wahhabi thought, and so perhaps a woman could hire a slave to guide her through the streets. So in this nightmarish and macabre world, a slave would guide another slave to the altar of male divinity.

Furthermore, I cannot help but wonder how does a woman cover the back of her hands, but still show her palms? The translation mentions the wearing of gloves, but again, I wonder, since gloves, as they exist today, were probably unknown to the Prophet, why aren't gloves considered a heretical innovation (*bid'a*)? There is a tradition attributed to the Prophet in which he reportedly forbids women from wearing a *quffaz* (hand cover) or *niqab* while in a state of *ihram* (a state of ritual consecration during pilgrimage). Scholars, however, have doubted the authenticity of this tradition. The scholars asserted that this was simply the opinion of Ibn 'Umar, and it was wrongfully attributed to the Prophet. In any case, *quffaz*, as used in that tradition, meant either a decoration made of cloth worn on the hand as a form of beautification or a loose piece of cloth stuffed with cotton and having buttons on the side worn as protection from the cold. These hand covers were loose, dark, and large. Isn't the tightness of today's gloves a *fita* (enticement), and shouldn't women wear loose black bags on their hands so that no one may be enticed by the attractive contours of the hand? Truly, ugliness can only beget utter absurdity.

The reader is left with the impression that the idiosyncratic understandings of the authors of the translation are supported by the traditions of Bukhari and the Qur'anic commentaries of al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir. But Bukhari's reports are grossly corrupted, and the com-

mentaries of al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir do not support the authors' understandings. In fact, these Qur'anic commentators report a variety of views and conclude that women may show their faces, hands, and feet. In other words, the authors of *The Noble Qur'an* translation usurped the authority of these distinguished scholars, but apparently did not bother to read or correctly represent what these scholars actually said. This translation is nothing more than a faithful reproduction of Bin Bazz's extremely conservative and intolerant views, and the views of the scholars serving in the Saudi *dar al-Ifa*.

It is clear that the authors of the translation and their supporters do not like women, and that they projected their inadequacies and deformities upon God's text and the whole Islamic intellectual tradition. Truly, the agony of the Muslim plight in the modern world cannot be expressed either in words or tears. What can one say about those people who seem to have declared an unmitigated war against women and who brandish the weapons of grotesque misogyny? What can one say about those people who, in their utter ignorance and maniacal arrogance, subjugate even the word of God to their ugliness and deformities? "Who is more unjust than those who suppress the testimony they received from God, and God is not oblivious as to what they do" (2:140). Truly, "These folks, the cult they are in, is destined to ruin, and false is what they practice" (7:139).

July 2000