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The Sex Ratio: A Scientific Glimpse of the Holy Qur'an.

To The Editor. – I read the article published in the January 1991 issue of the Journal of Islamic Medical Association “The sex ratio: A scientific glimpse of the Holy Qur'an” by Bakir and Fadel, with interest. In this article the authors refer to a Qur'anic verse:

“O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord who created you from a single person, created, of like nature his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) COUNTLESS men and women . . . ”

They then refer to a modern day statistical study which indicates that the ratio of male to female births is 106:100. According to the authors, in the above Qur'anic verse, since the word men came before women it is meant to suggest that there are more male than female births.

Using a commercially available software program¹ it was found that the phrase “men and women” appears at least 28 times in the Qur'an (4:1, 9:67, 9:68, 9:71, 9:72, 24:12,33:35*, 33:58, 33:73*, 47:19, 48:5, 48:6*, 57:13, 57:18, 85:10). In the following verse (33:35), this phrase appears ten times:

“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise—for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward”

If the authors' interpretation is correct, then one may interpret the above phrase as suggesting that there are more Muslim, more believing, more devout, more etc. men than women! I am sure that the authors will not agree with such an interpretation of the above verse. Furthermore, in another verse (33:73), Allāh says:

“(with the result) that God has to punish the hypocrites; men and women, and the unbelievers men and women, and God turns in mercy to the believers men and women: for God is oft-forgiving, most merciful”.

If the authors' interpretation is correct, the above verse becomes self-contradictory because it says “unbelievers men and women” and also “believers

men and women”. I am sure that the authors agree that Allāh's verse can not be self-contradictory.

It is widely accepted that the Holy Qur'an has been written in the language of a “common man”. After all it is meant to be understood and followed by all human beings. Therefore it may not be unreasonable to interpret the phrase men and women in verse 4:1 and elsewhere in the Holy Qur'an according to the following analogies. Historically, the phrase men and women has been widely used without the implication of any kind of gender related differences. For example, a speaker may address his/her audience as ladies and gentlemen even if the audience consists of two women and over a 100 men—and of course I do not imply by his/her that there are more men than women speakers!

It is always exciting to find scientific glimpses of the Holy Qur'an and I fully agree with the authors that there are a number of convincing examples of such glimpses.

Noorjahan Panjwani, Ph.D.
Department of Ophthalmology
New England Medical Center Hospital
Tufts University, 136 Harrison Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02111

*In verses 33:35, 33:73, and 48:6 the phrase men and women appears 10, 3 and 2 times respectively.

Reference

1. Software “Qur'an base”. Sound Vision, Chicago, IL 1990

Reply

We would like to thank Dr. Panjwani for her letter and interest in our article, J Islam Med Assn 1991; 23: 38-9. We would like to respond to the points she made:

1. In the Arabic language usage, at the time of Qur'anic revelation there were no phrases like “Ladies and gentlemen” nor “His/her audience”. Thus, this analogy is not pertinent.
2. We certainly do not understand, nor our interpretation of the verse under study (4:1) imply that the verse 33:35 means that there are more Muslim, devout, etc. men than women. Nor do we understand, nor our interpretation of verse 4:1 imply that verse 33:73 indicates that there are more hypocrite, believing and unbelieving men than women.
3. The statement in Dr. Panjwani's letter that the

phrase “men and women” was counted to occur 28 times in the Qur’ān is not accurate. This is a problem of translation. The other 27 cited verses do not have the words specifically mentioned in verse 4:1, i.e. “Rijālan” (for men) and “Nisā’an” (for women). The words in these verses are for, example: “Mu’minīn” (for believing men) and “Mu’mināt” for believing women. The Arabic language has this characteristic that is not present in the English language. The Arabic words alone can specify the gender, whereas in English that is not the case. When one says, “I saw a friend” you can not tell whether that friend was a male or a female, but in Arabic the word itself will indicate the gender.

In fact, we looked again to see in how many verses, in addition to verse 4:1, the words “Rijālan” and “Nisā’an” were used.¹ We found only three other verses 4:98, 4:176, and 48:25.

In none of these three verses, or in the other 27 verses cited by Dr. Panjwani, were the context the same as in verse 4:1. This verse explicitly addresses the process of creation of mankind while all the other verses are not addressing this aspect at all. Verse 4:1 is the only one that is addressing quantity or numbers.

4. The problem of the difficulty in translation is again evident in the translation of the verse under study, 4:1. The Arabic word is “Kathīran” which is more accurately translated (in our view) as “plenty” or “more”, than as “countless”. Also, this adjective, countless, in the Arabic text is grammatically, clearly related to “Rijālan” (men), and not to women. The verse says, “Rijālan Kathīran, wa Nisā’an.”

A comma after “men” in the translated verse would have made for a better understanding of the verse, i.e. “Countless men, and women.” We knew the difficulties in the translation but still elected to use exactly the same translation as written in a commonly accepted text, i.e. that of A Yusuf Ali.

5. This discussion is very fruitful and in this par-

ticular case it illustrates the difficulty in translation of the Qur’ān and in making any serious study of the Qur’ān without going to the original text in Arabic. Sound Vision’s “Qur’ān base” software is an extremely commendable endeavor but it should not be used in a study which the Arabic words or expressions have to be the basis for the study.

6. Finally, we probably should have brought up these points in the original paper, but we are grateful to Dr. Panjwani for pointing out these difficulties, so we were able to explain our thesis more clearly and support it with more evidence.

In conclusion, we believe that the Qur’ān is a book of guidance and not a science book. We believe that the miracles of the Qur’ān are endless but we wanted to direct attention to a maybe another of the several scientific glimpses from the Qur’ān. It may well be that our interpretation maybe proven to be wrong. We know that scientific theories may also be proven to be wrong. We firmly believe that what Allāh says was, is, and will always be the absolute truth.

Hossam E. Fadel, M.D,
Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology
University Hospital
818 St. Sebastian Way
Suite 200
Augusta, GA 30901
U.S.A.

S.M. Bakir, M.B.Ch.B., M.Sc., Ph.D.
Department of Physiology
College of Medicine
King Saud University
P.O. Box 2925
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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