When Women Speak...

Holy texts
Editorial
Louisa Maynardt

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Louisa Maynardt
This edition explores women reading texts in the context of Islam. The previous webzine focused on women's everyday experiences of Islam in contrast to formal study of Islam. In this edition we consider how Muslim women engage with their texts as they live out their faith day-to-day. Texts may be recited in prayers at the mosque or read for daily guidance and learning, but they may also be inserted in an amulet or used in a healing ritual.

Women's engagement with texts often mirror the extent to which they are able to access formal education. In traditional rural communities, girls may be taught in madrassa until they reach puberty, if they receive any schooling. Poverty may lead their parents to prioritise their brothers' education or they may be restricted by traditional ideas about women's education. Literacy rates among rural Muslim women remains low. In this context, a woman's knowledge about the Quran and other Islamic texts may come from her mother or grandmother, and she applies the beliefs and stories from Islamic scriptures in customary ways passed down by the generations.

In industrialised nations and urban settings Muslim women have more access to education, and western societies see a growing trend of Muslim women achieving higher education rates than their male counterparts. In these contexts, Muslim women may equally learn their faith from grandmothers and madrassa, but they also encounter the Quran and other Islamic texts in formal education and in public discourse. Coming across different interpretations of their faith than they were perhaps given at home, Muslim women explore discussions on the Internet or read more widely. These explorations may lead to a renewed religious consciousness or a stepping away from faith, either way, both result from engaging more with texts.

This Webzine edition shows some of the ways in which texts are accessed, interpreted and applied to daily life. Moyra Dale's description of women's mosque education highlights the importance of traditional methods for women in learning to memorise and recite the Quran, in order to interpret and apply its teachings. The respect and awe that is given to the Quran is shown in its oral form with much of women's practice focused on tajwid (method of recitation, or chanting). For the most part, the Quran is experienced as a blessing whether wrapped in a cloth on the shelf or in the sound of recitation. Moyra makes clear how these are the different understandings that Muslim women may bring to their encounter with the Bible.

Mat Hunter's practical suggestion to use Islamic chanting practices in Bible reading for believers from Muslim background drives Moyra's conclusion home. Mat describes a poignant event when the Bible opened up for such a believer because he had been given permission by a Christian mentor to express the biblical text in a beloved way. These two articles demonstrate the difference between the Bible and the Quran in their types of literature and the way that
adherents of these two scriptures approach their texts. Both articles show the importance of orality and respect for the text that is instructive for those who are bringing the Bible into Muslim contexts. It is a particular reminder to Protestant Christians who may pay more attention to the study of the meaning compared to those from Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, who may prioritise more symbolic and ritualised engagement with the Bible.

Carol Walker describes her journey of reading the Quran as a Christian, comparing the different styles found in the Bible and Quran and how women characters are deployed in the messaging of two texts. Her article points to the importance of chronological storying to engage meaning in both texts while also being at the heart of differences between the Bible and Quran. The Bible mostly supplies a narrative context while the Quran is allusive and narrative is supplied by sources from outside the Quran. Carol helpfully supplies a list of women characters in the Quran and explores the way Eve has been understood in Christian and Muslim interpretation, questioning the origins of misogynistic interpretations that crept into the Eve narrative in both traditions.

Miriam Williams chronicles the development of a time and space where Christian and Muslim women met to explore their questions about faith. She tells how they opened the Bible and Quran together to look at common characters between the two texts, called Prophets Stories. The time of sharing became a regular activity that was not only an exchange of knowledge but became spaces of generous Hospitality. The article describes various elements of the dialogue activity while explaining the risks and rewards it holds. Most importantly, Miriam describes how the Prophets Stories time together can be transformative, not only for those directly involved, but also for the wider social networks of which these women are part.

The article Sexy Selfies and Hijabs does not compare the Bible and Quran but looks at the way women present their bodies as a text for others to read. It asks what sexy selfies and fashionable hijabs say about power and gender. The article explains that texts are not only written documents; they include symbols and ideologies that these women affirm or challenge through their bodies. It therefore thinks about the activity of self-presentation as a text for others to read and asks what it says about sexual exploitation. The visual presentation of women’s bodies becomes a text that affirms or challenges the gendered power arrangements of the day. The article reads the biblical narrative of Tamar and Judah to think about the Bible’s perspective on women’s self-presentation and how these display gendered abuses of power.

The collection of articles in this Webzine present the variety of ways in which women engage with their texts, with each other and the world. They help us see the differences in the type and nature of Christian and Muslim scripture and the way women may read these texts. The articles make clear that we cannot assume that our way of reading or interpreting the text is the same as our Muslim sisters. They also show how we may discover renewed understanding and meaningful forms of engaging with the Bible.

Louisa Maynardt

1. http:/ /world.bymap.org/LiteracyRatesFemales.html
Learning the Qur’an in the mosque: Recitation, memorisation and interpretation
Abstract

As Muslim women around the world are increasingly involved in the piety movement, what does this mean for how they engage with the Qur’an? How might that in turn shape their expectations of encountering the Bible?

This paper explores the interaction of women in mosque programmes with the Qur’an, as they recite it, memorise it, and seek to understand, interpret and apply it with help from their teachers. We ask what this means for us when we seek to come with God’s Word to these women.
In the mosque

Women are approaching the gates of a mosque enclosure in a Middle Eastern city, in ones, twos and groups of five or six, all dressed in full-length coat and headscarf. Small differences of cut and colour suggest individual difference within the all-covering anonymity. Going in through the gates, they bypass the central ablutions place for men and the main door to the mosque, entering through a small side door where stairs lead to the upper area. Wooden racks at the base and landing of the stairs provide a place to leave their shoes and the women continue up in socks or stockinged feet, to the large meeting hall. Comfortably carpeted, the hall is sparsely furnished with a few plastic chairs at the back, shelves with some copies of the Qur’an, and some mattresses for seating around the side. Picture frames enclose the calligraphy of Qur’anic texts and the names of Allah. Off this hall are the office and some smaller rooms, with the women’s ablution area on the floor above. Some women are performing the actions of salah prayer. Other women pace backwards and forward holding the Qur’an as they murmur its words, or sit in pairs, with one reciting the Qur’an and the other, an instructor, listening and correcting as needed.

The presence of the Qur’an in this mosque area, both visually and aurally, reflects its presence in the outside world, encountered and viewed as bringing blessing through recitations broadcast from CD’s, radios or televisions, seen scrolled in elaborate calligraphic script around mosque perimeters, texts framed in houses and
businesses, or the book of the Qur’an itself occupying a place of honour on a kursi stand or high on a bookshelf or mantel.

In recent decades the number of women and girls learning how to memorize the Qur’an has grown exponentially, so that throughout the Muslim world young girls through to older women can be seen clustering around the gates and doorways of mosques, as they go to or come from Qur’an classes. For some women, their primary work in domestic space offers more opportunity to attend classes in the mosque or in private homes. There are also many young and older women who are professionally employed, still carrying responsibility for home duties, and also memorizing, or teaching memorization of the Qur’an.

**Recitation**

“Iqra!” (Recite!) is traditionally believed to be the command given to Muhammad, as the first word of revelation of the Qur’an:¹ ‘Qur’an’ means ‘recitation’. The Arabic of the Qur’an is understood as the divine speech, an exact representation of its heavenly source. According to Islamic teaching, the Qur’an originates in a heavenly preserved tablet² eternally pre-existent³ with God (Al-Buruj 85:21), also known as the ‘Mother of the Book’ (Al-Zukhruf 43:4: Al-Ra’d 13:39, Al-Imran 3:7). In this understanding of divine

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¹ “Iqra!” (recite / read) begins Al-’Alaq 96.
We find the same meaning cluster in Psalm 1:2, where the Hebrew word to ‘murmur’ (hagah) “means to make a low muttering sound, which is what one does with a text in a culture where there is no silent reading.” Robert Alter. *The Book of Psalms. A Translation with Commentary*. New York & London: W.W.Norton, 2007.

² The Jewish (pre-Christian) book of Jubilees makes mention of heavenly tablets.

³ Mediaeval Mu’tazilites (and some contemporary neo-Mu’tazilites) question the doctrine of the eternal pre-existence of the Qur’an.
inspiration, translation into another language is impossible: any non-Arabic versions of the Qur’an can only be interpretations.

A.T. Welch commented that, “For Muslims the Kur’an is much more than scripture or sacred literature in the usual Western sense. Its primary significance for the vast majority through the centuries has been in its oral form.”

Muslim encounter with the Qur’an is foremost in its aural dimension rather than semantic. Kristina Nelson describes a public performance of the recited Qur’an:

As (the reciter) begins a high passage he catches their attention. Suddenly the power of the phrase seizes the scattered sensibility of the crowd, focusing it, and carrying it forward like a great wave, setting the listeners down gently after one phrase and lifting them in the rising of the next. The recitation proceeds, the intensity grows. A man hides his face in his hands, another weeps quietly. Some listeners tense themselves as if in pain, while, in the pauses between phrases, others shout appreciative responses to the reciter. Time passes unnoticed...

The emotional impact of hearing the Qur’an recited is cited as proof of its divine origins. A male speaker during tarawih evening prayers at a mosque described reciting the Qur’an with non-Muslims listening who thought he was singing and were very touched by the sound, “as if they were listening to God’s voice.” He concluded, “If you

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6 The Ramadan evening prayers after the break-fast meal.
want to know about Islam, recite/read the Qur’an in Arabic.” When asked what they miss about Islam, Muslim followers of Jesus may mention the chanting of the Qur’an.

**Tajwid**

Muslims learn the principles of correct recitation in Arabic through the rules of *tajwid*, a comprehensive set of rules about pronunciation and timing, so that the Qur’an is recited in the way that Muhammad is understood to have received and recited it. Nelson quotes Muhaysin’s book on Qur’an recitation:

> The intent of *tajwid* is the recitation of the Qur’an as God Most High sent it down, and the authorization for it is that knowledge of it is a collective duty and the practice of it is a duty prescribed for all who wish to recite something from the Holy Qur’an.⁷

In this view, correct recitation of the Qur’an (in Arabic) is the primary way of interacting with it; questions about its meaning and interpretation are secondary.

Correct articulation is a matter of religious obedience, required for divine (and human) approval. A *da’iyya* (female Muslim teacher) supervising *tajwid* teachers admonished them about their pupils’ performance: “They should read better than this. ... If she has memorized ten sections with mistakes, it’s not accepted by God and it’s not right before people.” Another mosque teacher told her student, “We recite with *tajwid* so that our understanding of the Qur’an is clearer and we obey the rulings of God (may He be

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exalted). We should obey God in all the details of our lives. This is piety.”
Correct recitation is thus taught as a religious responsibility, part of pious formation. Graham and Kermani describe the importance of tajwid:

Chanting the Qur’an is potentially an actualisation of the revelatory act itself, and thus how the Qur’an is vocally rendered not only matters, but matters ultimately. ... it is in its oral recitation that the Qur’an is most clearly experienced as divine.⁹

Kenneth Cragg notes “the fact that the Qur’an is for recital rather than mere perusal, so that its sequences, strophes and accents have this in view rather than a studied logic. ... In Jalal al-Din Rumi’s metaphor, the Qur’an, like a Damascus brocade, has an under and an upper side and must be read accordingly.”¹⁰ If we follow Rumi’s allegory, rules for tajwid provide the pattern for the damask weave.

Mosques offer special sessions on tajwid protocols. In tajwid, the reciters are using language in a form that is not the Arabic of the home nor of formal speech and writing. Everyday written Arabic has different syntactic-phonetic rules, a contrastive lexicon, and more complex grammar than spoken dialects, but Qur’anic recitation is not like reading a newspaper or textbook in Modern Standard Arabic. Reciting the Qur’an requires a particular way of configuring speech organs. While some tajwid recalls formal Arabic grammar, many of the rules were specific to tajwid for reciting the Qur’an. They included length of articulation and of pauses, connections, and mode of

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articulation of some sounds.\textsuperscript{11} I attended \textit{tajwid} classes where all the women in the group already read, wrote and were native speakers in Arabic.

\textit{The lessons are given to small groups of five to fifteen. The teacher explains the rules, and sometimes gives her students opportunities to practice and be affirmed or corrected in their pronunciation. She ties the rules to Qur’anic examples, quoting the surah they are from, and giving the phrasal context. Sometimes she asks questions to test her hearers’ understanding of a rule, or asks them to find examples from a section of the Qur’an related to the rule that they’re discussing. At another point all the learners take up a Qur’an and the teacher recites it phrase by phrase, with the learners reciting it after her.}

The group lessons on \textit{tajwid} were applied in individual sessions, when the learner would sit with an instructor to hear the learner recite the verses. The instructors needed to have completely memorised the Qur’an and \textit{tajwid}, and received a certificate of \textit{tajwid}. The certificate had to come through a certified chain of instructors (which could include women).\textsuperscript{12} The learners were encouraged to focus on accuracy rather than memorizing extensive amounts of text, repeating a section until they got it right. An instructor told the woman she was hearing recite: “\textit{I don’t care if


Amal the instructor listens to pick up any errors, as she sits cross-legged, knee to knee\(^\text{13}\) with the young woman who is sitting facing her. Amal focuses on the vowel quality, telling the young reciter, “Attention - shape your mouth like this, more open – bring the ‘u’ through a tunnel, making it last.” She holds her nose to show her how to end right. The woman tries, retries - Amal explains, demonstrates again, smiles and tells her, ‘Well done!’ She gives lots of explanation and revision to this woman, focusing on the length of syllables, of the ‘n’, and occasionally corrects a word. She talks about the position of the tongue for ‘n’. “The tongue should be at the tip of the teeth, not behind them.” She gives me a quick explanation of the tajwid principle of ghunnah (nasality): “The ‘m’ and ‘n’ are blocked in the mouth, so the air comes through the nose - this is ghunnah.”

**Private prayer**

Some of the shorter Qur’anic chapters are recited as part of the daily salah prayers. Common sections include surahs Al-Fatiha 1, Al-‘Asr 103, Al-Fil 105, Quraish 106, Al-Ma‘un 107, Al-Kauthar 108, Al-Kafirun 109, Al-Nasr 110, Al-Ikhlas

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\(^{13}\) In the traditional pattern of memorizing the Qur’an the learner repeats the passages they have mastered or learned by ear, sitting on the floor knee-to-knee with the teacher. Nevad Kahteran. “Hafiz/Tahfiz/Hifz/Muhaffiz.” *The Qur’an: An Encyclopaedia.* London & New York: Routledge, 2006, 232.
One young woman asked another who was practicing reciting a passage with an instructor, “Do you recite that in salah?” The reciter nodded, and the first woman said, “It shows!” Nevad Kahteran quotes his own muhaffiz (teacher) on the importance of daily reciting: “the Qur’an is like a bird – if you let it go, it looses no time in flying out of your hand.”

Devout Muslims will seek to recite part of the Qur’an each day, often in the quiet morning hours after the pre-dawn salah, or in the evening.

