



## Virgins: There Are No 72 Virgins Waiting for Anyone in Paradise

### QUR'ANIC VERSES ON WOMEN AND MEN IN PARADISE

This is yet another of the cringe-inducing topics outrageously laid at the door of the Qur'an, but what can one do. Like a couple of others before it, this myth must unfortunately also be addressed because of how prevalent it has become since 9/11.<sup>1</sup>

Common sense and the Qur'an itself tell us that the promise of Paradise is made to both women and men who earn it through the choices they make during their lives on earth, and that the rewards are the same for both. We have seen this self-evident truth explicitly articulated in various verses of the Qur'an cited in this book already, and there are many more.

So why is it that when we come to *descriptions* of this Paradise, we suddenly perceive the three dozen or so instances of these in the Qur'an as if they were addressing only men? Societal programming, that is why. **Layers of patriarchal fog have accumulated over our minds over the centuries that have left us effectively *programmed* to hear any description of Paradise in the Qur'an as though it were addressing only men—**which is logically impossible. The Qur'an does occasionally address men specifically—such as when it describes *female* spouses—but where it uses

<sup>1</sup>According to Brown, Jonathan. 2015. *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*. London: Oneworld Publications, 238, the leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, had promised 72 virgins to Muslim “martyrs” in Heaven.

the generic plural it is undoubtedly addressing both women and men in its promises of the rewards of Paradise.

Descriptions of heaven in the Qur'an occur in a single verse or in a group of verses at a time. There is a lot of repetition, while some elements are mentioned only once or twice. Here are the key elements of these physical descriptions:

- Gardens underneath which rivers flow, plenty of shade, two upper and two lower gardens, and two groups of the righteous (the foremost or those “brought near”, i.e. to God, and those “of/on the right”).
- Abundant and varied fruit, cups ever-filled from a spring providing a refreshing drink, four types of potable rivers: of never-stale water, ever-fresh milk, delicious wine, and clear honey (47:15).
- Silk and embroidered clothing, jewellery, precious stones, reclining on couches in contentment.
- Boys and immortal youths, described as hidden pearls and as scattered pearls floating around, attentive to the inhabitants of Paradise as though they were their own children, filling their cups and generally waiting on them (52:24, 56:17).

And then there are the descriptions that reference either earthly women or other female beings in heaven, or both:

- **Purified mates/spouses** for every person in Paradise are mentioned in verses where the same phrase re-appears such as:

The Cow, 2:25; The House of 'Imran (Joaquim, father of Mary), 3:15; Women, 4:57

...And there [in the gardens underneath which rivers flow] they shall have purified spouses (*azwāj*)...

And as described in Part II, the word *zawj* and its plural *azwāj* used in the verses above and elsewhere means a “pair” or “one of a pair”, i.e. mate, so it is one spouse each, for those who may wonder.

Culturally, **verses referring to having a “purified spouse” in heaven are usually assumed to be addressing men only because of a fundamentally incorrect association of purity with virginity**, thereby

attaching it to women. The ubiquitous concept of “purity” (*tahara*, *zakat*) in the Qur’an is never used to refer to virginity. It is used in relation to:

- The souls of God’s prophets, for example:

The House of ‘Imran (Joaquim, father of Mary), 3:42

And when the angels said: Oh Mary,<sup>2</sup> God has chosen you and purified you [i.e. your soul] and chosen you above the women of the worlds.

The House of ‘Imran (Joaquim, father of Mary), 3:55

When God said: Oh Jesus, I am making you die (*mutawaffeeka*)<sup>3</sup> and raising you to Me and purifying you from those who disbelieve, and placing those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection [i.e. Judgment Day]...

- People on a righteous path and the inhabitants of Paradise, as in:

The Congregational Prayer, 62:2

It is He who sent forth among the illiterate a messenger [Muhammad] from among themselves, to relay to them His messages (*ayas*) and purify them and teach them the Book and wisdom, though they were before then lost in evident error.

Ta Ha (unknown meaning), 20:76

The Gardens of Eden under which rivers flow, where they shall dwell forever: that is the reward of those who purify themselves.

