



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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### Representations: Afterlife Stories: Overview

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This entry deals with Qur’ānic narratives about men and women in relation to the afterlife, specifically the Garden(s) of Paradise and the Fire(s) of Hell, and how those narratives often were changed, recast, and reinterpreted in the early centuries of Islam as traditions developed and were informed by the contexts in which Islam found itself the ruling faith.

Much popular Islamic lore portrays the afterlife as the habitation of glorious abodes of paradise where all is comfort, bliss (including sexual), and tranquility. In these stories there often seems little question that those described as enjoying the pleasures of this paradisiacal abode are men, and that their bliss is defined in terms of the fulfillment of all kinds of dreams and desires that they may have had while on the earthly plane. In truth, descriptions of the nature of the afterlife differ greatly throughout the literature of Islam. The Qur’ān presents one picture, the traditions often a quite different one, and the poetic narratives of Islamic Sufism yet others.

The dominant message of the Qur’ān is that the reward of the Garden and the punishments of the Fire (both Garden and Fire are often rendered in the plural) are the direct result of the beliefs and actions of women and men while alive on earth, and that those abodes will be their recompense in equal measure. Numerous verses of the Qur’ān attest to that reality. The Qur’ān contains no suggestion that men have greater access to paradise than women, or that women are more likely to spend eternity in the abodes of punishment, and the text is unequivocally clear that men and women are on an equal footing in terms of final felicity or perdition. Theological reflection on the Qur’ānic details regarding the Garden and the Fire tends not to deal directly with the question of what happens to women after they die, although reference is sometimes made to the fate of women in the course of discussing other issues.

In the few Qur’ānic narratives that specifically mention women in the Garden or the Fire it is clear that women are fully responsible for their own actions. In verse 66:10, for example, the wives of Lot and Noah are said to have been consigned to the Fire because of their faithlessness (reflected, however, in their relationships to their husbands). The next verse, 66:11, indicates that the wife of Pharaoh can expect to be at home in the Garden, most likely as a result of her having saved Moses (28:9) and thus preserved a Messenger of God. The one woman most clearly described in the Qur’ān as deserving a final resting place in the Fire is the wife of Abu Lahab (28:9), who is said to wear a collar of palm fiber around her neck in the flames (presumably) because of her iniquity in spreading thorns in front of the Prophet to cut his feet.

Qur’ān commentators have traditionally been disinclined to say that the fate of women is in any way related to that of their husbands. Still, a few verses do raise the question. In 37:22–3, for example, God calls for the gathering of those who have done wrong, along with their wives, to be led to the Fire. There the wives appear to be the unfortunate victims of perdition because they are married to evildoers. The opposite might be interpreted in

Qur'ānic promises such as that in 13:23, which says that the virtuous believer will be in the Garden with his wives and children. Such suggestions, however, are rare in the text and have been subject to a variety of interpretations in the classical commentaries. Modern commentators generally agree that wives are neither punished nor rewarded for the deeds of their husbands. Most affirm that men and women are personally responsible and will be judged equitably, although some leave the issue ambiguous as they feel the Qur'ān itself to reflect that ambiguity.

The Qur'ān has little to say in specific terms about women in relation to eschatological concerns beyond these very limited references. In the ḥadīth materials, however, one finds much more specific mention of the fate of women in the afterlife. Many Muslims deny that such tales are part of the authoritative or reliable corpus of traditional materials, but in fact they are reported in such notable collections of ḥadīth as those of Ibn Ḥanbal, Bukhārī, and Nasā'ī. It is obvious that many of these traditional narratives reflect both the legacy of the indigenous cultures into which Islam spread and current social attitudes toward women. Even when they seem to contradict the evidence of the Qur'ān, there is little question that these ḥadīths were influential in shaping opinion and justifying responses to women in ways that belie the generally egalitarian nature of the scripture itself. Some clearly specify that an unhappy judgment for women may be due to the faithlessness of their husbands, or even that the fault may lie with the women insofar as they themselves have not obeyed their husbands.

The amplification of materials in the traditions beyond the Qur'ānic narratives is most evident in three areas: the role of women in the days immediately preceding the resurrection, the specific consignment of women to the Fire for reasons beyond their control, and the relationship of believing women in paradise to the ḥūr .

The Qur'ān details a series of cataclysmic events that will serve to disrupt the natural order, thus signaling the imminence of the day when time will come to an end and all souls will be rejoined with their bodies for judgment. The traditions add to these narratives a series of events that will evidence the collapse of the ethical, moral, and social order. Many of these signs, pointing to societal disintegration, have to do with women. Among them are such examples as the necessity of a man obeying his wife and of men working for women, that women will go on pilgrimage unaccompanied by men, that sexual license and ignorance will prevail (with the clear implication that this is somehow the fault of women), and that women will come to outnumber men fifty to one.