**Public recitation**

Both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers learn the same rules, so that tajwid unites reciters of the Qur’an around the world, across borders of language and geography. However gender and geography affect the possibility of public recitation for women. Within Islam, the extent to which a woman’s voice is awrah (that which should be concealed) is vigorously debated. And the controversies shape public recitation of the Qur’an. Um Kalthoum, the famous national singer in Egypt, used to be a Qur’an reciter in her youth: however the public tones of female reciters of the Qur’an are no longer heard in the Middle East in mixed contexts. In other areas, such as South East Asia, women’s voices can be heard broadcast chanting the Qur’an. Nevertheless even in areas where it is permitted, the rules of purity mean that women who are menstruating cannot recite, publicly or privately.

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While Islam insists on the difference between Qur’anic recitation and music, the most skilled Qur’anic reciters have studied the principles of music. These principles undergird the deep collective impact of the recited Qur’an on its listeners. Neurological studies in the past decade exploring music and the brain have shown how music engages nearly every area of the brain and its neural subsystems. Music links with brain structures involved with motivation, reward, and emotion, so that it “stirs us at our biological roots.” Oliver Sacks describes how rhythm “synchronizes the brains and minds (and since emotion is always intertwined with music, the ‘hearts’) of all who participate. … Rhythm binds together the individual nervous systems of human community.” Use of rhyme, meter and music help to embed sequences in the brain, which facilitates memorising entire books.

Memorization

Muslims are encouraged to memorize some or all of the Qur’an. The da‘iyya told women attending a mosque programme that for the heart to be effective it should be bayt al-Qur’an (home of the Qur’an), “so, sisters, God willing, we’ll memorize all the verses.” On another occasion she encouraged the girls in the mosque summer programme to memorize as much as possible, if necessary giving up fun excursions to spend more time in study, because: “Every letter (memorised of the Qur’an) is a good deed.” As a good

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17 Sacks Musicophilia. L3555, 3392.

18 Sacks Musicophilia. L3287.
deed, the amount memorised directly affects a person’s status or reward in the afterlife in heaven: “if he memorised it all, he would gain the highest standing, if he memorised half, a medium rank, if he memorised a small portion, then he would be of small status.”

The Qur’an consists of 114 surahs (chapters), ordered from approximately the longer (and later) surahs to the shorter (and earlier) ones. It is also divided into equal sections, most commonly thirty sections, known as juz, to assist in memorizing it. Memorization can begin with any section of the Qur’an. Most commonly people memorize in sequence, either from the start to the end, or more often from the end to the beginning, as the final surahs are shorter and easier to retain as people are getting used to memorizing.

Traditionally when someone has memorised the whole Qur’an (often in their early or mid-teens) there is a party to celebrate. A women’s mosque programme held special parties to celebrate girls who had memorised part or all of the Qur’an. At one such celebration, the women’s chorus sang:
Raise your voices and congratulate her, she memorized the entire Qur’an.

Raise your voices and applaud.

What you will get is more valuable than the world’s treasures,

In heaven you will be crowned.

Make a procession and congratulate her, and crown her with honour,

Raise your voices with cheers and applause.¹⁹

The act of memorization confers blessing, independent of comprehension. Nevad Kahteran describes recitation as a good work in its own right:

The utterance of the words of the Qur’an (tilawat al-Qur’an) is a good deed (thawab), regardless of whether their exoteric and esoteric meaning is understood or not, while the significance and value of the act derive from the conviction, knowledge and recognition that the Qur’an is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.

However, he suggests that the best recitation is when language, reason and heart work together for proper pronunciation, understanding and obedience.²⁰

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¹⁹ Translated from the Arabic: Meltzer & Nix. The Light in Her Eyes.
**Blessing**

About 85% of the Muslim world do not speak Arabic as their first language; and even for Arabic speakers, the 7th century Arabic of the Qur'an is far removed from everyday speech, and even from the more formal Arabic of written materials. Being native speakers of Arabic doesn’t automatically confer on women the right way to recite the Qur’an: neither does it offer easy access to the meaning of scriptures in the language of a society fourteen centuries ago.

Fatima Mernissi, growing up in Morocco, describes being taught the Qur’an as a child, but being discouraged from any attempt to understand the verses she was writing and memorizing:

> For you see, most of the time, Lalla Tam did not bother to explain what the verses of the Koran meant. Instead we copied them down into our luha, or tablet, on Thursdays, and learned them by heart ...
> But during all this time, Lalla Tam did not explain the verse. She said that it would be useless to do so. 'Just learn by heart what you have written on your luha,' she would say. 'No one will ask you your opinion.'

The challenge of comprehension has perhaps strengthened a focus on the power of blessing conferred through the Qu’ran in the lives of Muslim women, rather than its meaning. Whether written or read aloud, the Qu’ran in material

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form is viewed as an efficacious source of barakah (blessing or protective power). Constance Padwick describes:

...the overwhelming sense in Muslim devotions of the holy power of the Qur’an, a power which is felt to be a spiritual protection. . . . hence the innumerable uses of Qur’anic texts in charms, and the output of separate surahs printed in minute form to be carried on the person for protection.22

A group of women might recite the Qur’an aloud, each one reciting one or two sections (juz) individually until the whole Qur’an has been corporately recited, to bring blessing on the reciters and the house where it takes place, or sometimes with intercessory intent for someone in need. Specific verses of the Qur’an can be written on a piece of paper and immersed in water (to drink for internal healing) or in oil (to anoint an afflicted part of the body). Women could also recite Qur’anic verses into the palms of their hands held together, which were then wiped on the required part of the body. Women would discuss with each other which Qur’anic verses or other religious invocations should be repeated how many times, either morning or evening, in particular months, for proper efficaciousness in healing or protection. Lane has an extensive chapter on the efficacy of written charms, usually from the Qur’anic text.23 Similar beliefs underwrote the engraving of

Qur’anic verses on old metal bowls, silver, brass and copper, so that someone drinking from them might be healed or kept safe in childbirth.

Comprehension

It is not uncommon to meet Muslims who have memorised and can recite the whole Qur’an, but do not know the meaning of what they recite. Like Lalla Tam, some believe that memorization of the Qur’an is sufficient as a good deed in itself. However, while some people put priority on memorization and correct recitation as the primary task, others include understanding the text also. A female mosque teacher reflected on the relationship between recitation, memorization and comprehension:

Some say tajwid should come before memorization, and some say there’s no reason why memorization and tajwid shouldn’t go together. Some say memorization first and then tajwid. I am afraid when the girls memorize, that the tajwid is so hard they won’t want to memorize, so I tell them, memorize it like you memorize anything, and then when we complete the memorizing, the tajwid will be easy, God willing. But if someone came and said that she wanted to learn the tajwid, I say, ‘Yes’, there’s no problem with this. The important thing is that you memorize, because the purpose is to memorize and to understand the Qur’an.

The same da’iyya expressed the need for comprehension more strongly on another occasion:
A person needs to know tajwid. But if he memorized the Qur’an and doesn’t know tajwid, he’s not penalized. But if he memorized the Qur’an and didn’t know the meaning, this is culpable—he needs to understand what he reads. More important than tajwid is to understand what he reads. But if he yajawwad wa yingham [recites it musically] without understanding what he is reciting, this is of no use.

Memorization and comprehension are on a continuum, where memorising can grow into comprehension. Brian Street described people learning the Qur’an in the context of different literacy practices in rural Iran:

While some simply learnt to recognise the words on the page as a sort of mnemonic for stimulating recitation of passages, many learned to read in Arabic and Farsi and used their skills to read other texts than the Koran. Some developed skills in interpretation and argumentation and some learnt to elaborate on basic themes and to express their meaning in various forms. A few learned the rudiments of writing.  

Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, also describing a non-Arabic Muslim context, suggest literacy in Arabic can be broken into five levels of comprehension:

1. Able to read the whole Qur’an: possibly can explain the meaning.
2. Can read the Qur’an, write it from memory: possibly can explain the meaning.

3. Can read, recite or translate any passage of the whole Qur'an; and may have studied commentaries.
4. Can read and translate the Qur'an, as they've studied Arabic as a language.
5. Their Arabic is sufficient to read commentaries on the Qur'an, religious life, write letters in; they are able to use both Modern Standard Arabic and Vernacular Arabic.\(^{25}\)

**Interpretation**

With growing literacy among women worldwide, alongside the spreading Islamic piety movement, there is a shift from a primary focus on the physical form of the Qur'an and its function in healing and protection, to internalizing the Qur'an through memorization, with the prestige it brings in this life and promises for the next. While the rules of *tajwid* ensure that the recitation of the Qur'an is consistent across the Muslim *ummah*, it is in the interpretation of and commentary on the Qur'an that different communities are defined.

In a Middle Eastern women’s mosque programme, when they had memorized the whole Qur’an, the women were encouraged to then memorize the concise commentary of Ibn Kathir (1301-1373AD), a classic conservative commentator. There was a competition, with regular announcements in the programme of which part of the Qur’an and commentary women were to memorize, followed by regular tests in reciting

Ibn Kathir’s *tafsir* for the different sections of the Qur’an. Then those who did well had their names read out and received prizes.

However, the women in that mosque programme could also read different books of *tafsir* for themselves in the women’s library. The *tafsir* of Egyptian Mohammad Mutawali Al Shaarawi (1911-1998) was popular. Many of the women also listened to popular contemporary Qur’anic teachers via satellite and cassette tapes. Ibn Kathir’s standard commentary was to be a beginning but not a boundary for the women’s understanding of the Qur’an and how it was interpreted. Contemporary conservative commentators also shaped the women’s reading and understanding.

Exposure to different commentators offered people personal choice in which interpretation they chose, even as they are able to take from any of the four different schools of interpretation, and can choose different schools for different times or subjects. Traditional commentators like Ibn Kathir cite a range of different jurists’ positions usually without endorsing a particular position. Saba Mahood points out in her ground-breaking book on the women’s piety movement how this “foregrounds the importance of individual choice and the right of the Muslim to exercise this choice.”

Many of the teachers in the women’s piety movement teach the continuing application of *ijtihad* (reinterpretation through personal endeavour) in understanding the Qur’an. One teacher listed the conditions to be a *mujtahid* (someone who could do *ijtihad*) as “to know the Qur’an, the *ahadith*, to have good Arabic language, and to show proper behaviour in their lives.”

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26 The four Sunni schools of law are Hanifi, Maliki, Shafi’i, Hanbali. The main Shi’a schools of law include Ja’fari and Zaidiyya.

A woman attending a mosque programme gave me an example of how it could work:

*If there are two women in another country and there is no indication of the direction of prayer, one woman might say, ‘This is the direction,’ and pray that way: and the other woman might suggest another direction and pray that way. In that case they would both be right because they are using their minds. idha ma fiy dalil, kul wahid mujtahid (If there is no evidence, everyone is a mujtahid.)*

**With intelligence and piety**

Importantly, women within the piety movement can also see interpretation modeled by their female teachers as they teach the Qur’an. In doing so, the women offer an implicit but powerful challenge to the pervasive *hadith* that women lack both intelligence and religion.\textsuperscript{28}

To help the women think further about Qur’anic interpretation, one mosque teacher would sometimes ask her students “about why woman was half of man with regard to witness and inheritance, and leave them for a period of a week or ten days to think about it, then discuss it with them.” (Al-Baqara 2:282 states

\textsuperscript{28} Narrated Abu Said Al-Khudri: Once Allah’s Apostle went out to the Musalla (to offer the prayer) of ‘Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, “O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women).” They asked, “Why is it so, O Allah’s Apostle?” He replied, “You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you.” The women asked, “O Allah’s Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?” He said, “Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?” They replied in the affirmative. He said, “This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn’t it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?” The women replied in the affirmative. He said, “This is the deficiency in her religion.” (Al-Bukhari, Book #6, Hadith #301). [https://www.searchtruth.com/searchHadith.php](https://www.searchtruth.com/searchHadith.php).
that a woman’s witness is half that of a man’s. In Al-Nisa’ 4:11, 12, 176, women are allocated half the inheritance of men.) The teacher offered different possibilities for interpretation from which the students might choose. This approach offers hermeneutic possibilities in dealing with texts traditionally cited in relation to women. For example, with Al-Baqara 2:282, the ruling on witness might be because women didn’t pay much attention in matters of money and were easily scared in violent crime, so it applied (only) to felonies of money and violence. Or else “now when women had the opportunity to study and be equal to men, their witness was of equal value: this was Islam.” She described other situations when a woman’s witness equaled that of a man. And she cited hadith describing when Muhammad had taken the advice of a woman, suggesting that the verse about witness must have restricted application to women generally.

An-Nisa’ 4:34 is generating much contemporary debate from Muslim writers, particularly in regard to the spousal injunctions allowing a man to hit his wife in the second half of the verse.

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29 Dale Shifting Allegiances. 166-7. The occasions she listed included testifying to a woman’s maternal relationship with a child through breastfeeding, virginity, adultery, and sighting the new moon signifying the beginning of Ramadan.
Men are the quwwamun (protectors and maintainers) of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in the husband’s absence what Allah orders them to guard. As to those women on whose part you see ill-conduct, admonish them, refuse to share their beds, beat them; but if they obey you, seek not against them means. Surely Allah is ever high, most great.  

However traditionally debate around this verse has focused more on the precise meaning of quwwamun. A mosque teacher, discussing the term ‘quwwamun,’ interpreted it in singular locational terms: “the man is the protector/authority over the house” (al-rajul quwwam ‘ala al-bayt), rather than in plural gendered terms according to the Qur’anic text - “men are protectors/in authority over women” (qawwwamun ‘ala al-nisa’).

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This means that he is responsible for the house, fixing things, children’s study, other needs. It’s best (seen) in action and not in the self. I wish men knew the meaning of quwwam - the right of the women for the man to be responsible for the house, (to provide) the woman’s income. It was once thought that women are min annajasah ([originating] from uncleanness) - this isn’t in Islam.

In her discussion, the teacher interpreted the verse in terms of behaviour and role responsibilities, rather than terms of divinely ordained difference between men and women. She also challenged popular linking of women with uncleanness. However, she did not mention the ways to deal with women “on whose part you see ill-conduct,” and in contrast to the wider contemporary discussion around that part of the verse I heard no discussion of it on any other occasion within that mosque community. It may have been too controversial in that social and cultural context. In that Middle Eastern mosque programme, the women operated within the permitted cultural space: but within the framework of gender complementarianism, they sought a more balanced re-reading.

**Application**

The Qur’anic text and *hadith* are reread for their application to women’s daily lives and duties. At a women’s programme in a mosque I attended lectures where the da’iyya taught through the Qur’an, reflecting on its meaning with reference to contemporary issues, from domestic matters in women’s daily lives to affairs of the international Muslim *ummah*. A lecture might cover two verses or ten. The verses were not announced by number (the beginning chapter and verse was given sometimes when the lecture commenced) or read aloud, but provided the stimulus or context for the
teaching, sometimes highlighting particular phrases. Often hadith or other stories were narrated. For example, *Al-Zumar* 39:9 was announced at the start of one lecture:

> Is one who is obedient to Allah, prostrating himself or standing during the hours of the night, fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the mercy of his Lord? Say: “Are those who know equal to those who know not?” It is only men of understanding who will remember.  

