

## Women and Beasts

The next selection from *Nahj al-Balaghah* to be discussed is a 'description of the misguided' (*sifat al-dal*), the relevant portion of which reads:

Beasts are concerned with their bellies. Carnivores are concerned with assaulting others. Women are concerned with the adornments of this ignoble life and the creation of mischief herein. Believers are humble, believers are admonishers, and believers are afraid [of Allah].<sup>1</sup>

As with the above, Ibn Abi al-Hadid asserts that this sermon was delivered about 'A'ishah while Imam 'Ali was marching towards Basra. However, the same concerns about applying it solely to 'A'ishah remain – namely, that it would still be condemning her on account of her gender, and the passage does not indicate that it is truly directed at 'A'ishah. While I am not defending her choice to incite civil war, I would say that any human being, male or female, should be given the basic respect of being critiqued for their actions, not through gender stereotypes, and it would be rather stereotypical and demeaning to say that a woman would ride to battle simply for the sake of 'adornments'. Additionally, as a wife of the Prophet, 'A'ishah lived a simple life without 'adornments' (Q 33:28–29), and so this makes it less likely that these words would have been directed at her. There also remains the question of whether these words would apply to Fatimah al-Zahra' or other revered women.

The separation of 'believer' from 'woman' is itself discomfiting, because it implies that men are believers, and women are threats; additionally, like the passages discussed in the previous sections, it implies that men are normative in Islam. The classification of women with 'beasts' and 'carnivores' goes against the essential humanity of women in the Qur'an, as well as the classical definition of the human as a 'rational animal'. However, the idea that woman is a creature of passion but not intellect is central to the dominant contemporary ideology of gender in Shi'ism.

As before, the most immediate way to explore the textual authenticity of the selection is to examine alternative sources. Three are traditionally mentioned:

1. al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, vol. 5, p. 82 (d. 941 ce, Shi'i)

2. Ibn Shu'bah al-Harrani, *Tuhaf al-'Uqul*, p. 108 (d. 990 ce, Shi'i)

3. al-Warram, *al-Majmu'ah*, p. 77. (d. 1252 ce, Shi'i)<sup>2</sup>

Of them, again, *al-Kafi* holds the strongest weight in the Shi'i tradition. However, the relevant excerpt in *al-Kafi* reads differently:

The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, used to often say [...]: 'O people, the concern of carnivores is attacking,<sup>3</sup> and the concern of beasts is their bellies, and the concern of women is men. And indeed the believers are empathetic, fearing, cautious – may Allah make us and you from among them.'<sup>4</sup>

Like the passage from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, this excerpt still juxtaposes women and believers; however, the object of women's interest is considerably different! This fits in with a set of narrations saying that because Adam was created from the earth, man is concerned with land; and because Eve was created from Adam, women are concerned with men.<sup>5</sup> However, that strand of narrations could also be rejected since the dominant Shi'i view – in contrast to the dominant Judaeo-Christian and Sunni view – is that Eve was *not* created from Adam.<sup>6</sup> The idea that Imam 'Ali 'often' said this further discredits the argument that this was directed at 'A'ishah. Additionally, the chain of narration is incomplete.<sup>7</sup>

This leads to the second Shi'i source, *Tuhaf al-'Uqul* by al-Harrani. *Tuhaf al-'Uqul* does contain the operative phrase 'the zeal of women is for this world, and mischief in it.'<sup>8</sup> However, again, the context is different, in that it is part of a lengthy ethical exhortation attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the context does not give any indication that this was delivered with respect to the Battle of the Camel. There is, again, the problem of lack of sourcing in that the book does not provide chains of narration; that is to say, it suffers from the same problem as *Nahj al-Balaghah*.

The last source is *al-Majmu'ah* from al-Warram. Since it post-dates *Nahj al-Balaghah* by three centuries, and also does not have sources or chains of narration, it cannot be used to validate its presence in earlier sources.

## Summary of Narration

Topic

Source

Implications

Notes

<sup>1</sup>. Sermon 153.

<sup>2</sup>. 'Abd al-Zahra' al-Khatib, *Masadir Nahj al-Balaghah* II, 354–359.

<sup>3</sup>. An alternate version says 'eating', which is orthographically similar to 'attacking' (ta'addi versus taghaddi).

<sup>4</sup>. 'Ayyuha al nas, inna al sib' himmatuha al-ta'addi [alternate: taghaddi] wa inna al-baha'im himmatuha butunuha wa inna al-nisa' himmatuhunna al-rijal wa inna al mu'minun mushfiqun kha'ifun wajilun, ja'alana Allah wa iyyakum minhum.'

Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi* V, 8 vols. (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1367 ah (solar)), 82, no. 9.

<sup>5</sup>. See, for example, al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi* V, 337, no. 3, 4 & 6.

<sup>6</sup>. The idea that Eve was not created from Adam is a Shi'i-specific view is emphasised in a narration in *Man La Yahduruhu*

al-Faqih, in which Imam al-Sadiq explicitly refutes this idea, which is described as being a belief which was circulating at that time. al-Saduq, al-Faqih III, 379, no. 4336. Shi'i narrations both support and oppose the idea that Eve was created from Adam's rib, but the narrations supporting this idea are often said to be the product of taqiyyah (that is, they were said but not meant to be believed) or else simply to be inauthentic.

[7.](#) The narration is marfu', meaning that the narrator did not take it directly from the Imam but does not indicate who passed it on to him.

[8.](#) 'Inna al-nisa hammuhunna zinat al-dunya wal-fasadu fiha', in al-Hasan ibn 'Ali al-Harrani, Tuhaf al-'Uqul, ed. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari (Qum: Jama'at al-Mudarrisin, 1404 AH), 156.

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