



# Female Divinity in the Qur'an

In Conversation with the Bible  
and the Ancient Near East

Emran El-Badawi

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## Female Divinity in the Qur'an

“El-Badawi writes what is likely to become a classic study about the appearance of the divine feminine in the Qur'an. As an accomplished polyglot, international researcher, and cultural voyager, he brings to life the dominant mother goddess cultures across the ancient Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Arabian regions and her confrontation with monotheism. El-Badawi reveals qur'anic secrets to tell the tale of a brutal but brilliant textual conflict that ultimately leads to patriarchal hegemony.”

—Roberta Sabbath, *University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV, USA*

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Houston, USA

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*In memory of martyrs and in celebration of survivors.*

*I grant you refuge in knowing  
that the dust will clear  
and they who fell in love and died together  
will one day laugh*

*—Hiba Abu Nada (tr. Huda Fakhreddine)*

*If I must die  
you must live  
to tell my story  
—Refaat Alareer*

## PREFACE

This book is the second part of a trilogy exploring ‘female power in Arabia.’ Its predecessor tells the story of *Queens and Prophets* in late antiquity, and its successor recounts the influence of Arab noblewomen upon the *jabiliyyah* and early Islam. Forged in the isolation of quarantine and the suffering wrought by the global pandemic, this book was completed in the wake of a new war in the Middle East.

It seems that with every book I produce covering Middle Eastern civilization in *antiquity*, another military incursion is hell-bent on punishing that very civilization in the name of *modernity*. So thick is the air which suffocates indigenous peoples trying to breathe the free air, and clinging to their land; their mere existence threatens regimes plagued with imperialist ambitions. Why is our world marching towards global conflict, corporate domination, and climate crisis? Such are the machinations of men who have ransomed humanity for profit, and nature for power. Meanwhile, the masses fight for their lives, calling for social justice or turning to right wing populism.

In what remains of its future, humanity must come to terms with its great predicament, healing a world ravaged by men. To this end, the Qur’an warns us against the folly of human dominion. After creating the universe, God seeks a guardian to watch over His creation, proclaiming,

Indeed, We offered trusteeship to the heavens, the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it in fear. So humankind bore it. Indeed, he is cruel and careless! (Q 33:72)

If our future hinges upon reimagining a world where humanity triumphs over cruelty, then why not center women? In doing so, we would be doing nothing new, but rather reclaiming the ‘natural order’ of ancient times. As the bearers of life, women have been the guardians of humanity for countless millennia. This is the reason, I submit, that the ‘mother goddess’ was worshipped across the pre-historic Near East, giving rise to the Cradle of Civilization, and leaving her mark on the Abrahamic scriptures. This is the ancient context behind *Female Divinity in the Qur’an* and why exploring it is important today.

Houston, TX

Emran El-Badawi

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research towards this book was presented at several international conferences and speaking engagements throughout 2019–2023. These included two conferences on the Qur'an at the Center for Islamic Theology at the University of Münster, Germany. There I had the benefit of learning from colleagues from across Europe and North Africa. The Second Aramaic and Syriac Studies Conference at the Department of Oriental Languages at the Cairo University gave me access to scholars working on Syriac from remote communities throughout the Middle East. It also allowed me to visit the illustrious Syriac monastery (Deir Al-Suryan) nestled among the mountains of Egypt's famed eastern desert. Upon its walls are exquisitely painted frescoes, which vividly portray the bygone world scholars desperately seek to experience and understand.

Conferences in the United States allowed me the opportunity to present my findings on an annual basis, and to receive timely, constructive feedback from colleagues. These include annual meetings of the International Qur'anic Studies Association in San Diego, Boston, San Antonio, and Denver; and the Southwest Commission on Religious Studies in Dallas. My research travels enjoyed the support of multiple internal grants from the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Houston, for which I am truly grateful.