The *da’iyya* used this verse to exhort the women on the need to draw close to God every day, through daily reverence and also practicing the night prayer. She reflected:

> The responsibility for worship is greater at night than during the day. In the day there are pressures, work, business, concerns of the house. At night there are twelve hours. There are different kinds of worship: there is the service of the home and children, teaching the children, caring for their food and cleaning.

Continuing, she told the women, “worship gives strength to people,” citing the example of an old person who “rises early and sleeps early, and is strong, can stand up with family and work.” Here the traditional emphasis on reverence and rising to worship at night was taught in the specific context of women’s lives of professional work and family responsibilities.

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32 Night prayer (*qiyaam al-layl* or *tahajjud*) is a voluntary prayer offered any time between the evening (*ishaa*) and dawn (*fajr*) prayer: although the past third of the night before dawn is commonly preferred.
The phrase ‘those who know’ and ‘those who know not’ prompted a comment on the importance of knowledge (‘ilm): “True religion and true learning lead to each other... Learning is the best of worship.” So she encouraged her hearers to visit “ignorant Muslims. Ignorance leads to disbelief. (We need) connectedness and faith and learning.” The women in the programme should ring, ask after, or visit one another, because “our sisters are the believers, whether we like them or not, whether they are rich or poor.” It was the “sisters of the mosque, sisters in God” who would provide support in difficulty, and give testimony on our behalf in heaven. In this way the teacher used the Qur’anic verse to encourage the women in coming to the mosque to learn as “the best of worship,” in the context of the situation and daily lives of her listeners.

Life questions were also addressed more specifically in the programme. This could be through lectures on particular topics such as bringing up children and answering their questions. At the end of every lecture, whether on the Qur’an or other matters, there was also a time when questions were answered about everyday life topics, questions that the women had written down on pieces of paper and handed forward. These could include issues such as taking contraceptive pills, having marital relations while still breastfeeding, the age to start wearing hijab, having jinn help with housework, giving bribes, and magic – the kind of questions that come up in popular question-and-answer sessions with imams in public broadcasting on radio and television. But here it was women teachers who were receiving the questions and answering from their own lived experience together with their knowledge and application of religious text.

Women teachers in the contemporary mosque movement model to their hearers how women can interpret the Qur’anic text. They apply the teaching to the personal and communal challenges that the women face, using examples from the details of
women’s own daily lives as well as the hadith. The context of the mosque and the Qur’an lectures gives authority also to the way specific questions of daily life are dealt with and answered.

Within the women’s piety movement, with its emphasis on memorizing the Qur’an and teaching, there is a shift from an emphasis on the physical form of the Qur’an as a source of blessing / power, to a focus on the Qur’an as memorized, recited and interpreted. Correct articulation, tajwid, is a pious duty. Rather than being subject to texts without question, the women were given a range of interpretive possibilities, within conservative cultural patriarchal and religious bounds. The new movement within Islam is in women being able more widely to gather to read and to teach the texts, in homes and also increasingly in mosques, and to learn their application to their lives for themselves.

**Expectations of Text**

This article has sought to understand how women in the piety movement encounter their sacred text. What then are the expectations that they may bring when we introduce them to the Bible? And how might we respond?

**Nature and Veracity of the Bible**

An assumption (even if unspoken) that many Muslims bring to the Bible, is that it has been corrupted. A second challenge is the difference between the Bible - primarily narrative in form, telling the story of God interacting with his people over a span of more than two thousand years – and the oracular form of the Qur’an, which Muslims believe was revealed over about thirty years. In dealing with both these assumptions about text, oral Bible storytelling is a helpful way to introduce people to the Bible. Most Muslims are interested to learn more of the
stories and people that are only alluded to in the Qur’an. As they hear more of the character of God who calls his people into covenant personal relationship with himself, through the stories of other people they may begin to see how their own story can become part of God’s great story also.

**Application**

Muslims expect that the direct teachings or indirect authority of sacred text will apply to every part of life. As we read the Bible with Muslims, we cannot read it as a text separate from the daily issues of life – relationships with relatives and friends, bringing up children, issues of health and sickness, household and business. All of these are part of the purview of exploring God’s Word and care for us together – religious learning and life are deeply intertwined.

**Interpretation**

Some Muslims are hesitant to comment on the Qur’an, preferring to defer to a teacher at the mosque who has the authority to speak. The women’s piety movement can open up the possibility for women to discuss and differ on interpretations, however they choose between authorized possibilities. In coming to the Bible, we expect the Holy Spirit to speak through it. It may be helpful to specifically discuss the role of the Holy Spirit and the faith community in helping us understand and apply God’s Word to our lives.

**Comprehension**

Thanks to the work of Bible translation, far more people in the world are able to read the Bible in their own language. That ‘God speaks my language!’ is good news to people as they encounter God’s Word, perhaps especially to non-Arab
Muslims. Some local Bible translations in Muslim communities, mindful of the authoritative status of Arabic as the language of revelation, have printed the NT translation into the local language alongside the Greek, in the same way that some editions of the Qur’an have the Arabic alongside a translation into another language.

**Memorization**

The readiness and capacity to memorize sacred text is a strength that Muslims can bring to the Bible, and challenge us in also. Ruth Nicholls has written about memorizing ‘liturgies’ of Biblical texts as an important part of discipling believers of Muslim background. In encountering God’s Word we seek meaning and personal transformation through the power of the Word in our lives. This contrasts with a more magical or animistic attitude of expecting material power or blessing through the physical text (in recited or written form), independent of its meaning.

**Recitation**

A number of believers of Muslim background point to the beauty of the recited Qur’an as one of the aspects of Islam that they most miss. I have heard believers chant Psalms and Gospel passages in Arabic and in English following the principles of tajwid. M. Hunter describes the importance of chanting scriptures in

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both Jewish and Christian traditions also. Recognizing its impact on the emotions, chanting is used to underscore the importance of scriptural texts. And rules of chanting are also used to aid memorization. In both introducing people to God’s Word, and in discipleship, recitation is an important tool that we could use.

There is controversy around women’s voices in both Christianity and Islam. However the reference to the ‘great company of women evangelists’ proclaiming God’s Word (Psalm 68:11), itself a paraphrase of the song of Deborah (Judges 5), anticipates the song of Mary on the birth of Jesus, and the voices of the women who proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. It is in this tradition that we can encourage women to sing God’s Word for all to hear and rejoice in.

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34 M. Hunter. “Chanting the Bible and Qur’an as a Discipleship Aid for Muslim Background Believers.” MA Integral Project, Australian College of Theology, 2017.
Conclusion

In this paper we have seen some of the ways that Muslim women experience the Qur’an and how they understand its text as the word of God. Whether they seek correct recitation, healing or blessing, or whether their voices have been excluded from the mosque, these are the experiences Muslims bring to their encounters with the Bible. In understanding their experience, we can anticipate what misunderstandings or barriers we need to overcome as they come to God’s Word. And it may open us to areas in Jewish and Christian traditions, such as memorization and recitation, that can enrich and deepen their (and our) experience of reading and being transformed by the Bible.
Chanting the Bible and Qur’an as a discipleship aid for Muslim Background Believers
“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day
and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its
season,

and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.”

Psalm 1:1-3 (ESV)

In my recent time living in Central Africa, I inquired of a BMB (believer from a Muslim
background) friend of mine about what aspects of Islamic culture he missed now that
he was following Issa (name for Jesus in Qur’an). He promptly told me that he missed
being in the mosque with the community and reciting the Qur’an together. I suggested
that he attempt to chant the Injeel (name for Gospel in Qur’an) we had been studying
which was translated into the local Arabic dialect. He stopped and with an inquisitive
look asked me, “Can I?” I told him, “Of course, give it a go!” We opened up to the
Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and my friend proceeded to chant the scripture just as he
had done with the Qur’an. He chanted in a beautiful tone, with much feeling and emotion, and when he finished he looked at me surprised and said, ‘That’s beautiful!’

For my friend, the scripture had come alive to him in a whole new way. The reverence the scriptures deserved was manifested in the chanting style he had been brought up with. Without the chant, the scriptures felt almost lifeless, void of flavour and colour. We then turned to the Psalms, and immediately the poetry and beauty with which they were created was brought to life, as my friend, with great emotion and intensity, chanted the Psalms. For him, the Holy Scriptures were truly honoured and the words venerated in the form of chant. Up until now, he had been reading that which was holy, but without the appropriate adornment which he felt it deserved. Suddenly however, the holy truths of the Bible were enhanced with the enchanting colour and nasality of voice and rhythm.

**Culturally Appropriate Worship**

This paper will discuss the need to contextualize such worship practices as recitation and its incorporation into Christian liturgy of corporate worship and individual devotion. It considers the history of chanting in the Judeo-Christian culture with a focus on the role of the Psalms in liturgical worship. The paper describes Islamic traditions of recitation and argues for chanting as a culturally contextualised form of worship that aids the discipling of believers from a Muslim background in particular. This article is an introduction and brief exploration of recitation in order to open up a discussion concerning the place of recitation of the Bible among BMBs.

When discipling BMBs there are a number of factors which can challenge believers’ steady growth to maturity in the faith - community pressures, identity struggles, and the process of adapting to a new culture when becoming a follower of
Jesus. The process of contextualization looks to minimize such cultural changes for a believer and allows them to express their new faith in a culturally relevant way. One area of contextualization which needs to be further explored is the way in which both an individual and community of believers express their worship, and as a result, their spiritual growth in their new-found faith.

Ruth Nicholls, a missionary in Asia who has a focus on fostering spiritual growth amongst Muslim seekers says, BMB spiritual growth is fostered by using culturally relevant, purposefully created liturgies that function like spiritual disciplines within the context of corporate worship.\(^{35}\) Nicholls explains that liturgies are common in Islam for daily ‘growing’ and ‘maturing’ and it is these liturgies, also described as cultic practices, which ‘give visibility to a society’s cosmic beliefs.’\(^{36}\)

A. Scott Moreau, a missiologist at Wheaton College Graduate School, also describes discipleship as a process which is facilitated by providing a culturally appropriate environment.\(^{37}\) Moreau sees cultic practices or ‘rituals’ as a key part of every Christians’ spiritual growth, whether it be private study of the scriptures, prayer or gathering in a corporate worship context. Each of these activities, he says, is performed in a ritualistic manner for the purpose of spiritual growth. They function in a much broader sense within a culture also. Moreau explains:

\(^{36}\) Nicholls, p. 207.
“Rituals are used for multiple purposes in societies. People in honor-oriented cultures expect to use rituals for such things as affirming their social and historic identity, transitioning from one type of status to another, and reminding them of who they are and how they are expected to properly relate to others.”

However, since the Reformation, the idea of ‘empty ritual’ has been opposed in evangelical circles and a focus on ‘relationship’ is more common. Moreau explains that this emphasis overlooks the inherent ritualistic nature in many of our activities within the evangelical church. As a result, missionaries have tended to leave out significant rituals in a culture that can be contextualized and incorporated in a new disciples’ worship. He says of missionaries: ‘At best they may work to contextualize liturgical New Testament rituals such as communion and baptism. However, they are likely to ignore or suppress important indigenous rituals that may be adaptable to church life’.

If we look within our culture, we can find many ‘rituals’ - though we may not recognize them as such - which act to build up a sense of identity or cultural awareness within our society. Moreau illustrates,

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38 Moreau, p. 274.
39 Moreau, p. 275.
“Saluting the flag and saying some type of pledge is intended to invigorate patriotism, wedding anniversaries revitalize a marriage, and weekly church services refresh our faith […] When properly contextualized, rituals draw on and reinforce cultural values related to connectedness and religious devotion, bringing people closer to Christ and his body.”

Chanting in early Jewish and Christian Traditions

The first references to chanting in the Bible dates back to the time of Ezra the prophet around 510 B.C.E. The passage in Nehemiah 8:8 regarding the prophets’ reading of the book of the law is believed to refer to the particular melodic cadences and the punctuation with which he read, known as cantillation. As we will explore, cantillation has a rich tradition throughout Judaism, early Christianity, and even in some contexts, to present expressions of Christianity. The emphasis on cantillation has always been in order to highlight and bring out the substance of the chant which is the scriptures itself. Andrew Wilson-Dickson, a composer and expert in early music explains, ‘cantillation of scripture was a potent reminder of the sanctity of the scriptures, setting the word of God apart from the unsanctified conversations of daily life. This won the chant a central place in Hebrew worship.’

40 Moreau, p. 277.
Eric Werner in his book, *The Sacred Bridge*, also explores the tradition of chant in early Judaism and Christianity, linking it to music traditions. He affirms the principle that the musical element of chant was to highlight the importance of the scriptures. He notes that the emphasis on chanting scripture was a common one amongst ancient civilizations acknowledging the effect music had on the emotions. Certain types of music and modes brought about particular moods and feelings and thus the accompaniment of scripture with music was encouraged to enhance such emotion and add weight to the scripture. The common understanding of what it meant to chant was ‘to furnish the words and sentences with the most appropriate phonetic inflection’ and was a much more common practice with scripture and liturgical texts than today.

In the wider Jewish tradition, rabbinic literature is replete with admonitions to chant. Rabbi Johanan (30-90 CE), a predominant writer of the Jewish Mishnah (collection of Jewish oral traditions, also known as Oral Torah), was known to have said:

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44 Werner, p. 104.
“Concerning anyone who reads from the Torah without melody or studies the Mishnah without a song, the verse states: “So too I gave them laws that were not good and judgements whereby they should not live” as one who studies Torah through song demonstrates that he is fond of his learning. Furthermore, the tune helps him remember what he has learned.”

Thus, in the Jewish tradition, chant became an important part of the liturgy and was found in the sacrificial cult at the temple in Jerusalem, in the services of local synagogues and even in private devotions.

The liturgy at the temple became a very well organized and oiled machine, leaving the synagogue to play a different role. As Werner points out, ‘The temple had developed a type of liturgy which, with its hierarchy, its sacrificial cult, and its rigid organization, engendered a sharp distinction between the officers of the ritual and the community of the faithful, the latter being almost passive bystanders.’ This was partly due to the lack of education amongst the congregations as well as limited copies of scripture available. Lay people, therefore were unable to read and recite scripture. The cantillation became an important part in liturgy because of this, for those who wish to participate in the liturgy, were able to listen to a solo cantor as he recited the precious scriptures.

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45 The Bible verse quoted is Ezekiel 20:25, https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.32a.1-18?lang=bi
46 Werner, p. 17.
47 Werner, p. 25.
The development of the melodies of the chant were largely derived from the punctuation of phrases and sentences in the scriptures. The natural flow of the voice when speaking, was embellished with melody. Wilson-Dickson refers to this chanting as ‘a kind of heightened speech’ and explains; ‘In many languages, a question is conveyed by raising the pitch of the voice at the end of a sentence, and this becomes part of the grammar of ... chant. A full stop is conveyed by a fall in the voice, and likewise a comma.’ The word ornaments can describe this rise and fall in pitch, however not in the same manner as the later musical tradition meant it, where it was seen largely as an optional or superfluous musical feature.