The Cow, 2:25 (and similarly 3:15 and 4:57)

And give good tidings to those who believe and do good deeds that theirs are gardens underneath which rivers flow...where they shall have purified spouses and dwell forever.

<sup>2</sup> See verse 21:91 mentioned in Chap. 10, on Mary being included in the Qur’an as one of God’s prophets.

<sup>3</sup> As every Arabic speaker knows from everyday speech, a person who has *tawaffa* has “died”. But most English translations of the Qur’an opt for indirect meanings in 3:55 such as “to be taken away” instead of the actual “be made to die”. See the note in Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (editor-in-chief) et al. 2015. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 146 and also Asad, Muhammad. 2003. *The Message of the Qur’an*. Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, 89.

- Things, e.g. rainwater or a house of worship:

The Pilgrimage, 22:26

And when We assigned for Abraham the site of the House [the *Kaaba* in Mecca], saying: Do not associate anything with Me and purify My house for those who would make the rounds, and those who would stand, and those who would bow, prostrating themselves.

- And actions, e.g. almsgiving or ablutions:

The Banquet (i.e. The Last Supper), 5:6

Oh you who believe: When you get up to pray wash your faces and hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles. And if you are physically unclean<sup>4</sup> then purify yourselves...

- **Reunification with one's earthly spouse** in Paradise is mentioned in verses such as:

Thunder, 13:23

Gardens of Eden that they [the righteous] shall enter, along with those who were righteous of their parents<sup>5</sup> and spouses and offspring. And the angels shall enter upon them from every gate—

Ya Sin (uncertain meaning), 36:55–56

Those who have earned Paradise on this day are busy rejoicing,  
They and their spouses reclining on couches in the shade.

<sup>4</sup>To be “physically unclean” and so require purification before prayer (beyond the just-described simple ablution that involves simply wiping the face, head, forearms and feet with water) refers to the need for actual washing after answering a call of nature or after sexual intercourse, as defined in the rest of verse 5:6 and also in 4:43. The Qur’an does not include menstruation in its definition of being “physically unclean” and therefore requiring purification/actual washing before prayer, though custom has always included it to the point that women are prohibited or excused, depending on one’s perspective, from even performing the daily prayers while menstruating.

<sup>5</sup>Most popular translations render *ābā'* in 13:23 as “fathers” rather than “parents”. But every Arabic speaker will readily recognise the word here to essentially mean “forefathers” and so includes mothers, and moreover the verse is clearly speaking of a person’s more proximate ancestors and descendants (as evidenced by the mention of one’s spouse, a contemporary) irrespective of their gender, so the forefathers in question are also proximate, i.e. parents. Besides, we would have expected to see the word “sons” used instead of the gender-neutral “offspring” for consistency had God meant to include righteous male relatives but exclude righteous female relatives from Heaven, surely the implication of such translations. See also the note in Asad, Muhammad. *Ibid.*, 406.

Forgiver, 40:8

Our Lord: admit them [the righteous] to the Gardens of Eden that You promised them, along with those who were righteous of their parents and spouses and offspring...

Ornaments of Gold, 43:69–70

Those who believed in Our messages (*āyās*) and who surrendered [to God]: Enter the Garden, you and your spouses, to be made joyous.

Disappointingly, most (but not all) translations use the word “wives” in the above and previous verses rather than “spouses”, as though God was only addressing men. This is not justifiable because the Qur’an here does not use the feminine plural version (*zawjāt* or even the ubiquitous *nisa’*, i.e. women, or wives) but the generic masculine plural (*azwāj*) of the word *zawj* or mate, which linguistically (and logically) means both husbands and wives.

That said, the Qur’an sometimes does speak specifically of **earthly women in Paradise**:

- “Those (women) of limited/short glances” (37:48, 38:52 and 55:56), i.e. righteous women, which is reminiscent of verses 24:30–31 covered earlier in Part IV where *both* believing men and believing women are advised to “lower their gaze” in modesty.
- The Event, 56:35–37  
We shall have created them (women) anew,  
Thus made them virgins.  
Loving, (and) of equal age/quality (*atrāb*).

In the above verse the Qur’an is promising that earthly women in Paradise will be newly created, perfect and young again, *as will men be born anew and made young again* since **the women will be of matching age and substance to the men**. To reduce virginity here—this bigger concept of being born anew—to a mere sexual state while applying it exclusively to women is to miss the point, which is **re-gifted youth and freshness on an eternal basis for women and men alike**.