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My appreciation goes to several conference conveners, including Mouhanad Khorchide, Catharina Rachik, George Kiraz, Salah Mahgoub Edris, Michael Pregill, Johanne Louise Christiansen, and Sajida Jalalzai for allowing me to share snapshots of my research with colleagues from different disciplines. My thanks go to Holger Zellentin, Ahmad Al-Jallad, Sophie Wagenhofer, John Kustko, and Brooke Baker for sharing with me their knowledge and friendship.

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To my boys—Prom Boy, Tank, and First Blood—thank you for laughing, fighting, and growing with me. I have learned so much from you; and I admire the dedication and long hours you spent on so many activities, even if band, theatre, and color guard made us all work nights and weekends! Over the years, every one of our cooking jam sessions, every page of Arabic we read, and every game of basketball, chess, or Super Smash Bros, was nothing short of sacred. Most of all, thank you for the dose of ‘hug energy’ after a long workday.

Rasha—you are stalworth woman, and quite possibly the last remaining goddess of the Ancient Near East. We make a great team, and together we have achieved many great things. Against impossible odds and despite countless challenges, this book is our latest achievement, and surely not the last.

## TRANSLATION

The Arabic word *allah* is translated as “God,” except when used in contrast with other deities, where it is rendered “Allah.” Also, “God” or “Lord” is used as indicator of the high deity of monotheistic religion, while “god” “lord” is used as indicator of deities in a polytheistic context. The same distinction holds for the pronoun “He” versus “he.”

Biblical translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Qur’an translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Arabic transliteration is based on the system used by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES). The simplified transliteration system does not mark letters with macrons or dots below. The *ta’ marbutah* is rendered as *ah* (e.g. Surah, *ummah*), and as *at* in the construct state (e.g. *Surat al-ikhlās*). Vowels are limited to *a*, *i*, *u*. The *‘ayn* is rendered as a single open quote (‘); the *hamzah* is rendered as an apostrophe (’).

The transliteration of ancient Arabian dialects, and other Classical or Near Eastern languages are also based on the simplified system described above, with the additional vowels *e* and *o*.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

## Periodicals

<i>A</i>	<i>Arabica</i>
<i>AOAT</i>	<i>Alter Orient und Altes Testament</i>
<i>AAE</i>	<i>Arabian Archeology and Epigraphy</i>
<i>AR</i>	<i>Archiv für Religionswissenschaft</i>
<i>AD</i>	<i>Adumatu</i>
<i>AP</i>	<i>Apocrypha</i>
<i>ARM</i>	<i>Aram</i>
<i>ARC</i>	<i>Archaeoastronomy</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Berytus</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>CAL</i>	<i>Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon</i>
<i>CCGG</i>	<i>Cahiers du Centre Gustave Glotz</i>
<i>CRS</i>	<i>Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres</i>
<i>CSCO</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i>
<i>DI</i>	<i>Der Islam</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of the Qur'an</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Études religieuses</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies</i>
<i>GSHA</i>	<i>GCC Society for History and Archeology</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>

IHT	<i>Islamic History and Thought</i>
IJZS	<i>International Journal of Zizek Studies</i>
IOS	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
IJ	<i>Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship</i>
IS	<i>Iranian Studies</i>
JA	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JANR	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JIQSA	<i>Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association</i>
JJHA	<i>Jordan Journal for History and Archeology</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQS	<i>Journal of Qur'anic Studies</i>
JSAI	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
MAA	<i>Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry</i>
MI	<i>Majallat al-'Ibar lil-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyyah wa-l-Athariyyah fi Shamal Ifriqya</i>
MUTA	<i>Al-Majallah al-Urduniyyah lil-Tarikh wal-Athar</i>
MW	<i>The Muslim World</i>
NESE	<i>Neue Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik</i>
OCIANA	<i>Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia</i>
PO	<i>Patrologia Orientalis</i>
PSAS	<i>Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies</i>
PSD	<i>The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary</i>
R	<i>Raydan</i>
RQ	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
S	<i>Semitica</i>
SO	<i>Sobernost</i>
SSR	<i>Shii Studies Review</i>
WZKM	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