Within cantillation, however, ornamentation highlights the grammar and the meaning of the text and thus was considered a very important part of liturgy. The correct accentuation and pronunciation of the Hebrew Bible were passed down orally until the Masoretes of the 6th Century began to notate the vowels and punctuation in a system of 28 symbols called neumes (ta’amim). Since their final codification about A.D. 850, these accents have remained intact and continue to be used in synagogues today.

This system of chanting developed throughout early Jewish and Christian liturgy to the point where there was quite a significant embellishment in the voice which became normal for cantillation. The early church theologian St. Augustine was well acquainted with the cantillation of scripture and emphasized the importance of

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49 Wilson-Dickson, p. 36.
50 Wilson-Dickson, p. 36.
51 Saulnier, p. 31.
52 Werner, p. 105.
music and singing within worship. There seemed to have been different traditions of chanting by his time. For example, Augustine comments in his book, ‘Confessions’, ‘that Athanasius used to oblige the readers to recite the psalms with such slight modulation of the voice that they seemed to be speaking rather than chanting’.  

Today different chanting traditions remain within Christianity although it has largely disappeared within evangelical Protestantism. In the Catholic tradition, chanting remained an important part of the liturgy of the church. Pope Pius X wanted chant to be ‘not as an isolated thing to be evaluated merely by musical standards, but as a complement or integral part of the liturgical life of the Church’. In Taizé, France, Brother Roger Schutz founded a community which housed families and refugees of war. The community developed and many pilgrims came to Taizé every year to worship, pray and meditate. Today ‘Taizé is an international ecumenical community composed of more than one hundred monks from Catholic and various Protestant backgrounds from more than twenty-five nations. Christian George, a professor of historical theology visited the Taizé community and shares his experiences. He writes, ‘the chanting of Taizé freed my songs of praise to fall from my head where I knew them, to my heart where I felt them, to my hands where I could live them.’

55 Christian George, Sacred travels: recovering the ancient practice of pilgrimage. (Downer Grove, IL.: IVP Academic 2006), p. 120.
56 George, p. 123.
The Liturgical Role of the Psalms

In the temple, the liturgies consisted of daily cantillation of the Psalms. On the first day: Psalm 24, on the second: Psalm 48, on the third: Psalm 82, on the fourth: Psalm 94, on the fifth: Psalm 81, on the sixth: 93, on the seventh: Psalm 92. These were usually chanted but with a single stringed instrument. There were a number of indicators throughout the writings of the Psalms to indicate punctuation and to aid with chanting. Selah usually indicated a pause and a change of section in the Psalm and is still included in some translations today. Anah indicated ‘respond’ and would often mean there would be a repeat of a phrase in response to someone’s lead. Psalm 136 is a good example of this, where perhaps a leader will chant the first line, ‘Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good’ and the congregation would respond ‘for his love endures forever’ (ESV). The music is what emphasizes the words of the psalms; it ‘does not attempt to describe the meaning of the text, but rather adorns or clothes the words in song.’

Unlike modern poetry or music, there was not a steady rhythm or beat to which the text was subject. The psalms however had strong and weak stresses with which the music would follow but it wasn’t a regular beat like we might imagine in a 4:4 time signature. Therefore, Wilson-Dickson says, ‘the musical rhythm was [...] probably dictated by the text and not confined to a steady beat, while the melodic scheme would have to be able to accommodate irregular verse-lengths.’ Some modern

57 Wilson-Dickson, p. 20.
58 Wilson-Dickson, p. 21.
59 Wilson-Dickson, p. 36.
60 Wilson-Dickson, p. 21.
translations of the Bible such as the 'Jerusalem Bible’ focus on bringing out these weak and strong stresses in the Psalms.\textsuperscript{61}

The accents and regulations with which scripture is to be read came with certain modes that were designated to various portions of scripture. For example the \textit{Haftara} musical mode is used for the ‘prophetic lesson of the Synagogue’ which is different from the mode used when the Torah is chanted.\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, some of the Psalms have written in their title, the name of the mode or melodic formula that is to be used to chant with. For the most part, the chant followed the grammatical outline of the Psalms which had each verse divided into two complementary halves. Each half would be based around a four-note tetrachord within an eight-note melodic scale. Below is the one such eight note scale known as the Dorian mode divided into its two halves:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{dorian_mode.png}
\end{center}

The first part of the verse would be chanted to the single base pitch like a drone called the ‘tenor’ and then a slight melodic bend using the remaining notes of the tetrachord would indicate the half way point of the verse. The singer would then chant

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{dorian_mode.png}
\caption{The Dorian mode divided into its two halves.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{61} Wilson-Dickson, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{62} Werner, p. 103.
the second half using the upper part of the eight-note scale and finishing with a more elaborate bend to end the verse. Throughout early manuscripts of the Psalms, printed marks were given to guide the singer in incorporating the musical phrases on to the text.

**Qur’anic Recitation**

The Islamic tradition of ‘reciting’ the Qur’an is an important spiritual practice for Muslims. The word ‘Qur’an’ is Arabic meaning ‘recitation.’ Unless it is delivered in a ‘chanted’ form, it cannot be truly called ‘the recitation’. The form of chanting comes from the Qur’an’s command: ‘recite the Qur’an slowly and distinctly’ (Al-Muzzamil 73:4) and is expanded upon in the Jalalayn Commentary (one of the Islamic world’s most widely known commentaries): ‘recite the Qur’an, recite it carefully, in a measured tone.’

Muhammad’s cousin and fourth caliph of Islam, Ali, was known to have explained this verse, saying, ‘(distinctly) means: to pronounce the letters with *tajwid* and know where to pause.”

*Tajwid* in Arabic literally means ‘to improve’ or ‘to do better’ and can be defined as ‘the knowledge and application of the rules of recitation as practised by the Prophet.’ *Tajwid* is the rigorous set of rules to be adhered to in the Islamic tradition of recitation of the scripture. These were constructed and developed by scholars to aid

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63 Wilson-Dickson, p. 36.
68 Ezzat, p. 15.
learners to recite the Qur’an with precision. They explain the details of the correct way of reciting the Qur’an including rhythm, timbre, sectioning of the text, and phonetics; as well as the rules and observances necessary for reciters including the use of ‘pauses’ and ‘stops’ known as waqf. The importance of retaining these rules is stressed because it is believed that the Qur’an must be preserved in the manner in which it was revealed to the prophet Mohammad. The act of simply reading the Qur’an as is, is seen by Muslims to be devaluing the revelation of the Qur’an. Reciting it in a chanting style is seen to reflect more accurately the glory with which it was given to the Prophet.

Muslims believe that the Qur’an was revealed through recitation. The first revelation to Muhammad is believed to have been the command to recite. The hadith explains that one night, when Muhammad was in his cave, the Archangel Gabriel came to him and said ‘Recite!’ to which he replied mā anā biqārī‘īn (I am not a reciter). The angel repeated a second time, and a third time to which Mohammad said, “What shall I recite?” and Gabriel revealed the first passage of the “Recitation.” The Angel recited in its correct pronunciation (with the rules of tajwid) and it was then passed on to the Prophet’s followers orally. In the 9th Century, a well-known Imam, Abu ‘Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Salam compiled a work entitled Kitab al-Qira’at in which he articulated the

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71 Nelson, p. xv.
72 Denny, p. 89.
73 Ezzat, p. 16.
science of *tajwid* and the rules for correct recitation.\textsuperscript{74} Since then, many scholars have written various extensive works detailing the science.

The command to recite is a serious one and is not taken lightly in an Islamic context. The Imam Ibn Al-Jazari (1350-1429) of Damascus, a well-known scholar of \textit{tajwid},\textsuperscript{75} is reported as having written in his famous \textit{tajwid} manual, ‘\textit{Al-Muqaddimah},’ “It is incumbent to observe the rules of tajwid; those who fail to do so are incurring a sin because the Qur’an was revealed by Allah and transmitted to us with the rules of tajwid.”\textsuperscript{76} However while there are grave consequences of incorrectly reciting, there are also great rewards for those who do so correctly, as, the famous traditionalist Al-Bukhari (810-870) explains in the Hadith: “The Messenger of Allah said, ‘Such a person as recites the Qur’an and masters it by heart, will be with the noble, righteous scribes (in heaven). And such a person exerts himself to learn the Qur’an by heart, and recites it with great difficulty, will have a double reward.”\textsuperscript{77}

The importance is understood by all, and thus, the recitation of the Qur’an is taught from an early age, as Frederick M. Denny, a professor of comparative religion at the University of Chicago states:

\textsuperscript{74} Ezzat, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{76} Muhammad Fathi, (accessed 26/07/17).
\textsuperscript{77} The Hadith, \textit{Sahih Al-Bukhari} (trans. M. Muhsin Khan, Book 60 no. 459).
“If the appreciation of the Qur’an is an acquired taste, it is acquired very early by Muslims, who then nurture and preserve it throughout their lives, not only in prayer and the celebrations that feature chanting, but also in the visual realm, because the calligraphy of the Qur’anic Arabic has provided the fundamental aesthetic of Islamic art and decoration.”

Denny further explains that the Qur’an’s ‘sheer rhetorical excellence and power...was from the beginning regarded as proof of its divine origin.’

**Modes of Recitation**

One aspect that gives Qur’anic recitation its unique sound is the musical modes with which the reciter chants, known as ‘*maqamat*’. Of the different modes used in classical Arabic music to recite the Qur’an, the twelve main *maqamat* are: *rast, bayyati, saba, hijaz, nahawand, nakriz, nawa, athar, sikah, huzam, jiharkah* and *ajam*. Reciting the Qur’an in any other musical style is considered by Muslims to lose its ‘soul or feeling’: ‘It is like putting your pants on your head and your hat on your feet. You don’t go to the mosque in your swimsuit; you don’t swim in your prayer clothes. The Qur’an has its own clothes’.

The most common mode, in which the opening chapter of the Qur’an – *al-fatiha* – is often recited, is the *bayyati* mode, notated as follows:  

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78 Denny, p. 97.  
79 Denny, p. 88.  
80 A. K Rasmussen, *Women, the recited Qur’an, and Islamic music in Indonesia* (eBook collection (EBSCOhost); Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 77.  
81 Rasmussen, p. 85.  
82 This is the most accurate notation of the mode which has its limitations when transcribing into western notation. [http://www.maqamworld.com/maqamat/bayati.html#bayati](http://www.maqamworld.com/maqamat/bayati.html#bayati)
These modes however, are defined among Qur’anic reciters more by the phrases and improvised nature of the human voice than by their intervalllic structure. Thus, the western style format of notating the particular intervals of the mode is uncommon and learning these modes is a process that is passed on orally.\(^8^3\) The above-notated bayyati mode is written to its best approximation in the western style notation.

It is important to note that Qur’anic recitation is widely viewed amongst Muslims as being a distinct medium from music in general. There is quite a long-standing debate over the issue of music and its role in the Islamic religion, known as the sama’ debate, which has often polarized Muslim scholars. Both views concur that music is a strong and influential force, but one argues that it ‘is a force which distracts from — if not actually interferes with — the struggle to achieve God’s will,’ whereas the other says ‘music is a neutral force which, (when) channeled and regulated, can just as well lead to God as away from Him.’\(^8^4\)

For reciters of the Qur’an, using maqamat modes is important for teaching and memorizing the Qur’an, and also safeguards the Qur’an from being the ‘creation of any individual’. When using these modal forms, the improvisational nature in recitation

\(^8^3\) Rasmussen, p. 94.
\(^8^4\) Nelson, p. 50.
means that no two performances are the same, thus there is no fixed ‘tune’ or ‘song’ attached to the divine scripture so as to make it a man-made creation.  

This emphasis on the divine nature of the scriptures is very important and is the reason the rules of *tajwīd* are so important in its recitation. Muslims believe the Qur’an to be the word of God in its divine language - Arabic. This revelation is not only central to the life and culture of Muslims by its written words, but by its sound. One scholar of Qur’anic recitation, Kristina Nelson states, ‘The Qur’an is not the Qur’an unless it is heard.’

Rasmussen adds that ‘the musical line should always be subordinate to the text,’ and often what happens is that those who have had experience in singing secular music or even involvement in the call to prayer, because of its ‘free’ nature, often find it difficult returning to the confines of Qur’anic recitation.

The recitation of the Qur’an can be further divided into two styles particular to different cultural settings. The *mujawwad* style is used for public settings with its characteristics of drama within its melody and vocal artistry, whereas *murattal* style is used for more private settings. The *mujawwad* style is very melismatic in nature; vocal artistry is common and the melody of each syllable is embellished. One syllable can include many different pitches over an extended musical phrase and can jump between differing tonal registers at every verse. This style is often used in public performances and individual artistry and improvisation is encouraged.

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85 Rasmussen, p. 88.
86 Nelson, p. xiv.
87 Rasmussen, p. 100.
88 Nelson, p. xxv.
In contrast, the purpose of murattal is the clear articulation of the text for maximum understanding of meaning. In order to ensure this, each syllable of the text is given one or at maximum, two pitches. The voice is in a low tone, and its range rarely exceeds an interval of a fourth. Its intent is that listeners can hear the text clearly so as to facilitate contemplation and meditation.⁸⁹

**Towards a Biblical tajwid**

Unfortunately, as many Muslims around the world come to follow Christ, they lack an appropriate form to express worship like that which is so familiar and beautiful to Muslims. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss examples from my time in Central Africa using a recording of a local reciting of scripture to help us pursue further options of encouraging local BMBs to express their worship in this way. Muslims believe this practice to be necessary in order to receive mercy and blessing from God, and this can be an important issue in its contextualization. The motivation of the activity must be addressed in order that the word ‘may dwell in (believers)’ (Col 3:16) and not be merely ritualistic or void of meaning. The scope, however, of such a practice is far reaching, and can be used for evangelism, teaching – particularly for the illiterate, and liturgical worship. What would Islamic style recitation look like in the context of Christian worship? How might the rules of tajwid apply within a biblical theology of worship? Would such an activity be seen as a ritual? And would this have a positive or negative affect on disciples’ spiritual growth?

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As seen above, for Muslims recitation is a very important practice with a strong emphasis on the correct way of reciting. Penalties apply for an incorrect application of the rules of *tajwid*. Indeed, for Muslims, it is a practice which is necessary in order to acquire merit or rewards from God. The more one recites, it is believed, the more rewards or blessings one receives. However, this is a fundamentally futile motive from a biblical point of view and needs to be addressed. Perhaps the clearest explanation of this is found in Romans 12:1; '*in view of God’s mercy...offer your bodies as living sacrifices...this is your spiritual act of worship’* (NIV). Here we clearly see the difference, whereas in the Muslim understanding, such ‘worship’ is to be done *in order to acquire God’s mercy* from a biblical point of view, such worship is *in view of God’s mercy*.

