

Quranic Allusions to Sex Determination: analysis and translatability in the Light of Modern Science

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Received: 19/07/2022

Accepted: 27/10/2022

Published:04/05/2023

Abstract:

Proponents of scientific exegesis of the Quran claim that there are verses from this holy book that anticipate modern science. This article focuses on the verses that are said to have relevance to sex determination in the process of human creation. The Quran refers to this issue in two different chapters: The Star (53: 45-46) and The Resurrection (75: 36-39). These verses are reviewed in order to see to what extent the statements provided by the exponents of scientific exegesis are true. This is done through putting their views side by side with traditional commentators' views and then investigating them all against Arabic language resources. Modern scientific discoveries in this particular aspect are also reviewed along with certain selected translations of the Quran.

Keywords: Quranic Allusions, Sex Determination, translatability, Modern Science

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INTRODUCTION

Proponents of scientific exegesis of the Quran claim that there are verses from this holy book that anticipate modern science. This article focuses on the verses that are said to have relevance to sex determination in the process of human creation. The Quran refers to this issue in two different chapters: The Star (53: 45-46) and The Resurrection (75: 36-39). These verses are reviewed in order to see to what extent the statements provided by the exponents of scientific exegesis are true. This is done through putting their views side by side with traditional commentators' views and then investigating them all against Arabic language resources. Modern scientific discoveries in this particular aspect are also reviewed along with certain selected translations of the Quran.

The verses (45-46) from surah Annajm (The Star):

[46-45: النجم] (وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ۚ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَىٰ ۖ ٤٦)

Abdullah Y. *"That He did create in pairs – male and female, from a*

Ali: *seed when lodged (in its place)" (53: 45-46)*

Hilali and *" And that He (Allah) creates the pairs, male and*

Khan: *female, From Nutfah (drops of semen male and female discharges) when it is emitted" (53: 45-46)*

A. J. Arberry: *"and that He Himself created the two kinds, male and female, of a sperm-drop, when it was cast forth" (53: 45-46)*

Of these two verses of the Quran, two words are the focus of the discussion below. These words are "الزَّوْجَيْنِ" and "تُمْنَى" pronounced as *azzawjain* and *tumna*, respectively.

Earlier and recent commentators of the holy Quran seem to have a consensus over the meaning of these two Quranic words. As far as the word *azzawjain* is concerned, traditional exegetes like Ibn Katheer (1999), Al-Sa'di (2002) and Al-Baidawi (2000) as well as recent ones like Al-Najar (2007), Al-Sha'rawi (1991) and Ibn A'shur (1984) agree that it refers to both sexes, male and female. Al-Najar (2007) and Al-Sa'di (2002) add that this is applicable to all living animals not only confined to humankind. Concerning the word *tumna*, Ibn Katheer (1999) explains this word as "poured from the men's back into the women's uteruses". Al-Baidawi (2000) says that *tumna* means gushed forth into the uterus. Like Ibn Katheer and Al-Baidawi, Al-Sha'rawi (1991) and Ibn A'shur (1984) agree that the verb *tumna* is about the man's fluid being poured and spilled into the woman's uterus. Contrary to them all, Al-Najar (2007) sees the word *nutfah* as

referring to the woman's ovum. However, he argues that the word *tumna* refers to this ovum being fertilized by the man's sperm. Despite the dispute over the reference of the word *nutfah*, they all agree concerning the understanding of the verb *tumna* that it relates to the man's fluid that is gushed forth and fertilizes the ovum in the uterus.

In this respect, Al-Sha'rawi (1991) states that this verse has solved a long-lasting dispute as some thought it is the woman who is responsible for determining the sex of the baby, whether male or female. Yet, when one reads this verse, one undoubtedly knows that it is man who is to blame.