- “Glorious and of equal age/quality” (78:33)—while there is nothing in this sentence that implies that its subject is feminine, it has almost always been taken to refer to women while “glorious” is usu-

ally translated as “voluptuous” or even “buxom”,<sup>6</sup> a rendering that is unfortunately in keeping with the narrowing and therefore sexualisation of the broad and profound descriptions of Paradise.

- **Union with a *hoor* spouse in Paradise**, by default (given all the above and the emphasis on “pairs”) for those without an earthly spouse as mate, is mentioned in such verses as:

Smoke, 44:54

So (it shall be); and We shall have married them [literally “paired” them with, i.e. *zawwajnahum*] to beautiful-eyed *hoor*.

Smoke, 52:20

Reclining on couches in rows; and We shall have married them [literally “paired” them with, i.e. *zawwajnahum*] to beautiful-eyed *hoor*.

*Hoor*, or *hooris* in its anglicised form, are heaven-made beings also likened to hidden pearls, having a beautiful whiteness of the eye that contrasts with an intense blackness of the iris (e.g. 56:22).<sup>7</sup> But some translations render the description as “wide-eyed” rather than “beautiful-eyed”, which has a very different connotation that I find culturally telling. Meanwhile the word *hoor* is strikingly similar (in its Arabic word construction) to the term used in the Qur’an to refer to the disciples of Jesus, the *hawariyyun* (61:14).<sup>8</sup> This confirms that the term *hoor* essentially and unsurprisingly refers to pure beings, and in fact Muhammad himself was described as *hoori*-eyed by a female contemporary,<sup>9</sup> which would have been unlikely if only females were thought to constitute this category of pure beings in Paradise. **That there should be male and not only female**

<sup>6</sup> See the note in Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 1055–6 on verse 78:33, as well as any Arabic dictionary where *kaʿb* as a noun can mean either heel or lower part (clearly not the meaning here) or glory, dignity, honour, i.e. nothing to do with the female figure.

<sup>7</sup> Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 944 and Nasr et al., *Op. Cit.*, 1213.

<sup>8</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying just a touch, the root of every word in Arabic consists of three letters, so different words containing the same three letters in the same order are usually related and express the same concept, but from different angles or points of emphasis. On *hawariyyun* in reference to the disciples of Jesus and its essential meaning, see also the note in Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Kahf, Mohja. 2000. Braiding the Stories: Women’s Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era. In *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb, 162. New York: Syracuse University Press.

heavenly beings or *hoor* makes perfect sense: if God promises to pair the single people in Paradise with *hoor*, then surely there will be single women and not only single men in Paradise in need of being paired up in this way, right?

That said, and just as it sometimes speaks specifically of earthly women in Paradise, the Qur'an does speak specifically at times of *hoor women in Paradise*:

- “*Hoor* (female) in palatial pavilions” (55:72), although this is usually translated as “*hoor* confined/restrained in pavilions”, which is surely counter-intuitive in the delightful and carefree Paradise the Qur'an describes. Linguistically, the root word at play here is *qasr* which can mean either “palace” or “limitation, restriction”: given the repeated descriptions of Paradise as a luxurious, beautiful, happy place free of all concerns for all of its inhabitants, does it make sense to then basically “restrict” the movement of these female heavenly beings to a particular structure there? Does it not make more sense that the verse is saying that they are enjoying these pavilions that are more like palaces? The usual interpretation and translation surely undermine the essence of the Qur'an's extensive description of Paradise as an idyllic place for *all*.
- “(Female *hoor*) untouched by human or *jinn*” (55:56 and 55:74), the *jinn* being a species invisible to human beings that the Qur'an often mentions. Like human beings, the *jinn* have free will and are therefore capable of both right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, greatness or lowliness. Mention of the *jinn* here makes it clear, to me at least, that “untouched” means never having been vulnerable to the *imperfections or failings* of either humans or *jinn*, a far more profound and comprehensive characteristic than to simply be virgin in a sexual sense—surely a more aptly loft concept when speaking of Paradise and of the two species, humankind and *jinn*, that the Qur'an addresses.