However, the act of reciting the Bible is one that obviously facilitates memorization and recollection of scripture which is often encouraged within scripture itself. Nicholls says, ‘the memorization of Scripture and its recitation is enjoined within the Scriptures; the call to “bring to mind” and “remember” is a constant theme. For people from an oral social background, remembering through recitation, some using song, is important.’

Nicholls notes the use of ‘The Lords’ Prayer’ in this context, which has been used within the church for centuries in a recitation style, to teach fundamental doctrine and theology. Thus, we can conclude that recitation of scripture in general, - at least sections such as the Psalms - can be easily contextualized for BMBs as an activity of spiritual formation which can have great impact on believers’ growth to maturity.

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90 Nicholls, p. 215.
The example was given at the beginning of this paper of a Central African friend who chanted the Magnificat and Psalms in a traditional way known to him. What allowed my friend to chant in this way was simply the permission that was given to him. He hadn’t thought it possible to incorporate such an activity into his worship. Recitation is not my area of expertise (he gave me an opportunity to attempt the recitation, but to no avail – the Arabic maqam mode was far from natural to my westernized ears which were attuned only to the common major and minor scales). It is, however, his area of expertise and something he has been doing since childhood. Thus, it is important to note that this potential form of worship is not something that can be taught or owned by western missionaries but something that can only be encouraged and given permission. Thus, I present the following two questions for missionaries to ponder:

1. **What are the possibilities and scope of such a practice?**

For most Muslims, the *tawraat, zabuur, and injeel* are all books that have been spoken of with honour and reverence, however few have actually read such books and fewer still, have even heard a single scripture from them. Unfortunately, often a Muslim’s first exposure to the scriptures is in the context of a Christian reading them who potentially fails to deliver the scripture with the appropriate honour with which Muslims often associate them. For example, a mistreatment of the physical book of the Bible or a quotation given in a language other than that which is considered holy (Arabic), can reinforce believed negative stereotypes about scriptures and the ‘people of the book’.
Recitation of the Bible can be a powerful tool in allowing *those who have ears, to hear* and opening Muslims’ hearts up to the book of the law, the prayers of David, or the teachings of Jesus. If a Muslim heard the scriptures delivered in the familiar and pious manner of recitation, it would break down long held stereotypes about the scriptures and would allow them to feel comfortable in listening to them as the words of Truth. The recitation of the Bible has potential to be a powerful tool of evangelism throughout the Islamic world.

The recitation of scripture in a developing world context plays a similar role to that which it had in early Judaism and Christianity. Where the large portion of the community were illiterate and unable to read the scriptures for themselves, a single chanter, reciting the scriptures acted as an important teaching tool for those who were unable to do so. Within an oral society, *listening* to scripture is a far more natural and effective way of receiving the scriptures and ‘delighting and meditating on the law’ as the Psalms exhort.

2. **In what ways can we encourage this form of worship among BMBs?**

It is only in recent years that dialects and other languages have had Bibles translated using the Arabic alphabet. Up until recently ‘low registers’ and other languages have been produced in the Roman alphabet. But a shift has occurred in the understanding of the weight of the Arabic alphabet within Muslim societies. This shift needs to continue to further include aspects of Islamic culture within the translations of the Bible, such as using the symbols of *tajwid* within scripture. I stated earlier that it was the *permission* I gave my friend, that led him to enjoy the full extent of worship within the scripture
reading he had been brought up with. In printed scripture, the symbols of
Tajwid could give an individual permission to chant the scriptures and enjoy
the beautification of the Word of God. Below is a sample suggestion of
scripture with the symbols of Tajwid based on my friend’s recording of Psalm
1 (in his dialect:

![Musical notation]

The transcription above has been written as an approximation, with the
tonality been notated to the nearest quarter-tone within the parameters of the
various maqamat, and the rhythm similarly has been transcribed to the nearest
quaver, crotchet and minim. The pitch of the chant barely exceeds an interval of
a fourth and occasionally reaches a fifth.
What we have attempted to provide here is permission for an BMB to read the scripture in the manner in which he or she deems appropriate – which in most cases I assume would be the form of chant for those who have been trained in it. We do not have sufficient space here to explore the extent of the possibilities for recitation of scripture, nor are we able to provide means by which BMB’s may recite using the symbols of *tajwid*. However, perhaps, as in the case with my friend, the *tajwid* symbols were not necessary in order to enjoy a ‘layman’s’ rendition of the recitation.

**Conclusion**

The various traditions of recitation are rich in history and meaning across multiple religions and cultures. We have analysed the Islamic and the Judeo-Christian tradition and explored how believers from Muslim backgrounds can incorporate their recitation into the Christian expression of worship. For a BMB to adapt their worship style to suit the norm within Christian culture is asking a lot. In the same way as I was completely unable to adapt my westernized ears to the Arab *maqam*, the forms of Christian worship are dissimilar for a Muslim. It can be seen as a sacrifice of their cultural identity.

The use of the Islamic recitation form of scripture for Christian worship is an extremely important conversation as the tradition is of such significance to Muslims. The question was asked, ‘what do you miss most about Islam?’ and it is imperative to answer this question in the way of providing a means by which one may express whatever God-given desire to worship that needs to be expressed. For many Muslims, they lack an appropriate manner in which they can express their worship and reverence to God once they have come to Christ. Therefore, as brothers and sisters we
have an obligation to give permission and explore appropriate means by which they may enjoy the beauty of scripture and express their worship.
The Bible - Women - The Qur'an:
Some intertwining perspectives
I remember talking with a new Christian friend who had grown-up in the Middle East, some forty years ago. Her wise advice, that if I wanted to introduce Muslim friends to the good news of Jesus then the scripture I needed to know well is the Bible, has served me well in the intervening years. Mostly it has served to nurture my own walk with the Living God, so that when I have been asked to explain the hope that is in me it has simply been natural to share texts, themes, and stories from God’s word that have shaped and thrilled me, almost invariably resulting in further interest in my questioner. Some of those friends have been keen to tell me that the things I have spoken of are found in the Qur'an, a few wanted to know if I had read the Qur'an, and one with whom I corresponded for a while challenged me to join her in making a comparison between the two scriptures: I continue to feel sad that responsibilities which took me away from the role I had at that time meant I could not follow through on that challenge. Perhaps if I had had a better knowledge of the Qur'an I would have been able to manage responsibilities and take up the challenge.

For many of the early years of ministry I had attempted reading an English translation of the Qur'an, but in a dip-in-and-out-to-find-out-what-is-said-on-key-topics kind of way. My knowledge of what is in the Qur'an was guided by the knowledge of others, mostly through the teaching and writing of Christians. It was an unusual Muslim friend who could give me any help in how to go about becoming familiar with the Qur'an. They knew their faith through the traditions they had been taught. Their Qur'an was literally a veiled book, as it was kept wrapped in a cloth to honour and protect it and was in a language which they could not read (Arabic) even if they were literate. (Many Muslim women I had the privilege to meet in Pakistan were smart but
When I shared stories of Jesus’ respect and kindness towards women, even as they were drawn to him, some would want me to know that this was what their Prophet was like too. I am guessing that readers of this article have probably had the same experience, whilst hopefully also finding that faithfully continuing to share such stories, especially in the context of more sustained Chronological Storying from the Bible (sometimes now called CBS), is nevertheless taken by the Spirit of God to reveal His love. For those unfamiliar with CBS, the approach combines oral sharing of Bible Stories, usually in their chronological sequence, with discussion.\(^\text{91}\) The non-literate has freedom to repeat and to memorize in a dialogical process that is gently geared toward a clear destination.\(^\text{92}\) With literate women it was, and is, always easier to open texts to enable exploration of the evidence. But inevitably most at some point have questions of comparison. Often the questioners’ ideas about what is in Christian scripture and in the Qur’an is more informed by what others have taught them than their own reading of the text (as is true of most Christians, even a majority of those training for ministry, if my recent experiences of lecturing and teaching are anything to go by! ... and also true of most secular commentators on the relationship between Islam and Christianity). Certainly, in the South Asian context, most questioners could not actually help me to locate where words or phrases they might quote from memory had come from. Yet their

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\(^{91}\) Annette Hall, “Chronological Bible Storying” in *From Fear to Faith: Muslim and Christian Women*, compiled by Mary Ann Cate and Karol Downey (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 75.

\(^{92}\) Scott Moreau and Mike O’Rear, “And So the Story Goes ... Web Resources on Storytelling, Myths and Proverbs,” *EMQ* 40 no. 2 (April 2004), 237.
assumptions, part grounded in their scripture and part in their traditions, influenced what they could understand of the Christian message.

In light of these things I continue to endorse the views of my friend of forty years ago but am also convinced of the need to develop good general knowledge of the Qur’an and what Muslim sisters know of it. What follows are, therefore, some insights gathered as I have sought to become clearer about the kinds of things other women may to want to clarify, including what to make of observations by some influential contemporary Muslim women writers. I set up our shared reflections by first giving a wide-angle overview of what we find in the Qur’an, before taking us into some selected detail. I do, of course, write as a Christian. Indeed, I illustrate various points by making comparison with the Bible, as most of us develop our understanding through analogy. However, it would please me greatly if you check my detail with the primary source (the Qur’an) and, when you have opportunity, compare with what others say.

**Introducing the Qur’an and its women characters**

The vast majority of Muslims accept the leading ‘orthodox’ view that the Qur’an has actually always existed, but was revealed through the Prophet Muhammad in the later third of his life, i.e., the late sixth and early seventh century after the birth of Christ (CE). After a period of counter proposals and even heated debate, current non-Muslim scholarship has largely settled to agreeing with the broad details of timing and

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93 There have always been those who hold that the Qur’an is a product of human mediation in much the same way as Christians speak of inspiration of the Bible (see Suleiman A. Mourad ‘Theology, Freewill and Predestination’ in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *The Islamic World*, 2013: 187). It is not an uncommon view amongst Muslim intelligentsia today.
circumstances in which the Qur'an came into being that Islam has claimed. More disputed is the milieu in which it was initially situated, and what kinds of exposure to Christians, Jews and other religious groups are in evidence in the allusive references to shared prophets and models. Where Muslims and Christians co-exist together today most will be aware that we share Mary, Abraham, Moses and some other major figures. To state the obvious, there is no reference to important figures in the indigenous belief systems of North America or Austral-Asia, nor even to Buddha or Confucius, in the Qur'an. However, most of the limited number of qur'anic characters, other than those who were contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad, are to be found in the Bible. There is a particular relationship between Islam and the biblical faiths that begs comparative questions. There are allusions in the Qur'an which imply familiarity with elements of Jewish and Christian traditions. It is not uncommon for Christians to view elements of the Qur'anic presentations of past events and prophetic models as evidence of misunderstanding or due to dependency on apocryphal sources, if not demonic perversions, or for Muslims to say that differences exist because the biblical material is changed from the true original. But if we are serious about getting our assumptions straight, we need to first check the detail of what is there. If you want to think this through some more, I found the comments of Anderson, in the opening chapter of his *The Qur'an in Context*, very helpful on this matter.

The Qur'an is around the size of the New Testament but is very different in its make-up. The New Testament is made up of blocks of books characterised by their

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genre: the Gospels and Acts track history in a narratival way, the letters are ... letters, whilst the book of Revelation intertwines symbolic visions with apocalyptic storying. The Qur’an is made up of 114 suras, which are not books (though suras 2-5, if not others, could be considered book length in the biblical kind of way) nor even really chapters (as chapters tend to be constructed to follow one another to develop argument or plot). In many ways suras are more like Psalms. Each is distinct. Some include references to historical events and stories found elsewhere in the monotheistic scripture (a bit like we find in Pauline letters as well as some Psalms), whilst others are more like prayers, or are tools for worship. It does feature apocalyptic outbursts, and also, in suras close to the beginning of the Qur’an, extended portions of legislation. The stories in the Qur’an tend not to be full blown narratives, Sura Yusuf (ie., sura 12) notwithstanding. In narrative, such as the Gospels of the New Testament and books such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel etc in the Old Testament, the characteristics of individuals and the plot develop as different events take place over time: these narratives not only provide some historical chronology but open up the way human beings come to know God (or wander away from Him). Whether it is the apostle Peter or the great patriarch Abraham, the narrative of the Bible shows them being stretched in faith and developing as people of God through their failings and their Redeemer’s kindness as unanticipated experiences come their way. In contrast, though like some of the letters of the New Testament (eg., Romans 9:8-18, Hebrews 11), the Qur’an mostly gives short vignettes, as it utilises the great characters as models of faith in its overarching genre of prophetic warning. The difference between qur’anic genre and much of the Bible make it difficult for Muslim readers of the Bible to find their way around and make initial sense of the biblical text. The differences can also tempt us to present our Bible characters in a qur’anic kind of way to make them
understandable. The irony is that, as we observed at the beginning of this article, the majority of Muslims know about the important characters of Islam through their traditions (rather than directly from the Qur’an), and this fills in detail about them through story! It is not possible to give a precise total for the number of women characters found in the Qur’an, nor indeed for the Bible. The Qur’an does not say how many daughters Lot had (Q11:81), nor the quantity of Egyptian women who cut themselves in the Joseph story (Q12:30-31) or give the exact number of ‘Mothers of the Believers’ (Q33:6). But then how many women celebrated the birth of Naomi’s grandson at the end of the book of Ruth (Ruth 4:14), or eulogised the breasts that nurtured Jesus (Luke 11:28)? Clearly counting such things in scripture is an inexact science. Even so, we note that there are around 20 women specifically identified in the Qur’an, mostly referred to in single or short blocks of verses. Only one of them, Mary the mother of Isa, is mentioned by name. Most of the others are namelessly identified, often in terms of a male relative. Meanwhile around thirty male characters are named in the Qur’an. Most are identified as prophets. The Bible has between 135 and 170 women who are identified by personal name amongst an even harder-to-be-sure-of number of between 1,700 to 2,900 named men.96 The issue of genre may play a part in this difference between the Bible and the Qur’an too. For the relatively low number of named women compared to men in the Bible reflects their absence from the prophetic books, the rarity of them being foreign political leaders or of them being mentioned in

96 Karla G. Bohmbach, ‘Names and Naming in the Biblical World’ (in Meyers (ed.) A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical books and the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001: 33-4) reviews ambiguities in the texts which make it impossible to give an exact number, eg., where spellings could make a name refer either to a man or a women, or even two people.
lists of priests and warriors. What the Bible reader notes is that women have significant roles within the great narrative portions of her scripture, and where her status and condition decline it is symptomatic of deterioration of community faith. With the help of the table below, and some knowledge of the Bible, we also note that the only women mentioned in both the New Testament and the Qur’an are the mothers of John the Baptist / Yahya and Jesus / Isa. Many aspects of the Gospel accounts are unknown to those nurtured on the Qur’an. But, then, what details about the women characters in the Qur’an have we tended to assume or overlook?