**Languages**

*Akk.* *Akkadian*

*Arab.* *Arabic*

*Aram.* *Aramaic (Hatran, Jewish Biblical, Mandaic, Nabataean, Palmyrene)*

*Gk.* *Classical Greek*

*Heb.* *Biblical Hebrew*

*Him.* *Himyaritic*

*Pers.* *Middle Persian*

*Saf.* *Safaitic*

*Sum.* *Sumerian*

*Syr.* *Syriac*

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## Introduction

What traces did Ancient Near Eastern goddesses leave in the Qur'an? What do these traces tell us about female power in Arabia? And how did this power change on the advent of Islam? Answering these questions is at the heart of this book.

Q 53:19–22 explicitly mentions the Arabian goddesses Allat, al-'Uzza and Manat, to whom later Islamic tradition ascribes the sole episode of false prophecy suffered by Muhammad, during the early days of his prophetic ministry. This episode, made popular in the novel *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, is the subject of examination later in this book. Meanwhile the qur'anic passage decries the female names of heavenly intercessors—angels—countering instead that all sovereignty belongs to the one God.

The text's uncompromising monotheism is situated in a milieu where countless references within rock inscriptions, church histories, and Arabic literature, demonstrate the prevalence and then subsequent decline of goddess names invoked for devotional, cultic or social functions throughout "late antique" Arabia (ca. 106–632 CE).

Female divinity as presented here is the quintessential symbol of "female power," which in turn was the religious, political, and institutional agency exercised by women throughout society. In other words, goddesses existed because women exercised influence; or at the very least because they were involved in public life. To this end, the Qur'an makes ample reference to

female power. The text does so, I argue, by means of appropriation, with seismic and hitherto unexplored ramifications for our understanding of the Qur'an, late antique Arabia, and the emergence of Islam.

## STUDIES AND SOURCES

The Qur'an addresses the relationship between gender and divinity. Yet recent studies on the qur'anic God have typically considered the question of divinity separately from gender. Bridging the gap between these two questions appears, therefore, to be a necessary mission. This mission builds upon the critical insights of preceding studies in conversation with post-biblical and Near Eastern traditions.

The God of the Qur'an—Allah—is understood theologically as genderless. However, the imagery employed by the text to illustrate His majesty and will is clearly masculine. Allah is, thus, linguistically male, without wives, sons or daughters (Q 6:101; 17:40; 37:149–159; 72:3). Originally worshipped as one of many gods, He is eventually recognized as high god among the pagan Arabs (Q 29:61–63; 31:25; 39:38; 43:87), emanating from a storied tradition of Arabian cultic veneration preserved in epigraphic and literary evidence.<sup>1</sup> Among a plethora of personal attributes for which Arabian divinities are well known, He is the God of both mercy and vengeance, and fundamentally identified as one and the same as the God of the Bible and post-biblical salvation history (e.g. Q 2:136).<sup>2</sup> Understanding the biblical God can therefore shed light on His qur'anic counterpart.

To this end, Yahweh is famous for asserting his wrathful anger throughout the Hebrew Bible, and for his re-appearance as the loving Father in the New Testament. No matter what the qualities of the biblical God are, serving Him meant the eradication of pagan, Near Eastern cults serving other divinities, now characterized by idolatry and sin. The goddesses—principally Asherah—and the powerful women they represented—including queen Jezebel and priestess Maacah—were roundly condemned. Their

<sup>1</sup> Nicolai Sinai, *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allah in Pre-Quranic Poetry*, New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2019, 15–16; Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 319.

<sup>2</sup> See Gabriel Reynolds, *Allah: God in the Qur'an*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020, 178–179, 250.

elimination made way for successive generations of kings and clergy. While there is a large body of scholarship examining gender and divinity in the Bible, there is precious little by way of examination on this very subject in the Qur'an.