Grammatically speaking, the word *azzawjain* in Arabic language is the dual form from the word *zawj* and is pluralized as *azwaj*. Ibn Manzur (n.d) states that *zawj* means the one that has a companion of its kind. Arabs say *عندي زوجان من النعال* (i.e, I have got a pair of shoes). It also means the male or the female that constitute a couple. In this case, the male is called *zawj* and the female is called *zawj* as well. Both are called *zawjan* or *zawjain* according to the case

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in which they occur in Arabic grammar, whether nominative or accusative, respectively

As for the word *tumna*, Arabic-Arabic dictionaries do not give much attention to this entry. Ibn Manzur (n.d) and Al-Fairuzabadi (2005) state that this word *tumna* comes originally from the word *mana*, and the place called Mina in Mecca was named after it because the pilgrims every year in Hajj season slaughter their sacrifices there and hence a lot of blood is poured and spilled in that place. Zindani, et al., (2000) also mention this Quranic expression in their glossary. They confirm that the word *tumna* expresses the meaning of *poured and spilled in the uterus*.

Modern science proves that the sex of a foetus is determined by the nature of the sperm and not of the ovum. Zakir Naik (2008) and Al-bar (1983) state that the sex of the child, whether male or female, depends on whether the 23rd pair of chromosomes is XX or XY respectively. Primarily, they continue, sex determination occurs at fertilization and depends upon the type of sex chromosome in the sperm that fertilizes the ovum. If it is an 'X' bearing sperm that fertilizes the ovum, the foetus is a female and if it is a 'Y' bearing sperm then the foetus is a male. Naik continues:

Mothers-in-law in the Indian subcontinent, usually prefer having male grandchildren and often blame their daughters-in-law if the child is not a boy. If only they knew that the determining factor is the nature of the male sperm and not the female ovum! If they were to blame anybody, they should rather blame their sons, not their daughters-in-law, since both the Qur'an and Science hold that it is the male fluid that is responsible for the sex of the child! (Naik, 2008)

Othman (n.d) states that modern science confirms that the type of sex is determined by the man. It is specifically the spermatozoon carrying either an (X) or a (Y) chromosome in the man's fluid which is to fertilize the woman's ovum. Again, Hussain (1999) states that the developing disciplines of genetics and molecular biology have scientifically validated the accuracy of this information given by the Qur'an. It is now understood, he continues, that sex is determined by the sperm cells from the male, and that the female has no role in this process.

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When it comes to the translation of these two Quranic terms, notes can be summarized as follows:

azzawjain is rendered as "in pairs", "the pairs" and "the two kinds" by Ali, Hilali and Khan, and Arberry, respectively. Though they faithfully adhere to the source text in following their renditions by the phrase "male and female", the translations they provided are not so accurate, since neither the word "pairs" nor the word "kinds" fully convey the intended meaning of the Arabic word *azzawjain* in this context. For more clarification, let us consider another translation provided by Abdel Haleem (2005): «*that He Himself created the two sexes, male and female, from an ejected drop of sperm*» (*The Star*: 45-46)

Haleem's translation shows that English language has a more explicit term that can be used in this case as a dynamic equivalent to the Arabic word *azzawjain*. That is "the two sexes".

Concerning the translation of the word *tumna*, it should be noted first that this word is a passive-voice form of the Arabic present form of the verb *yamni*, meaning ejaculate, pour or spill. Here the

three translators use three different terms for this Quranic word. Ali renders it as "lodged (in its place)". This translation is inadequate since it does not suggest the direction and manner of ejaculation as is done by the Arabic word. English-English Longman dictionary (2005) explains this word as "to become firmly stuck somewhere." For more clarification, the following example is given: the bullet was lodged in his spine. Hilali and Khan use "it is emitted" to render the meaning of the Quranic term *tumna*. Though this rendition is to some extent acceptable, still there is a problem regarding the antecedent to which the pronoun "it" refers back. It is not clear who is the one responsible for the process – whether the man or the woman. Arberry remains the most accurate of them all. He uses "it was cast forth" with a clear antecedent of the pronoun "it", showing that it is the man who takes the lead.