The stories about female characters which are beloved by Muslim women tend not to come from the Qur’an. They know all kinds of detail about their great faith example Khadija, who is not mentioned in the Qur’an at all. But then neither is Fatima, nor A’isha unless as tradition suggests she is being alluded to in sura 24:11-12. The women who are to be found in the Qur’an are listed below. The table shows which suras mention women characters, and who those women are (those bracketed indicate that it is not clear who is being referred to):

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97 The recent edition of the Tyndale commentary on the book of Judges (Mary J. Evans, Judges and Ruth, IVP, 2017) is a helpful guide to this subject.
98 Barbara Freyer Stowasser’s Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, remains the seminal work on the subject.
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<th>Sura</th>
<th>Women Characters</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>'A woman of Imran' (vv. 35-36) and her daughter Mary (vv.35-63)</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Wife of Abraham (vv.69-73), daughters (v.78) and wife of Lot (v.81), Potiphar's wife (vv.21-35) and Egyptian women who cut their hands (vv.30-31) – in the Joseph story</td>
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<td>(Hagar (v.37))</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Mary (vv.16-34)</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Wife of Lot (vv.32-33)</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>(Mothers of the Believers (vv.6,28-40,53, etc))</td>
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Women characters in the Qur’an: some observations

In recent years a number of Muslim women scholars, taking up a term first coined by the biblical scholar Phylis Trible, have sought to present a ‘depatriarchalized’ reading of the Qur’an. Trible’s fresh analysis of the early chapters of Genesis, developed in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (1978), sent wide ripples which continue to reverberate in the world of biblical studies. Women such as Riffat Hassan, Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud have likewise reviewed assumptions about female origins, status and culpability which had been justified through their scripture. They too have created fresh perspectives within their own community of faith as they have reviewed what is written and taught about the qur’anic Eve. It is both heartening to see the initiatives and heart-breaking to read the comparative elements of their critiques.

In her 1985 al-Mushir article Hassan led the way with polemical criticism of the influence of biblically-based Christian teaching about Eve’s contribution to the Fall, as

99 Her initial article, called ‘Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation’, JAAR 41: 30-48, was published in 1973.
she pointed out that there is no indication in the Qur’an that the woman initiated the eating of the fruit in the Garden. Denise Spellberg (1996) reinforced the critique of Christian influence by arguing that Islamic consensus was constructed from encounter with Jewish and Christian oral, written and cultural tradition in ninth and tenth century Baghdad (during the Abbasid Caliphate). From my own investigations I have discovered that it is, in fact, really hard to accurately deduce how the very negative teaching about the wife of Adam emerged. It more likely came from Greek influence in the Baghdad region, as Aristotelian ideas came to the fore when Muslims, Jews and Christians thrashed out their thoughts there in the early parts of the Abbasid era. It is true that hierarchical notions of women’s status can be found in patristic statements from this period, but the extreme position found in Muslim tradition (not the Qur’an) that woman was made from ‘a bent rib’ existed centuries before it drifted in to Christian lore. It is not at all clear in which direction the traffic of ideas and interpretation went. It does, perhaps, illustrate how inter-faith debate can take everyone away from detail in their own scriptures.

But if we leave traditions out of the equation what is said of Eve in the Qur’an, and in the Bible? First we affirm that there is no direct reference to her creation in the Qur’an, but also note that the account of her beginnings in Genesis 2 are a celebration of the correspondence of the man and the women: the ‘this’, ‘this’, ‘this’ of Genesis

100 Denise Spellberg, ‘Writing the Unwritten Life of Islamic Eve: Menstruation and Demonization of Motherhood’ in International Journal of Middle East Studies 28, 1996:305.
2:23 is exuberant declaration of discovering the perfect match. In the Bible she then emerges as an active character in the narrative of Genesis chapters 3 and 4, and is referred to for illustration in 2 Corinthians 11:3 (where her experience is taken as a warning to both men and women about their capacity for being duped) and 1 Timothy 2:13-15 (in a letter from Paul to the young pastor Timothy, where guidelines are given that strong vocal women should quietly learn, echoing the important lesson in Genesis that Adam’s wife was neither the actual source of life nor of wisdom). The three repeat accounts of Adam and his wife eating the fruit and being expelled from the Garden found in the Qur'an all involve language that affirms the gift of gendered human coupling, even as the pair share in the same act of disobedient eating. Reading the Bible and Qur'an side by side, leads us to similarly note that at the heart of 1 Timothy, as at the end of Genesis chapter 2, statements indicate the high view in which scriptures hold marriage: 1 Timothy 4:1-5 warns against hypocrites with seared consciences who ‘forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving ... for everything created by God is good ... ’ Alongside this we also observe that both the Qur'an and Bible admit that the good relationship can go wrong, and expand on the implications. We find that the second sura, which has the story of Adam and his wife as the first vignette, moves towards legislation in its second half which deals with provision in case of divorce, being widowed and law suits. We also find that in Genesis their story sets the context for the long account of patriarchs and matriarchs that is characterised by all kinds of hopes, passions, deceptions but also deliverance, with the downward spiral resolved after, on the one hand, Judah’s heart is turned back towards righteousness through the creative intervention of a woman who was being ignored (Genesis 38) and, on the other, Joseph resists a temptress (Genesis 39). Read this way, both accounts leave
open any judgement we make on Adam’s partner: in the Bible and the Qur’an Adam’s wife is a good thing, even as the pair succumb to Satan’s deception.

Careful attention to biblical narrative reveals that women have always had active roles in the purpose of God in ways that extend beyond child rearing, or keeping home (e.g., Abigail (1 Sam 25), the wise woman of Abel beth-Maacah (2 Sam 20), the slave girl in the story of Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), Mary Magdelene (John 20:11-18), Phoebe (Romans 16:1)). As Jardim demonstrates more fully, women also have agency in the Qur’an (Georgina Jardim, *Recovering the Female Voice in Islamic Scripture*, 2016, see especially pp 204-5 and 217-219). However Muslim women scholars addressing issues of patriarchy turn to semiotics and ontology rather than to narrative within their scripture to make their point: as already observed, the option of narrative is not readily available to them due to the genres employed. And interestingly, even for the scholars, recognising the theological intent of biblical narrative does not come naturally: in her very balanced article on the Joseph story (sura 12) Shirin Shafaie draws the conclusion that ‘The biblical account is far less theological; here the name of God appears only once, whereas in the qur’anic account, we can observe a “transition from narrative to explicit theological discourse.”’\(^{103}\) The moot point that impacts how we help each other hear our respective texts then, lies in our understanding(s) of how they do theology. We Christians would all do well, I suggest, to consider the many ways the Bible informs knowledge of God without constantly interjecting with a, or the, name of God, even as we consider how to help friends recognise what is being set out through

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the tracing of history or drawing on signs and symbolism. Biblical narrative is not sugar-coating around hidden doctrine, but theological testimony to the way the living God deals in the real lives of flawed humanity.

Actually the Qur'an too demonstrates direct and indirect ways of presenting teaching. On the one hand the single straightforward statement in Sura 33:35

“Surely the men who submit (to Allah) and the women who submit (to Allah), the men who have faith and the women who have faith, the men who are obedient and the women who are obedient, the men who are truthful and the women who are truthful; the men who are steadfast and the women who are steadfast, the men who humble themselves (to Allah) and the women who humble themselves (to Allah), the men who give alms and the women who give alms, the men who fast and the women who fast, the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard their chastity, the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember Allah much: for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward”

is regularly taken to demonstrate equality of women and men before God whilst, on the other, elements of Sura 4:34, which in a literal reading seems to promote harsh treatment of wives by husbands,
“... righteous women are obedient and guard the rights of men in their absence under Allah’s protection. As for women of whom you fear rebellion, admonish them, and remain apart from them in beds, and beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek ways to harm them ...”

are judged to be not so straightforward but needing to be explained through comparison with other texts and underlying principles. Barlas and Wadud both resolve the seeming conflict through philosophical deduction that takes the principles of God’s justice and of unity as the foundation of their interpretation. Narrative from beyond and within the Qur’an also contributes evidence from which deductions can be made. Detail given about Mary (sura 3:45), and about Moses’ mother (sura 28:7) show women being inspired by God whilst sura 66, in particular, counterbalances any presumption that the majority of the Qur’an’s women characters are simply appendages of the leading prophets of the major epochs (ie., the wives of Adam, of Noah, of Abraham and Lot, women in the world of Moses and then of John the Baptist and Jesus, and of Muhammad) by emphasising that even these women only attain Paradise through their own genuine faith.

So, both Bible and Qur’an highlight the importance of the personal active faith of individual women. However it is notable that sura 66 (Surat al-Tahrim, ‘The Prohibition’), which has the largest concentration of different women characters in the Qur’an though only twelve verses long, is more known for the traditional background

104 Asma Barlas, Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002:16
105 Amina Wadud, Qur’an and Woman: Rereading Sacred Texts from a Woman’s Perspective, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999:25-26
stories related to its origins than for what it says about the faith of women. In all likelihood your Muslim friends will know well the alternative entertaining back stories from the hadith, which tell of the Prophet being tricked by two of his jealous wives.\textsuperscript{106} It is very unlikely that they will know that the detail on Noah’s wife conflicts with that in the Bible, and that this is the only place in any world literature where she is deemed to be wanting in her faith. From traditional interpretations they are also likely to understand that the sura provides the basis for confirming that Pharaoh’s wife, Assiya, and Mary qualify to be consorts for Muhammad in Paradise. Meanwhile Christian readers tend to be left wondering why Mary is called ‘the daughter of ‘Imran’ here (sura 66:12). Contemporary scholars tell us that this echoes reference to Mary being born into the clan of ‘Imran in sura 3: 33, and being called ‘Sister of Aaron’ in Q19:28, and may not be due to a muddle with the sister of Moses but echoing the allegorical language of the early Syriac theologian, Ephrem (306-373 CE), who likened Mary the mother of Jesus to Aaron’s flowering rod (Numbers 17:8).\textsuperscript{107} Here, almost delinked from Jesus, who is not referred to in sura 66, Mary is recognised as a legitimate member from amongst the Jewish community (belonging to the clan from which their first leaders came\textsuperscript{108}), whose openness to revelation and capacity for self-control is exemplary. Elements within other vignettes referring to her in the Qur’an (sura 3:31-63, Sura 19:16-34) also seem to echo non-canonical Christian traditions of

\textsuperscript{106} Stowasser’s \textit{Women in the Qur’an}, 100
that time. Tradition, it seems, has long clouded what Muslims and Christians have understood of each others’ scriptures.

All this leads me to conclude that getting clear about precise detail in the Qur’an will not necessarily help us know the lessons our friends have learnt from it. It will, though, help us not to be unknowingly dismissive or presumptuous about the text our sisters treasure.

**Some final thoughts**

A lot of Christians, keen to prepare themselves for witness to Muslims, memorise questions related to a qur’anic (re)telling of the annunciation to Mary (sura 3:42-49). If you have found that useful all well and good. But the parallel telling in the Gospel of Luke opens up much more detail both about Jesus, Son of David, and also the active growing faith of Mary. It does not leave her as a voiceless, pious example. Her story does not end with the conception, nor even the birth, of Jesus. Staying with the narrative we discover a woman whose initial faith was challenged and reshaped the longer she was around Jesus. Continuing to dig into and reflect on the biblical text has the potential to take us on that same journey. It is enriched when we do so against the backdrop of comparing with the Qur’an: a process that is eminently doable these days. Hopefully, as a result it becomes ever more natural to share texts, themes, and stories from God’s word that shape and thrill us, to the end that our friends want to become a part of the bigger narrative of God’s unfolding plans for the world He loves.

Dialoguing together as a neighbourhood group

-The Prophets’ Stories
It all started with my involvement in a cooking group which is part of the offer from our local church community centre situated in the multi faith area of the city in which we have made our home in the UK. The local school is next door so it’s a great place for mums to meet up and to engage in a variety of activities at the centre. We liked being together, we had a lot of fun together. We were also starting to ask questions of and about each other.

“Do Christians pray, then?”

“I didn’t know Muslims knew anything about Jesus!”

“What do Christians believe happens after death?” following the news that one of the women’s mother had died.

“I have no idea what’s in the Bible/Qur’an.”

I noticed that faith was often spoken of in these contexts but there was lack of time and space for this to be explored together in any depth. I also picked up a recurring theme of anxiety around how women are to bring up their children in faith in today’s secular environment. This resonated with me personally, as a mother myself, and it chimed with a piece I had read about work with women in the Middle East where the author had commented that:
‘Women are ‘burdened’ with the responsibility of the preservation of tradition, (and, by implication, faith in the community)’

It was clear that we needed to find a way to talk about faith which would enable us to maintain the warm relationships we had been building up. Some considerable negotiation and talking through the possibilities were necessary. How could we engage within the context of women of different faith who live side by side in the community, seeking to understand each other while respecting our differences without animosity? The concept of sharing stories of the Prophets from both the Qur’an and the Bible came to us and seemed to fit our need. Together, we chose 7 such prophets – the main factor in the selection was based on familiarity and we were careful to arrange the sessions not around chronology but on working from commonality to difference. From a very tentative start this activity proved extremely popular. Those attending wanted to continue meeting to enable sharing of faith experiences and values. Myths about ‘the other’ were being dismantled, fear and suspicion turning to love and respect, deep things were being shared, new insights gained, and strong bonds were being formed. And so, for the last 5 years, the Prophets’ Stories dialogue activity has been part of the annual programme of events on offer at the community centre.

**Dialogue as Generous Hospitality**

In my engagement with Muslim women from the diaspora, who may lack confidence in new situations and are working towards competency in their English language skills, I

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110 Melanie McNeil. St Francis Magazine Vol.6, No 5/October 2010
have found it helpful to consider what “generous love”\textsuperscript{111} might look like when designing, preparing and delivering the Prophets’ Stories resource.

One characteristic of this would be that we watch the abuse of power – we have the resources, the venue, the language, and in some cases, a larger pool of knowledge.

Another characteristic might be that we take time to negotiate for and ensure inclusion and accessibility. For our group this meant that rather than using the text of our Holy Books we found a way of relating the stories through the use of pictures printed onto cards, laid out on a table in front of us. The inclusion of ice breakers, listening games, and perspective sharing activities, which we engage in prior to exploring the week’s story together, help create a safe space to share and build tolerance to difference so that women find enjoyment in attending.

The role of the facilitator is key in both modelling presence and holding the group gently but firmly. Group management skills, a commitment to fairness in offering equal ‘floor space’, and sensitivity to those who struggle with difference is also needed in leading these sessions where all are invited to contribute from their own faith perspective. The focus is not on discussing ‘expert to expert’ or even ‘expert to grassroots’, it is people together, exploring and discovering.

These sets of attitudes and behaviours are consistent with the concept of the Hospitality of God – on which I had been reflecting in terms of cross-cultural mission - which forms the background to the ethos and methodology of this resource. It implies

\textsuperscript{111} Title of paper 2008 An Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations
http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/generous-love
not simply refreshments, and a comfy seat, but an attitude of open-ness, a willingness to listen and to value.