Many contemporary writers find in this theme of the ethical and moral disintegration of society as a sign of the coming of the end of time a perfect opportunity to reflect their concern that social changes today are destroying the fabric of Muslim ethics and culture. The Egyptian commentator Abū al-'Azā'im, for example, indicates that the coming of the eschaton is evident in the fact that men have become obedient to their wives and women now think themselves superior to men, handling the financial affairs of the household, shopping and participating in public life with no objections from their husbands. Others hold the opposite view, such as M. Sadeddin Evrin of the Advanced Islamic Studies Institute in Istanbul, who sees that the equality of women, with full participation in society, is suggestive of a general advance in culture. Evrin believes that the women of today's world are the best examples of the women who will inhabit paradise.

The Qur'ān contains no hint that the ultimate abodes of the Fire or the Garden will be occupied more by one gender than another. Many ḥadīths, however, do contain strong suggestions that the majority of women will be consigned to the Fire, and that the majority of the inhabitants of Hell will be women.

For example, the Prophet Muḥammad himself at the time of his mi'rāj (heavenly ascension) is quoted as saying that when he gazed into the Fire he saw that most of the inhabitants were women. The reason they are there, he is reported to have said, is that these women have been untrustworthy and ungrateful for the good things they have been given. In another version of this story the Prophet is said to have clarified that their ingratitude is not, in fact, in relation to God, but in relation to their husbands for the charity these men have shown to their mates. Other traditions, again generally considered to be part of the corpus of reliable ḥadīths, report that women are deficient in

their religious practice (which, presumably, would keep them from a favorable reward at the end of time) precisely because of the biological fact that they menstruate and thus cannot pray at certain times. Such tales, it seems obvious, are intended not as actual descriptions of the expectations of final consignment. They can, however, serve to legitimate forms of social control over women, especially insofar as they suggest that a wife's relationship (and obedience) to God is in some way determined by her relationship (and obedience) to her husband.

Aside from the Qur'ānic affirmations that the pleasures of the Garden will be the reward of faithful women as well as faithful men, there is little specific reference to gender in the context of paradise. The rewards described there are plenteous and apparently available to all. The one seeming exception is the Qur'ānic mention of the ḥūr, the chaste maidens of the Garden promised as an eternal reward to Muslims who have earned a place in paradise. The term ḥūr is mentioned four times in the Qur'ān, all references from the early Meccan period, and literally means having eyes with marked contrast of black and white. These scriptural references are sparse and restrained, though they make it clear that the ḥūr are lovely, virginal, and intended as a reward. These references have piqued the imagination of Muslims for many generations and provided the basis for a great deal of elaboration in the ḥadīths and subsequent narratives of Islam. Not surprisingly, these maidens have been seen to be the clearly defined rewards for faithful men, not women. (Contrary to popular lore, however, there is no reference in the Qur'ān that specifically designates the ḥūr as the rewards of those who are martyrs for the faith). Some ḥadīths, generally considered unreliable, provide great elaboration in the descriptions of the ḥūr. Sometimes they are said to be made of saffron from the feet to the knees, musk from the knees to the breast, amber from the breast to the neck, and camphor from the neck to the head. They may be wearing 70 or 70,000 gowns so sheer that even the marrow of their bones can be seen, reclining on couches of hyacinth encrusted with rubies and jewels, and the like. Most intriguing to the imagination, perhaps, is the extra-Qur'ānic affirmation that the ḥūr do not sleep, get sick, menstruate, or become pregnant. In fact, many traditions affirm that they remain eternally virgins.

There is no indication in either the Qur'ān or the traditions that the ḥūr should be equated with the female believers in the Garden. Some tales even go so far as to say that the ḥūr in Paradise are awaiting the male believers, and look on their earthly wives as rivals. Even the ḥadīths are vague in reference to human females and their roles in the Garden, though they are sometimes referred to as daughters of Eve who will have one husband each, presumably their earthly husbands. If a woman has had more than one husband, the situation is unclear – sometimes it is said that she will get the last one as a husband in the Garden, sometimes the best, and sometimes that she will have her choice. Neither classical nor contemporary exegesis of the Qur'ān offers much clarification as to the relationship of the ḥūr to the mu'mināt or faithful women. Most modern commentators actually seem to avoid elaborating on the two categories of females, repeating with only slight modification the words of the Qur'ān in its particular references. While some contemporary commentators and writers affirm that the pleasures of the Garden are to be understood in a very physical sense, including the companionship of the ḥūr, most agree on a more figurative, spiritual, or even psychological explanation. Most deny that procreation as such will have any role in the life to come. The general explanation is that the descriptions of the Garden and the Fire in the Qur'ān are really only suggestive of what the human imagination in its limited capacities cannot fully grasp.

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