The verses (36-39) from surah Al-Qiyamah (The Resurrection):

The other group of verses taken from surat Al-Qiyamah (the Resurrection) say:

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﴿أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَنْ يُتْرَكَ سُدًى ﴿٣٦﴾ أَلَمْ يَكُ نُطْفَةً مِنْ مَنِيٍّ يُُمْتَّى ﴿٣٧﴾ ثُمَّ كَانَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقَ
فَسَوَّى ﴿٣٨﴾ فَجَعَلَ مِنْهُ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَى ﴿٣٩﴾﴾ [القيامة: 36-39]

*«Does man think he will be left alone? Was he not just a drop of spilt-out sperm, which became a clinging form, which God shaped in due proportion, fashioning from **it** the two sexes, male and female? »* [Al-Qiyamah: 36-39] (Abdel-Haleem, 2005)

In this extract, the two words that have been the focus of the discussion above are repeated here with equal amount of importance. To avoid redundancy, only the translation of the pronoun "هُ", pronounced as *hu*, in the word "مِنْهُ", pronounced as *minhu*, is the focus of the discussion here. This pronoun adds to the emphasis, suggested by the previous discussion, on the man as the only responsible agent for the determination of the sex of the foetus. Contrary to Ali, Hilali and Khan, and Arberry, Haleem translates this pronoun as "it", referring back to the "drop of spilt-out sperm". As shown below, the others translate it as "him", referring back to man, which in this context means both men and women in general.

Abdullah Y. *"Does man think that he will be left uncontrolled,*

- Ali: *[without purpose]? Was he not a drop of sperm emitted (in lowly form)? Then did he become a clinging clot; then did (Allah) make and fashion (him) in due proportion. And of **him** He made two sexes, male and female."* [75:36-39]
- Hilali and Khan: *"Does man think that he will be left Suda (neglected). Was he not a Nutfah (mixed male and female discharge of semen) poured forth? Then he became an Alaqah (a clot); then (Allah) shaped and fashioned (him) in due proportion. And made **him** in two sexes, male and female."* [75:36-39]
- A. J. Arberry: *"What, does man reckon he shall be left to roam at will? Was he not a sperm-drop spilled? Then he was a blood-clot, and He created and formed, and He made of **him** two kinds, male and female."* [75:36-39]

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All the three translators are inaccurate as far as the translation of this pronoun is concerned. This inaccuracy is attributed to the following points:

1. They all go against great exegetes of the Quran like Al-Sha'rawi and Qutb. Both Al-Sha'rawi (1991) and Qutb (1981) stress on the importance of the pronoun *hu* (it) in the word *minhu* (from it) as it obviously refers back to the man's fluid already mentioned, in order to distinguish the creation of a male baby from that of a female one.
2. They all go against the well-established rules of Arabic language grammar. Alghalayini (2002) states that when a pronoun is preceded by more than one antecedent, the pronoun shall only refer back to the nearest, as is the case in this extract of the Quran.

Conclusion

Based upon the argumentation presented above, the findings can be listed as follows:

1. The claims of scientific exegesis proponents that Quran

precedes modern science, at least in this minute aspect of sex determination, are proved true. This shows undoubtedly that Quran is the word of God, the Super Power behind the creation of the whole universe.

2. Some translators provide insufficient and inadequate translation. This can be referred to their failure to go in line with the open language of the holy Quran and their lack of detailed knowledge of Arabic language grammar.
3. Concerning the first set of verses, Arberry and Haleem provide utmost accuracy in their translations. This reflects Arberry's loyalty to the source text as well as Haleem's mastery of the Arabic language.
4. As far as the second set of verses is concerned, only Haleem's translation stands out, reflecting the true intended meaning of the verses in accordance with Arabic language grammar and modern exegete's interpretations.
5. The task of translating the meanings of the holy Quran should not be incurred by a single person. Rather it should be a

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collaborative work that comprises specialists and experts not only in the field of linguistics but also in other aspects of life such as embryology, geology, astronomy, oceanology, botany, ... etc, and under the supervision of a high Islamic authority.

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