Cultures differ in the emphasis they place on who it is that is being honoured in situations of hospitality. Is it the guest who is honouring the household by accepting the invitation or is it the household that is honouring the guest by inviting them to share time and food with them? In either case, I think we can recognize the huge privilege the church in a diaspora setting has in meeting in this way. Whilst we may be the host for our guests from around the world, we may ask ourselves with what values are we going to choose to host? Will we offer only the food we have to share or we will taste also the food they have to bring to the table?

**Dialogue as risk**

We were reminded that dialogue is seen as a risky thing by both faith communities. Christians from the liberal wing needed convincing that this is not an overtly evangelistic tool whilst evangelicals wanted reassurance that entertaining the listening to and discussion on the Qur’an at the same time as the Bible is not demonic. Some Muslim women were brave enough to engage from the beginning but many either chose to be vague and indecisive before they joined us or politely, but firmly refused.

The risk of misunderstanding each other to the extent of causing offence and even conflict was a real anxiety. The use of icebreakers and listening activities built into each session helped to mitigate this. However, perhaps more powerful was the relaxing of the tension in the room, which was physically palpable on our first meeting. Once we had seen and shared the Jonah/Yunus story and understood that we had much in common to start our conversations with, we were reassured that “we could do this”.

There was recognition of the risk all participants felt of exploring another view in having their own beliefs challenged. “Is it Ok to think like this?” was a question individuals from both faith communities would ask themselves at times. Introducing the group to the document on faith sharing produced by the Christian Muslim Forum UK\(^{112}\) was helpful in assuring all that this type of activity is, indeed, permissible. Using visuals instead of text turned out to have more than one positive effect. Having a third, inanimate ‘other’, (represented by the cards) on the table in front of us took away any unintended sense of personal challenge or attack. Being able to move the pictures around the table also demonstrated for us the nuance that there is when different communities interpret scripture. If it is possible that the story events were in \textit{this} order, rather than in \textit{that} order might that open the door to the possibility that the story might have an alternative meaning?

In my reading I came across an interesting term coined by Kwok, a Korean theologian: ‘the diasporic imagination’. This describes the state of a female diasporic, who, as a result of her life story is always doubly located, and having to negotiate consciousness between past and present, here and now. Kwok suggests that such a woman is having to reinvent herself as an individual, as part of a collective; struggling for ways to express herself, she may be able to formulate alternative views because she negotiates with multiple others.\(^{113}\) It occurred to me that the existence of this phenomenon was a significant enabler in our context.

\(^{112}\) http://presenceandengagement.org.uk/sites/default/files/Ethical_Guidelines_for_Witness.pdf
Religion is not a stable entity but needs interpretation and re-interpretation by its followers and believers. By being willing to engage in this way all the women, at different times in the series exposed themselves to the surprising possibility of obtaining new knowledge and understanding. Our activity resembled a negotiation between past and present, here and now, just as in the diasporic imagination.

**Dialogue as empowerment**

People of faith all over the world seek to interpret their texts, either written or orally handed down, in part in order to try and make sense of the world around them and the reality of the lives they lead.

> “Most religious practitioners are not theologically trained, and their making meaning of texts and contexts are often overlooked in theological research”

*GRUNG (2010:88)*

So how is meaning made when one has either a low literacy level or is not literate to a high degree? Amina Wadud, Black American Muslim convert, writer of “Qur’an and woman” argues for experience as a form of authority. Indeed, she insists in the efficacy of female experience as a type of authority - as a new tafsir. She asks that, in addition to seeing authority as leadership/power, we start seeing authority as knowledge/expertise. Coming across the use of the conversation café technique\(^{114}\) was a perfect enabler in my context. It is a technique which helps to promote the ‘wisdom

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\(^{114}\) [www.conversationcafe.org](http://www.conversationcafe.org)
in the room’ so that people feel able to start engaging in conversations about things that matter. Women who are not used to being given the time and space to share of their knowledge rooted in experience are emboldened to start speaking from their heart. The affirmation offered by the group gives courage to all. Women begin to discover that as a result of having to deal with, meet the challenge of and negotiate the impact of past experiences in our lives we, ourselves, are receptacles of wisdom and knowledge. It then sets the scene for really listening and valuing the Stories from each other’s traditions and how we have come to interpret them for ourselves.

**Dialogue as Discovery**

The approach taken in the Prophets' Stories encourages discovery of new things rather than an expert teaching or ‘telling’ of the truth. Together, we learn how these stories and themes explored teach us about God and what they have to say to us today. The emphasis in telling the story is neither on the historical details nor on textual accuracy. Rather, since for both faiths, prophets may be said to be models for believers, the messages conveyed about God through their life events are taken as wisdom for the group to explore. Participants who would reject ‘Christian teaching’ have an opportunity to hear God’s word speak to their lives as it speaks of the lives of others. The prayer is that through the exploration of the signs which God gives us, Christ will be discovered. Furthermore, some women have found themselves asking for Bibles in their own language in order to explore further.

The story of Joseph/Yusuf is much loved by both faith communities. Muslim women amongst us could very much relate to the sibling rivalry caused by the family situation where the husband has 2 wives; the experience of exile is a present reality for them as diasporic people, many of them having fled war and the economic
consequences of war; and, as in Joseph’s experience, the wait for justice to be done is a long one.

The Hospitality of God includes making room not only for each other – giving floorspace to ‘the other’ story, but also room for the Holy Spirit to work and to bring to light. So, the role of questions, rather than statements is employed in the Prophets Stories as an aid in helping us explore their meaning. These questions are posed as wonderings and spaces for people to offer their thoughts rather than looking for a response that is the ‘right’ answer. We asked ourselves:

- What did Joseph mean when he said to his brothers, you meant it for evil, but God intended it for good …to save many lives?
- What is the worst evil that can happen to us? Who can save us from that?
- What is it that we fear in the judgement?
- How do we move from being judged to being forgiven?
- What does it mean to repent?
- If Adam really repented and God forgave him, why was he not allowed to stay in God’s presence, but instead was banished from Paradise?

Here we get to the nub of our (collective) hearts’ cry – to be saved/to be forgiven/to be moved from judgement and hell fire to Paradise/life. And discussion flows.

When we look at the Story of Noah/Nuh, we note a striking difference in the way the story plays out. The Qur’an has a ‘Mrs Nuh’ figure and one son who doesn’t believe. Nuh intercedes for them to be saved from the flood but God refuses since they
decline to enter the boat and instead seek their own rescue (Quran Surah 11: 42 and 66:10) The question can be asked:

*Are we saved/believers as family/community or as individuals?*

*Is there a role for a mediator? – Nuh pleaded for his son to be saved*

*What gives Mohamed that authority above the other prophets to be the one who intercedes?*

This opens up a whole conversation about Jesus, our mediator, advocate and intercessor.

A discussion on the story of Abraham offers us great moments of unity when we can affirm our insistence of worship of the One True God who made Heaven and Earth, but also dissonance around the meaning of the story of sacrifice of the son. Christians can suggest that this is a precursor to what happened to Jesus – and that He was the ransom, perhaps referred to in the Qur’an “And we ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice” (Quran Surah 37:106) Muslims will want to share the Qur’anic account of Ibrahim setting up the institution of the Haj. And Christians will be moved to hear the passion with which those who have performed the Haj pilgrimage speak of their experience of a “cleansing” there.

Moses’ early story resonates with women who have had to leave children behind (again as a result of violent conflict troubling their home countries) – trusting God for them. In the Qur’an there is no Passover story – which serves to point to the protective power of being covered by blood against the angel of death – a theme picked up again when we explore the story of Jesus. And once again we discover that
the Biblical accounts of the Prophets Stories seem to show God who acts for us and on our behalf, intervening in people's lives to deliver and to save.

Muslim women relate how they gain special comfort from the birth narrative of Jesus in the Qur'an whilst in labour or times of distress. And Christians will be intrigued as Muslims go on to talk of the vindication of Mary spoken by the child Jesus from his crib. Whilst Muslim women will know of some miracles Jesus performed, they know nothing about His teaching. They listen with great attention and respect to the meaning of the cross and the work of salvation through His death and resurrection. Then the response comes: “we don't believe that, but now we know why it's important to you.”

**Dialogue as Transformation.**

Freire saw dialogue as having a transforming aim, at both individual and societal level.115

We see transformation of the individuals in our group and believe that this lays the foundation for social change.

There have been moments when women contributed in ways representing “transformative speech, addressing the here and now”.116 Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers and reconciliation with them at the end of the story spurred one woman to decide out-loud to phone her brother who had long been estranged from the family. All the Christian women who engage, and some of the Muslim women express a desire to

115 Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Paulo Freire 1970
116 Grung June (2010:69)
return to the stories heard at their mother’s knee - giving stories back to the women, perhaps?

Another woman, offered a thought after a silence in the room following the telling and listening of the story of Jesus and the assurance of forgiveness He brings: “You must be so grateful”.

A year later that same woman shared with me how, since she had heard the Prophets Stories, she knew that God loved her, so she felt she never needed to be afraid and, she added: “The funny thing is I feel I really don’t deserve it”. It’s clear she is experiencing something of the love, freedom from fear and grace God, in Christ, offers us.

As regards transformation at societal level -

I would like to end with another thought from Amina Wadud who posits that the central story doesn’t change when women put their stories on the table, but they invite men to the margins to experience life at the margins and to discover a new way of being human. In our local context there have been several attempts at dialogue in the form of Meetings for Better Understandings with men at the institutional level of church and mosque. In all cases they have broken down due to the adversarial nature of the engagement and the focus on doctrinal issues. Could it be that lessons learnt amongst women committing to engage by sharing from their knowledge and experience could show a new, more fruitful paradigm for male encounter groups?
Sexy selfies and Hijabs:  
Women’s texts of power?
For more than a century now feminist hermeneutics has shown that women read and interpret scriptures from a particular experience and point of view. Women bring certain understandings to their reading that is shaped not only by the physical female experience but also by the social structures within which they live. Feminism is the public conversation about differences in human experience, how those experiences relate to power and how power affects men and women differently.¹¹⁷

**Feminist conversation**

Feminist conversations (or more often debates), bring social attitudes from different sides - with their historical and traditional narratives - to bear on women’s struggles for equality. For Muslim and Christian feminists it includes the Bible and Quran. As sacred texts, they not only describe the social order of their day but they establish gender hierarchies through the readings that are produced by (mostly male) commentators and exegetes, and the systems of law that they produce. The societies that result from these textual processes are often seen as having unequal gender arrangements wherein women’s ability to express themselves is curtailed. For example, the book *Daughters of Abraham* is based on the premise that women’s struggles to have their voices heard are shared throughout the monotheisms Judaism,

¹¹⁷ This article acknowledges that feminism in the 21st century has moved beyond women’s struggles but applies the term throughout in the article to its traditional reference to women. See Moyra Dale on WWS website for discussion of changing feminist discourse, [https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/feminism-muslimahs-and-christians-where-do-they-meet/](https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/feminism-muslimahs-and-christians-where-do-they-meet/)
Christianity and Islam. In Diarmaid MacCulloch’s study of silence in Christianity he describes women’s forgotten leadership among early Christians as “a silence that still haunts the Church.”

In the modern era, developed democratic societies regularly argue that gender equity has improved. They point to progressive constitutions and legal parity to show that gender injustices from the past have been reformed and that their societies have ‘moved on.’ Inequalities, such as the gender pay gap and violence against women are generally seen as aberrations that will be eradicated given time, education and development. In this view, women are seen as fully able to control their own destiny and self-expression with all the instruments of modern life to hand.

However, Mignon R. Jacobs argues that issues of gender and power are one of the frontiers in which equality has yet to be achieved. Part of the challenge is a basic understanding of gender within public and private domains. Jacobs points out that cultural and religious ideologies have defined the basic understandings about gender, even among those who do not claim religious belonging. The result is that gender and gender-differences provide the framework wherein identities and relationships function. Often, the framework includes ideologies of male dominance and female inferiority as the norm, and the typical female and male relationship as intimate or an opportunity for intimacy.

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This article explores two modern phenomena of women’s self-expression and asks how women’s self-expression gives us a clue to the texts that influence women’s lives and the way in which this relates to the power structures within which they live. The first phenomenon is women posting photographs of themselves on social media that are termed ‘sexy selfies’ and the second is new forms of Muslim head covering (hijab). The article does not take issue with taking selfies or head covering as such but with the social analysis that detaches these phenomena from oppressive gender discourses. The article explores biblical portrayals of women’s visual self-expression as a mirror of today’s challenges, looking at gender and power in the story of Tamar (Genesis 38). It asks whether the Bible challenges modern forms of women’s self-expression and sexual objectification, or merely affirms these issues as an age-old part of humanity.

**Sexy selfies**

In 2018 the University of New South Wales published the results of research on the phenomenon of women posting sexy selfies online. The study considered the proliferation of sexy selfies across 113 nations in the world, seeking to identify what features the societies where sexy selfies are most prevalent have in common. The results so far find that sexy selfies are most prevalent in educated, developed nations – “the very same societies that have spent decades battling the sexual objectification of women and girls.”121

The research then asked whether women are being exploited if they post sexy photos of themselves. The report acknowledges that assessing sexualisation is complex yet, it simplistically concluded that women take sexy selfies to compete with other women and to climb the social ladder in economically unequal environments. The phenomenon, in their opinion, says more about the economies and rise of inequality than about gender discrimination. In an earlier version of the paper, it asserts “that women tend to sexualise themselves in environments with greater economic inequality, rather than where they might be oppressed because of their gender.”

The conclusions of the study make a distinction between gender oppression and the sexualisation of women in progressive societies. It argues that sexualised behaviour in the case of sexy selfies is an ‘evolutionary’ behaviour of women to create or enhance their opportunities for social mobility in competition with each other. The study does not conclude that this is an expression of gender oppression because the societies where sexy selfies proliferate are supposedly egalitarian.

By separating income inequality and gender oppression, the article fails to consider a possible latent relationship between the two. The research does not reflect on the phenomenon of sexy selfies in relation to cultural norms of so-called progressive societies and their discourses of gender and sexuality. The conclusions of the study do not consider the complex relationship between secularism, democracy, religion and gender equality across Western democracies that is still contested. Several sexual scandals over the past couple of years, such as the #MeToo movement,

have brought into open question whether legal equality necessarily translates into social equality, and whether cultures of gender oppression indeed come to an end when women become equal before the law.

**Hijab**

The topic of gender is widespread in Muslim contexts, internally as well as in relation to wider society. Gender roles and the way they should be expressed are often debated and reframed, so that some have argued for gender as the litmus test of Islam in modernity. In progressive democracies in particular, Muslim women have become more vocal and public in their criticism of gender arrangements in Muslim traditions as well as in secular society. Some have argued that gender played a significant role in the ‘Arab Spring.’

