

## Women in Nahj al-Balaghah: Women's Seclusion

These sermons can be viewed in tandem with a letter from *Nahj al-Balaghah*, in which Imam 'Ali advises his son: [1](#)

Do not consult women because their view is weak and their determination unstable. Cover their eyes by keeping them under the veil because strictness of veiling keeps them for long. Their coming out is not worse than your allowing an unreliable man to visit them. If you can manage that they should not know anyone other than you, do so. Do not allow a woman matters other than those about herself, because a woman is a flower not an administrator. Do not pay her regard beyond herself. Do not encourage her to intercede for others. Do not show suspicion out of place, because this leads a correct woman to evil and a chaste woman to deflection. [2](#)

Women's intellectual and ethical deficiencies, and why women should not be in positions of authority, have already been discussed extensively above. The idea that women are mentally weak and should not be concerned with matters beyond themselves goes against the portrayal of Khadijah, the wife of the Prophet, as well as other women in the households of the Imams who were encouraged to pursue and teach Islamic knowledge. [3](#)

Unlike some of the other sermons, the operative points of this text are reproduced in *al-Kafi* and *al-Faqih* as being part of a letter from Imam 'Ali to his son. However, the chain of narration in *al-Kafi* is missing a narrator, and, as usual, *al-Faqih* does not provide sources. [4](#) The most accurate conclusion that can be deduced by the inclusion of this content in these two books is that the portrayal of Imam 'Ali as being restrictive towards women, and the exclusion of women from the public sphere, was considered normative by this era, and hence did not raise any proverbial eyebrows.

The main contribution that this section brings to the discussion is the exhortation for women's seclusion. It goes without saying that the focus on woman as a sexual being – in terms of seclusion, keeping her away from men, female chastity, and male jealousy – is male normative, and also diverges from the Qur'anic portrayal of women as complete beings in favour of the Aristotelian view of women as imperfect

beings.<sup>5</sup> It also thematically contradicts the teachings on chastity in the Qur'an, in that the Qur'an treats chastity as equally important for men and women, and also makes a woman responsible for her own chastity (for instance, in the praise of the Virgin Mary protecting her own chastity). In contrast, this excerpt instructs a woman's menfolk for force her to be chaste, thereby removing her own agency.

Rawand Osman cites Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, who wrote extensively on Islamic law pertaining to women, as describing this view as problematic since Shi'i jurisprudence prescribes Islamic modest dress for women but does not require seclusion or prohibit 'decent mixing between men and women'.<sup>6</sup> She also notes a narration from Imam al-Sadiq condemning a man who preferred to stay in his home on the grounds that he would not be able to learn about his religion there; the same could be said for women.<sup>7</sup>

She observes that the Qur'an prescribes women's seclusion as a *punishment* for illicit conduct rather than as a norm.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, she also notes that the text is self-contradictory because 'if not allowing a woman to know any man is not jealousy out of place, then what is?'<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that, like the ancient Greek views of woman, this passage acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy: if a woman is kept inside of her home, discouraged from considering anything but herself, treated primarily as a sexual being, and perpetually treated with distrust, then how could she be expected to be anything but an intellectually deficient flower?

Atypically, this narration focuses on actual veiling instead of mere seclusion, which tends to receive more attention in the classical tradition. Interestingly, here, the veil and seclusion are presented as being for the benefit of the woman, instead of being for the sake of preserving men from women's temptations, which is how the *hijab* is typically discussed today. The observation that a strict *hijab* 'preserves' women could also refer to the simple truth that, in a harsh desert, being fully covered preserves a woman's appearance. Regardless of whether or not these words truly trace back to Imam 'Ali, they represent the cultural norm in the heart of the tenth century Islamic empire whereby women were not expected to be present in the public sphere.

A word is in order on the contemporary ramifications of such beliefs, and how the presumption that women's seclusion is Islamic affects the Shi'i worldview. While an underlying principle of *fiqh* is that 'whatever is not forbidden is permissible', post-Prophetic Shi'i texts about women take the opposite approach: they are generally based on the baseline assumption that a woman must be unseen and unheard, and then it must be proven some part of a woman (such as the face) can be seen, or her voice heard. It is as if there is a feedback loop – an otherwise inauthenticable text promoting women's seclusion (such as this) is accepted on the grounds that it agrees with preconceived ideas about what is Islamic, and then it is used to reinforce the view that women's seclusion is Islamic. This view, in turn, is used to draw greater conclusions about what women cannot or should not do in society.

Summary of Narration

Topic

## Source

## Agrees with

## Implications

- [1.](#) Generally this letter is considered to have been addressed to al-Hasan ibn 'Ali, although some scholars argue that it was addressed to Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah, a younger son of Imam 'Ali.
- [2.](#) Letter 31.
- [3.](#) A common saying, albeit not substantiated as a hadith, is that Islam would not have survived were it not for the sword of 'Ali and the wealth of Khadijah. Regarding the wives of the Imams, one can consider the role of the wives and female relatives of Imam al-Husayn in publicising his message after he was killed; the mother of Imam al-Kazim, who is said to have been appointed by her husband to teach women; and Fatimah al-Ma'sumah.
- [4.](#) al-Kulayni, al-Kafi V, 510, no. 3
- [5.](#) The implication that women are imperfect beings can also be found in the predominantly Sunni recension of the narration which says that there are four women to have 'reached perfection': Asiyah, Maryam, Khadijah, and Fatimah – which is often considered to be favourable to women, but which implies that all other women are imperfect. In contrast, this narration usually appears in Shi'i sources as 'the four women to have been selected [by Allah]'
- [6.](#) Rawand Osman, Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna, 165–166.
- [7.](#) Ibid., 166, note 101, citing al-Kulayni, al-Kafi I, 31.
- [8.](#) Ibid., 106.
- [9.](#) Ibid., 166.

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