At the same time the Qur'an both inherits and critiques the institution of kingship inherited from the Bible, demonstrated in its retelling of the story of the king Solomon and queen of Sheba. The queen, who remains unnamed in the Qur'an, is the only woman leader identified in the text. She is said to have commanded great wealth and power. But her worship of the sun, moon, and stars attracted the anger and avarice of the legendary king of Israel. He arrives at once to conquer her, humiliate her people, and lay waste to her country. That is, of course, unless she surrenders to the one God of King Solomon, coercing her people to 'convert' to his religion. She and her people willingly abandon their idolatrous ways. Her realm is spared. And the encounter serves as a powerful cautionary tale for the pagan noblewomen of posterity (Q 27:23–44).<sup>3</sup>

On the question of gender, the Qur'an considers women to be both *equal* to men and *independent* of them in the sight of God (Q 33:35).<sup>4</sup> They are, however, subject to the laws He mandates for society where typically men are in charge (Q 4:34). These diverging sensibilities have generated significant scholarly debate about the "moral-ethical system" in the Qur'an.<sup>5</sup> However, the overwhelming majority of these studies examine the Qur'an's reception by medieval Islamic tradition (ca. 750–1258 CE), notably Exegesis and Law.<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship does envision Allah's feminine side, so to speak. However, this too is focused on the reception

<sup>3</sup> See further Emran El-Badawi, *Queens and Prophets: How Arabian Noblewomen and Holy Men Shaped Paganism, Christianity and Islam*, London: Oneworld, 2022, 34–37; David Penchansky, *Solomon and the Ant: The Qur'an in Conversation with the Bible*, Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021, 109–120; Mustansir Mir, "The Queen of Sheba's conversion in Q 27:44: A problem examined," *JQS* 9.2, 2007, 43–56.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Celene Ibrahim, *Women and Gender in the Qur'an*, Oxford: Oxford University press, 2020, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Bauer and Feras Hamza, *Women, Households, and the Hereafter in the Qur'an: A Patronage of Piety*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Aysha Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 189–190 counters the idea of normative masculinity.

of medieval tradition, namely Sufism, rather than the text itself.<sup>7</sup> How the ontology of women in the text was shaped by late antique Arabia and the wider Near East, particularly its goddesses and the powerful women they represented—including noblewomen of royal or priestly origin—is missing entirely.

That being said, the influence of gender upon divinity, and vice versa, within the Qur'an's milieu is the subject of a handful of priceless studies. Pagan goddesses belonged the spectrum of supernatural beings believed to have inhabited the lands and skies of Arabia. Qur'anic references to such celestial and terrestrial beings are in conversation with a wealth of post-biblical traditions and Near Eastern cultures. They were daughters of God, divine intercessors, angelic intermediaries, or malevolent demons.<sup>8</sup> The Qur'an's particular abhorrence of female divinity is summarized by Patricia Crone,

Polemics against these gods, angels, and children of God dominate the Meccan suras, which tell us time and time again that God has no offspring, least of all females, that nobody shares in His nature, and that everything apart from Him is His creation.<sup>9</sup>

In reply to Crone's assessment Karen Bauer and Feras Hamza state,

These verses on daughters of God express outrage. But taken in context, the gender of these figures plays an important part in the Qur'anic polemic against them precisely because it shows up pagan inconsistency: while they reject female offspring, choosing the males for themselves, the pagans have no compunctions about taking God's daughters to be female. The outrage in [Q 53] should be considered as a direct challenge to the very same pagans who have been accused of burying their infant girls. [Q 81:8–9]<sup>10</sup>

Considering both scholarly interventions, the Qur'an's condemnation of the so called "daughters of God" is an attack against the hypocrisy of

<sup>7</sup>Eric Geoffroy, *Allah au féminin: La Femme les femmes dans la tradition soufie*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2020.

<sup>8</sup>Patricia Crone, "The religion of the Qur'anic pagans: God and the lesser deities," *A* 57, 2010, 189; Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, 178, 232.

<sup>9</sup>Patricia Crone, "Angels versus humans as messengers of God," *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*, eds. Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011, 316 (emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup>Bauer and Hamza, *Women, Households, and the Hereafter in the Qur'an*, 63, edited.