One of the ways in which Muslim women are taking part in the debate on gender in western contexts, is through the head covering as a visual marker. Muslim fashion has become a lucrative industry for many, from individual Youtube tutorials to *hijabi* catwalk models. Large corporations have also developed a Muslim market with clothing ranges for Muslim women. Yet, some commentators view the growth of Muslim fashion as a return to emphasis of the female Muslim’s body. Aisha Hasan, who writes for Muslimah Diaries, is critical of these trends, saying, “Muslim women seem to have ‘halal’ equivalent for every imported ‘progressive’ standard by which women are

judged." She says that contemporary presentations of Muslim women often hark back to the way they were depicted in Orientalist art.\textsuperscript{124}

In both phenomena of sexy selfies and fashionable hijab, women are representing themselves in public in response to social discourses which are dominated by two factors. Firstly, social media has blurred the lines between public and private domains. Secondly, many commentators have pointed out that modern western culture has become highly sexualised and that sexualised socialising has become normalised and mainstream. How are women taking part in these two spheres of contemporary culture? Claire Moran argues that sexualised discourses both obscure the sexist nature of contemporary culture and “transforms, repackages and feeds this sexism back to women as their own choice and as a representation of empowerment.”\textsuperscript{125} Women’s self-expression in sexy selfies or fashionable hijab therefore represents a form of self-identity, which is framed by the texts of contemporary culture. These two phenomena raise a question about women’s self-expression and whether public visual presentations are necessarily an indication that they have successfully achieved equality. Are these public phenomena texts of power or might these forms of self-expression be symptoms of deep inequalities?


Texts of Life

Reading a text is an intertextual exercise; we pay attention to more than the literary document in front of us. Firstly, each text contains other texts embedded explicitly or implicitly in the literary text under consideration, so that meaning is derived from the coming together of different literary texts:

“It is only in the coming together of different texts, texts which respond to one another through time and space that a text acquires meaning. Meaning can shift and is not trapped in the text itself. It takes its shape not only in relation to the texts which a particular text itself gives as references, but also in the connections brought by the ‘simple coincidence of previous reading.’”

Secondly, intertextuality goes beyond the connections between two or more literary documents. Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextualité, arguing that a text is more than a literary document. Texts are not only words on paper but are signs that stand in for a complex of meaning: “[Kristeva] blurs the line between a ‘sign’ or ‘word’ and ‘text’, so that the base unit becomes a ‘text’ and subsequently everything is a text: a piece of paper with letters on it is a text but so, also, history as understood by the reader is a text.” It involves cultures and the way these interact in the process of

No text exists independently of its situation in a universe of other texts, and no reader interprets a text on a ‘blank slate.’

Indeed, part of the pleasure or beauty of a text is that it may also dislocate the reader’s historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions. That is why reading is more than deciding the meaning in a piece of writing; it is an act of creativity. The text is the place where historical, cultural and psychological assumptions are affirmed or challenged before they are assimilated or dismissed. Writing, painting, clothing and selfies may therefore all be seen as creative texts that reconcile culture, circumstance and the presentation of the self.

Visual images of the female form have always represented cultural understandings of female sexuality. Where painters and photographers were the ones who produced the images previously, in the social media era, women are visually presenting themselves. Sexy selfies are responding to a perceived cultural norm of self-expression and empowerment. Muslim women who live in ‘progressive democracies’ are interpreting contemporary norms and values that may include reactions against sexy selfies. Their visual presentations in public create texts that try to contrast with sexualised characteristics and traits, framed within a religious or political understanding.

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129 Tanner, p. 284.
The intent behind sexy selfies and fashionable hijab may be seen as on opposite sides of a spectrum. Yet, there is a commonality in the visual presentation of the self that seems to revert to earlier sexist ideas of women as being either virtuous or deceptive. The questions that this paper seeks to address are whether these two activities of self-presentation are necessarily on opposite sides: do they display empowerment, or do they conform to sexualised notions of female identity? If power is the ability to influence the future and others, what forms of power do these texts hide or display? The Bible presents us with an opportunity to reflect on these questions in the chapter about Tamar and her father-in-law, Judah.

Tamar

Genesis 38 is a biblical episode that brings together women’s self-presentation and cultural texts of power. It describes a relationship between Judah, older half-brother of Joseph and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. It seems to diverge from the Joseph narrative (Gen. 37-47) but contains gender parallels that bring the Joseph story into stark relief. There are textual and thematic links that tie it closely to the surrounding narrative. Textually, there is the repeated theme of deception with a piece of clothing and a goat (Gen. 27, Jacob deceives Isaac; Gen. 37, Jacob’s sons deceive him). Gen.

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132 Jacobs, p. 44.
133 Both are sons of Jacob; Joseph is a son of Rachel (Gen 35.24) and Judah a son of Leah (Gen 35.23). Both Joseph and Judah narratives are placed within the framework of the genealogies of Jacob and Esau to document episodes in the lives of Rachel and Leah’s sons (Gen 35.23-36.40). Joseph is Rachel’s oldest son (Gen 35.17) but Judah is Leah’s fourth son. In a similar way to his uncle Esau, Leah’s firstborn, Reuben, had squandered his birth-right through impetuousness and haste. He had prematurely claimed a right to his father’s concubine, Bilhah, for which he would lose his status as first born (Gen 35.22, see also Gen 49.3-4). The second and third brothers, Simeon and Levi, took disproportionate action against the Shechemites after the rape of their sister, Dinah. Therefore, Judah, the fourth born, obtains the blessing of the firstborn from Jacob (Gen 49.8-10). Abusive or unjust gender relations seem to be at the heart of each man’s legacy.
38:25 is also a repeat of the same phrase “recognize, pray!” from Tamar to Judah on which the plot turns in Gen. 37:32, from the brothers to Jacob. Thematically, both Joseph and Tamar show God acting to preserve his people: in the Joseph narrative, to protect the family of Jacob in a time of famine and in the Tamar narrative, to ensure the Davidic and Messianic line through Judah, which Judah’s neglect of Tamar has imperilled.

The chapter starts with Judah leaving his brothers. This follows after Joseph had been sold to the Ishmaelites and Jacob had learned of Joseph’s supposed death. We are not told the reasons why Judah leaves but may imagine that he was disillusioned with his family and feeling guilty over his father’s distress (Gen. 37:34-5). He ‘goes down’ to stay with a man called Hirah from Adullam, perhaps also indicating his spiritual decline to live among the Canaanites. Judah meets and marries a Canaanite woman, Bat Shua (Hebrew, ‘daughter of Shua’), who bears him three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah (vv. 2-5). The first son is named by Judah but the other two are named by their mother with a remark that the last one, Shelah, is born at Kezib: had Judah and Bat Shua become estranged, or was he deserting his wife just as he had deserted his father?

Judah assumes the role of head of the family once the boys have come of age and arranges a marriage for the oldest, Er, with Tamar. We are not told whether Tamar is a Canaanite or had been brought back from Judah’s family but it seems plausible that she had been sent for in the same way that Rebekha had been acquired for Isaac

When Er dies because he ‘was wicked in the Lord’s sight’ (v. 7), Judah enforces the levirate custom and gives Tamar to his second son, Onan. Onan declines to father children for his brother possibly out of financial motive to limit the number who would inherit Judah’s estate. Onan is similarly put to death by the Lord (v. 10).

Rather than seeing God’s actions in the lives of his sons, Judah starts to suspect Tamar. He sends her back to her father’s house to wait until Shelah, the third son, has grown up. According to Near Eastern law, Judah could have performed the levirate obligation himself if Shelah was under ten years old, or he could have set her free. Judah thus sends Tamar away in a state of limbo and possible disgrace as daughter-in-law who is rejected by her husband’s family.

After an extended period of time – we are not told how long – Bat Shua, Tamar’s mother-in-law dies while Tamar is still waiting to be given to Shelah. When Judah finishes the period of grieving, Tamar learns that her father-in-law is on his way to a sheepshearing festival in Timnah with his friend Hirah, the Adullamite (v. 12). While many commentators pay attention to Tamar’s ‘plotting’ to disguise herself, no one takes note that it is Bat Shua’s death that provides Tamar with the opportunity to consider the remedy of her situation. Tamar had not attempted to enforce the levirate

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137 Frymer-Kensky, para. 2. Lev. 18:15 prohibits a man from sexual relations with his daughter-in-law and both are to be put to death if the law is transgressed according to Lev. 20:12.
obligation from Judah while Bat Shua was still alive, implying a measure of respect for her mother-in-law.

Both Judah and Tamar seem to discard symbols of grieving at the same time, he by engaging in a public event, she by discarding her widow's clothing though she takes them up again in v. 19. Tamar adapts her image to appear differently, described as disguising herself with a veil and sitting down at the entrance to Enaim on the road to Timnah (v. 14). The reason for her actions is given as her realisation that Shelah was now grown up and she had not yet been given to him in levirate. The text does not say that she set out to entrap Judah, but it is implied in the location which Judah most probably had to pass on the way to the sheep shearing.

Mignon Jacobs explains that disguise can only work within relationship because relationships are dependent on identity as father, son, daughter-in-law, etc. Disguise cannot work where there is no recognition of identity.\(^\text{158}\) Jacobs further explains that Tamar shows an awareness of her place and status in weighing up the options available to her:

"Tamar's awareness is a result of a process that persuades her of her place and function within her domain. Subversive as it may be, Tamar’s power is both in her restricted options and in the available avenues for securing her rights."

Whatever Tamar’s intentions, Judah initiates their sexual encounter by assuming she is a prostitute (Heb. \textit{zonah}). Tamar responds by negotiating the terms of

\(^{158}\) Jacobs, pp. 177 and 179.
their engagement, obtaining his seal and its cord, and the staff in his hand as pledge of the payment of a goat for her fee (v. 18). These items would have been personal to any man and would have served as his identification. After Judah leaves, Tamar removes her veil and resumes wearing her widow’s clothes. The text has already made clear that Tamar is pregnant and describes the incident in forthright terms. But Judah is now concerned with maintaining his reputation. He sends his friend to retrieve the pledge, possibly asking him to call the woman a ‘shrine prostitute’ or ‘public woman’ (Heb. qodsha) rather than the more derogatory zonah, ‘prostitute’ that he mistook her for. When Hirah is unsuccessful, Judah fears that he may become a laughing stock and lets the matter go (v. 23).

Upon learning of Tamar’s pregnancy about three months later, Judah again assumes the role of protector of the family’s honour (v. 24). He orders Tamar to be burnt to death based on the hearsay of another and proposes the death penalty that would become Levitical law for the daughter of a priest. When Tamar is brought out, she sends notice to Judah to look at the seal, cord and staff that will identify the man responsible. Judah recognises his property and acknowledges that Tamar is more righteous than he, because he had not kept his word (v. 26). Tamar survives and is vindicated. Her courage, creativity and belief in justice sees her become part of the genealogy of David (Ruth 4:18-22), and later Christ (Matthew 1:1-6). Judah returns to his father and takes responsibility for his family (Gen. 43:8-9 and 44: 18-34).

139 The penalty of burning to death for prostitution is prescribed for the daughter of a priest in Lev. 21:9.
Women, Pictures and Power

The story of Tamar relies to a large extent on the importance of visualisation to be resolved. Tamar is not heard until she produces the visual 'goods': she hears her father-in-law's orders and obeys, she hears gossip about his trip to Timnah, she is seen as prostitute and negotiates on the basis of what Judah has seen, she does not so much argue for her innocence as implicate Judah when she shows the objects that identify him as the person responsible for her plight. Tamar's course of action demonstrates that she could not rely on the promises of Judah and is driven to take action herself. Her disguise illustrates her awareness of her culture and its norms. Mignon Jacobs argues that as a widow, Tamar might be reprimanded, but as a prostitute she has a wider range of possible behaviours. Her functional identity together with the situation establishes the basis of her power: “she uses her sexuality to compel someone’s response and to secure what is otherwise elusive.”

Tamar thus shows that women may resort to sexualised self-presentation when they are powerless. In order to be heard in worlds that are concerned with material objects and power, women first need to attract attention to the female form to be able to make their case for right and justice. This does not imply that women see themselves as victims. The power of perception is a vital part of being persuaded, even though it may be based on misperceptions. The Bible affirms Tamar for taking the initiative and simultaneously exposes the extraordinary measures women resort to to be heard.

140 Jacobs, p. 196.
At the same time, the chapter of Tamar and Judah presents women and men with the warning that power can corrupt. Immediately following the ‘Tamar episode’ the Joseph narrative continues with Joseph’s experience of injustice that is brought about by a powerful woman. Potiphar’s wife reduces Joseph to a sexual object, who, in contrast to Tamar, loses his clothing (Gen. 39:12). The woman, Potiphar’s wife, presents Joseph’s cloak as visual proof to argue her false claim against him (Gen. 39:13-18) and the man, Joseph, is penalised. Similarly to Tamar, Joseph bides his time in prison as Tamar had waited on Shelah.

Both Joseph and Tamar have an awareness of their status and their intention, and the perceived avenues available to them to achieve influence over others. Joseph does not take initiative to bring reconciliation or repentance to Potiphar and his wife, or to argue for his innocence.\textsuperscript{141} When he is rescued by the pharaoh’s fateful dreaming (Gen. 41:9-14) and restored, Joseph uses disguise and deception on his brothers to bring them to an acknowledgment of the wrongs committed against him (Gen. 42:7, 44:2 and 45:1). The Bible leaves Potiphar and his wife to their own destiny and continues exploring the relationships between the sons of Jacob.

Both Tamar and Joseph show that injustice will be righted and that perpetrators will ultimately admit their errors but that this might take a long time.\textsuperscript{142} They also make evident that not all forms of visual self-expression are for purposes of

\textsuperscript{141} It is interesting to note that the Qur’an feels the need to exonerate Potiphar’s wife (trad. Zulaykha) and that Joseph argues his innocence which is believed by the husband (trad. Aziz) in Q12:23-35. The Qur’an seems more concerned with the repentance of Zulaykha in the light of Joseph’s integrity and faithfulness (v. 24).

justice. Representations of the female body, even in disguise, depend on relationship and may be misinterpreted and objectified despite personal intentions.

The Genesis episodes presented here are not meant to be recommendations for behaviour. They challenge our assumptions that sexy selfies and fashionable hijabs necessarily show women’s empowerment and hold up a mirror to the power dynamics in contemporary gender relations. The Tamar and Joseph narratives warn against abuses of power, showing that sexuality itself is a form of power. Sexualised self-presentation may be an avenue of last resort or of abuse, depending not on whether the person is male or female, but on who holds the power in the relationship. Female relationships may be the by-product of male-implemented systems, but the choice of ethical behaviour remains with the person.

143 The Genesis narratives of rival wives and their offspring may be seen as foundation for the Levitical laws that proscribes sexual relations between men and their family members. For example, Lev. 18:15 prohibits sexual relations between men and their daughters-in-law (punishable by death in Lev. 20:12). Lev. 18:18 makes it illegal for a man to marry his wife’s sister while she is still living. Lev. 19:29 holds fathers responsible for their daughters becoming prostitutes, finding it degrading and the origins of wickedness. Lev. 21:9 commands the punishment of a daughter of a priest who defiles herself through prostitution as a disgrace to her father.