**In summary**, women and men are promised the same things in Paradise. “Purified spouses/mates” for everyone (2:25, 3:15, 4:57), whether one's righteous spouse from one's time on earth (13:23, 36:56, 40:8, 43:70) or a spouse from among beings referred to as *hoor* or *hooris* (44:54, 52:20). And as already mentioned, the word *zawj* in its plural

*azwaj* used in these verses and elsewhere means a “pair” or “one of a pair” of either sex, i.e. mate, so it is one spouse each.

Virginity as relating to people being born again and made equally and eternally young in Paradise applies to both women and men by definition. For those who would insist on a narrower and more sexual meaning, or on “purified spouses” referring to sexual virginity and of women specifically, it is worth remembering that at least 10 and possibly 11 of the 12 women the Prophet married during his lifetime were not virgins, and that chastity was prescribed for men and women alike<sup>10</sup> as we have seen in Chap. 14, entitled Marriage and Chap. 19, entitled Sexual Misconduct.

**It is legitimate to ask why the Qur’an sometimes focuses its description on the women of Paradise specifically, be they earthly or *hoori* women.** I have not come across any commentary on why this is the case, which is unsurprising given that most commentaries assume that the Qur’an is addressing men anyway, as if women were appendages. My own thought on this issue is that perhaps men were a harder sell at the time and needed to be wooed more proactively than women, being the tribal and clan leaders of their communities and the defenders of the prevailing idolatry: in fact as mentioned in Chap. 14, Marriage, the earliest converts to the new religion were in fact the underdogs, namely young men and women of no influence, and slaves.

My other thought on the question of women in Paradise, whether earthly or *hoori*, is to recall the Prophet’s own description of them (among other beings and things) after the miracle of his heavenly visit in the company of the archangel Gabriel, which could not be further from the popular preoccupations I have reluctantly addressed in this chapter:

...if a woman of the people of Paradise appeared unto the people of earth, she would fill the space between Heaven and here below with light and fragrance.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>See also Barlas, Asma. 2015. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 155.

<sup>11</sup>Lings, Martin. 1988. *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources*. London: Unwin Hyman Limited, 102.



## THE PUSHBACK OF ALLEGED *HADITH*: 72 VIRGINS ARE PROMISED...OR PERHAPS 70

Just to get it out of the way, the number 72 does not occur anywhere in the Qur'an. There are three mentions of the number 70 in varied contexts—all unrelated to women or even *hoor*—which sometimes appears as a stand-in for the word “many”<sup>12</sup> in the way we might today say “dozens”, for example.

There is an alleged *hadith* attributed to the Prophet that promises a martyr several things, including 72 *hooris* as wives.<sup>13</sup> While we are at it, there is another alleged *hadith* that promises the lowliest believer, who does not even have to be a martyr, the same thing—along with 80,000 servants!<sup>14</sup> Yet another allegedly states that a martyr gets 70 *hooris* as wives and is allowed to intercede on behalf of 70 members of his family.<sup>15</sup> And so it goes.

Firstly, and as discussed above at length, a female *hoori* according to the Qur'an is first and foremost a heaven-made, purified being untouched in every way—physical, mental or spiritual—by humans or *jinn*. To reduce a female *hoori* to a mere “virgin” and use the two terms interchangeably is a cultural bias that speaks for itself.

Secondly and unsurprisingly, none of these *hadiths* have ever stood on solid ground anyway, even going back to their original inclusion in the *hadith* corpus, which as we discussed in Part I at length had scooped up every last claim anyone ever made if they assigned it to the Prophet. Questions of problematic transmitters, whether intentional or not, with regard to this group of alleged *hadiths* on *hooris* were well-documented from the outset by scholars who researched the infractions and even expressed regret for their previous confidence in some transmitters.<sup>16</sup> In any case, collective common sense had always pretty much dismissed such reports, until modern communications gave a fringe and agenda-driven claim a global voice.

<sup>12</sup> The number 70 appears as either a specific number or as a substitute for “many” in verses 7:155, 9:80 and 69:32.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Jonathan. *Op. Cit.* (2015), 302.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix IV, 302–305.

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